

# The EcoSystemic Return

An Anthology for Now

Edited by  
Hugh Palmer &  
Lorna Edwards

The EcoSystemic Practice Series



This book shimmers with the brilliance of a stunning ecological cosmovision that simultaneously decenters the human self while rethinking the world of things as profuse with a stranger vitality than we could ever have anticipated.

Bayo Akomolafe

This is a spine-tingling collection of papers, edging the reader out of their comfort zones, decentering the human and putting the eco back into systemic. It is exciting, disquieting, challenging reading, reading that presses for action. The action that is required for changing the future of systemic practice, and ultimately our world.

Karen Partridge

The EcoSystemic Return transcends the realm of a mere book. It is a rallying cry for systemic practitioners to systemically look at how our looking, is looking at how we are looking, and how we have ignored what nature is telling us about how we have glossed over. It urges us to delve into the realms of culture, religion, and spirituality fostering a more inclusive and humanistic eco approach to systemic family therapy globally, beyond East versus West.

Maimunah Mosli and Fajariah Saban

The EcoSystemic Return is an invitation and an appeal to use all our senses in our lives and work. It makes clear that we are nature, that there is no split and definitely no hierarchy between humans and animals, people and nature, thinking, feeling and doing, between body and mind.

Justine van Lawick

This book is abundantly rich. It re-connects the eco with the systemic. It introduces post-humanism and new materialist thinking in systemic practice. Well, in fact it is more about systemic living than about systemic practice. If you are a systemic practitioner and you want to break out of the mould and expand your thinking, this is a book for you.

Peter Rober



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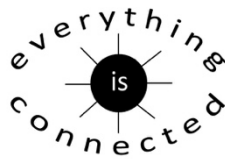
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**Editors**

**Hugh Palmer & Lorna Edwards**





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# The EcoSystemic Return

## An Anthology for Now

Editors

Hugh Palmer & Lorna Edwards



## About this book

*The EcoSystemic Return* is an anthology of papers by and for systemic practitioners that uses an ecological, systemic lens to critically engage with environmental matters such as climate change and wider critical systemic implications. Several chapters address the urgent need for ecological considerations in our societal structures and decisions. Chapters also explore the challenging terrain of global health crises, particularly pandemics, using systems theory and new materialist thinking to understand our interconnected vulnerabilities and strengths.

This collection does not provide easy answers but invites you to participate in a crucial dialogue that is needed right now: it is a call to engage with these diverse perspectives, reflecting on the connections between systemic practices and ecological awareness, to reimagine our place alongside each other, other living creatures and our planet, Earth. It is a journey of rediscovery and reconnection, a voyage back to our roots, and a stepping stone towards a more sustainable future.

\*\*\*\*\*

*The EcoSystemic Return* started life as discussion in a group of systemic therapists about how systemic thinking can counter the problems of climate change and lost local knowledges and practices.

All chapters in this book were originally published as articles across different volumes of *Murmurations: Journal of Transformative Systemic Practice* - <https://murmurations.cloud>. The journal editors have kindly given permission to reproduce the papers in this book. The publisher, Everything is Connected Press is a not-for-profit community interest company which supports the independent, fully open access, peer-reviewed journal, *Murmurations: Journal of Transformative Systemic Practice*.

# Endorsements

Perhaps it could never be overestimated just how critically important it is to address what each of the papers of this volume say in their own way: that we are not alone; that the problems humans face as a species owe their stubbornness to the idea that we are ontologically separate from ecologies and each other; and, that the challenge of our times is to think alongside and within a world of thick, dense, material relations - instead of above it. This book shimmers with the brilliance of a stunning ecological cosmovision that simultaneously decenters the human self while rethinking the world of things as profuse with a stranger vitality than we could ever have anticipated.

*Professor Bayo Akomolafe, The Aspen Institute & Schumacher Center*

This is a spine-tingling collection of papers, edging the reader out of their comfort zones, decentring the human and putting the eco back into systemic. It is exciting, disquieting, challenging reading, reading that presses for action. The action that is required for changing the future of systemic practice, and ultimately our world.

*Dr Karen Partridge, Consultant Systemic Psychotherapist and Clinical Psychologist, Institute of Family Therapy, London*

The eco-systemic return is an inevitable step in the co-evolution of systemic thinking and practice, embedded in today's turbulent world. Based on Bateson's and Guattari's, concept of three ecologies, we consider human subjectivity, social relations and the environment as entangled, mutual dependent, co-producing life. Research shows how green environments contribute to mental health. This rich book invites readers to observe systems as multi-actor-networks with intra-acting human and non-human actors, living together, differently. A must read for committed systemic practitioners.

*Dr Robert van Hennik, The Lorentzhuis, The Netherlands*



In our journey as Asian Muslim systemic family practitioners, deeply entwined in the intricate web of interconnected relationships, The EcoSystemic Return emerges as a beacon, offering a profound, timely reminder and contribution to the ever-evolving landscape of systemic therapy. Tracey A. Laszloffy's preface strikes a chord with the essence of our own expedition into family therapy, where systems theory became the guiding light of our practice. The book boldly confronts the urgent challenges of climate change and the erosion of local knowledge, seamlessly weaving them into the fabric of systemic thinking. The inclusion of Indigenous knowledge, emphasizing nature, wholeness, and circularity, seamlessly aligns with the holistic worldview inherent in many Asian cultures. This not only enriches therapeutic practices but also pays homage to the diverse wisdom embedded in indigenous traditions. The EcoSystemic Return transcends the realm of a mere book; it is a rallying cry for systemic practitioners to systemically look at how our looking, is looking at how we are looking, and how we have ignored what nature is telling us about how we have glossed over. It urges us to delve into the realms of culture, religion, and spirituality fostering a more inclusive and humanistic eco approach to systemic family therapy globally ie. outside of East versus West.

*Maimunah Mosli and Fajariah Saban, Hayaa Network, Singapore*

An inspiring anthology, infused with old and new wisdom, The EcoSystemic Return invites the reader on a transformative journey of rediscovery. Informed by systemic logic, the authors offer a courageous invitation to step in as activists and disruptors, to notice our relationship with the environment and to model the change we wish to see in our own systems.

*Professor Hannah Sherbersky, AFT CEO*

This book invited me to engage in both personal and professional reflections. I was born in Guyana, a country located on the South American continent, bordering Brazil and Venezuela. Many of my early memories have been shaped by my parents' stories about family and community life there. Those stories included the importance of

appreciating and caring for the land – and sea – which fed and nourished us. My great-grandmother's abilities as a healer were known and valued in our village. I have often wished that I had the ability to heal in the way she did and now I am entertaining the idea that I may have the ability to offer healing in conversation, through using words rather than plants. At a professional level in my therapeutic practice, I am seeing more people who are expressing a wish to think about ecological concerns. Developing a practice that offers a service outside of the established ways of practising psychotherapy can be quite challenging if you are a Black psychotherapist. The author, Alice Walker, has also come back into my life through reading her book, *Living By The Word*. In the book there is a chapter titled "Everything is a Human Being" (Walker, 1988). This book offers an open invitation to engage with on-going conversations on how we can take seriously our responsibilities as caretakers of the earth.

*Dr Sharon Bond, Systemic Therapist and Trainer, Chi-Ron Centre, London*

This is an important and necessary book. For too long, we systemic thinkers and workers have ignored the ecological context we are part of in our practices. The book consists of articles that previously appeared in the online journal *murmurations*, most of which I had read before started reading this book. Now that they are connected, the texts reinforce each other, and the message becomes inescapable. While reading, I became a feel-thinker and a think-feeler in the environment. All my senses opened up. I saw and heard the birds in the garden, I walked into the garden and felt the wind, I perceived how the wind makes the world move as in a dance, I smelled the earth, the first daffodils and I tasted the air and a sage leaf. This book, the eco-systemic return, is an invitation and an appeal to use all our senses in our lives and work. It makes clear that we are nature, that there is no split and definitely no hierarchy between humans and animals, people and nature, men and women, thinking, feeling and doing, between body and mind. This book makes inescapably clear that we have to make this eco-systemic return. It is a return when we assume that we have been there.

*Dr Justine van Lawick, Systemic Practitioner, The Netherlands*

Although the authors of this book are family therapists, this book is not about family therapy. Or maybe it is, but if it is about family therapy, then -as one of the authors suggests- maybe the planet should be considered as the patient. This book is abundantly rich. It re-connects the eco with the systemic. It introduces post-humanism and new materialist thinking in systemic practice. Well, in fact it is more about *systemic living* than about *systemic practice*. If you are a systemic practitioner and you want to break out of the mould and expand your thinking, this is a book for you.

*Professor Peter Rober, KU Leuven, Belgium*



# Contents

<i>Foreword by Tracey Laszloffy</i>	i
<i>Introduction by Hugh Palmer and Lorna Edwards</i>	vii
1 Where did the Eco go in Systemic Practice? <i>Hugh Palmer</i>	1
2 Rewilding Systemic Practice <i>Chiara Santin</i>	18
3 Deep Donkey and Dadirri. Asking Creatura out to Play <i>Roger Duncan</i>	48
4 Lines of Flight <i>Justine van Lawick</i>	73
5 Re-Membering and Naturing my Life and Work in a Fifth Province. <i>Imelda McCarthy</i>	92
6 Pandemic Disease and Systems Theory. An Ecological View. <i>Stan Amaladas and Ray Becvar</i>	111
7 In Relationship with a Virus: An Argument for “New” Materialist Thinking to be Introduced into Systemic Thinking and an Argument for Why It Has Always Already Been There. <i>Mark Huhnen</i>	134
8 African Indigenous Oral Traditional Endarkened Feminist Practice: Indigenous Knowledge on the Wrong Side of Matter. <i>Julia Jude</i>	154

9	Transmaterial Worlding. Beyond Human Systems <i>Gail Simon &amp; Leah Salter</i>	170
10	Reclaiming the Relationship with Bodily Knowing through Movement in Nature <i>Lorna Edwards, Andreas Breden, Chiara Santin, Justine Van Lawick and Erik van der Elst</i>	196
11	Stone Scissors Paper. A Trilogy of Papers. Rambling Reflections <i>Leah Salter</i> The Water Table <i>Lisen Kebbe</i> Moving Mountains <i>Gail Simon</i>	216 219 228 239
12	The Systemic Crisis of Climate Change: Clinical and Political Reflections (2013)  The EcoSystemic Return: Clinical and Political Implications (2021) <i>Philip Kearney</i>	253 264
13	“Think Different” to Prevent Extinction. Connecting Gregory Bateson’s Cybernetic Epistemology with Posthumanism. <i>Hugh Palmer</i> <i>Biographies</i>	278 300

# Foreword

Tracey A. Laszloffy

I decided to become a family therapist 35 years ago when I learned about systems theory as an undergraduate in an *Introduction to Family Therapy* course. I will never forget the amazement I felt sitting in the lecture hall on the first day of class as the professor explained that systems theory is the foundation of the field of family therapy which assumes that all things are interconnected, and you cannot isolate individuals from their family context. I was thrilled to discover this systemic profession that emphasized the significance of context, patterns of interaction, and circular causality. Growing up I did not have the language of systems theory, but I had been in search of a career path that would focus on healing and transformation at both the micro and macro level, and I was especially concerned about environmental issues. Lo and behold, this relatively new field of family therapy seemed to be exactly what I was looking for. And when I read the work of Gregory Bateson who spoke so directly about the dangers of humanity's abuse of the environment, I was further convinced I had found my calling. After all, systemic therapists had to be eco-systemic, right? Sadly not.

Over the course of the past 30 some years I have found the field to be surprisingly resistant to efforts to expand the frame to incorporate the ecological context. I have been perplexed by the irony that the field of psychology has done a better job of addressing ecological issues through the formation of an entire sub-discipline known as eco-psychology. For decades I submitted proposals to conferences and manuscripts to journals focusing on eco-informed family therapy that were rejected time and again. I acknowledge



these rejections may have reflected a lack of quality work on my part, but I am inclined to think there was something else at play. My first breakthrough came in 2009 with the acceptance of my paper, “Remembering the Pattern that Connects: Toward an Eco-Informed MFT” by *Contemporary Family Therapy*. The journal’s editor, Dorothy Becvar, told me quite directly that she not only believed the paper was solid, but she felt an obligation to shine a light on this topic that was shockingly unaddressed within the field at large. Yet even after that publication, little changed. It is why I felt so strongly about the need for a book that would reflect systemic integrity by incorporating the ecological context in our work, and hence in 2019, *Eco-Informed Practice: Family Therapy in an Age of Ecological Peril*, which I co-edited with Markie Twist, was published. This work endeavored to challenge the historical neglect of the ecological context by creatively expanding the therapeutic frame to incorporate a focus on nature and the ecological crisis, and now *The EcoSystemic Return* extends this work.

At the start of *The EcoSystemic Return* Hugh Palmer acknowledges that the “eco” has been lost to many systemic practitioners. He states, “There are a handful of therapists who have heeded Bateson’s call, but not many, and certainly not in the early days of our profession” (Palmer, p. 3). Palmer goes on to reference Bateson’s clarity that the health and wellbeing of individuals and families is inextricably tied to and the health and wellbeing of the environment. He recalls how Bateson spoke pointedly about the insanity of humanity’s delusions that it is possible to pollute and degrade parts of the planet without undermining the health of the whole planet. He reminds us of the ways that Bateson warned against modern post-industrial culture’s perception of separation that leads us to falsely believe that humans are separate from nature, that we are not animals, that we are superior to all other animals, and that we are

divinely imbued with the authority to control, exploit, and dominate the land and all of its resources. Building on Bateson's warnings, Palmer explains how humankind is so steeped in the myth of separation, so organized around the politics of division and domination, and so addicted to advanced consumerism and technology that it is difficult to see what is true; that all life on earth is interrelated and inextricably intertwined and what happens to a part happens to the whole. Irrespective of color, creed or class, irrespective of gender or geographic location, irrespective of age, aptitude or attitude, and irrespective of species, we are all kin. We are all one and if we destroy any part of the whole, we ultimately destroy ourselves.

In the decades that have passed since Bateson issued his warnings humankind continued to "chop up the ecology" and consequently, the earth has now passed a critical threshold having heated up roughly 1.2 degrees Celsius (3.6 Fahrenheit) since preindustrial times placing us 1 degree away from the tipping point that scientists have been warning us about. And virtually every day we hear of the consequences of this warming as communities across the planet are ravaged by heatwaves, droughts, flooding, wildfires, hurricanes, typhoons, and tornadoes. It is precisely because we are being confronted by the perilous consequences of our unsystemic living, that more than ever we need systemic practitioners to incorporate the eco into our work, and this is why we desperately need an anthology like *The EcoSystemic Return*.

The chapters compiled by Palmer and Edwards are written by therapists who have many years of experience practicing systemically, and who thoughtfully explore how systemic therapists can reclaim the "eco" in our work with clients. They propose provocative ideas for disrupting conventional ways of thinking and acting rooted in the Cartesian dualistic paradigm that shapes modern

post-industrial society, and they offer creative clinical practices that embrace the “eco” in systemic work by drawing from various sources, including and especially from the wisdom of Indigenous knowledges that center nature and emphasize wholeness and circularity in approaches to healing. Yet, at the same time, while this book is written by systemic therapists and it addresses clinical practice, its message extends beyond the realm of therapy. It is a call out to all citizens who are concerned about the ecological crisis that is upon us.

While eco-systemic therapy is vital, it is not enough to dial back the devastation of our current practices. Hugh Palmer acknowledges when he states, “If our collaborations in our work do not reflect the changes needed in the wider world, then we are kidding ourselves that we are agents of change and that we are still innovators of theories of change” (p. 9-10). This point is later reinforced by Phillip Kearney who says that “a quantum shift is required. And that implies disruption, I assert” (p. 111). But what does this disruption entail? Certainly, at the individual level each of us needs to closely examine the personal choices we make in terms of how we eat, generate energy, transport ourselves, define who is our brethren, support the allocation of resources to those in need, as well as manage how much time is spent interacting with technology versus with nature. But also, we need to come together collectively to exert broad, organized pressure across all sectors that will drive governments, corporations, and other powerbrokers to implement the kinds of large-scale actions required to pull us back from the brink of calamity. The point here is that action is required, and it must be informed by systemic logic that keeps us faithful to the reality that all things are interconnected and all our fates are intertwined. *The EcoSystemic Return* makes a salient contribution in this direction and hence, I hope you will read it and be inspired to act.

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# Introduction

Hugh Palmer and Lorna Edwards

As we navigate through the complexities of these turbulent times, it has become increasingly evident that the traditional Western models of understanding our existence require urgent expansion. Our relationship with our environment has been woven throughout the human narrative, which is at the core of this exploration. This book is a compilation of writings from *Murmurations: Journal of Transformative Systemic Practice*, which embarks on a journey to re-examine, reimagine, and reintegrate systemic practice within a holistic ecological context.

"The EcoSystemic Return" embarks on a transformative journey of rediscovery and reconciliation with the ecosystem that humanity is an inseparable part of. This anthology offers some profound reflections upon the intricate relationship between humanity and ecology, inspired by the theories of systemic practice. Interweaving insights from various fields, including psychology, biology, and philosophy, this book presents numerous perspectives to broaden our understanding of our ecological existence.

The overarching theme of this collection is a thoughtful investigation of systemic thinking's ecological dimensions. Understanding our place and impact within these ecosystems becomes paramount in a world where human actions ripple through (and increasingly rip apart) intricate life networks. The works included here delve deep into this exploration, charting paths through various realms such as systemic practice, embodied knowledge, rewilding perspectives, indigenous wisdom, and posthumanist theory.

Concepts of 'rewilding' and 're-membering' emerge as salient themes, underscoring the urgency of reconnecting with the broader ecosystem we are part of. The notions of play and creativity, integral to our existence, are also profoundly interrogated, offering innovative and fresh perspectives on our relationship with the natural world.

The chapters navigate the challenging terrain of global health crises, notably the recent pandemic, employing systems theory and new materialist thinking to understand our interconnected vulnerabilities and strengths. The ecological lens is further expanded to critically engage with climate change, its systemic implications, and the urgent need for ecological considerations in our societal structures and decisions.

This collection does not provide easy answers but invites you to participate in a crucial dialogue. It is a call to engage with these diverse perspectives, reflect on the intersection of systemic practice and ecological awareness, and reimagine our place in this intricately woven tapestry of life. It is a journey of rediscovery and reconnection, a voyage back to our roots, and a stepping stone towards a more sustainable future.

At the heart of this collection of writings lies a critique of the separation between humans and nature, a division ingrained in our collective consciousness over centuries. This detachment, often manifesting in anthropocentric ways of being, has spawned a series of environmental and social crises, dramatically highlighted by climate change and ecological imbalance. Our attempts to manage and control the natural world through various forms of colonisation – by individuals, professions, and institutions – have contributed significantly to these crises.

The book encourages readers to interrogate this chasm, to rethink

and dismantle the dualism between humans and the ecosystem, which has dictated our approach to life and living for far too long. It suggests that the traditional paradigms of control and management are no longer sustainable or desirable and instead advocates for a shift towards a more harmonious and balanced relationship with nature.

Through a systemic lens, the contributors argue that we are not observers of the universe but its participants. Echoing Gregory Bateson's ideas, the anthology reminds us that we are part of the ecosystem, both affecting and affected by it. To illustrate the interconnectedness of life, the book delves into 'new materialist' thinking and the concept of 'transmaterial worlding.' These perspectives illuminate the interweaving of human and non-human entities, encouraging us to recognise our co-existence with the non-human world rather than dominance over it.

Our perceived disconnection from the natural world has stunted our understanding of our existence within the ecosystem. This anthology revisits these foundations by advocating for rewilding our systemic practices. Far from being a passing trend, rewilding is positioned as a critical response to our ecological crisis. It invites us to transform therapeutic spaces and re-establish the link with our ecological selves, exploring how ecotherapy can aid in healing individuals and the fractures within our society.

The book also explores the relevance and potential of indigenous knowledge systems in reconstructing our understanding of our ecological existence. Drawing from African indigenous oral traditional practices, it challenges the hegemony of Western epistemologies. Indigenous practices, which have long emphasised humanity's interconnectedness with nature, offer valuable insights into aligning our lifestyles with the planet's rhythms.



Significantly, these chapters recognise the global challenges our world grapples with today and acknowledge that the ecological crisis we face is a systemic crisis, reaffirming that these global events are not isolated occurrences but rather symptomatic of our strained relationship with the ecosystem.

Ecological thinking extends beyond our interaction with the natural environment—it pervades our social systems, ways of relating, collective decision-making, and visions for the future. In discussing these themes, the book underlines the necessity for collective action, emphasising the importance of democratic processes in fostering sustainable systemic change.

"The EcoSystemic Return" is a call to embark on a self and collective journey of rediscovery. It encourages us to reassess our practices, philosophies, stories, and perceived wisdom to foster a paradigm shift towards ecological thinking. This shift invites us to transcend our individual existences and recognise our interconnectedness with the broader ecosystem. The book aims to illuminate a future that acknowledges our co-existence with the ecosystem, values the intricate networks of life, and respects the non-human entities with whom we share our planet.

*Lorna Edwards, Wales and Hugh Palmer, Yorkshire*

*February 2024*

O N E

# Where did the Eco go in Systemic Practice?

Hugh Palmer

In September 2017, at an Association for Family Therapy Conference, I went for a walk in the woods in the grounds of the conference venue hotel in Dunblane, Scotland. It was early autumn, and the trees were beginning to show their golden colours. This was no ordinary walk but a contemplative, meditative walk in nature led by Lorna Edwards, a family therapist from Wales. It was a fascinating and delightful experience, and I was grateful to Lorna for helping me reconnect systemic thinking with ecology, nature and my relationship with the natural world. In a sense, we continue that walk together, remaining friends and, along with others, contributing to the development of an EcoSystemic Practice Network.

This paper began life as a presentation for the inaugural EcoSystemic Return workshop and networking event held by the EcoSystemic Practice Network Movement in June 2021. My intention in this paper is to revisit Gregory Bateson's legacy, to consider what we might reclaim as part of our heritage, inform future practice, and discuss how more recent thinkers can support this move.

Most systemic practitioners will be aware of the significant contributions that Gregory Bateson made to the development of systemic family therapy. His early ideas, despite being reified at times, about communication patterns in families were instrumental in inspiring clinicians to work with families rather than with individuals. His later contributions such as taking a second-order position or the concept of circularity which was embraced by the Milan team, proved to be very influential and are still valued and

integral elements of contemporary systemic practice. Nevertheless, the systemic community neglected much of his broader thinking. Bateson's more general ecological concerns and his thinking about epistemology and ontology might have shaped our practice even more than the comparatively few adopted ideas. With rising concerns about the impact of humans upon the environment in the era in which we live, now described as the Anthropocene era, along with the posthuman turn (Braidotti 2019), perhaps now is the time for us to look both backwards and forwards to deepen our understanding of Bateson's message, to acknowledge the continuing importance of his thinking and influence upon the posthumanities.

### **Looking back to Bateson**

I believe that Bateson held hopes that therapists might be amongst those most open to his ideas and that we might be encouraged to work and think beyond the confines of the clinic and the family. As a relatively new profession, informed by his thinking, we seemed receptive to his cybernetic epistemology. Speaking at a 1969 Conference on Mental Health in Asia and the Pacific, he directly addressed therapists:

It is clear now to many people that there are many catastrophic dangers which have grown out of the Occidental errors of epistemology. These range from insecticides to pollution, to atomic fallout, to the possibility of melting the Antarctic ice cap. Above all, our fantastic compulsion to save individual lives has created the possibility of world famine in the immediate future.

Perhaps we have an even chance of getting through the next twenty years with no disaster more serious than the mere destruction of a nation or group of nations. I believe that this massive aggregation of threats to man and his ecological systems arises out of errors in our habits of thought at deep and partly unconscious levels.

As therapists, clearly we have a duty.

First, to achieve clarity in ourselves; and then to look for every sign of clarity in others and to implement them and reinforce them in whatever is sane in them.

And there are patches of sanity still surviving in the world. Much of Oriental philosophy is more sane than anything the West has produced, and some of the inarticulate efforts of our own young people are more sane than the conventions of the establishment.

(Bateson, 1972, pp. 492-3)

Reading this stark warning in 2021, I think of Greta Thunberg and her “Skolstrejk för klimatet” and the international Extinction Rebellion movement, perhaps voices of sanity in the face of the insanity of capitalism and necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003) and I both wonder if and hope that they offer the kind of clarity that Bateson asked us to seek. There are a handful of therapists who have heeded Bateson’s call, but not many, and certainly not in the early days of our profession.

Having spent a considerable amount of time looking for early family therapists who may have written about ecology in the earlier days of family therapy (the 1960s-80s), only one family therapist, Edgar Auerwald, seemed to appreciate Bateson’s message at that time, recognising that family therapists might begin to think differently:

Yes, I do believe that we all must learn to think like ecologists. My belief is born of the conviction that U Thant [Secretary-general of the United Nations from 1961 to 1971] is probably correct when he estimates that we have at most ten years before the point of no return will be reached in our headlong rush toward extinction. If there is the slightest chance that he is correct, and if we cannot manage to get the parents of our day to understand the cry of their children, it is just possible that our interest in families may become, not just academic, but horribly irrelevant. While none of us has the power to

change the thinking style of the world, we can by our own thinking and our everyday operations promote and contribute to such crucial change. For the sake of our children, I believe we must do so, so that they may have children, too

(Auerswald, 1971, p. 7)

Auerswald stressed the importance of therapists taking personal responsibility to change their way of thinking and promote change, otherwise, our work with families would become irrelevant in the face of environmental collapse. Yet, despite his position of influence, few followed in his footsteps until decades later. One of the more recent voices is that of Tracy Laszloffy, a family therapist based in Connecticut, who has been promoting an ecosystemic approach for some time, noting that the field of family therapy has “devoted sparse attention to addressing the connections between individual, family, and environmental issues” (2009, p. 223). She has recently published an article (Laszloffy & Davis, 2019) and a book (Laszloffy & Twist, 2019), all of which contribute to the reclamation of Bateson’s broader ecological concerns within systemic therapy.

Apart from Auerswald, who made a connection between our practice and broader ecological awareness and responsibility (e.g. 1968, 1971, 1987), it is evident that the early use of the term “ecosystemic” was restricted to thinking about the context of an individual within a family, and occasionally, their community. Thus, to early family therapists, the “ecology” was, in effect, the client’s family and immediate network. This limited view of ecology was also evident in Neuro-Linguistic Programming, which shared some of the same roots as family therapy, emphasising developing a “well-formed, ecological outcome” with clients. But, again, the ecology here refers to the client’s immediate context.

I have noticed a parallel in the writing of Arne Naess (2008), who contrasted *deep* ecology with *shallow* ecology. Shallow ecology focuses on short-term, narrow human interests, whereas deep ecology decentres humans and has ethical values respecting nature and the inherent worth of other beings. Bateson asked us to embrace a deep ecology. We didn’t.

## Not just another “gadget”

Despite the relatively limited ecological perspective in family therapy, it is only fair to recognise that other elements of Bateson’s thinking were adopted, enabling a shift from an anti-contextual and reductionistic epistemology concerned with objectivity and “truth” to a worldview encompassing complexity, contextual patterns of relationship and multiple realities. It could be argued that this was far more than another “gadget” (Bateson 1972, p. 150), as the shift to second-order thinking was (and still is) transformational.

In most of his writing, Bateson was critical of the conscious purpose characteristic of Western, lineal thinking and our lack of systemic wisdom in considering the broader implications of our actions. He used language, concepts, and metaphors drawn from his own experience as an anthropologist and natural historian. His thinking spanned what might now be called constructivist, social constructivist and social constructionist, suggesting that individuals build knowledge through a recursive relationship between cognitive processes and social interaction. His cybernetic epistemology does not allow for a duality of either/or between cognitive processes and social interaction; it is all one thing. Bateson considered that our perceptive processes are necessarily unconscious, which enables us to have a sense of “self” - so how you and I know what we know, then, is a process mediated by our (largely unconscious) perception of our cognitions, relationships and the context in which we live. Our knowing is in part self-referential (individually and collectively) and based upon unconscious, conscious, relational and contextual processes. Knowing, according to Bateson, is both epistemological *and* ontological.

His critique of Western (Occidental) thought (or epistemology) was a constant theme in his writing, warning that we are heading towards catastrophe unless we change the way we think. Bateson considered that our epistemology governs how we adapt to and construe our world, and it was clear that he was very concerned:

If we continue to operate in terms of a Cartesian dualism of mind versus matter, we shall probably also continue to see the world in terms of God versus man; elite versus people; chosen race versus others; nation versus nation; and man versus environment. It is doubtful whether a species having both an advanced technology and this strange way of looking at its world can endure.

(Bateson, 1972, p. 343)

These words ring even more true today. For example, our advanced technology can connect people globally and create communities and at the same time increase division and polarisation. Our reliance upon, and intimacy with, technology has changed us, our relationships with each other and the material world. The cost to the environment of this advanced technology is high; the resources and materials required to manufacture mobile phones, computers or the latest electric cars have implications for the planet and human lives. Capitalism seems to be the zenith of a dualistic way of thinking that sees the Earth, creatures and humans as mere resources to be exploited for profit. We are now witnessing an elite where billionaires are sending themselves to space, and at the same time, people are starving, even in comparatively wealthy countries.

Bateson reminds us that, due to our dualistic epistemology and conscious purpose, we are destroying the very ecology of which we are a part:

There is an ecology of bad ideas, just as there is an ecology of weeds [...] When you narrow down your epistemology and act on the premise 'What interests me is me, or my organisation, or my species,' you chop off consideration of other loops or the loop structure. You decide that you want to get rid of the by products of human life and that Lake Erie will be a good place to put them. You forget that the eco-mental system called Lake Erie is part of your wider eco-mental system—and that if Lake Erie is driven insane, its insanity is incorporated in the larger system of your thought and experience.

(Bateson, 1972, p. 492)

As a discipline, I wonder if we have been guilty of contributing to this insanity, this ecology of bad ideas, by only focussing on the “bits” of Bateson’s theories that interested us and chopping off the rest? Of course, the message in the quote above is much broader: our tendency to seek short-term solutions to problems without considering the wider implications of those choices demonstrates a lack of humility and wisdom. The impact of our choices upon our environment (or *eco-mental system*) will ultimately affect our own species, so when Lake Erie is driven insane, this insanity becomes part of us and our thinking. Nearly fifty years on, the entire planet is becoming insane. Wildfires are raging in the United States, Russia, Canada, Greece, Algeria, Turkey and Italy. Deadly and catastrophic floods have occurred in Europe. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released their sixth assessment report in August 2021, warning that “It is unequivocal that human influence has warmed the atmosphere, ocean and land. Widespread and rapid changes in the atmosphere, ocean, cryosphere and biosphere have occurred” (SPM-5).

Returning to therapists only focussing on elements of theory that were of immediate interest, and disregarding the wider contextual loops, Bateson was astute enough in his understanding of clinicians to warn us that:

Theory is becoming available to action oriented people, whose first impulse is that which is primarily in empiricism. ‘Take it on the wards and try it. Don’t waste years trying to understand the theory. Just use whatever hunches seem to follow from it.’ Such people are likely to be frustrated and their patients hurt...Theory is not just another gadget which can be used without understanding

(Bateson, 1991, p. 150)

This sharp criticism was directed towards those who had reified the Double Bind Theory of schizophrenia (Bateson, Jackson, Haley, & Weakland, 1956), including some of his then collaborators, and also towards those who interpreted it as if it were a theory of the “causes” of schizophrenia, possibly (according to the superficial understanding of the critics) blaming mothers, something that would be antithetical to Bateson. However, a lack



of appreciation of theory can be apparent in our field. I have witnessed systemic practitioners who are quite capable of thinking systemically *about* the families they work with and yet appear incapable or unwilling of thinking systemically in contexts beyond the clinic, or even within the clinic itself.

For example, some systemic practices, like reflecting teams, can become ritualised gadgets, delivered without critical thinking about how, when, and where they are used. In their defence, many systemic practitioners work in rigid organisational structures that do not promote systemic thought beyond the clinic. Even the clinic itself is still primarily seen as the place to “do” therapy, rather than considering other spaces. I wonder how many of us switch off our “systemic” brains and revert to a non-cybernetic epistemology in our everyday lives. Bateson did acknowledge how hard (and isolating) it is to maintain a cybernetic epistemology in a dualistic world:

From time to time I get complaints that my writing is dense and hard to understand. It may comfort those who find the matter hard to understand if I tell them that I have driven myself, over the years, into a ‘place’ where conventional dualistic statements of mind-body relations—the conventional dualisms of Darwinism, psychoanalysis, and theology—are absolutely unintelligible to me. It is becoming as difficult for me to understand dualists as it is for them to understand me.

(Bateson, 1977 p. 236)

Returning to cybernetic epistemology, Bateson explains how important it is to try to understand the larger circuits relevant to a particular context or phenomenon, and this quote is pertinent to our discussion of systemic therapy and the broader contexts of our practice:

The basic rule of systems theory is that, if you want to understand some phenomenon or appearance, you must consider that phenomenon within the context of all completed

circuits which are relevant to it [thinking this way] might even lead the human race to a sort of wisdom that would preclude the wanton destruction of our biological environment and preclude some of the very peculiar attitudes we exhibit toward patients, foreigners, minorities, our spouses, and our children—and even each other.

(Bateson, 1991, p. 260)

Narrative and more systemic therapists nowadays do pay more attention to the wider circuits of the lives of those they work with, from social justice issues in their practice, challenging oppressive dominant discourses and raising awareness of ecological problems, which is very encouraging. Still, there is much more that can be done to avoid focusing on single wider circuits.

As systemic thinkers and practitioners, we have a responsibility, not only to those we serve but also to ourselves, families, communities, and future generations. Bateson asked us to think beyond the clinic. We must. We are facing a multi-faceted crisis right now: inequality, pandemic, oppression and catastrophic climate change. Gail Simon recently referred to this as a “Panmorphic Crisis”:

...the cluster bomb of social, health, climate and economic catastrophes, mass systemic failure over time and in the moment. I am using the term panmorphic crisis to describe a transitional time-space populated by urgent needs for changes in meta matters and materialities. And woven through this panmorphic crisis is a tussle between different epistemologies of control.

(Simon, 2021, p. 20)

This crisis requires shifts in both our practice and our thinking, and these shifts are already beginning to emerge as rhizomatic, as points of growth and change (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987).

## Looking forward: Posthumanism following Bateson's footsteps

Valerie Featherstone (an educationalist, rather than a therapist), in her feminist critique of family therapy, wrote about a possible paradigm shift within our field that could be feminist *and* ecosystemic:

In a feminist ideological framework, life is an evolving process and is seen in multidimensional terms, thus there is 'no grand cure or final fix' for presenting problems...Therefore, it is considered that yet another paradigm shift could take place within family therapy, a feminist, ecosystemic, or ecological perspective and way of thinking being a preferable model when helping families

(Featherstone, 1996, p. 19)

Posthumanism (Braidotti, 2019) is a rejection of Cartesian duality made by Bateson, though not always attributed to Bateson, whom Deleuze and Guattari dismissed for his 'American career' (Shaw, 2015). The posthuman decentres humanity, challenging the narrative of boundaries between humans and other species, and even the material world, including natural and manufactured objects. Simon and Salter have framed the relationship between human and all other life-forms as transmateriality and shown how we create material-discursive worlds (Simon and Salter, 2019). But, again, Bateson had already laid the foundations for this in his analogy of the blind man and a stick, for example:

Consider a blind man with a stick. Where does the blind man's self begin? At the tip of the stick? At the handle of the stick? Or at some point halfway up the stick? These questions are nonsense, because the stick is a pathway along which differences are transmitted under transformation, so that to draw a delimiting line across this pathway is to cut off a part of the systemic circuit which determines the blind man's locomotion

(Bateson, 1972, p. 324)

Here, the stick is not a boundary but a pathway, illustrating Bateson's understanding of immanence – that there are no “parts” or boundaries, only the system as a whole. Bateson could easily be described as a posthumanist. He asked us to think systemically about ourselves, our own lives and responsibilities, to each other and our environment, for we too are part of the whole. The feminist philosopher and physicist, Karen Barad, echoes this call:

We are responsible for the world of which we are a part, not because it is an arbitrary construction of our choosing but because reality is sedimented out of particular practices that we have a role in shaping and through which we are shaped

(Barad, 2007, p. 390)

Barad's observation reflects much of Bateson's earlier message to us: we are both part of the environment and shape the environment, which, in turn, shapes us. How our practices shape our world requires responsibility and the sort of wisdom that emerges from a systemic, cybernetic epistemology instead of the short-term solutions of conscious purpose and decontextualised thinking.

We are living in increasingly precarious and troubling times (Tsing, 2015). It is evident that a crisis is with us. Indeed, as Simon (2021) has suggested, we are in a panmorphic crisis echoing Bateson's warnings about our hope of survival.

This state of flux offers both opportunities and threats; we now occupy a liminal space – a place of potential and becoming on the one hand, but of environmental catastrophe and the loss of human and non-human life on the other. Liminality is familiar to Jungian psychologists; not one place nor another, but somewhere in between. Ethnographers think of the liminal in the situation of a researcher, separated from their own culture, but at the same time apart from the culture of interest. Systemic practitioners do this all the time. We use phrases like “not knowing” (Anderson and Goolishian, 1992) or “safe uncertainty” (Mason, 1993) to describe the liminality that is part of our practice. It may be found in the session where time flew by,

where you were all so engrossed in the conversation and yet felt something, almost impossible to articulate, beginning to shift, or times when a subjugated narrative begins to emerge, or when a metaphor for change begins to form in your mind.

We are responsible for using this space (what little there may be left of it) wisely and taking responsibility in this time of urgency. There have been occasions when I've been trying to repair a broken garage door (that inevitably broke at a time when I really needed it working – isn't that always the case?) or assemble a complicated bit of furniture for myself or one of my children, where I've become frustrated and felt like an upset teenager who wished that my dad, or someone else (anyone!), would materialise and sort it out for me. A moment of quiet reflection invariably leads me back to the realisation that it is down to me. I have to get on with the job myself. I wonder how true this is for all of us, to an extent, wishing someone would come and rescue us, help fix the problem, the mess, and take away our frustration. But, ultimately, it is down to me, to you - us, to take responsibility, not necessarily for creating the mess we are in, but in co-creating routes out of it.

### **Taking responsibility and becoming an activist**

Taking responsibility within this liminal space at the brink of either healing or disaster may require us to make trouble. As Haraway observes, "Our task is to make trouble, to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places" (Haraway, 2016, p. 1.) As we rediscover the relevance and wisdom of Bateson's cybernetic epistemology and appreciate the threads of his thinking (re)emerging in posthumanities that decentre humans, our discipline already has the benefit of being able to think (and act) systemically. Systemic thinkers are positioned to both make trouble and to create quiet spaces or even the sanctuaries described by Bayo Akomelafe (2020). The Norwegian philosopher and ecologist Arne Naess recognised that, although individually we might not be able to save the world, we need to be active.

The remedy (or psychotherapy) against sadness caused by the world's misery is to do something about it. I shall refrain from mentioning Florence Nightingale, but let me note that Gandhi loved to care for, wash, and massage lepers; he simply enjoyed it. It is very common to find those who constantly deal with extreme misery to be more than usually cheerful. According to Spinoza, the power of an individual is infinitely small compared with that of the entire universe, so we must not expect to save the whole world. The main point—which is built into the basic conceptual framework of Spinoza's philosophy—is that of activeness

(Naess, 2008, p. 125)

Taking the lead from Naess and answering Bateson's earlier call to therapists, I would argue that we begin to think of ourselves as *systemic activists* rather than systemic therapists or practitioners. No longer confined to clinics, but crossing boundaries into our communities, local woodlands, and wilderness spaces. As systemic activists, we can redefine our attachments and connections, recognise and listen to a multiplicity of voices, human and otherwise, as we shift from being postmodern to becoming posthuman, as Rosi Braidotti tells us:

'We' are immanent to, which means intrinsically connected to, the very conditions we are also critical of. The posthuman convergence is a shared trait of our historical moment, but it is not at all clear whose crisis this actually is. Because we cannot speak of an undifferentiated humanity (or an undifferentiated 'we') that is allegedly sharing in a common condition of both technological mediation and crisis and extinction, extra work is required of critical thinkers... An immanent, posthuman project assumes that all matter or substance is one and immanent to itself. This means that the posthuman subject asserts the material totality of and interconnection with all living things.

(Braidotti, 2019, p. 54)

Reading the quote above, I can't help but be reminded of Bateson's cybernetic epistemology – where context is *everything* – and we are part of it. As systemic thinkers, practitioners and activists, we are undoubtedly well placed to not only redefine our senses of attachment and connection but to invite others to participate in this journey of healing and transformation. There is as much cause for hope as there is for despair, but this window will not and cannot last long. We can become nomads, not fixed to one way of looking at the world, but travelling with other thinkers and practitioners – not just from our discipline – and, most importantly, with the people we serve. We have individual and collective responsibilities to challenge the individualisation of distress created by the structural violence of capitalism, patriarchy and necro-politics. We have individual and collective responsibilities to challenge colonisation, racism, sexism, and the othering of our kin, both human and otherwise. We have individual and collective responsibilities to respond to the unfolding climate crisis. And we don't have much time – this is urgent.

How we do this, given that all of us are different, will depend on each one of us to take responsibility in our own ways, and as Braidotti notes, “we-are-in-this-together-but-we-are not-one-and-the-same” (2019, p. 165).

Becoming a systemic activist in Bateson's footsteps will require considerable thought and effort. We need to consider the wider loops of our well-intentioned choices, which will inevitably present us with ethical dilemmas. Not only can we make changes in our personal lives, but what changes to how we work might address the many critical changes and situate all the participants in therapy in interwoven wider systems risking and at risk environment? As systemic activists, we can make (or push for, depending on the context in which we work) changes to our working practices to limit the environmental impact. For example, online work reduces the need for travel and transportation. We might consider including “Ecology” as one of the Social GGRRAACCEEESSS (Burnham, 2013) and talk with the families we support about how ecological concerns may impact them all. It is worth bearing in mind that children and young people, in particular, are becoming very anxious about their future and the future of the planet as we currently know it (Pihkala, 2018). This is far from

an exhaustive list, and I hope readers will consider other ways to become systemic activists and share their ideas with others.

If our collaborations in our work do not reflect the changes needed in the wider world, then we are kidding ourselves that we are agents of change and that we are still innovators of theories of change.

The concept of isomorphism suggests that it is important for therapists to model the change they wish to see in their systems. As therapists, we are committed to promoting healing and transformation in the lives of our clients, but that means we are ideally also a part of healing and transforming the world within which we all exist.

(Laszloffy and Davis, 2019, p. 181)

Healing and transforming our own lives and those of our clients cannot happen on a planet that is no longer able to sustain us. This is a crisis, and we do not have much time to start to think very differently about ourselves and our world and to reorientate and decentre ourselves.

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# Rewilding Systemic Practice

Chiara Santin

## **Rewilding my systemic practice: “Moments of magic” from my ecotherapy practice**

In the last two years I have been through a process of rewilding my systemic practice with individuals, couples and families. This has created a context for many significant therapeutic moments, “moments of magic” as described by one of the parents I work with. Given the context of a rewilding of therapy in and through nature, I will use the term “co-explorers” to describe the people I work with.

## **A wild therapy room in the woods: exterior designing and home making in nature**

In developing my ecotherapy practice I have been thinking about how my personal experiences of home making across the Italian and English cultures, my passion for interior design, have influenced my relationship with the natural, the imaginal space made up by the landscape, the natural elements, and therapeutic boundaries outdoors. I am inspired by the Fifth province approach, which advocates for an imaginal and sacred space, a dialogical space to create the possibility of new understandings, new meanings out of different pathways, identities and experiences and, most importantly, a space where there is no need for othering. It invites entry to a space where many diverse and even conflicting positions and practices can co-exist beyond time and space and be negotiated in dialogue with others (McCarthy, 2001).



If I am in nature, I often experience the urge to find a protected space, a corner, a den in which to sit undisturbed, maybe hide, a legacy from my childhood. As a therapist, thinking how I create a safe therapeutic space, I am holding the idea of space as sacred and intimate, as private rather than public. However, in an open outdoor space how would I convey safety, intimacy, and boundaries?

In the past two years I have been practicing in the local green spaces, within the Natural Cemetery, Memorial and burial grounds for all faiths. It has become like a new home in nature for me i.e. a place where I feel safe and comfortable. I re-discovered my innate wish to be an interior designer and have been drawn to experimenting as an exterior designer by creating my

first wild therapy room. I chose a spot in the woods, slightly off the path, drawing some boundaries by placing some branches around it and a focal point made by some rocks and sticks. It felt exciting. It was a liminal space, between the more protected woodland and the open pastures, which was, however, exposed to the worst weather conditions and high winds. Therefore, when I returned after the winter months, I found it was almost destroyed, unrecognisable. I did not know the land and I naively did not consider this as a possibility. I felt upset as if it belonged to me! A good reminder that it belonged to nature and its elements, and how fragile and transient life is.



I had to let go of the first wild therapy room and create another one. I was reminded to remain wild in my approach and open to the unpredictability of working in nature, whilst still feeling safe, “at home”. I identified another spot, this time in a very protected part of the woods, under huge yew trees. I have a special relationship with yew trees as they were familiar to me in Italy and have a regular presence in spiritual places in the UK. They are evergreen, therefore, my wild therapy room can benefit from their low

branches to create a cosy dark shelter all year around, with some basic logs as seats and some branches. In the middle, some rocks, snail shells, sticks have been gathered. This time I was prepared to consider this as a temporary wild therapy room, that could easily be overtaken by nettles and become inaccessible. To my surprise, the second wild therapy room has weathered the storms and two winters now. I like the fact that there are no doors, it is open to anyone who wish to visit, human and non-human beings! Yet it feels “home” to me and give me an embodied sense of safety. People have made positive comments describing my wild therapy room, as a protected, intimate and homely space. Home-in-nature can come to symbolise the therapeutic alliance (Berger and McLeod, 2006, p. 83).

In my developing ecotherapy practice, the landscape itself and my relationship with this special place have often shaped what happens in ecotherapy sessions and has offered me a loose structure. I tend to start with entering the woods as a way of coming into a different space, relaxing body and mind, reducing stress, an opportunity to get in touch with buried emotions, the intention to engage in often difficult but meaningful conversations. The big tree at the entrance of the woodland is our door to the therapeutic space. A different way to draw some invisible therapeutic boundaries.

As we gently walk through the woods, I often ask to look for something that reflects the topic to focus on, the conversation they would want to have with me and with each other. Or I can ask to collect something for other family members. It seems to help to focus, to find a way to relate the problem to nature. Then, as we come out of the woods there is a bench in a beautiful spot which gives an open view of green, round hills and the sea in the distance. It seems to invite wild and brave conversations with individuals, couples and families. Sometimes my co-explorers might prefer conversations where nature is more in the background or in a more intimate space, so we can move to the wild therapy room under the yew trees. Once again the space might invite more intimate conversations with my co-explorers where words can be replaced by objects used as metaphors or arranged as a representation of their own life, family , relationships.





### **A wild reflecting team**

Rewilding my practice has helped me to welcome all weathers and see interruptions as possibilities rather than intrusions, as Jordan and Marshall (2010) highlight “challenging issues for the therapist, in dealing with intrusions from the natural world, such as erratic, difficult weather conditions” (Jordan and Marshall, 2010, p. 349). As I developed a sense of personal safety in nature to manage my own fears and anxiety e.g. the

weather, I noticed a greater sense of relational safety and risk taking (Mason, 2005) for both myself and co-explorers.

On one occasion I could not believe how outspoken a young person was with her mother when previously she did not feel she could speak for herself in an online session. Walking and talking and being in the wild therapy room offered a safer context for wild conversations to happen between them. It was also an opportunity for her to say that her father was “a bit like a squirrel”, meaning that he would jump from one branch to another, being quite disengaged with difficulties that his daughters were facing and leaving the mother to make most decisions and carry the emotional load.

In this case and often, I do not know what to expect from ecotherapy sessions, but I trust that nature will be my co-therapist and will play a significant part in the process. Therefore, I am focused on tuning into myself and my co-explorers through our connection to nature, aware of their needs and preferences, their desired changes, and the agreed therapeutic goals and less preoccupied with having a plan and “doing” something.

In my experience ecotherapy tends to be more relational, more responsive to multiple influences and unpredictable interruptions than in traditional therapy settings. All interruptions or even disruptions during ecotherapy sessions are like visits from the natural world which often carry an important message, a bit like a reflecting team in systemic practice (Andersen, 1987). The reflecting team approach is designed to bring different voices into the therapeutic process and promote multiple perspectives and different positions e.g. speaker, listener, witness, observer who can connect and validate co-explorers’ experiences. The reflecting team approach is also inviting reflecting processes (Andersen, 1992) moving between “inner talks” while listening and “outer talks” while talking (Andersen, 1996). Multiple voices and perspectives can create opportunities for new stories and meanings to emerge. Changing the context to the outdoor, the landscape itself becomes the stage for wild voices to be heard and welcomed. However, with a *wild reflecting team*,



there is no control over who and whose voice will be heard, as the natural voices or messages will be unpredictable, yet powerfully relevant.

During ecotherapy sessions we can be interrupted by playful squirrels, an unusual birdsong, some crows flying away, a sky lark hovering over.

On one occasion, I was walking with a co-explorer who said: “I really need to talk to you about something”. She was hesitant... Going round the bushes...I knew it was hard for her to talk.

“What would help you to make it easier to talk about it? What would you want from me?” I asked.

“Your professional advice”, she said.

“Ok, I will wear my professional hat”.

And she continued, “It is about my mental health. It’s serious. It has become worse in lockdown. I need to talk about it. I need help”.

I felt there was a need for me to respond by anticipating some of her fears. “No matter what it is, I will still be proud of you and the work you have done so far”.

I could feel the pain and shame attached to “this thing” but also I felt a deep connection to her, her honesty and her love for nature. Admitting to needing help was a big step for her and a result of many years of therapy. We started walking. However, the wind was so strong that she started shouting to be heard. In this moment of shouting and listening and walking, a horde of crows flew up and swirled over us and I interrupted saying, “Look at that! Imagine being free from all of this worry”. Our conversation carried on in a more sheltered space near the trees. She identified with a particular tree and appeared to feel grounded and safe enough in her body whilst talking. I kept repeating: “You are safe, here, with me and your favourite tree”. She described it at the time as a “moment of magic”, that she was able to savour (Bryant and Veroff, 2007) and go back to this moment at any time when she needed to feel safe. By being attuned to her mood and preoccupations in the moment, using movement and other life forms – the

crows and the trees, my words and sounds – she felt the right circumstances came together for her to seize the moment and keep it.



Ecotherapy sessions are often shaped by opportunities in the landscape itself as well as previous experiences of therapy and people's relationship with nature and what they bring on the day. I do not want to impose my own agenda or expectation of interaction with nature and try to offer a space for my co-explorers to find their own way to be in nature that is comfortable. Jordan (2014) in fact, warns therapists against the risk of their own relationship and beliefs about the environment being imposed on co-explorers.

Imagine a continuum. For example, on the one hand, some people have a deep bond with nature and regularly spend time outdoors; therefore, they will be more likely to connect and interact directly with nature, with different elements, with the seasons, with the landscape and its metaphors. In this case nature becomes the primary therapist. On the other hand, some people want nature to be in the background, a place where they can relax into conversations as if they were indoors. From my experience I learnt that, in all cases, co-explorers' relationship/s with

nature is a key factor. I have identified the following:

- Neutral – when there is an implicit affinity and unconscious awareness of being part of nature, based on the biophilia hypotheses i.e. the innate capacity for human beings to be attracted to nature and “life and lifelike processes” (Wilson, 1984, p. 1)
- Familiarity with being outdoors – recognising the benefits of being in nature, for some might be a commodity, a place for leisure activities e.g. going to a park to play football, or skate boarding
- Personal – based on an attachment and bonding, feeling part of nature and a sense of belonging, *at home* feeling
- Dialogical – based on a fluency in the language of nature, interacting with natural elements as metaphors, mirroring in a mutual recognition of being part of nature
- Spiritual – based on nature as a place for being in contact with God or a spiritual presence and/or experiencing self as a spiritual being
- Ecological – based on sensitivity about environmental issues and healthy lifestyles, eco-anxiety and concern for the state of the planet
- Political – based on carrying specific beliefs and being activists in climate change, nature conservation and politics.

My co-explorers will have diverse relationships with nature which are not mutually exclusive and might interact with each other to reflect each person’s level of awareness and familiarity of interaction with nature, experiences, stories of being in nature and beliefs about the environment. This often influences the therapeutic process in unpredictable and exciting ways. It can also change over time. Some local families and some participants of an ecotherapy group, have realised that the greenspaces are accessible and available to them at other times too; therefore, ecotherapy can also promote a different relationship with nature that people can enjoy

outside therapy as they connect with nature and develop a closer relationship and familiarity with exploring the inner and outer landscapes.

### **Nature as my co-therapist and primary therapist**

Rewilding therapy means also experiencing nature as a co-therapist and be open to the healing power of nature, and relying less on my own ideas, plans and techniques. Practicing in nature is not simply transferring therapy outdoors, but becoming active in the process, as nature is not only the setting in which therapy occurs but also a partner in the process (Berger and McLeod, 2006). Jordan and Hinds (2016) describe nature as the third party in the therapeutic process or a 3-way relationship between co-explorer, therapist and nature, “a tripartite therapeutic partnership” (Hegarty, 2010, p. 66).

Hegarty (2010) also claims that the role of the therapist is to be a facilitator, watching, holding the space from a distance, letting go of their control to rely more on trust and intuition, and nature becoming the primary therapist with its healing power.

Being mindful of and trusting nature as a co-therapist has allowed me to initiate some conversations as well as *stepping out of the way and let the conversations*

*unfold without interference* as a parent described it to me, an example of nature becoming the primary therapist. I now see myself as a minimalist



therapist, peripheral and de-centred to allow the power of nature to do its magic. I suggest that working in nature allows a more flexible positioning, where the therapist can move freely between different positions e.g. an observer and facilitator, responsible for holding the therapeutic space as well as a participant and witness from a meta-perspective and trusting the healing power of nature in which we all become immersed. This latter could be regarded as a third order positioning.

I often reflect on whether working in nature allows a different pace in the therapeutic process, a different depth and lightness at the same time; it can feel like going on a fast track and pace whilst slowing down the process and reducing the number of words needed to enter a meaningful therapeutic conversation. On several occasions, one off ecotherapy meeting with couples or families have made enough difference to them that they did not need further meetings or reduced the frequency to once a month or every two months. Sometimes, the process of therapy seems to be like a quiet, yet powerfully strong stream of fresh water, moving through the rocks and free flowing towards its own course. Since I was a systemic trainee, I kept an inner mantra alive to help me relax into the therapeutic process: “Go with the flow”. I now feel like it happens often in ecotherapy meetings, where the therapeutic process will just flow where it is needed and nature will take care of us all.

It has been liberating to trust that nature will offer containment when needed, will hold silences as well as powerful shouting or whispering and will inspire wild conversations. On one occasion, I invited my co-explorer to shout out all her anger and her determination to shut down her critical voice, full of fear and constant worry, in order to honour her resolve to become less tolerant of its unreasonable demands. She said that she was worried about frightening the birds. Another day I invited her to do the same, and she did. I found myself joining her in the shouting, in spite of being worried about people in the distance hearing us. It felt like another “*moment of magic*” as if we were both standing against the tyranny of the self-critical voice. She thanked me for this, and I am sure I would not have done it indoors, within four walls, even if I was in my therapy room at home.

Considering nature as a co-therapist leads also to a co-created process within a more egalitarian and collaborative space than in a traditional therapy setting, in spite of the asymmetry of power in the therapeutic relationship. In my experience, working in nature also facilitates children



having more of a voice and sharing their understanding of relationships through metaphors and objects from nature. Children and adults can have powerful conversations whilst the focus is on creating a visual representation or searching, collecting and creating natural objects. This could be about mapping relationships within families, representing their position in the family, making natural vibes sticks to develop empathy for each other, talking about worries through rocks or sticks, having a chat with each other about a relevant topic or creating something in pairs, for example, a parent and a child, or a sibling group, so that a more equal power and shared language can be used to express themselves. Searching,

creating, showing and talking become all part of the same process of sharing, communicating and sense-making in nature.

## **What rewilding means to me**

Rewilding has been about re-discovering my inner landscape of wildness. I reflected that I have been trained and tamed to become an *English therapist*, a bit like having to wear a therapy cloak to cover my exuberant Italianness, tame my impatient ways of interrupting and my own rhythm in conversation with others, worrying about if and when, sharing my own thinking and emotions in a dialogical flow, tussling with the idea of personal space and the “right” physical and emotional distance with my co-explorers, in order to develop a well-tamed English therapist self (Santin, 2018).

By practising in nature, I have been wondering: Can I dare to be freer from ways of being a therapist where I learnt to conform, through training and constraining work contexts (e.g. social care) and finding ways of accessing all of myself; my body, mind, heart, spirit; my life in Italy, my life in the UK; my way of relating, my life skills and experiences? Can I dare to use my whole embedded and embodied self (Hardham, 1996) in a way that can benefit my co-explorers and help them achieve therapeutic change? Can I feel safe enough to explore new ways of being and practicing? Can I dare to be a wild therapist in the same way I wished to be a playful and cheeky child and get away with it?

The awareness of being part of the infinite web of life, wisdom, ideas, freely emerging in ecotherapy sessions has been liberating for my systemic practice. I rediscovered nature as being intertwined with my body-sense, my professional identity and style as a therapist. In nature I feel more grounded, more present and connected to Life and to myself, my whole self, including my spiritual self, which often felt hidden or inaccessible in the past. Working in nature and rewilding my practice can be associated with what Shotter (2010, p. 2) describes as the interplay of “the spontaneous”, the “living activities”, the bodily experience, the



expressiveness which invite responsiveness; these elements become alive all at once and the therapist is sometimes a doer, sometime the witness in this process of dynamic unfolding. I have noticed that by being more connected to my body in nature, my co-explorers are also more in touch with their own bodily sensations and embodied emotions as Brazier (2018, p. 17) states “By observing and experiencing the therapist’s embodiedness, the co-explorer also learns to connect to his own body-sense”. When I am with my co-explorers, all experiencing the aliveness and connectedness with nature, ecotherapy can be transformative and have a magical, dynamic and emerging quality. As Karen Barad says:

The world and its possibilities for becoming are remade with each moment. Meeting each moment, being alive to the possibilities of becoming, is an ethical call, an invitation that is written into the very matter of all beings and becoming.

(Barad, 2007, p. 396)

Rewilding my practice has helped me re-define therapy as moments, moments of meaningful conversations and exploration, moments of silence and reflections and “moments of magic” that have the potential to be therapeutic, i.e. they contain the seed for change as they can open up new possibilities and new “ways of becoming” in relationships. Change for my co-explorers is more like an invisible wind, a gentle dance, a movement, a subtle shift within our inner landscape in response to the outer landscape of words, actions, conversations and interactions with nature. I often experience what Andersen (1996, p. 121) says: “Some words touch the speaker such that the listener can see the talker be moved”. It is often felt by both. I feel moved inside, I recognise it in my inner landscape. My co-explorers too. In Shotter’s words (2010, p. 2) “Something very special occurs when two or more living beings meet and begin to respond to each other (more happens than them merely having an impact on one other)”. Shotter, in fact, talks about surprising changes, changes that happen spontaneously, associated with amazement and wonder and, therefore, extraordinary as they are qualitatively different. Using one of my co-explorer’s words:



*My sessions in the woods with Chiara always surprise me in how deep, moving and life shifting they can be. I love nature and so being outdoors for therapy is a gift. It's not just the sessions that are powerful, but their effects continue afterwards and are changing our family life positively. I don't know how that happens. It feels a bit like magic but it IS happening...*

Rewilding my practice has also allowed my creativity to run wild. Therapy has become more like a green canvas, similar to when I start painting and I do not know what I am going to paint but the canvas is nature itself. Ecotherapy is an experiential endeavour mediated by nature and its metaphors, more powerful than any conversation, a dialogical space for new meanings to emerge beyond words. In nature, I experience a different kind of connection with my co-explorers, similar to what Shotter writes,

Words do not *do* anything on their own; they do not stand for things, nor represent ideas. They have a meaning only in those situations in which living human beings make some *use* of them in relating themselves to other human beings. In these situations, living people bodily respond to each other's utterances and voicings, and in so doing, not only do they *relate* themselves to each other, but they also *relate* themselves to their surroundings.

(Shotter, 2010, p. 44)

This experience of words taking meaning in a relational context and from the surroundings makes practicing in nature inherently more relational than in clinical settings, promoting relationally responsive understanding and meaning making beyond language. Duncan (2017) suggests that the primacy of the *creatural or imaginal* invites us to recognize and appreciate the non-verbal and non-linear intelligence beyond the constraints of logical thinking and conceptual language.

In fact, in ecotherapy sessions, language and words can become redundant; interacting with nature can be meaning-rich beyond words. English being my second language, it has been liberating to rely less on verbal language and more on metaphors; just a few words can sometimes access powerful meanings. One day a



co-explorer started our conversation saying that she was totally exhausted and how parenting their 6-year-old adopted son was intensely challenging. As we just entered the dark woods, I felt like “entering” into the word “exhausting”, connecting to her emotions and stories embedded in that word. I experienced in that moment what Andersen (1996, p. 121) states *“There are always emotions in the words, there are other words in the words, sometimes sounds and music in them, sometimes whole stories, sometimes whole lives”*. As we were standing by one of the more majestic trees in the woodland, I asked her: “What do you need?” She said: “I need to hide”. I invited her to look for a hiding place around her and she chose a hole at the roots of the big tree. I asked her again: “What do you need inside?” She started collecting a few leaves, some moss, rocks and sticks. I picked up a few soft feathers to offer. She arranged all of them to create a soft bed, a rock as a door, a stick to signpost a dwelling. I asked her to imagine giving herself some rest. It felt like a “moment of magic”, much more powerful than many words to describe the nature of her exhaustion, how she could find some solace in nature and renew her commitment to taking care of herself.

## **The seeds of Ecotherapy: my journey towards “coming home” through nature**

We all have some stories to tell about nature. Mine take me back to my childhood in Italy. When I was a young child, I used to get up in the middle of the night to watch the stars whilst everybody was asleep. I felt scared but terribly excited, like a small creature lost in the immensity of the dark sky but, strangely, I felt safe. Similarly, being near the high peaks of the Alps where I grew up, the majesty of the rocks, the wild flowers growing in the cracks and the mysterious forests, the abundance of water gathering in joyous streams and pristine lakes, were a deeply spiritual experience. It was also an escape into a world of peace and beauty. Yes, nature has always been my safe place and my spiritual home, based on a special emotional bond.

I have been reflecting on my personal intergenerational stories about migration and emotional homelessness linked to a longing for a “home”, which could offer some comfort or a hiding place for shame (Santin, 2016). One way of describing my ongoing personal and professional journey so far has been like “coming home”, exploring my inner landscape through nature and my rediscovered sense of self as a person and as a therapist. This has become like the seeds of my ecotherapy practice, taking therapy outdoors to maximise the benefits of being and interacting with nature in a therapeutic way.

During the lockdown, as I started going regularly for walks in nature and exploring new places, many memories started surfacing. I remember as a child, spending a lot of time with my primary school friend who lived near the countryside on the outskirts of my village. We created a little den in the nearby wood and spent most of our time there. It was such a special and peaceful place, a sanctuary, a safe home, in nature. Memories of nature from my life in Italy have become increasingly present in my embodied sense of safety. Yet, my journey towards feeling safe in nature in the UK has been a long one. I moved to the UK 23 years ago. I noticed how my body was not able to fully relax when outdoors, often telling me that it was not safe for me to be in such an unfamiliar place. The air and smells were

different. The landscape and the wet weather were keeping me at a distance from the outdoors. In addition to this, there was always a worry at the back of my mind whether it is safe enough for me, as a woman, to visit green spaces on my own, as well as having a general fear of being treated unkindly as “a foreigner”, especially after Brexit, worrying that somebody would make a remark or tell me off for something I had or had not done. This is also a reminder of how access to nature can reflect social positioning and inequality as different groups in society might experience this as a privilege or as marginalisation and denial of a common good e.g. nature. I recognise that it is a privilege for me to have easy access to nature on my doorstep, and to benefit from my past experiences of connection through nature, which has led to an embodied feeling of peace and safety, a sense of “coming home” to my inner self. This feels even more like a privilege as I reflect on the dangerous and deadly migration journeys, all over the world, across Europe, its Mediterranean Sea and the UK Channel, a desperate attempt for survival, a simple longing for a place of safety and a home for the future...



I always loved photography as a way of remembering places I have been, a way of keeping them alive in my memory. Bryant and Veroff (2007) suggest that savouring positive emotional experiences has the effect of reliving the

experience and deepening it. Taking photos in nature and revisiting them later has helped me savouring moments in nature when I am elsewhere. It allows me to recall body sensations, emotions, thoughts associated with meaningful moments of connection, which, in turn, enhance my sense of embodied self and connection to life and other life forces. This savouring for me is not just a cognitive act of remembering, of accessing memories from the past; it is rather a process of imagining being again in places, with people, reliving the sensory experiences associated with them.

I found this idea and practice useful for myself and those I work with, particularly during the pandemic. It could be argued that human bodies have become accustomed to being activated by fear of catching the virus, with the capacity to self-regulate (behavioural and emotional states) being tested (Porges, 2020). This is compounded by the biological need for connection to self and others which would (usually) promote calm and connectedness (Porges, 2020) but has been interrupted by the impact of the pandemic. My experience of taking therapy outdoors in the past two years confirms that people can appreciate feeling calmer and more connected to self, their body and others in nature. This is not necessarily about the amount of time spent outdoors but the quality of connection to nature, between people and their environment and with others (Richardson, et al., 2021). I agree with Lengieza and Swim's definition of connectedness in nature as recognising the experience of oneness with nature and a blurring of boundaries between self and nature and a form of self-transcendence (Lengieza and Swim, 2021).

My experience of reconnecting with nature as a safe and even spiritual place in the UK, a "coming home" journey, has helped me feeling safe in nature as a person *and* as a therapist. I feel connected to my embodied sense of self, to my cultural roots, open to emotional connection with people and nature. Safety is a key factor in any form of psychotherapy, however in ecotherapy I am invited to constantly balance it with taking risks and be open to the unpredictability of what is emerging in the conversation and the environment itself. This could involve rain, the blowing of the wind, the uneven or muddy path, all of which could influence what happens in ecotherapy sessions. Therefore, Mason's concept of safe uncertainty

(1993, 2019) usefully points to how safety can co-exist with uncertainty and can promote experimenting with rewilding therapy as a way of taking relational risks (Mason, 2005) and feeling safe in creating and exploring new territories.

### **Rewilding in the conservation world and therapeutic practice**

Rewilding in conservation biology is a process of letting nature find its own balance through minimal human intervention e.g. re-introducing wild animals. In some cases, it can be controversial as it may conflict with how the land is distributed and used, reducing the economic benefits for farmers who need to earn a livelihood. There are also many rewilding projects that are experimenting with minimal human interventions into natural habitats, to allow nature to re-generate itself and promote wildlife and biodiversity. I have the privilege to be part of one of these projects which is local to me. The idea of rewilding has also been used to think about bringing change into education by providing learning opportunities for home schooling and leisure time through outdoor activities for children and adults to help them reconnect with nature. For example Project Rewild in Sussex suggests a definition of rewilding as,

a way of supporting the land and sea to return to a better sense of balance, of giving space for the land to recover, of standing back and letting nature heal itself. Rewilding is a way of relinquishing human control, of repositioning humans so that we are a part of – and not apart from – nature. Rewilding is a way to help nature to thrive.

Daniel Ford

Working therapeutically in nature is not new. Many psychotherapists and counsellors from a variety of modalities, have been working outdoors. Common features are the relevance of symbolism and synchronicity, the use of metaphors, the interaction between interior and exterior landscapes (Jordan, 2009) and the mirroring between psyche and nature (Rust, 2009). Within a psychodynamic frame, some claim that the synchronicity with

other-than-human can deepen the therapeutic relationship (Totton, 2012), whilst others question this assumption and suggest that, when working in nature, it is difficult to assess its impact on the therapeutic relationship (Harris, 2018). Key findings of reviewing some research papers suggest that working in nature offers stabilisation of distress. There is more focus on relationship building and using nature metaphors to create new narratives and new meanings (Cooley et al., 2019). However, most psychotherapists and counsellors work with individuals and/or groups. I therefore question what ecotherapy looks like for systemic and family psychotherapists working with couples and families. Roger Duncan, a biologist and systemic psychotherapist (2017) urges to consider Bateson's ideas of the *Creatural* and the *Imaginal*. *Creatural* is the natural tendency towards ecological and human wholeness and self-healing e.g. body capacity for self-healing, constant adaptations and regeneration. Totton (2011, p. 1), a psycho-dynamic body psychotherapist, claims that "therapy is by nature wild: but a lot of at the moment is rather tame". He defines *Wild Therapy* as the attempt to challenge psychotherapy to include and embrace the other-than-human and more-than-human world, and the ethical imperative to take care of all the beings in the universe. He advocates a connection to the "wild mind", a state of awareness and shift in ecological consciousness that recognises us all as being connected with the world and all beings, to challenge the process of domestication of our lives.

### **Ecotherapy as world therapy**

In my personal and professional life I always wonder about new ways of balancing hope and despair (Flaskas and McCarthy, 2007). It has inspired and given impetus to my ecotherapy practice with families, and I have become part of a biodiversity project, whose aim is to mobilise the local community in rewilding and regenerate a neglected green space. community in rewilding and regenerate a neglected green space.

Some professionals in the systemic field have started to explore what the role of systemic therapy is in this unprecedented combination of crises, in which we are sometimes perpetrators or victims, and sometimes both



because there are other social and economic structures in place which value, for example, white lives over Black lives and are invested in socioeconomic imbalance remaining unequal. Overall, the systemic profession is in state of collective denial by failing to consider the larger ecological systems and context. And, as both Hugh Palmer and Phil Kearney point out in their papers (Kearney, 2021; Palmer, 2021), the systemic therapy community has been selective in which theoretical roots of our profession we care to remember and act with. We are failing to embrace fully an ecosystemic epistemology. We are in an emergency which requires an ethical commitment to future generations (Kearney, 2021).



It is time to acknowledge that this crisis is a systemic issue that requires systemic change. Simon (2021) suggests that we are in a *panmorphic crisis* where the disruption in all areas of our lives i.e. social, health, climate, has already happened and is happening. There is no way back. We cannot restore old ways of thinking and practising which have embedded social inequalities and injustice for centuries. Nor should we as we risk recolonising our practices with all the historic ways of thinking and doing, many of which need discarding and critiquing. The Black Lives Matter



movement encourages people to embrace the disruption of the philosophical domination by western anthropocentric theories, a real change of direction in our ways of knowing and being in our lives, away from colonising and pathologising practices. If we recognise that we are living in “transmaterial worlds”, then perhaps we can see the interconnectedness of matter, humans and non-humans - all entangled with each other. We can become part of “transmaterial worlding” – making our worlds through an active and emerging process of transformation of our existence and membership; creating alternative ways of being to disrupt the process of privileging certain voices and stories over others (Simon and Salter, 2019, 2020). Simon and Salter state, “Transmaterial worlding requires that we re-think our relations with-in our environment, that we re- position ourselves from in-habiting the world or co-habiting (both separate us from other materiality) to co-inhabiting” (2019, p. 8).

In the current political context, there have been many public inquiries and good intentions, many recommendations and apologies; many books, and academic papers. Yet Black Lives Matter and COP26 are reminders of our failure to bring about meaningful and structural changes to make a positive difference in people’s lives. I am aware of my many privileges, like being White, cisgender, having an education, having some wealth, living in a good house, having a profession that is giving me a position of personal and economic power, a status in society, and even writing this article is a privilege. If we don’t directly take a stance against oppression and other forms of injustice then we join the discourse and practice of. As McGoldrick says, “Each day, with each intervention, if I am not part of the solution, then I am part of the problem” (McGoldrick, 1994, p. 152).

## **Open-ended Conclusion**

Nobody can any longer deny that our current crisis is affecting all areas of our lives, i.e. a “panmorphic crisis”, locally and globally, including our systemic community (Simon, 2021). What can we offer to the world of psychotherapy and activism at this challenging time? How are systemic

ideas, theories, and concepts helpful in the way we think about life on the planet, the current pandemic and the increasing extent of mental health needs? And do they go far enough in trying to respond to the current call for action and systemic change? What would ecosystemic therapy look like if we start working with children, young people, couples and families in nature, considering us all embedded in a complex interplay of wider communities, social, political, cultural, ecological contexts?

In the past few years, in response to a calling for action, my commitment to a quiet activism has led to rewilding my systemic practice with individuals, couples and families. Exploring new inner and outer landscapes has been challenging and exciting in equal measure. I have been through a personal and professional journey towards feeling safe in nature and taking therapy outdoors, a journey of “coming home” whilst recognising my wildness. I reclaimed my own experiences of home making into experimenting with being an exterior designer and creating a protected, yet wild, space in the woods i.e. a wild therapy room. This is part of a process of re-thinking therapeutic boundaries, re-defining therapy itself as a co-created process of exploring and engaging in inner and outer landscapes as co-explorers. I have been reclaiming some of my indigenous knowledge and experiences of my life in Italy and my bond with nature so that I am better able to access my whole embedded and embodied self (Hardham, 1996) and to be more present and connected to the aliveness and healing power of nature when I am with my co-explorers.

Practising in nature has allowed me to trust nature as a co-therapist and often as a primary therapist in a therapeutic process which is based on relating to one another as human beings and to the other-than-human world. Rewilding my systemic practice means letting go of many plans, ideas, and constraints and consider nature as a safe space to explore old and new inner and outer landscapes and stay with the unfamiliar and unpredictable whilst feeling “at home” in the wild.

Nature is non-binary; it embraces opposites with courage and grace. The power imbalance between co-explorers and therapists and the power of language are mitigated by nature. I have been learning how powerful

natural metaphors can be to promote meaningful and potentially transformative conversations about life and relationships. Speaking through natural objects, letting the landscape or the voices of nature influence the course of a conversation, allowing nature to play its part, have been liberating and nurturing for me towards becoming a minimalist, wild therapist.

I have witnessed many *moments of magic* in ecotherapy explorations where change seems to happen in subtle, yet powerful ways. There is lightness even when talking about worries through the metaphor of heavy rocks. There is depth even when talking about a tree, or a flower, or gathering some natural objects to express unbearable feelings or untold stories when words are hard to find. In nature, therapy becomes more like a green canvas, a free flow of ideas, wisdom, aliveness and strength that can open up and even speed up the therapeutic process. In nature there is space for stillness as well as movement, silence and words, all in harmony, like a dance suspended in time and yet feeling so present with each other and with any wild message that nature wishes to give.



With “moments of magic” come moments of despair too about the gravity of the current crisis which we cannot deny any longer. Here it comes also the responsibility for shaping and reshaping our lives and systemic practices. Karen Barad (2007, p. 390) states, “We are responsible for the world of which we are part, not because it is an arbitrary construction of our choosing but because reality is sedimented out of particular practices that we have a role in shaping and through which we are shaped.”

Practising ecotherapy in nature with a wild reflecting team of birds, wild animals, trees, whilst picking up some rubbish on the way out of the woods, might be a daring metaphor for giving voice to the most silenced and marginalised experiences in our communities, including our profession and wider socio-political contexts. I am reminded that we damaged the environment in such a way that we cannot disentangle plastic from our lives, it is even in the fish we may eat, in the oceans, in the air we breathe, everywhere; therefore as I walk into green spaces and see cans of beer or plastic bottles or any other polluting rubbish, I can decide to ignore, or complain or pick it up.

Matter and what matters - whose voices we listen to and how we respond - can include many parts of our “universe”: trees, plants, mosses, plastic (and other) waste, drugs we pass through our systems and into the water table of the earth, chemicals which benefit, sedate or annihilate entire communities with growing medical punctuation of social and political problems. We are waking daily to long lists of interconnected environmental matters and in an ongoing state of shock or denial or compliance.

Simon & Salter (2019, p. 9)

As it happens in nature, messages from the natural world can become useful interruptions and even disruptions to welcome unexpected voices. My rewilding journey has just started. I welcome anyone to join, to explore new ways of being in the world, to be systemic thinkers and hopeful dreamers based on our own wildness, to share our indigenous knowledges and wisdom based on respect and reciprocity rather than othering. We are

both hosts and guests in nature, longing for a safe wild home and a peaceful posture for a collective onward journey.

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## T H R E E

# Deep Donkey and Dadirri. Asking Creatura out to play

Roger Duncan

### **Donkey - learning to play with a socially constructed order in a Newtonian world**

When I was a about ten years old we used to go on holiday in the UK with our complicated 1970s state-of-the-art trailer tent that unfolded into a sort of camping house. We stayed in campsites in Cornwall and Scotland. Before the days of the internet, mobile phones and signs that said, “no ball games”, children would gather and find things to do. One of the games we played was a ball game called “Donkey”.

This game involved throwing and catching a tennis ball against the faded yellow concrete render of the windowless, gable end of the shower block. The aim of this game was to create a rhythm as we each threw the ball and let it bounce once against the wall and once on the ground before catching it with one hand. Throw-bounce-bounce-catch, throw-bounce-bounce-catch, throw-bounce-bounce-catch. We each stepped up in turn to try and catch the ball. This game was played out within the ruthless social learning hierarchy of pre-adolescent children. The game required a rigorous intensity of concentration to keep the rhythm going to “keep the kettle boiling”. The name “Donkey” derives from the social shaming process of objectifying and othering of anyone who failed to keep the order or rhythm and dropped the ball. One miss and you became a “D” the second miss a “DO” and so on until the ultimate shame of dropping the ball six times to become “Donkey”. Game over.

I learnt a lot from these simple games about social expectations, turn taking, gender, age and class, but also Euclidian geometry. It was essential to watch carefully where the ball might fall after any throw, how its bounce might change if it hit a broken area of wall render or a patch of gravel on the ground. This required focused attention to keep my uncoordinated, pre-adolescent male body in position to catch the ball with one hand and remembering, who was next, who had dropped the ball and how many times I had dropped it to avoid becoming the dreaded “Donkey”!

In the early 1970s, the Western World was obsessed with space travel, labour saving gadgets and germ-killing chemicals, commercial spinoffs of the space programme. Science had come of age and was secretly preparing all of us to leave the earth behind and explore this exciting new “final frontier”. However, I had a deep connection with the natural world and had developed a strong felt sense of the importance of just listening to nature that seemed to silently be communicating its beauty and mysteries to me in a way I could not articulate. I spent a lot of time outside just being, looking and listening, in a pleasant but slightly dissociated state. As a budding young naturalist, I didn’t really have a framework to understand what I was experiencing, but it was obvious to all concerned that, due to this nature connection, I would become a biologist. As I delved deeper into my natural history books, the rules of science and ways of understanding biology became clear, just experiencing nature was not really OK. Science was a *Game of Nouns*, a way of knowing through organising into a taxonomy of biological units and genetic memes where survival was the highest goal. This implicit message was clear, there was no room for a felt sense in biology, that was the realm of artists, who deluded themselves with imaginations of things that could not be objectified or measured in science’s clean Newtonian, Cartesian world - they had really dropped the ball on reality and were well on the way to “Donkey”. As my studies progressed, it became clear that nature was in deep trouble and although biological sciences evidenced this, then as now, they had little to offer in the way of practical help other than further study. Concern for environmental issues in those days was fringed with a touch of madness. This was not a real-world game, and these issues would be solved by the

miracle of unfolding technology, super crops and chemical fertilisers would feed the world, maybe we could even genetically modify plants? And besides we could always go to the Moon or Mars.

Nearly fifty-years on as we recycle our exponentially increasing mountains of waste, environmentalism has become mainstream, and it is unequivocally clear that we are facing an unfolding ecological catastrophe (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2021). The global pandemic seems to be the latest iteration in a series of emerging and unsettling ecological disasters and as we wake up to the systemic fragility of our world, it is clear we need a radical and deep adaption of our current perspective (Bendell, 2020). This has coincided with a painful awakening to the legacy of the social and environmental destruction resulting from a colonial world view of nature and culture.

In this article I hope to explore how an understanding of some of Bateson's original ideas at the core of systemic thinking, particularly his idea of understanding *creatura*, might help systemic psychotherapists navigate a way forward that addresses the need for both a Decolonial Turn and an EcoSystemic Return within systemic psychotherapy (Ndlovu, 2014).

## **Systemic thinking**

After years of working with adolescents in nature as a woodland manager, wilderness camp leader and vision fast guide, and trying to integrate art and science into an understanding of nature, training as a systemic psychotherapist seemed like an exciting way forward (Duncan, 2018). I thought this might be a way of exploring the complexity of the human mind through psychotherapy and also promised to link this thinking with the equally complex and parallel process of understanding nature. As a biologist I was attracted to the field through the work of Gregory Bateson who famously suggested the problems of the world were a result of the difference between the way people think and the way nature actually works (in Bateson, 2010).

Gregory Bateson pointed to the root of the problem as an *epistemological error* within the western way of thinking about psychiatry and biology (Bateson, 1979). He believed that this error, at the core of modernist, materialist, scientific world view, originated in the Cartesian split that separated the world into objects and subjects, and which has had disastrous consequences for both nature and non-western cultures.

To overcome this error, Gregory Bateson suggested using the old Gnostic idea of separating the world in a different way by looking at the world through the two separate lens of *pleroma* and *creatura* (Bateson and Bateson, 2004). The lens or gaze of *pleroma* identifies the physical and first order aspects of nature, the domain of production, of how to be effective in the Newtonian, logical and physical world (Lang et al., 1990). Seeing the world through the lens of *pleroma* is essential if we need to master science, technology and run a global capitalist system, and this first order view is implicit in the game of Donkey.

However, observing the world through the lens of *creatura* reveals a completely different ontological perspective that is more aligned with indigenous cultural perspectives, where the gaze is towards patterns within living systems and interactions that do not necessarily manifest physically or even conceptually in the Newtonian world at all. Donna Haraway's (2016) account of the Navaho blanket weavers illustrates this difference. Navaho blankets were identified as potential objects of trade in the 1930s, seen with the gaze of *pleroma*, the relationship with the weavers, the delicate balance of the sheep and the landscape remained invisible. This is still the case with this way of seeing today where the relationship to production processes and disposal of products remains invisible if we look only through the lens of *pleroma*. Economic pressure undermined these invisible *creatural* relationships. However, for the Navaho women their gaze was through the lens of *creatura*. The ancient process of weaving was all about relationships, stories, matriarchal lineages, patterns, plant dyes, sheep, and landscape. Navaho weaving was not about production but a daily situated ceremony of connection and interrelatedness, an emergent interactive "cosmological performance" that "embodied the worldmaking and world sustaining of relationships". A performance not in the container

of the world, but of the world, as it is continually storied into dynamic substance in a creatural process (Haraway, 2016, p. 91). Through the lens of creatura, we can observe the self-healing systemic complexity shared by both nature and the human mind, which can appear at first chaotic; however, Bateson insists creatura has its own language or grammar which can be learnt through careful observation (Bateson, 1979). Learning to see this creatural aspect of nature requires a patient hermeneutic process of deep listening, of learning “this curious language which has no things in it only difference and relationships” (Bateson and Bateson, 2004, p. 191).

The Milan group of psychiatrists appear to be the first therapists to take Gergory Bateson’s idea seriously and began to develop ways of thinking that were not implicitly structured by modernism and Cartesian dualism. They encouraged a non-expert stance and the cultivation of curiosity in the face of ideas about diagnosis, and they developed the practice of circular questions in clinical settings to identify patterns in the relationships between people (Selvini Palazzoli et al., 1980; Cecchin, 1987). The work of the Milan group began to move the focus to a whole systems approach to families and social problems, which forty years on is still a novel idea in some areas of medicine, education, and social care.

Systemic psychotherapy continued to rise to Bateson’s rigorous challenge by embracing post-modernist ideas within psychotherapy by exploring the tyranny of language that trapped thinking in a pleromal world view from which point the subtlety of creatura remains invisible (Becvar and Becvar, 1999). Systemic therapies have usefully explored how both therapists and clients might become organised by dominant narratives that tend to subjugate less obvious and more subtle and complex stories that remain unspoken and unrecognised, arising from the ineffable matrix of the creatura (White and Epston, 1990; Anderson and Goolishian, 1992). The systemic practice of reflexivity borrows from the laws of geometry that govern optics. This has been used to scaffold thinking to help see events from different perspectives, or different positions, by moving the mirror, as it were (Tomm, 1987). Systemic psychotherapy is a well-established method of engaging with complexity and has been used helpfully to approach issues of clinical risk (Mason, 1993), as well as diversity, race and

gender (Burnham, 2011) but the depth of Bateson's contribution is still poorly understood (Launer, 2001; Palmer, 2021).

Bateson's elusive challenge of finding the patterns that connect nature and the human mind has, however, been explored within the field of ecopsychology. The term *ecopsychology* was popularised by Theodore Roszak in the early 1990s which he defined as an "emerging synthesis of ecology and psychology and the skilful application of ecological insights to the practice of psychotherapy" (Roszak, 1992). Ecopsychology has a focus on the healing of the alienation between humans and nature and encourages us to live a more sustainable life and develop a more mature and ethical sense of responsibility toward the natural world, as well as decolonising our relationship with indigenous cultures (Fisher, 2019). Decolonising demands a reimagining the dominant western world view and part of the challenge of engaging with this process is the painful realisation that a colonial world view is deeply embedded in the very structural epistemology and ontology of western culture. Maldonado-Torres describes the Decolonial Turn as being able to move away from the belief that we need to have a western subject to validate experiences (Maldonado-Torres, 2004). Changing the colonial position requires a radical rethink of our western world view and a move beyond the mere logic of western ideas. It necessitates not only a more systemic perspective but also the possibility of seeing the complexity of nature and mental health through the lens of indigenous knowledge systems (Ndlovu, 2014). It also involves a deep rethink of the very structure of the western culture, and language, the water in which a culture swim. It requires an acknowledgement that "western, educated, industrialised, rich and democratic" or *WEIRD* culture has subjugated and destroyed most other world views (Diamond, 2012, p. 8). The Decolonial Turn needs more than mere inclusivity of diversity of non-white and non-western subjects within the western social and political structures, but a radical opening and acceptance of the intrinsic values of previously subjugated Indigenous peoples' world views.

## Dadirri and Indigenous knowledge systems

Both psychotherapeutic and ecopsychological ideas about nature and culture are very new fields of study in western culture. However, this work of connecting nature and culture has been practiced by indigenous cultures for a very long time and it is now essential to understand how these issues have been approached by non-western peoples. The culture of Indigenous peoples in Australia is at least 40,000 years old, according to western science. However, the knowledge passed on by word of mouth within Indigenous peoples in Australia suggests that the culture has engaged in the practice of connecting with the spiritual in nature continually for the last 100,000 years.

Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr, Indigenous Australian artist and educator has shared a nature-connection practice called *Dadirri*, a hermeneutic approach to the beauty of nature through deep listening (Ungunmerr, 2021). She describes this as essential for the mental health and well-being of Indigenous Australian people in order to connect with the land or “country” as well as the ancestors. Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr shared this knowledge in the understanding that it does not belong to Indigenous Australian people alone, but to all peoples and cultures who have forgotten this connection with their own indigenous heritage. However, when this way of knowing nature was first shared by Indigenous Australian people with western colonial settlers it was translated into English as “the dreaming” based on their limited understanding of its complexity - it was just a dream. More recently, Tyson Yunkaporta, an Indigenous Australian artist and scholar retranslated “the dreaming” from the original Indigenous Australian language as “Suprarational interdimensional ontology endogenous to custodial ritual complexes” (Yunkaporta, 2021, p. 19). It is worth reading this a few times to grasp the complexity of this Indigenous ontology which shows a sophistication of understanding of the natural world rarely seen in western thinking (Shepard, 1998).

Galina Angarova, the United Nations Indigenous spokesperson, describes how she witnessed as a child the breakdown of her Indigenous Siberian culture and language in the Lake Baikal region of Russia. She describes how

her own tribe were particularly skilled at embracing western values and education and now are highly overrepresented in the professional classes of the region. However, she understands this as a “trauma response” to the speed of their cultural dislocation and how in losing their ancient cultural way of life they quickly embraced the soul-numbing comfort of western epistemology in response to the grief of their loss (Angarova, 2020).

In contrast, the authors of “Reclaiming Youth at Risk”, have very successfully applied ancient indigenous knowledge systems to address contemporary social and emotional issues within their “youth at risk” programmes in the United States. They use an 15,000-year-old Lakota developmental mapping tool called the “Circle of Courage” (Brendtro et al., 2009). This work focuses on the essential foundation of attachment and belonging, not only to our parents, but also to family, tribe, culture and nature itself and how the loss of any one of these layers of nested hierarchies of attachment is detrimental to mental health. The “Circle of Courage” model builds on a secure attachment which then supports the skills of mastery, autonomy, and the highest cultural goal, not survival, but altruism.

The Australian Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islanders’ well-being programme, “Gayaa Dhuwi”, in a similar way to reclaiming youth at risk, is working with indigenous wisdom to address current social and mental health issues (Gayaa Dhuwi “*Proud Spirit*” Australia). Gayaa Dhuwi recognises seven stages of attachment as essential to Indigenous peoples’ mental health and social well-being. These are: mind, body, family, community, culture, country, and ancestors.

This indigenous mental health provision describes a complex, multi-layered attachment system that focuses not only on the mind, but also on the role of the body; the wider kinship group; the culture of arts and practical skills; and language and storytelling for knowledge transmission. This system also extends to a connection with nature through the practice of *Dadirri*, deep listening to the spirit of the land, as well as the essential role in well-being played by the relationship with ancestors in the dream time.



Rowen White, a Mohawk seed-keeper describes finding herself dislocated from her cultural Mohawk heritage and her journey of recovering her sense of belonging and reconnecting through gardening. White rediscovered her deep sense of tribal identity through collecting and learning to grow traditional Mohawk varieties of maize seed. White calls her journey an “apprenticeship to the Corn Mother” and believes connecting with the earth through growing food is a way for all broken tribal groups including western culture, which she calls “The diaspora of the disconnected” could be restored and reconnected with the earth (White & Hemphill, 2021).

Malidoma Patrice Somé from the Dagara tribe in West Africa states that true healing comes when the individual remembers their identity and their purpose, chosen in the world of ancestral wisdom, and reconnects with the world of Spirit (Somé, 1995). The Dagara, like many indigenous cultures, see children as Returning ancestors who have come with a clear intent, and the role of the Elders within the community is to awaken these young people to their mission which they have mostly forgotten by the time they reach adolescence. The Tibetan Book of the Dead, which is a very ancient source of indigenous knowledge, describes this process of reincarnation in detail and suggests spiritual practices for the living and dying to negotiate, not only a conscious passage through the afterlife, but also guidance on how to identify and enter a womb into which they will be reborn in the next life (Coleman and Jimpa, 2005). Anyone who has looked into the eyes of a new-born child might sense that we are encountering an ancient “being”, trailing deep history and holding an intent for a future beyond the imagination of its parents, despite the lack of a coherent narrative within modernist western culture to support this.

## **Letting go of Donkey**

Thinking about these indigenous ideas from within a western epistemology, we might immediately begin to look for evidence of their truth and how it fits into our worldview. But it is possible to hold this knowledge lightly and playfully. Engaging with “The Decolonial Turn” does not ask us to mindlessly

“culturally appropriate” and cherry pick indigenous knowledge systems to support failing western lifestyles as western culture is already at a stage of “narrative collapse” (Schmachtenberger, 2020). The WEIRD semantic narrative is beginning to go into free fall, and we are well beyond the notion of “safe uncertainty” (Mason, 1993). “The Decolonial Turn” requires us to turn the western cultural view on its head and see the hubris in western reductionist thinking for dismissing the value of these vast indigenous knowledge systems, which unlike western science (Sheldrake, 2012) have been moderated by tens of thousands of years of transgenerational mutual learning, a process that transforms this information into what Nora Bateson refers to as “warm data” (Bateson, 2020).

As a cisgender, white male, my adoption at the age of two months, from a white Canadian family into a white British family in the 1950s, appeared to go quite well. Adoption is, however, a first order solution for a very deep systemic attachment issue. Over the years, I have realised that my adoption left me with a general mistrust of human relationships and of most first order western cultural narratives. However, I did develop a deep body-based fascination with patterns of communication in nature and later, a strong identification with indigenous cultural perceptions and descriptions of our relationship with the natural world. This experience and my subsequent research have led me to the idea that we were all once Indigenous people and that this deeper knowledge already exists within WEIRD culture, and it is our birth rite to claim back our own lost and stolen indigenous ways of knowing. If you are reading this as a European and wondering about the endemic legacy of colonisation, you might want to ask yourself what tribes you originate from and what were your tribes’ language and how and when this knowledge was lost.

The current Western view of nature continues to be dominated by a modernist biological narrative of Darwinian evolution. A socially constructed world view of nature, based on survival that requires a successful subject and an unfit object to be understood, an idea at the basis of social Darwinism that has provided the implicit justification for a colonial world view. Although the conjuring trick of projecting the Victorian social struggle for existence on to nature and then identifying this struggle as fact,

was exposed by Friedrich Engels as long ago as 1875 (Barad, 2007, p. 496). This modernist paradigm was more recently repackaged as *The New Synthesis* which understood the world by dividing it into discreet autonomous objective building blocks such as, organisms, organs, genes and ecosystems, all carefully and strictly described and measured using the pleromal language of image and concepts (Dawkins, 1986). However, to understand ecopsychology in these uncertain times invites a new way of understanding nature, a move from objectification, separation and disconnection to one of stewardship and kinship care (Salmon, 2015).

Feminist philosopher and biologist, Donna Haraway and biologist, Merlin Sheldrake both conclude that the current narrative of biology is no longer adequate to describe the complexity of nature that is now emerging, which is much more symbiotic, un-boundaried and entangled than previously imagined (Haraway, 2016; Sheldrake, 2021). As we gradually wake up to the complexity of the ecological catastrophe, it is clear we have reached the limits of a modernist approach to nature.

Karen Barad, a feminist physicist and philosopher, challenges the very notion of our Newtonian reality and the delusion of Cartesian separation and even the idea of “representationalism”, the idea of the objective reality of things (Barad, 2007). She takes us on a deep dive into quantum physics and describes how the universe is not a series of objects waiting to be discovered, but that the world is created anew as it comes to meet us halfway. Barad describes how from the perspective of quantum physics, space and time are not the container of the universe, but rather atoms, like the Navaho women weavers, are engaged in a process of “worlding” of manifesting time and space as a result of their situated relationship (Barad, 2007). Barad encourages a move beyond a merely reflective stance to a diffractive view. Diffraction occurs where different coherent patterns of energy, such as waves on the seashore, interact with each other and create new patterns that alter, enhance, and moderate the previous coherence into emergent new information. This can happen with waves on the seashore, with light waves and sound waves but also with stories, narratives and epistemologies. This could be a useful way to think about indigenous knowledge systems and how they create new patterns and

stories and ways of thinking within the WEIRD mind. Both the “Decolonial Turn” and the EcoSystemic Return necessitates a deep listening to these complex interference patterns, as different ontologies collide and “interact”, for what new knowledge might emerge. In quantum physics the separation of the world into subjects and objects is no longer a good enough working model of reality.

While inclusion of diversity is highly positive, Trauma Therapist, Resma Menakem (Menakem, 2020) raises the question, “Diversity from what?” and asks if inclusion of diversity risks becoming merely a process of serial inclusion of previously objectified groups into the implicit ontological framework of WEIRD cultures?

Are we merely inviting a different team to play the same old game where the implicit rules are never questioned? The Decolonial Turn calls those who benefit from coloniality to let go of the objectification of different or “other” racial or identity groups and recognise all peoples are subjects. The EcoSystemic Return requires us to recognise the subjectivity of all nature; animals, plants, fungi, trees, rocks, viruses, carbon dioxide molecules and atoms-its subjects all the way down- nature is somebody (Hoffmeyer, 2008). Once we embrace this way of thinking, the Coronavirus is no longer a mindless replicant or a philosophical zombie out to get us, but we see the pandemic as a complex creatural pattern of cross species communication. The Coronavirus is talking to us (Akomolafe, 2020).

If we take seriously the idea that nature is not only more complex than we think, but more complex than we can think, we might begin to explore the idea that nature and therefore mind has no semantic narrative by which it can be understood (Bateson, 1979). More complex thinking and clever ideas and more talking are not going to help. But perhaps we can understand nature by learning to navigate through the language of creatura, a language we share with nature and the body “that has no things in it only differences and relationships” (Bateson and Bateson, 2004: 191). This strange way of knowing was also described by French philosopher Henry Corbin, which he called “the imaginal world” an epistemology that exists “between our sense perception and categories of the intellect”

(Cheetham, 2003: 99). This way of knowing begins to unravel western colonial descriptions of the world because it exposes objectification as a basic Cartesian epistemological error, creatural or imaginal communication can engage only with subjects. Engaging with the creatura involves a different mode of knowing called “heart knowing” or *Gnosis*, a knowing that changes the knowing subject (Cheetham, 2015), the essence of any successful psychotherapy. Corbin also calls the imaginal “active imagination” a process familiar to psychodynamic and psychoanalytic psychotherapists to navigate the processes of transference and countertransference as a way of gaining knowledge that is intersubjective and arises between people.

Recent developments in our understanding of the Polyvagal theory within psychotherapy is now giving us a much better understanding of the role of the non-verbal body sensing or “neuroception” and its role in the emotional dysregulation of mental health and how we might work with this in a therapeutic context (Dana, 2018; Ogden et al., 2006). A combined diffractive understanding of the language of creatura and how to engage with the polyvagal system has a potential to give us a way to think about how we pick up subtle non-verbal interactions within families and social groups. However, by working with an understanding of both nature and the polyvagal system, through ritual and by working with the body working outside, we can invite creatura out to play as a third agent within the therapeutic process (Berger, 2006).

Recent studies combining psychedelic psychotherapy and neuroscience have brought into question the role of the ego in our mental health and even the subjective reality of the self. It has begun to blur the boundaries between science, nature and spirituality (Razvi and Elfrink, 2020; Carhart-Harris and Friston, 2019). The use of psychedelics in psychotherapy has opened a conversation for a much wider perspective on the nature of the mind and ultimately allowing access to much more complex intra subjective experiences. These experiences include patients in “end-of-life” care experiencing deep *Gnosis*, not only losing a fear of death, but also reporting having meaningful communication with friends and relatives in the afterlife (Strassman, 2001). Carhart-Harris’s theory of the entropic brain gives

access to a more complex picture of the human mind than is usually employed in mental health and raises questions about how this might become part of the therapeutic healing for patients suffering from long term depression as well as for palliative care (Carhart-Harris et al, 2014).

As we leave behind the tyranny of our crumbling western narratives, the belief in the objective reality of the world, the illusion of the subjective self and explore the world as only difference and relationships, we are pitched off the edge of the semantic language world and begin a free fall through the semiosphere (Crittenden and Landini, 2015; Hoffmeyer, 2008); a time-less, space-less, world of emotional noise with some faintly communicating signs and signals. Navigation in this space requires an almost alchemical process of hermeneutic enquiry informed by “movements of the psyche back and forth across the boundaries of consciousness and over the contours of the emotions” until the shape of what we are looking at becomes clear (Cheetham, 2015, p. 63). We are no longer playing in the socially constructed and Newtonian world with its out-of-date operating system. We need to learn to play a bigger game.

### **Deep Donkey- asking creatura out to play**

I am suggesting playfully that we might need to upgrade our game of Donkey to a quantum systemic indigenous new game to scaffold our way into this complex emerging world, that I call Deep Donkey.

*Deep Donkey* is a game for one player where we learn to meet the subjects of the universe halfway and invite them out to play. In *Deep Donkey* the physical boundaries have gone, along with the classical Newtonian world view - no wall, no ball, no ground. Instead of the ball we have something non-physical and more emotional such as a dream, a wish, an intent, an action or in the case of systemic psychotherapy - a question. We can think of the solid boundaries of the wall and ground replaced by something like the surface of a pond. Unlike the Newtonian reflective geometry of the wall where the measured rebound of the ball is determined by the solidity of the wall and the strength of the throw and elasticity of the ball, in *Deep*

*Donkey* nothing is pre-determined. Below the surface of the pond, is water of unknown viscosity, of unknown depth where the bottom is not a reflective surface like the surface of a wall, but a diffractive surface, an unknown landscape shaped by submerged contours, debris and texture. We have to step into and trust a sense of unknowing and be open to curiosity. In *Deep Donkey* we are reminded that *creatura* is beyond our sense perceptions and there are no concepts or categories of the intellect. The return of our quantum ball comes unexpectedly and emergently without constraints of time, space or any other socially constructed qualities. In a therapy session this might come as a word, a micro gesture or a thought in the mind of the therapist. To catch the response, we need to think not reflectively, waiting for a response to our question, but diffractively, being open to the emergent and contextually responsive to the unknown.

It might be helpful to think of *Donkey* and *Deep Donkey* using the model of the domains (Lang et al., 1990). *Donkey* is played between the realms of production and explanation, a sort of call and response trying to fit an objective reality into different possible narratives. *Deep Donkey* is played across the boundaries of both the domains of production and explanation and into the domain of the aesthetics. A process we can map by using Van Gennep's three stages of a rite of passage, severance, liminality or threshold and incorporation (Van Gennep, 1961). *Deep Donkey* involves a severance from the known, a passage across the threshold into the liminality of *creatura* and "the imaginal" and then a *return* with a new story, insight or idea, emotion or explanation or determination that requires a process of incorporation into the new reality. In *Deep Donkey*, the practice is of deep listening like the process of *Dadirri* for the aesthetic patterns that connect, and the deep systemic intelligence that predates human thinking which is perhaps the basis of indigenous knowledge systems and learning.

We can also use the model of the domains to help think about how ecopsychotherapy might be formulated in a systemic context. We can think of the domain of production as work with the body, how we engage physically and practically with the world. The realm of explanation can be used to think about the narrative or languaged description of events. Both

these domains are subsets of the larger context- the domain of aesthetics and we can widen the lens within an ecopsychological context to think of aesthetics as the realm beyond language, a continuum between nature and body. This includes not only nature but body impulses and responses such as those resulting from experiences of trauma, informed by the theory of the polyvagal and neuroception (Dana, 2018; Ogden et al., 2006; Van Der Kolk, 2014).

### **EcoSystemic practice in clinical and non-clinical settings**

The rules of Donkey require an othering by the subject for the game to operate. Most forms of psychotherapy still secretly drink the waters of modernist Darwinian, Newtonian rationalism with its idol of an evidence base, a paternalistic invitation to play Donkey and avoid being othered as different. Even systemic psychotherapy with its clear call from Gregory Bateson to find patterns that connect has yet to engage with the unfolding of the disastrous western epistemological error now playing out in the wider natural and cultural eco systems. Systemic family psychotherapy, with its implicit remit of healing the nuclear family, has yet to include an understanding of the body, the legacy of broken tribal language and kinship groups, and nature-based community culture. The value of connection with nature and spiritual ancestors are still some way off and it is difficult to imagine what the beginning of an *EcoSystemic Return* might look like in clinical and non-clinical settings. I will now describe three examples which I hope might illustrate how a subtle reframing and holding creatura in mind can be used within systemic therapy.

### **Toward an EcoSystemic formulation**

As a systemic psychotherapist I am working in CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service) with a generic situation that may be familiar. The room is small but has big windows and the garden outside is tended by contractors. The chairs are synthetic fibre for hygiene and I am sitting with a teenage girl and her mother. The girl has been referred as a result of self-harm and suicidal ideation. She is missing school and falling



behind in her education. My mental health assessment is focused on her family history, transgenerational trauma, her cutting and how to make it safe enough for her go back to school. As a therapist, thinking about the EcoSystemic Return, I wonder about her relationship with her body and why she is cutting it? I wonder about her wider family and cultural support; the sense of her tribal kinship identity; where is her land and how does she relate to nature in general? What sort of culture has she experienced other than television and social media? Does she have access to any stories which have a narrative of connection, and life purpose? Does she have access to a group of safe elders who have knowledge and skills to lead her through nature-based rites of passage that can help her make sense of all of this and integrate it into her life? Does she have a sense of being part of a deep time lineage of ancestors of whom she is one? Her mother is also traumatised and self-harmed when she was the same age and can barely parent her, and her father is in prison. What support can I offer her with the limited resources I have to hand? In many cases indigenous cultures have a clearer picture of the real depth of human disconnection than we have in western culture and may have some more sophisticated ways to create healthy systemic reconnections.

### **An unaccompanied asylum seeker from the Sudan**

The conversation is slow and relaxed, spacious like the landscape of the Sudan. The session is calmed by the gentle softly spoken Arabic interpreter who is leaning back on his chair. He translates stories of horseback, Janjaweed rebels, killing of cattle and burning villages, lost family. The translator tells the young man's stories about walking in the desert, working in Libya, being robbed frequently at gunpoint, and making it over the channel to the UK, in an unsafe boat after seven attempts. The Sudanese teenager holds these stories in his posture and muscle tone. He has symptoms of PTSD. He is in foster care and learning English at school. He is not broken by these experiences but can make no sense of them and sleeps poorly. His classmates have no understanding of his epic journey. I listen with the interpreter to the young man's stories, quietly, slowly and with deep respect as he begins to recognise and use the ancient healing

social context of having his story heard by elders. The sessions move forward in an atmosphere of mutual respect and the nightmares subside. He is still culturally dislocated and part of a new *diaspora of the disconnected* (White, 2021) in his journey from herding his father's cattle with his brothers in the Sudanese bush, to sitting in a secondary school classroom in the UK. Gradually, with the interpreter's help, we are able to make sense of his life changing journey, through connecting with his tribal identity. We learn that he is from a famous and ancient African kingdom, with a lineage of clans and God kings, migrations and battles and assimilation into different pre-colonial Africa landscapes. As I retell his story in the third person, "this is the story of a man who..." he listens, his posture shifts, he nods, he finds his position within the indigenous narratives of his tribe. And he begins to recognise the power of what he has achieved. His body is showing this new knowing. After a few more sessions, with gentle gratitude and respect, he says he feels better and no longer needs these conversations.

### **Asking creatura out to play**

I was running an experiential ecopsychology retreat for a men's group. It involved some days preparation and culminated in each person staying on their own overnight away from others some woods. The preparation involved repeated exposure to nature without the limitations of a western narrative, a practice of being open to deep listening, not only to ourselves, but what nature might be asking us to think about and remember. One group member who had a number of traumatic experiences from his life in the military as well as family loss. Although he was keen to be part of the group, he had deep belief in the modernist view reality of the world and was not expecting to learn much from nature. After his first "solo" time, he came back and told us of an amazing coincidence he had experienced. He was sitting in the woods staring at a piece of a broken tree trunk and had the thought that it looked just like the head of a woodpecker. Just as this thought entered his mind, a real-life green woodpecker flew in and landed on the stump. In ecopsychology work this sort of synchronistic experience is common, but despite this he was not convinced it had any meaning. The

next day he returned with two more strange synchronicities. Driving home he was held up behind a slow-moving van and was struggling to control his road rage, until the van finally turned off and revealed the image of a woodpecker on the side. That evening he visited a close friend who showed him her woodpecker sculpture that she had recently bought. The group was intrigued by his stories, but he was still unconvinced of their significance and for a further solo time headed to a desolate coastal location that he knew, hopefully well away from any creatural or real woodpeckers.

He returned late in the evening to his car after a cold and misty cliff top walk and felt satisfied that he had got what he needed from the experience. While he had been away a young couple with a van had arrived and been camping and partying in the car park. The young man was asleep in his sleeping bag, but his girlfriend was still awake and keen to continue the party. As he returned to his car, she sat up and offered him a drink - a can of Woodpecker Cider.

Imaginal experiences usually take us by surprise and demand our attention. They have a strong emotional charge which is outside of our conscious control and these experiences are meaningful, but the meaning is not always immediately clear, and integration of these experiences can take a long time (Kohner, 2012).

## Conclusion

In this article I have used the children's ball game of Donkey as a metaphor to help think about the historically, socially constructed, western cultural world view. I am suggesting that in the face of the emerging systemic complexity of our current ecological and social narrative collapse, we might need to find a more complex metaphor to navigate our future.

I have described how indigenous knowledge systems have a much older and more sophisticated ways of knowing to navigate complex uncertainty and how these ways of knowing are also found within the older thinking systems of the West. Gregory and Mary Catherine Bateson describe the importance of deep listening to our heart knowing or *Gnosis* if we engage

with a creatura (Bateson and Bateson, 2004). This is similar to the process known to the Indigenous Australian peoples as *Dadirri*. In this article I have playfully suggested a new metaphor for this process which is sometimes difficult to understand and often seems too deeply entangled in complex epistemological and ontological semantics. The new metaphor I describe for working with creatura I call *Deep Donkey*, an upgraded, neo-indigenous and quantum version of the Donkey game I used to play. I suggest the idea of *Deep Donkey* can be used within both systemic psychotherapy and ecopsychotherapy to navigate our vital EcoSystemic Return.

The incorporation of the EcoSystemic Return within systemic psychotherapy opens the legitimacy of working with body-based trauma which can distort thinking and emotions. (Crittenden, 2008). It also provides a framework for exploring the relationship between nature and mental health in ways that to go beyond a purely narrative approach. An EcoSystemic Return has the potential to realign systemic psychotherapy with indigenous ontologies that have been subjugated, actively suppressed and eradicated and now seem essential to address the global ecological and mental health crisis. The EcoSystemic Return can also provide systemic psychotherapy with the scaffolding to understand not only the emerging complexity of nature, but also the complexity of the human psyche that is emerging within psychedelic psychotherapy.

Despite its apparent deep philosophical and epistemic complexity, the practice of *Deep Donkey* is very familiar to us. It occurs very commonly when we engage with nature with a clear intent, but no fixed goal, and we must wait for an emergent response from a partially known subject – the practice of gardening. Like *Dadirri*, gardening or more accurately organic gardening, has been practised as intergenerational mutual learning for of millennian. *Deep Donkey* is an embodied engagement in a diffractive process, a game of planting seeds in the fertile soil of both mind, and nature, and then waiting patiently to see if and how creatura might come out to play. It is a process most people have forgotten, or have been actively taught to forget, and one which requires remembering as a core practice for the EcoSystemic Return.

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## F O U R

# Lines of flight

Justine van Lawick

The only thing that makes life possible is permanent,  
intolerable uncertainty: not knowing what comes next.

Ursula K. Le Guin 1969

It matters what matters we use to think other matters with;  
it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it  
matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think  
thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties  
tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds  
make stories.

Donna J. Haraway 2016

For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we  
learn by doing them.

Aristotle 350 BC

I have been worried about the long-lasting effects of the dominant, neo-liberal and capitalist systems that are having a devastating influence on planet Earth and on the life and relations of all the beings, human and non-human, living in this world. When Gregory Bateson wrote “Steps to an Ecology of Mind” (1974) and “Mind and Nature” (1979), he already made clear that human beings do not see the interconnectedness of everything, and because we do not see it, we break it. The breaking of connections has

created fractures, wounds and fragmentations in nature, between people, between humans and non-humans: animals, plants and other matter. This has created a gigantic ecological crisis and a profoundly unethical and unjust world with an ever-growing gap between the rich and the poor, the people with resources and those without. We perform our systemic practice in this context. What is our responsibility? In what way can we resist the destructive powers and support actions of hope: *lines of flight* (Guattari 2015)? We can find inspiration in other areas where activists formulate manifestos as a start of other hopeful practices. In this paper, I give the example of a group of journalists that started *The Correspondent*<sup>1</sup> and I invite all readers to think about actions that we could start, maybe with a manifesto for systemic practices?

## Introduction

Starting my university studies in 1969/1970 I plunged into a context full of life and changes, fired by the student revolts in Paris 1968.

After two years struggling to orientate myself, I was involved in endless smoky political discussions about the dominance of the bourgeois powers, the discrimination of women, the destructive dynamics of the capitalist system, the oppressive system of psychiatry. I was part of the feminist movement in the Netherlands, was involved in the anti-psychiatry movement and supported to start shelters for abused women. Apart from that it was the time of flower power, music, marijuana, spirituality and yoga. Although these two movements were not much connected I was involved in both. I never really was in the centre of activities, I was curious, supportive but also always in doubt, questioning the premises, dynamics and dominance of groups. Nevertheless, I came to live in a commune where many of my friends studied politics and Marxist-Leninist theory and some of them decided to become members of the communist party. For me it was clear I would never join that party because of the pressure to agree with their convictions and the lack of space for dialogue. Entering a

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<sup>1</sup> <https://thecorrespondent.com>

communist festival on 1st May, Workers' Day, I saw a big banner: "abonneer u op *De Waarheid*" - subscribe to *The Truth* - the newspaper of the communist party. I thought it was crazy to pretend having a monopoly on the truth and I took a distance. I realised that they were only talking about their own truth, their convictions. Truth was and is an important category for me, but as a *process*: seeking truth, finding local and personal truth or truthfulness.

Another reason was that there was no place for interconnectedness and spirituality. Spirituality and spiritual experiences of feeling connected with the whole world, nature, trees, beauty, animals and people, always were, and are, in my life. I felt at home with Arne Næss, a Norwegian philosopher and environmentalist who started a "deep ecology" movement which asserted the interconnectedness and equality of all organisms, human and non-human (Næss 1989).

Part of the communist movement was about rejecting the power of religion and churches, thought to be "opium of the people". With this, the spiritual (soft) powers that are related to the experience of interconnectedness were ignored and rejected as soft, mystifying and bourgeois.

Later, when we found out about the fierce oppression of people and of the free word in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe we got disappointed, most left the party and concluded that the communist system failed to offer people a good life. We finished studies, found work and started families. Other practices and theories came to the foreground.

When I came into contact with family therapy, systems theory and systemic practices, I was immediately interested and excited by the attention on relationships, families, family dynamics, generations and context. Leaving linear cause-effect thinking for circularity. Later there was the awareness of multiple truths in post structuralism and social constructionism, attention for diversity, for a multiplicity of voices, complexity, narratives, power and gender, uncertainty, not knowing and curiosity, communities and culture. I felt at home and experienced that all my voices, ideas, practices and doubts could have a place. So I never left the field.

In the last decade fresh attention is emerging for the theory of Karl Marx, and again for publications and talks which address the destructive power of the capitalist system and neo liberalism. At this point in time, this is fuelled by the ecological crisis, the endangered planet earth, the enduring injustice in the world, the ever-growing gap between the rich and the poor, the mass of drifting people searching for a possible life, and the emptiness of consumerism. I would argue that in these days authors and philosophers are much more aware of the interconnectedness of everything and that spirituality has eventually found her place.

Now, towards the end of my career, I decided to make space for a professional doctorate in systemic practices with Gail Simon and her team. She invites us to have an ethical and political agenda in our research.

Research in our field tends to contain a social justice or critical responsibility agenda in its intention to improve lives and promote equality. The aim of systemic practitioner research leans towards producing innovative and leading-edge systemic practice rather than attempting to prove something.

Simon, 2018, p .52

I thought of a concrete way of adding to this agenda.

In this text I suggest exploring concrete practices in the same spirit, practices that do not come directly from the systemic field but that can be related to our field. I hope that these connections can bring us further and open up new possibilities. In this way we can create a learning community that is larger than our own field.

## **New Possibilities**

A growing group of contemporary philosophers, scientists and artists are again drawing our attention to the devastating effects of the capitalist system, striving for free markets and profit maximisation; a system that created an ecological crisis that nearly destroys the planet earth and all the human and non-human life. But now the interconnectedness seems to be in the centre, talking about “new materialism” where relationships of

humans and non-humans are seen as inseparable. The “post human” era has critiqued the centrality of the human being, Anthropos (a white male, able-bodied, Aryan, heterosexual stereotype hero). The Anthropocene era is, or has to be, ended (Haraway 2003; Braidotti 2013; Karen Barad 2007; Bruno Latour 2007).

This creates new possibilities for political action and change.

The book *Lines of Flight: For Another World of Possibilities* offers an early but newly translated text by Félix Guattari (1930-1992) a French psychoanalyst, philosopher and political activist (Guattari 2015)

He anticipated, and believed in, decentralised forms of political activism. He wished his book not only to be theoretical but also practical, and although the book is written in a dense (the translator calls it a “baroque”) style, it offers a fresh set of conceptual tools for imaginative and engaged thinking about capitalism and effective forms of resistance to it.

As Robert van Hennik mentions in his thesis, *Practice Based Evidence Based Practice* (van Hennik 2018 p. 28), Guattari wrote about these lines of flight earlier, together with Deleuze, referring to actions of resistance against dominant systems.

Reading these days for my doctorate, and listening to presentations in *youtube*, made me become aware of the connections, Karen Barad (2014) would say *diffractions*, between Ursula le Guin, Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, Karen Barad, Arne Naess, Gert Biesta, Gail Simon, Robert van Hennik, David van Reybrouck, Jim Wilson, Lex Bohlmeier and my own thinking, longing and doing. In order to understand what Karen Barad’s ideas about diffraction are she describes the process of earth worms and soil “earth worms revel while helping to make compost or otherwise being busy at work and play, turning on the soil over and over, ingesting and excreting it, tunnelling through it, burrowing, all means of aerating the soil, allowing oxygen in, opening it up and breathing new life into it” (2014, p. 168). Diffractive reading, as I understand it, is reading through one another of texts that create space, air, for new ideas to emerge, often suddenly. Writing this sentence, an old text from a German theatre maker, Botho

Strauss (1970), comes in my mind: “Versuch ästhetische und politische Ereignisse zusammen zu denken” – (Try to think of aesthetic and political events together). I didn’t have any thought about this text for years, so maybe it is an example too. While thinking about diffraction and how to explain this concept, I made a connection with Botho Strauss’ writing about the going together of political and aesthetic qualities in theatre, needing each other and feeding each other, and creating something new. It is about differences, acknowledging the differences, and seeing new perspectives by thinking (or doing) the differences through one another.

Doing this we can also see the similarities.

The authors that I mentioned are all worried about the long-lasting effects of the dominant, neo-liberal and capitalist systems that are having a devastating influence on planet Earth and on the life and relations of all the beings, human and non-human, living in this world. When Gregory Bateson wrote “Steps to an Ecology of Mind” (1974) and “Mind and Nature” (1979), he already made clear that human beings do not see the interconnectedness of everything, and because we do not see it, we break it. The breaking of connections has created fractures, wounds and fragmentations in nature, between people, between humans and non-humans: animals, plants and other matter. This has created a gigantic ecological crisis and a profoundly unethical and unjust world with an ever-growing gap between the rich and the poor, the people with resources and without. This tragedy has created a growing group of refugees, poor people, homeless people and dislocated migrants who are excluded from belonging, a home and a proper life. Not only adults, also children, families and the elderly. Also close by to the University of Bedfordshire where I was studying: the *Luton Post* of the 1st December 2018 pointed out that Luton was one of the top homelessness spots in the UK. A study by a homeless charity centre found that Luton has 3,458 people living homeless in the borough, which equates to just one in 63 people. Shelter’s chief executive Campbell Robb said: “This is the tragic result of a nation struggling under the weight of sky-high rents, a lack of affordable homes, and cuts to welfare support.” (Robb 2018) - all symptoms of the neo-liberal capitalist system.

We have to face this crisis that is the larger context in which we work with clients, families, organisations and companies.

The thinkers, artists, practitioners and authors mentioned above try to find ways or niches where other stories can be told, other movements can be made, stories and doings that connect, affirmative performances of possibilities to resist inequality and create collaborative and ethical practices.

In her presentation in Amsterdam, March 2017, Donna Haraway proposed that we cannot hold Anthropos and the Anthropocene responsible for all the failings and the threat of destruction of planet Earth and the life in it. She suggests a more historical and situational term: Capitalocene, referring to the devastating effect of the capitalist system over time.

Haraway also argues that a new term is needed: she suggests Chthulucene, a word derived from chthon, meaning “earth” in Greek and which is associated with things that dwell in or under the earth.

The Chthulucene, for Haraway, refers to processes of reworlding. She suggests it is more like a process of composting than one of being Posthuman. The path towards something that might possibly have a chance of living on, Haraway argues, is through the activation of the chthonic powers that are within our grasp, as we collect up the waste of the Anthropocene and the exterminism of the Capitalocene.

Allan Parsons, 2018

Haraway states that we need string figures, connected stories, performances and actions that hold each other, not autopoietic but sympoietic. Maturana & Varela (1984) introduced the concept of autopoiesis in the field of systems theory and systemic practices. As biologists they wanted to distinguish living systems from non-living systems. Living systems, they argued, are self-producing systems, which maintain their particular form through self-regulation and self-organisation: autopoiesis. Haraway makes a big step in introducing the concept of “sympoiesis”. Although she doesn’t explain this concept, I



suppose she is referring to living systems as processes of creating and organising together and regulating life together. In this process we need stories that connect, stories that are related to art, science, action, speculative fabulation (SF) that are never finished, that are on-going. We could add “practitioner research” to this context. According to Haraway, the stories of care for on-going life got lost in the Capitalocene.

Rosi Braidotti indicates that “The pursuit of practices of hope, rooted in the ordinary micro practices of everyday life, is a simple strategy to hold, sustain and map out sustainable transformations. The motivation for the social construction of hope is grounded in a profound sense of responsibility and accountability” (Dolphijn & van der Tuin 2012, p. 36)

It is an inviting thought and a challenge to suggest that we can act responsibly and accountably by pursuing practices of hope and possibilities for change in our everyday practices. My supervisor, Alexis Weedon, commented, “It is as if the performance of something positive and an internalised strategy, prepares the ground for the seeds (to use a gardening metaphor).” I like that metaphor. We can do that with our family, friends, colleagues, clients, students, in the streets, in public transport and other public spaces, in theatre, in writing, in art, and so on - everywhere. For me this is related to being dialogical in the world. Jaakko Seikkula told me, “It is not a way of doing, it is a way of life” (2012).

Haraway invites us to stay in the trouble, not to walk away from it, to find new ways, other possibilities, but from within.

This is related to the theories of Gert Biesta on education (Gert Biesta 2014). He is worried about the educational system that nowadays is designed to adapt children to the capitalist system, to make them flexible workers that can continue the system. And to make them good consumers of goods, to preserve future economic growth. Children are stimulated and manipulated to feel a longing for special shoes, gadgets, games or holidays. Biesta states that the freedom the children learn is the freedom to shop. He argues that this is keeping children and youngsters infantile. We know that the reality is that we cannot fulfil all our wishes. And according to Biesta we need to experience and accept limits to become a responsible

adult, to ask ourselves: “Do I really need that or can I live without it?”. Children need to learn to say NO. Biesta wants to raise in children the longing to be adult and to make a contribution to a good world. To resist should be a part of the curriculum in schools. He goes against the “child focused” learning, children need to be educated to focus on the world and the other. My freedom cannot be without the freedom of the other, he says, referring to Levinas who is a big resource for him. The question, “who or what am I?” is not so important for Biesta. Rather, the question is more “How I can matter for the other? How I can make a difference in the world?”

Gert Biesta wants to shift the attention in schools from getting high grades as soon as possible in order to enter a profitable career, to teaching. Teaching doesn’t mean that teachers know everything, they do not. Teachers, and other adults cannot know everything and do not understand everything. According to Biesta, uncertainty and not knowing is in the centre of teaching. The task of teachers is to interrupt students, to give them difficult assignments, complex tasks. And some learning processes need time. They cannot or should not be done in a hurry.

His ideas and practices seem very important to me. I do not know if he realises that he infers that schools can be outside of the mainstream capitalist system. Unfortunately, schools are influenced and also sponsored by businesses. It will take a lot of effort to create free space for schools that want to incorporate the ideas of Biesta. But we have to search for the landscape of possibilities. I do not know if Haraway and Biesta know each other but they both underline the challenge to stay in the world, to accept the challenge of uncertainty, ambiguity and frustrations and find your way dealing with the complexity.

I would argue that this is related to what Guattari means by “lines of flight”. This paper is also meant as a *line of flight*. We need to create a larger learning community with signs of political activism in a world of possibilities (Guattari 2015). The lines of flight together can create a fabric, string figures (Haraway 2017) that can offer imaginations of a more relational world between humans and the non-human. These lines of flight can also help us

as systemic practitioners and researchers to imagine new movements and performances in systemic practices.

A line of flight that came in my life a year ago is: *The Correspondent*.

When my youngest son Marek (born 1987) send me a Dutch article and podcast from *de Correspondent* on evolution, written by the young historian, researcher and author, Rutger Bregman (born 1988) - with a more social relational theory, totally different from Charles Darwin, and far from the theory about selfish genes by Richard Dawkins - I was struck by the original thinking and got interested in this online journal.

When I read about the history, politics, mission and activism of this journal, I was emotionally touched and energised.

What is this project about?

A Dutch philosopher and journalist Rob Wijnberg (born 1982) had to leave his position as the editor in chief of the NRC, a major Dutch daily newspaper, because of his wish to change the narratives told in the daily news. Together with colleagues he developed a project. The founding of *de Correspondent* in 2013 was a political act with the purpose of *building a movement for handling news in a radically different way*.

Wijnberg argues, news is fast food for the mind.

The news makes us passive spectators to a world full of insane events we seem to have no control over. Though it promises to bring the world closer, it actually distances us from it. It sows cynicism, division, and suspicion, and reaps polarisation, conflict, and despair. It makes us afraid of each other, of the world, and of the future.

Wijnberg 2018

Wijnberg reflects on what the news does to us. We can hardly escape the news bubble we are in, the stories told in TV, radio, newspapers, screens in public transport areas, push notifications, laptop, phones, twitter, everywhere the “breaking news” is demanding our attention. Wijnberg

presumes that we are all addicted to news and the stories told, and that this influences our worldview more than we are aware of. The stories told in (social) media, and the way they are told, are one of the most powerful tools for populism.

The team of *The Correspondent* formulated 10 founding principles, a Manifesto.

1. We are your antidote to the daily news grind

News mostly is about what happens today, but rarely about what happens every day. It covers the most sensational exceptions, leaving you uninformed about the rules. The Correspondent wants to redefine what news is about, shifting the focus from the sensational to the foundational. Our correspondents cover the most important developments and underlying forces that shape our world, rather than speculating about the latest hype or scare. Put another way: we don't cover the weather, we cover the climate, informing you about how the world really works.

2. We do not take ad dollars of any kind

The Correspondent is an ad-free platform. This includes so called sponsored content. We are funded by paying members. Our business model is providing you with quality journalism, not selling your attention to advertisers. The Correspondent is open to collaborating with media partners. We also accept funding from organisations whose investments contribute directly to our journalistic goals. Any such agreement will include one non-negotiable condition: full editorial independence.

3. We fight stereotypes, prejudice, and fearmongering

The simplest way to make headlines is to insult a group of people and generate outrage. The flood of news coverage then leads to a second rage cycle aimed at media excess. This pattern reinforces some of our worst habits: stoking fear for commercial gain or political advantage, trading in stereotypes to trigger response. The Correspondent is

committed to fighting harmful simplifications, and steering clear of breaking news that is meant to shock rather than inform. We try not to be driven by the fear of missing out, allowing us to dig deeper and fact check more thoroughly.

4. We don't just cover the problem, but also what can be done about it

Consuming a lot of news can make you feel cynical and powerless. The Correspondent aims to counteract this effect by searching for common ground between different people, and by giving as much attention to solutions as we do to problems. We call this 'constructive journalism', not to be mistaken for 'good news'. Constructive journalism tells the stories in a way that might get things moving in a different direction. We believe in journalistic activism, meant to bring about change.

5. We collaborate with you, our knowledgeable members

Collectively, our readers know way more than we do about most of the stories we cover. That's why The Correspondent does not simply broadcast information. When we cover something, you know a lot about, we invite you to contribute your expertise and share your experience. That's part of being a member. Correspondents share their story ideas and research questions from the start, inviting feedback from members to make our journalism better. We don't see you as a mere news consumer, but as a knowledgeable contributor of expertise.

6. We don't take the view from nowhere. We tell you where we're coming from

At The Correspondent, we don't think journalists should pretend to be 'neutral' or 'unbiased'. Instead, our correspondents' level with you about where they're coming from, in the belief that transparency about point-of-view is better than claiming to have none. We are not on anyone's team. We're not the voice of a party. And we believe facts matter. But we also know facts need interpretation have meaning. That's why we are open about the worldview and moral convictions informing our storytelling. We change our minds if the facts tell us to.

7. We protect your privacy, by minimizing the personal data we collect

Most free online services let their users pay by turning over their personal data. At The Correspondent, we minimise the data we collect about you. We only collect the data we are required by law to collect, or that is necessary for our platform to function correctly (such as login names and passwords). We do not sell this information to third parties. Our reasons for collecting data must be explained clearly. And wherever possible, members must have control over the data collected.

8. We want to be as inclusive as possible

Journalism is at its best when it includes many different perspectives and worldviews. That's why we seek to include people from a broad variety of backgrounds, both in our newsroom and on our platform. Our principle of inclusivity extends to the way we find writers, reach readers, and treat members. Expecting writers to have a point of view helps in recruiting a diverse staff. Members can share our journalism freely with anyone, expanding our readership. And we have an inclusive pricing model, so nobody is excluded from our journalism because of purchasing power.

9. We always put journalism before financial gain

For over a century, the dominant business model in the news industry has been selling the attention of audiences to advertisers. The end goal is to maximise shareholder profit by attracting as much attention as possible. At The Correspondent, our goal is to serve our members, maximising trust instead of financial gains. That's why we do not maximise shareholder return, limiting dividends to 5 percent of revenue. We do not accept investment capital that does not adhere to this dividend cap.

10. We believe in transparency and continued self-improvement

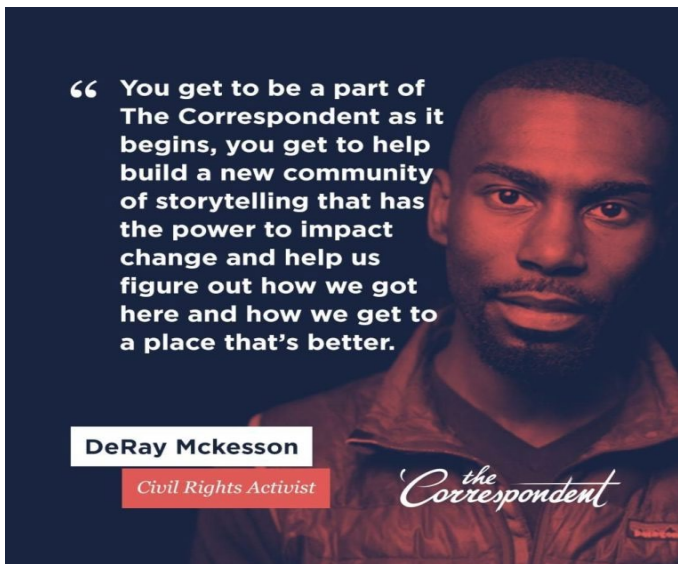
We know we're not 'the fix' for what's wrong in journalism, and we know that there's no one way to do it. When we make mistakes, we admit and correct them. We will also be transparent about how we spend your money by publishing an annual financial and editorial report. And we will keep pushing ourselves to do a better job, inviting you to help. Together we will keep learning, about ourselves and the world around us.

So far these are their founding principles.

Five years later more than 60,000 Dutch speaking readers are member of the open access journal, paying €70 a year as a member if they can.

In September 2019, they will start with an English/USA version to be able to influence the stories that are told in the world, and structure the world, much more. They gave it the name: "*The correspondent for unbreaking news*". They are able to start the English-speaking community through much support from members and well-known people, mostly from the USA. They are creating a critical mass for change.

### One example from their website:



I am an active member of *The Correspondent* now, listening to in-depth 45 minutes personal interviews by journalist Lex Bohlmeier with diverse people from different contexts talking about how active colonialism still is, about psychiatry, education, ecology, personal histories, theatre, music, death, love, sports and many other relevant issues. After five years of his two weekly talks he mentions that he is radicalising (a term that is mostly used for worries around radicalisation among Muslims). He became aware that the foundation of many problems in the world (climate change, migration, wars) is the fundamental inequality and injustice in the world, and that many discussions about problems arising from this, distract us from resisting this fundamental inequality.

## Reflections

Can *The Correspondent* or other related initiatives make a difference? I think they do because they aim to create a just world. There is no linear connection with these initiatives and change but they add to the critical mass that can bring about change.

What I value about this initiative is that they are beyond critique, not only going against, but creating new worlds, new hope, as Braidotti would say.

Barad says in her interview in Dolphijn and van der Tuin (2012) that she is not so interested in critique. She sees critique as a negative, destructive practice to dismiss, to put somebody or something down, distancing from the other. She prefers the idea of Turing (1950) about critical mass, “that is, when a single neutron enters a critical sample of nuclear material which produces a branching chain reaction that explodes with ideas” (p. 49). So we need a size or amount of actions large enough to explode with ideas, to bring about (often unpredictable) change. Barad talks about the need to be suggestive, creative and visionary.

I would argue that the Manifesto of *The Correspondent* is relevant to systemic practices too. As systemic practitioners, we challenge fragmentation and want to see the patterns that connect; we want to fight



stereotypes, prejudices and fearmongering; we don't just cover up the problem but ask what can be done about it. In collaborative practice, we understand that clients know a lot and are experts about their own lives. Like *The Correspondent*, we acknowledge that we cannot be neutral or unbiased, that we have a worldview, a vision, and we can change our mind. Their principle to protect personal data and to collect as little data as possible should be a holy rule in our practices too. I am worried about the amount of personal data of clients in computer systems. In the mental health field, data collection is not minimal but maximised. This is an on-going worry for many of us, and a practice that we should resist by all possible means. *The Correspondent* is as inclusive as possible as well in their diverse professional team as in the diverse topics and persons they address. I know we wish the same but space for diversity is still an issue that needs much attention. Like *The Correspondent* we want to put the mission of our work before financial gain. This fundamental value has been under pressure for a long time due to the dominance of the economic market principles that have become so dominant in the mental health field and other areas of the arts and public services. But in systemic practice we have the same drive: social benefit over financial gain. The last sentence of the manifesto could be said by a practitioner in the systemic field: *Together we will keep learning, about ourselves and the world around us.*

Could we also make a manifesto? What would be our main principles? Can we still be suggestive, creative and visionary?

Talking to colleagues about this I get the impression that many have lost hope. They feel so oppressed by the ever-growing bureaucracy, the pressure to produce and make enough money for the company, to do assessment and follow protocols. They do not feel space to be creative. They feel silenced.

Many publications that address the *loss of trust* come in my mind when I think about this issue.

Jim Wilson (2017) worries about the loss of trust in the mental health field. In his latest book he describes the de-humanising practices of technological activities like finding an accurate diagnosis, following protocols, and

producing measurable and cost-effective outcomes. These neo-liberal practices correspond with the introduction of economic market processes into health care. This has led to controlling therapeutic practice and endless bureaucratic activity where complexity, ambiguity, creativity and risk-taking do not have a place anymore. Control came in the place of trust and this has led to a culture of distrust, in which professionals have lost pleasure in their work and feel more and more alienated from their original values, their interest in people and their wish to diminish the suffering of people. Wilson suggests many ways to resist these negative processes and to stay creative, by staying in relation within communities, in teams, with others (2017).

Another author and systemic therapist that I want to mention on the issue of trust is Robert van Hennik. In his thesis, *Practice Based Evidence Based Practice* (2018) he reflects on transparency and trust in mental health care. He quotes Byung-chul Han saying, “Trust is only possible in a state between knowing and not knowing, trust means establishing a positive relationship with another person in spite of not knowing” and van Hennik adds the question, “how can we produce trust and trustworthiness in a post-modern world?” (van Hennik 2018, p. 25). His suggestion is to form a collaborative learning community of therapist(s) and client(s) using Feedback Informed Systemic Therapy (FITS). In this approach, the therapist is a therapist as well as a researcher, and clients are clients and co-researchers. Together they reflect on the outcomes and effects of their collaboration, creating a collaborative learning community. In this way trust can exist in between knowing and not knowing in the context of uncertainties.

How can we create a context for new hope, for new lines of flight, or remember lines of flight of earlier times? We need string figures (Haraway) and communities that can resist. String figures can be connected actions, like the manifesto and actions of The Correspondent; the actions of the 15 year old Swedish girl Greta Thunberg that started the school strikes for climate<sup>2</sup> that went all over the world and the actions of the USA students

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EAmUIEsN9A>

that mobilised thousands against gun violence started by Emma Gonzalez<sup>3</sup> and the actions of the artist Jason de Caires<sup>4</sup> who makes stunning under water statues to rescue the undersea life and the coral reefs.

What can we do as systemic practitioners, what actions would fit in these string figures?

I hope this *line of flight* adds to our unique systemic community and I also hope that more will follow in the image of beautiful and complex murmurations.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/24/us/emma-gonzalez-march-for-our-lives.html>

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## F O U R

# Reflecting on Change

Imelda McCarthy

For a field that is grounded in context, interactions and systems, and given the level of threat our ecosystem is facing, there is no excuse for the field of Family Therapy to not address the ecological context.

(Laszloffy, 2019a, p. 113)

Existence is not human centric

(Sadguru)

### **Reflections on the introduction**

We are in a time of “in between” the old world and a world not yet. What do we call it? I call it a Fifth Province – a space between, a liminal space and imaginal space. Some people feel fatigued by postmodernism and modernism which have almost played themselves out in most quarters especially in the face of “fake news” and an “anything goes” for science, truth and common sense on the one hand and the straight jacket of evidence-based practices and tick boxes on the other hand! Jonathan Rowson calls this time, “a time between worlds” and “a time to look within, between and beyond” (2021). So, I am wondering what would spiritual, systemic and co-evolutionary practice look like at this time of panmorphic crisis (Simon, 2021)

I have paid some attention to these meta crises in a previous article (Bateson and McCarthy, 2016) and to spirituality and systemic practice in other publications (for example, 2004, 2010). We are hearing a call to move further in this time of ambiguity where the old leaves its traces and the new offers glimpses. In the systemic field, we have developed first order, second order and third order systems writing about external, reflexive and intersectional systemic matters. The inclusion of the environment, non-human and natural worlds points to a fourth order way of conceptualising systems. While this is important in this time of species decimation and extinction, maybe a “Fifth Order” in systemic thinking and practice is following hot on its heels.

When I think of a murmuration and how birds know when and how to move in synchronisation, in pattern with each other, then I wonder that maybe human beings have the same capacities to intuit each other and move with synergy.

Some of the newer systemic writings (McCarthy and Minogue, 2020; Simon and Salter, 2019, 2021; Simon, 2021; Duncan, 2019) and others in this issue are also addressing some of these kinds of liminal communications and pointing us in the direction of exploring such possibilities. As I write, I also realise that I too am between stories and worlds as I prepare to leave the home I have lived in for 43 years to move to a smaller home more fitted to sustainable downsized living. This writing is emerging out of a liminal space between the re-memberings of a past and the imaginings of a future – between a known world and an unknown world in my personal and professional worlds, together with our larger social and material worlds – surely a Fifth Province!

## **The Pandemic**

At the outset of the Pandemic in Ireland when people were only allowed to circulate within two kilometres of their home, it was not unusual to see whole family groups and their animals gathering in little “pods” around our local parks even in early Spring before the weather had warmed the earth

or the trees had their leaves. It must have provoked something from ancient times for urban folk to come, en masse, to their local green areas.

I guess this is a little like summer calling us to beaches and rural areas for our holidays. Perhaps, something in the human soul recognises this affiliation with nature with its support of wellbeing in our lives. I know that during the pandemic, in the many therapy and consultation conversations I have, therapists have been advising clients to go walking in their local parks, along canal, riverbanks and seashores. Dublin, being on the coast, many even took to sea swimming which gained momentum throughout the year. Bicycle paths were filled and also added along coastal roads throughout the country while traffic was low to non-existent.

Many around the world rediscovered gardening and growing vegetables again according to newspaper and television reportage. Perhaps this has been a major bulwark for those with access to gardens or allotments in managing depression and anxiety during an almost year and a half of lockdown. Growing flowers, shrubs, trees and vegetables supports us on social, physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual levels if reports from supervisees and clients are anything to go by (for example, Clatworthy et al, 2013). However, as we know only too well, people with gardens are people with some privilege. Many in our communities live on estates and in apartment blocks with no private outdoor gardens or balconies. Many are surrounded by concrete with little or no green spaces or trees. Even in this often taken for granted arena of nature we must not forget that there are massive inequalities in our social living experiences. Our learning often come from the margins and marginalised peoples will always illuminate what we need to address in our ways of living together. My Fifth Province colleagues and I began writing about “marginal illuminations” and colonisation as early as 1989 after visiting the 9<sup>th</sup> century Book of Kells. (Kearney et al., 1989; Byrne and McCarthy, 2019).

A little virus is surely that part of previously marginalised nature, which has re-introduced humanity to different considerations, values and ethics in their individual, familial and community lives. It seems as we go forward and co-evolve a differently lived life, nature along with other important

threatened contexts can no longer be left out of our systemic conversations with those who seek our help in therapy, supervision and consultation. We all matter. We are all matter! Just as we in the North and West of our planet have colonised nature, there is now a growing realisation and calls for realisation of how we have also colonised not only countries of the East and South but also the lives of human beings who are positioned as mattering less than humans in the North and West. This then extends to those peoples' material worlds of non-human animals and the environment that feed and support us. It is surely time to begin to move beyond human centrality in our world(s) (Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2019). There have been different terms for this decentring of human beings such as metahuman (Chopra, 2019), posthuman (Braidotti, 2019), and Anthropocene (Fremaux, 2019). This is a wake-up call to address not only how human beings continue to colonise the planet but how so-called Free Market Capitalist interests of the North and West foster these destructive activities. As systemic practitioners the time has come for us to step up and develop resilience, critical narratives and coherence in systemic thinking and practice amongst ourselves and our clients. (McCarthy, 2016).

As I began to think of all these issues, I feel drawn to look over my life and trace the lineage of the growing of my own gendered, political, economic and environmental realisations. I will insert these personal reflections at points throughout this paper.

## **Growing Realisations**

Since my adolescence I was a kind of activist. Actually, now that I write this article I am called to an earlier instance of that activist impulse being awakened. A month after my only sister was born, my mother brought me with her to the local church one evening. I sat beside her at a side altar with some other women while the priest led a service. I asked why we were not sitting in the centre of the church and what was going on. My mum told me it was because she had just had my baby sister and this was “a blessing of the mother after childbirth” ceremony. My eight-year-old-self thought this a bit strange, so I remember asking her why she needed to be blessed. She



explained to me that women were seen as “unclean” during periods and during the child-birth process and then had to be cleansed through a blessing. To this day I can remember the anger and mystification I felt.

The next awakening memory I have is of my sister being in hospital for some stomach pains. My mother had spoken to a social worker (whose notes were kept at the end of the bed in those days). My sister had taken a peek and when I visited, she urged me to look to see what they “said about Mum”. What I read was that my mother “was a small fussy woman”. I stopped reading and we talked about this not being our Mum and that this social worker didn’t know what she was talking about. I made a decision there and then I would never make an “objective” negative opinion in writing about anyone and it was this incident that led to my democratisation of all professional notetaking and not saying anything apart from descriptions of what I had seen with no commentary. I did this in my professional life in memory of my sister whom I lost when she was just on the cusp of her teenage years, to honour my Mum too, and my working-class background. Subsequently many of my own and my team’s papers were about the possibility for abuse and colonisation of all clients but more especially those on the margins of society in therapeutic conversations. (McCarthy, 1991, 1994, 2011; McCarthy & Byrne, 2019).

### **De-Colonisation: the development of a Fifth Province Approach – Indigenous inter-relationships**

The many recent calls to de-colonial approaches in our lives and work reminded me of my own start in systemic work. Still early in my career, I had the great fortune and privilege to begin to work with Nollaig Byrne, who was a child psychiatrist, and Philip Kearney, who had also been my classmate as a social science student. We came together shortly after Nollaig and Phil returned to Ireland from the Canada and the USA respectively in 1978 and 1979. When we began set up the first training course in Dublin the field of family and systemic therapies<sup>2</sup> was mostly populated by North American and British writers. However, as a result some of the ideas and life practices they outlined did not seem resonant

with our own context here in Ireland. In fact, in the early development of family therapy in Ireland we were not anxious to invite British presenters to give workshops given our relatively recent history of colonisation which officially ended in 1922 with the Irish Republic being declared when I was one year old.



My Dad and I when I was a year old with  
Newspaper headline declaring the advent of the  
Republic of Ireland 1949

As we got to know many of our British colleagues our fears were not upheld and many became our great friends and supporters over the years. I am remembering in particular, Peter and Susan Lang, Martin Little of KCC; Alan Cooklin and Gill Gorrell Barnes, Brian Cade, Elsa Jones together with the original team at Cardiff and so on. However, I am skipping ahead of myself as these relationships developed when we had been working for some years together. Initially, we looked to the US for mentors, especially to Monica McGoldrick, Lynn Hoffman and Harry Goolishian. It was Lynn and Monica who introduced us to our systemic colleagues in Europe, especially Gianfranco Cecchin and Luigi Boscolo. In 1983 we had our exciting entry to the “Teams’ Conferences” as they came to be known, organised initially by Lynn Hoffman around the work of the Milan team. We were also invited by Monica McGoldrick, Carol Anderson and Froma Walsh to join American feminist family therapists for the Women’s Colloquia held in a little inn, interestingly called Stonehenge, in Connecticut during the summers of 1984 and 1986. These were later expanded with a further one held in Copenhagen in 1989 and the first gender conference in Oxford in 1991. Much of the impetus for gender work in the systemic field emerged from these meetings. As a result of these meetings, in 1984 I brought a group together in Dublin which we called WITCHES – Women in Therapy Chapter, to explore gender discrimination in our work as family therapists.

Seeing how Irish families were being portrayed in the Anglo-American literature, our team set out to reclaim our indigenous knowledge and practices within our post-colonial Irish society. Countering the Anglo-American hegemony of “authoritative clear communication” we set out to use old Celtic legends and stories (fifth province, children of Lir; ambiguity and ambivalence celebrating the exaggeration of “tall stories” and indigenous story telling)), together with drawing on native 5,000 year old rock carvings for our logo and diamonds and finally calling in the writings of our Irish poets, writers and artists.<sup>3</sup>

Working with Phil, both Nollaig and I were rapidly brought into the world of nature and environmental concerns – whales caught in the ice, global warming as it was then, nuclear power and so on. Phil has been an ecological and environmental campaigner since his early twenties (Kearney

2013). A founding member of the Green Party in Ireland he has gone on to chairing national and international forums on Climate Change and biodiversity. Currently he serves as the national chair of An Taisce which safeguards the heritage of Ireland from Climate Change and environmental issues to archaeology, art and architecture. It was he who brought Nollaig and I to *The Crane Bag: Book of Irish Studies* (1977) and the rock drawings from the 5,000 year old Neolithic monuments at Newgrange in Co. Meath. It is probably no accident that Meath and West Meath are thought to be part of the Fifth Province, as in the Irish language Midhe (Eng. Meath) means “middle” or “centre”. The Fifth Province has been imagined to be an in between space, a liminal space, a space of imagination at the centre of Ireland where long ago the Four Provinces of Ireland met (Hederman and Kearney, 1978)!

Our generation was brought up on Irish stories and we were born into a post-world war two context of scarcity. Although I grew up in Ireland’s capital city, Dublin – apart from a year-long sojourn in my mother’s rural town and family home, I was very much a city child. My father, like my mother hailed from a small town in rural Ireland. As a young child I saw my parents cut turf and grow their own vegetables. We even had hens in our urban garden. Both my parents were avid gardeners and we always grew our own potatoes, cabbage, onions, lettuce, scallions, peas, tomatoes and rhubarb as the staple crops. Of course, I was inducted into this production from a very early age until in my teens when peer company and roaming the roads of our locality became a much more interesting activity for me. My best friend, Clarice, whose parents also had an allotment beside my family’s, was my partner in these forays away from our early experiences of cultivating vegetables.

Although I grew up with an appreciation of food production and the nature of canal bank life I had no sense of nature as part of who I was. I saw myself as a separate being. You’d have thought being part of a hockey team for most of my life would have taught me something about connections, being a part of something bigger. Then when I did find Systems Theory as a trainee social worker, I did not understand it and got a glorious 10% in my first test. Later, in the same course, I discovered the work of Salvador

Minuchin and his team's work with poor inner-city children and their families and the light bulb finally came on. (Minuchin et al., 1967). Here, he worked with Braulio Montalvo and Bernice Rossman who both went on to work at the Philadelphia Child Guidance Clinic with him when he was made Clinical Director. Dick Auerswald, who also worked with them, was the first to use the term Eco Systemic Family Therapy (1968). Because of the resonance of this work with my own in a high-rise public housing area I went on to have the great privilege of being supervised by Braulio Montalvo in Philadelphia in the late 70's and again at the Philadelphia Child Guidance Clinic during the summer of 1981. In this period, I experienced all the ways in which a family and community focused clinic fostered resilience through their in-service and community outreach programmes.

### **Fostering Resilience and Equanimity**

Fostering resilience and equanimity has been a pre-occupation of mine for as long as I can remember. The concept probably even brought me into the therapy field and so my Philadelphia experiences helped augment the ways I could support families in crises. Of late it has become stronger as I began to look for all the ways in which we can as systemic practitioners draw attention to this time of what Gail Simon refers to as "panmorphic crisis" (Simon 2021). Our world and our humanity are in trouble and it is probably true to say that the majority on the northern part of our planet are still unaware of the degree and range of crises looming before us if we do not cut our emissions, roll back climate change and cease other destructive environmental activities.

As a systemic practitioner the following are some of my ideas in relation to the fostering of resilience in all of us and so may be useful conversational areas in our work and lives moving forward. As an illustration of such resilience, I love the images above taken by a Traditional Chinese Medical Practitioner, Sabine Wilms of mushroom spores on a metal surface. What incredible resiliency in these underground and above ground mycelium networks. These little mushrooms can teach us so much about interconnection and survival ( *see the film, Fantastic Fungi, 2019*).



*“The aching beauty of impermanence” Mushroom spores on metal covering of compost heap.*

*Photos by Sabine Wilms, 2021*

If I think of my own situation when I had a full hip replacement my husband had set up a space in our “garden” room where I could see the sky and clouds through the skylight windows in the ceiling. I was surrounded by glass with large doors onto our patio which allowed fresh air to circulate throughout my days. I slept and spent my days in this nature idyll in my home. Here the trees, shrubs and flowers together with the birds and the bees (and other insects) moved freely in and out of the space. Each day in this space I felt the improvement – in pain, mobility, flexibility and energy. I had no doubt about it at the time and was aware that my rehabilitation was being supported by the nature around me as it interconnected and intra-connected with the nature that was also my own self. I was of course supported daily by my husband, Michael and my wonderful friend, Jean.

Reflecting thus on my experiences of rehabilitation and healing in a nature-saturated urban environment brought me back to my childhood home on the banks of one of Dublin’s canals. I grew up on a small ordinary road of Edwardian red-bricks. At one end of our road was the Grand Canal while at the other end was the art deco cigarette factory with its constant aroma of

tobacco filling the air!! However, at the rear of our houses beyond our back gardens, there was “the lane” as we called it. This space was grassed and full of trees of different kinds including the haw trees which feature large in Irish mythological stories of the Sí (fairies). Here we made imaginary worlds to occupy and climbed high into the trees often to the consternation of our onlooking parents. Here was a little bit of countryside experience in the heart of the city of my childhood.

When I began to work at the Mater Clinic during the 1970’s and 80’s, staff members in Social Work and Psychology brought their dogs to work in their clinical sessions. There was a programme of equine therapy for children in a school for autistic children; there were rabbits and fish for the children to interact with in the waiting room. None of these activities I imagine would now pass insurance, health and safety concerns in spite of learning that, “Animals can be a wonderful addition to therapeutic intervention, not only to help decrease symptomatology, but also in creating a sense of safety and positivity for some clinical participants” (Hertlein and Hechter, 2019). Then, there were also the Summer Schools for children and adolescents which included hikes and camping trips to the sea and in the mountains. Today’s children and young adults maybe the first generations in our Western world, to be so disconnected from nature (Hechter and Fife, p. 19). Irish Philosopher, Richard Kearney in his latest book talks about the plight of modern children and indeed their parents in being out of touch in relationships and in their social worlds because they are so caught up in the “touch screens” of their digital worlds (Kearney, 2021).

### **Reflecting on an inter-/intra-connected Nature**

Along with my friends and colleagues (Chris Kinman, 2016; Gail Simon, 2021; Nora Bateson, 2016; Roger Duncan, 2019; Chiara Santin, 2020) who have been writing about “naturing therapies”, Anne Fremaux in her book, “Green Republicanism” (2019) re-embeds humans and economics within the natural world as part of it, shows how to repair social and ecological connectivities, how to restore our relationships with non-human animals

and she challenges “endless growth” models of consumption. Perhaps she is proposing a new republic of the human and natural environment beyond commodification of the living and natural world of which we are a part. (Fishwick & Kiersey, 2021). In fact, Fremaux calls us to the co-creation of sustainable and resilient societies to bring us into a post Anthropocene world where non-humans and humans can flourish (2019).

Over the years in my practice, I have been having conversations with clients and supervisees about resilience and wellbeing in their lives. The conversations have been both clinical in orientation and knitted into their relational and individual wellbeing. These have included considerations of fostering resilience in children through recycling, single plastic use, our changing world-scape, future shortages and how they might acquire knowledge of food growing and repairing toys and so on alongside their parents, as well as walking in nature, walking barefoot on the earth, gardening, perma-cultural activities, meditation practices and retreats.

Before the pandemic I had been organising weekend retreats. The activities integrated systemic and Fifth Province practices with the teachings of my spiritual teacher, Sri Vasudeva. Through these we have developed a meditative way of speaking in a practice we called, “Sacred Conversations”. The latter was taken from Fifth Province Systemic practice and one that we also shared with the Just Therapy Team in New Zealand (Waldegrave et al., 2003). In these retreats we chanted, meditated, held sacred conversations, reflected during individual quiet time and walked in woodlands. We have tried where possible to bring the group to areas of woodland to walk and often used these walks to commune with nature or to reflect on some spiritual inspirations while in nature. In a way, my own journeys into the wildness of my inner being began through meditation and during four- and five-day solo retreats in the countryside. Meditation has enabled me to experience greater synergy and synchronicity in my life in that I could see intra-connections in my daily life vividly. Those around me were noticing a growing calmness and equanimity which I also felt.

It has been my own experience that practices that start with our inner world help build equanimity in our inner *and* outer lives. This switch in focus



to including the inner world of multi-dimensional experiencing was brought about when Sri Vasudeva, commented after a presentation on conversations around sexualised abuse (Wade 1997) that my “frame was too small”. As I was thinking within a solution-focused frame, I had begun my presentation with a problem definition of the work, child and family. He, on the other hand, was inviting me to move from a spiritual space where there were no problems, where, as Gianfranco Cecchin often said, “everything is perfect” (1984, personal communication). Immediately, the penny dropped as I also re-remembered Gianfranco’s communication. Moving from a context of spirit the field was more expansive and the problem became smaller and secondary by existing in or emerging from that field as a description of a facet of life. As Shakespeare in Hamlet, Act 2, Scene 2 said, “nothing is good or bad but thinking makes it so”! I had also seen from my direct experience of Allan Wade’s work on Response Based Therapy that in moving from expansive possibilities, greater resilience emerged in, I would say, both clients and therapists (Wade, 1997, 2007). I have found this has been especially so in the wake and face of crises, tragic events and challenging life issues.

I use the phrase “inner world” in a way that *both* calls us inward in our own unique expression as an individual human being *and* inwards within the intra-connectivity of us with our universe. It has been my experience that as I connect with the essence of *who I am* in stillness and silence, I also powerfully connect with the essence of *who we are* as in inter- and intra-connected whole or web. This has been more augmented when we do this together in groups. In these activities we come to experience and “see” that we are indeed inseparable from each other, nature and our material world. There is inter-being. In this inter-being, we inter-are (McCarthy, 2004, 2016; Hahn, 1999)! As Julian of Norwich, the fourteenth century mystic and anchorite has said, there is just a “onening” throughout all of nature, divine, human and non-human (Fox, 2020). Perhaps, in these changing times of the pandemic this is surely a time for greater “oneing” which can bring forth experiences of resilience and equanimity.

As long as our lives are more commerce than communion, more product than process, more us/them than we, more manufactured than organic, and more digital reality than nature reality, the more likely we will be to rely on secondary instead of primary sources to try and satisfy primary needs.

(Laszloffy, 2019b, p. 39)

We could say that we are in a time between dystopia and utopia, in a time between worlds, that we are in a liminal space. And we might say that we are in a time between stories. While recognising our current world and ecological predicaments, we are also in great need of a new story of hope for the future despite the inevitability of facing more of the environmental challenges and fighting social injustice (Afuape and Hughes, 2016). We will need to be able settle well with less as we support each other towards a different kind of wellbeing, athléimneacht on a New Earth (Tolle, 2009). This is surely what systemic practitioners can play a part in?

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## **Footnotes**

1. In Buddhism, equanimity is one of the four sublime attitudes and is considered: neither a thought nor an emotion, it is rather the steady conscious realisation of reality's transience. It is the ground for wisdom and freedom and the protector of compassion and love. It is an experience of not being tossed about in the midst of life's challenges where we have mental and emotional stability under strain or tension. It is often referred to as equilibrium, tranquillity or calmness.
2. The first clinical training course in Family Therapy was founded at the Department of child and Family Psychiatry, Mater Misericordiae Hospital, Dublin by Dr Nollaig Byrne, Phil Kearney, Myself and Professor Jim Sheehan

and was under the auspices of the Clinical Director and Administrator of the Clinic, Dr Paul McQuaid and Sr. Jo Kennedy

3. I recognise other indigenous therapy emergences in Europe from the 1980's and 1990s – Milan Systemic Therapy in line with a more community approach in Italy; The Reflecting Team in the North of Norway with Tom Andersen and his team; Open Dialogues in the North of Finland with Jaakko Seikkula and his teams and so on.
4. Where possible in the reference list I have used the chosen first names of authors.

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# Pandemic Disease and Systems Theory: An Ecological View

Ray Becvar and Stan Amaladas

The fundamental problem that we raise and address in this chapter is the problem of understanding our relationship with our afflictions in ways that are uniquely shaped by such afflictions. We capture our need to shifting our attention from our dominant Western epistemology to systems thinking. In this article, we argue that systems theory and thinking

- reminds us of the pathologies of epistemology that may preclude learning from our relationship with Covid-19.
- offers us a way to examine the relationship between an uninvited guest like Covid-19 guests and hosts (human beings) particularly in the light of Rumi's formulation of being human, namely, as being a "guest house". While we may never get to a place where we invite Covid-19 into our lives, we can at least respect the fact that it will exist in our lives, as afflictions do, and with this awareness we can begin to find ways to co-exist with it, in the same way that we must do with all other creatures and nature on our only home – Mother Earth.
- opens us to telling a story about our afflictions in ways that are uniquely shaped by such afflictions. In this regard the authors examine several human responses (stories) to Covid-19 within the context of our system that continues to change and evolve.



- uncovers the need to recover from our state of addiction to a state of sobriety. The state of sobriety returns us to an awareness that we cannot just do one thing because each movement or perturbation necessarily resonates throughout the system.
- allows us to shift to an ecological rather than a solely political or economic view of *Homo Sapiens*. This ecological shift moves us into a moral/ethical realm (we use them interchangeably here) whereby humankind learns to abide by another law. It is a law that is itself punctuated by the distinction between control and restraint. The punctuation of this distinction enables us to become more aware of our attempts to establish a unilateral control over that which is multilateral. These attempts will not only fail, but they would also create different, and perhaps more serious problems. This development of another law to abide by, suggests that we surrender ourselves to being governed by the law of restraint.

In this chapter, we focus on the relationship between the pandemic disease called Covid-19 and people, through the conceptual lens of systems theory. Both philosophically and pragmatically, our paper is about Bateson's (1979) concept of epistemology. Bateson presents Occidental epistemology as a method of thinking that leads to a mindset in which man exerts an autocratic rule over all cybernetic systems. In exerting his autocratic rule, "man" changes the environment to suit him and in doing so he unbalances the natural cybernetic combination of competition and mutual dependency and "it is that combination that is the important thing to consider" (Bateson, 1979, p. 438). It is this concept of combination that guides our thinking in this paper.

Part of the challenge with our "Western" way of thinking is that it provides us with a method of thinking that sees people as independent of and separated from the contexts of which they are necessarily a part. Implicit in this assumption is that there is a set of values of what is "supposed to be" or "not supposed to be". Furthermore, we tend to live our lives without conscious awareness that our "belief system" is only a belief system. And,

as Becvar (2017) argued, we “tend to cling to these beliefs literally for dear life or at least for dear sanity” (p. 3), because they are our grounding, our securing, and our certainty. Consequently, they are “not easily open to reflective questioning, and are less easily changed even when they do not serve the individual’s intended purposes” (Bartlett, 1983, p. 25).

Systems theory provides an alternative world view that may help us to more than survive the current pandemic, to prepare us for future challenges, and for our continued life on this planet. At base, systems theory is about relationships, interconnections, and interdependencies. Thomas (1978), for example, offers a useful technical definition of a system: “. . . a system is a structure of interacting, intercommunicating components that, as a group, act or operate individually and jointly to achieve a common goal through the concerted activity of the individual parts” (p. 12). This is, of course a completely satisfactory definition of the natural conditions of earth, except maybe for the last part about a common goal.

The concept of goal necessarily reflects humans espousing diverse and often times contradictory values that prescribe specific purposes and outcomes. Systems theory is a useful perspective in that, consistent within itself, it would have us see reciprocal rather than linear causation as we explore the relationship between people and Covid-19. Indeed, from a systems perspective the concepts of cause and control are inconsistent with the concept of relationship. Systems theory also reminds us that it is we observers who punctuate components of a whole that is never actually divided. We believe that systems theory provides a better lens through which we can develop a meaningful understanding of our relationship with the virus that is now a part of our lives.

The virus is rather like an unwanted/uninvited guest, and yet it is a part of the family of creatures that co-habit this planet. In another sense, while we may not have consciously invited this guest, in living or not living the way we have lived, we have created a context that opened the door for this creature/virus called Covid-19 to take center stage in our lives. But we get ahead of ourselves. We begin our story with the belief that a systems-thinking perspective may offer a better means to develop an understanding

of how to live well with this uninvited creature/guest. Humans as species seem to need stories to understand and live our lives. The way things really are will ever elude us, but our stories may offer us a meaningful coherence. So, what story can we tell in response to our question: what would it mean to live well with this uninvited guest/creature/virus? But before we answer our question, allow us to share who we are.

### **Who Are We?**

As scholar-practitioners in the fields of sociology and leadership studies (Amaladas) and family therapy (Becvar), we share a principled relationship to ecosystemic thinking. Following Gregory Bateson and Mary Catherine Bateson (1987), this perspective challenges us to look for

- i. patterns that connect socially constructed relationships,
- ii. within a particular context, and
- iii. it orients to unveiling how we know what we know.

Unlike the dominant scientific paradigm that separates the combination of both the observer from the observed, ecosystemic thinking theorises that we cannot be in any system and not be a part of it (Bateson, 1979). Ecosystemic thinking orients to the participation of observers within that which they observe (system/world) and their participation in enabling their realities to be what they are. This higher-order consciousness is consistent with second-order cybernetics (Bateson, 1979), namely that observers are aware that they are and cannot *not* be a part of a totally interconnected universe.

At the same time, we both share a deep passion for the place of stories in our lives and in the capacity of self and others to transcend storied conditions that limit growth and change. It is this passion that brings us together to inquire into our shared questions: What would it mean to live well with this uninvited guest/creature/virus called Covid-19? What does it mean to live well with our afflictions?

## Being Human is a Guest House

As a way of responding to our questions, allow us to appeal to Jalāl ad-Dīn Rumi, a 13<sup>th</sup> century Persian poet, and in particular, his poem, “The Guest House”. The opening lines of his poem reads as follows:

*This being human is a guest house.  
Every morning a new arrival.*

*A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes  
As an unexpected visitor.*

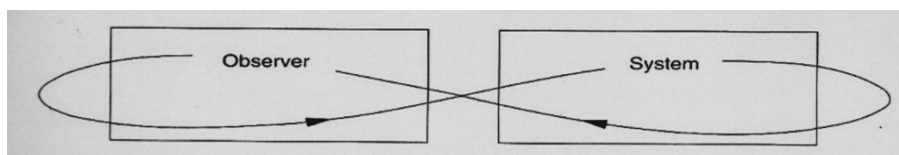
*Indeed, globally, we are in the middle of a “new arrival” as an “unexpected visitor”, called Covid-19, and it is heartless and indifferent, at least as it is viewed from a human perspective.* Its worldwide negative effects are felt in over many hundred thousand deaths within a space of seven months, in the havoc it has created in politics, economics, medical professions, and education, in the closing of schools and universities, in human experiences of panic, fear, anger, and all that we have come to accept as routine every day behaviours. We are particularly troubled by this *new arrival’s/guest’s* indifference to its *hosts*. The concept of indifference suggests it not only has a mind of its own, but it also has a purpose and its purpose is perverse. It knows no boundaries and it is unsympathetic to whom it attacks.

Consequently, while it may be “natural” for hosts in their guest houses to do all that they can to eradicate or evict this “new arrival”, Rumi continues his poem by offering a strikingly different choice. He calls on his readers to “Welcome and entertain them all!” And if this runs counter intuitive of the meanness of Covid-19’s presence, Rumi adds more: “treat each guest honourably - Even if they’re a crowd of sorrows who violently sweep your house empty of its furniture...” because, as he opined, “he may be clearing you out for some new delight”. In concluding his poem, he further calls on his readers to “Be grateful for whoever comes because each has been sent as a guide from beyond”.

The questions that we raise and address in this paper are: If being human is a guest house, then how do we, as hosts, entertain, be grateful, and treat this uninvited guest honourably especially since it has created significant levels of *dis-ease* among its unsuspecting hosts? What new delight might there be in store for us? While a vaccine might be developed to treat the virus, and we will be glad when this occurs, our memory of its presence will always be with those of us who survive this virus, and the questions that we raise in this paper will continue to haunt our human existence.

Our questions suggest that inasmuch as Covid-19, as an affliction, has become a part of our human history, it raises the problem of understanding our relationship with our afflictions, in ways that are uniquely co-influenced (not caused or determined) by both our understanding and our understanding of our understanding of what it means to be afflicted. Ecosystemic thinking suggests that this problem will always persist, and it will not end even when a cure is found. To raise the problem in this way is to move away from a linear cause-effect relationship with our afflictions where causes and effects move in a uni-direction. An ecosystemic perspective moves us to orient towards a recursive way of thinking where effects come back to the cause. Figure 1 captures the essence of this relationship.

**Figure 1:** *Recursive relationship between observer and system*



Becvar, 2017

We acknowledge that any understanding that we humans might develop is but an understanding - to satisfy our need to find one. Said differently, we need a story because, as Isak Dinesen noted, “all sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them” (as cited in Arendt, 1983, p. 104). Adding to “Isak” Dinesen thoughts, a male pseudonym name

which Karen Christentze Dinesen adopted to half show and half hide her authorship because of “her firm conviction that it was not very becoming for a woman to be an author” (Arendt, 1983, p. 95), Arendt (1983), suggests that we need a story because it “reveals the meaning of what otherwise would remain an unbearable sequence of sheer happenings” (p. 104).

Subsequently, as we are in the company of an unwelcomed guest/visitor, allow us to at least entertain its presence by asking: what story (stories) can we tell from its uninvited visit? As one of us was recently blessed with a grandchild, imagine a grandfather telling their grandson a story about Covid-19. Perhaps the beginning of his story could be something like this: “Once upon a time, human beings claimed that they did not consciously invite a guest called Covid-19. But as the story goes, they may well have created the conditions that can be experienced as an invitation. And a strange part of this story, my dear grandson, is that human beings started taking an interest in an uninvited guest that had absolutely no interest in them”. To not tell a story about that which is now a part of our story (history), would essentially mean that we at best ignore, or at worst, deny its presence. And for Arendt (1983), it would mean that we simply experience its uninvited presence as yet another unbearable sheer happening. Let us continue our story then, by “entertaining” human responses to Covid-19 as a way of developing an understanding of what it means to live with and learn from its uninvited visit by orienting to it as if, as Rumi recommends, it is a “guide from beyond”. (Yes, this too is a part of our story).

### **More Than a Technical Problem**

If the suffering of our Covid-19 affliction is seen *only* as a technical problem, then the suffering of hosts can be alleviated through financial and economic compensations, and social practices like wearing of masks, washing of hands, sanitising, physical and social distancing. Without denying the need for these kinds of support and safe practices, we would suggest that while these do offer a level of temporary relief from economic pain and fear, it cannot take away the life of suffering our afflictions. The

life of suffering still remains untouched by technical solutions to a more complex problem. Another way of expressing this is that technical solutions, although necessary in times of Covid-19, will not enable us to entertain the idea that Covid-19 has become part of our history and story or the opportunity to understand the complex problem of what it means to suffer our own afflictions. At best, technical solutions can only offer us a way of coping with the negative effects of this disease by offering temporary financial relief or temporary solutions through safe practices. At the same time, while in this middle of this pandemic, in the midst of this “uninvited visitor” we do hear a common refrain from the doorsteps of politicians (some at least), front-line workers, and those in the social media: “We are all in this together”. Allow us to shift our attention to this common refrain.

### **We Are All In This Together**

As logical as this refrain sounds, some will be tempted to suggest that “all” are not equally in danger of becoming hosts to the virus. In the United States, for example, the poor, the health-care workers, and people of colour are more likely to be inflicted than others. Similarly, some people around the globe are more likely to be hosts than others. There is an injustice in our togetherness that reflects class and caste differences. This politicised response, however, would distract us from answering the questions that we raise for ourselves. As a way of answering our questions, we need to ask: what more can this refrain affirm? The best that this refrain, “we are *all* in this together”, affirms is that the affliction of “all” in the midst of Covid-19, is “our” problem and to be a guest-house is essentially to take collective responsibility for responding thoughtfully to suffering the injustice of our own afflictions. It is to entertain the idea that this uninvited guest, has in effect, raised our consciousness to pay attention to the suffering of all hosts as a collective responsibility (as a societal problem) that must be addressed.

## On Guests and Hosts

In speaking of guests and hosts, systems theory reminds us that we have punctuated a distinction. The idea of guests, by virtue of being a guest, presuppose the presence of a host. The idea of hosts, by virtue of being a host, presuppose the presence of a guest. Guests and hosts are two concepts that belong together. Allow us to reference the anthropologist and system's thinker, Bateson's (Gregory Bateson & Mary Catherine Bateson, 1987) experiment where he demonstrated the complementarity of seemingly opposite thoughts through his imaginary conversation (Metalogue) with his daughter (pp. 35-36):

*Daughter:* I did an experiment once.

*Father:* Yes?

*Daughter:* I wanted to find out if I could think two thoughts at the same time. So, I thought "It's summer" and I thought "it's winter". And then I tried to think the two thoughts together.

*Father:* Yes?

*Daughter:* But I found I wasn't having two thoughts. I was only having one thought *about* two thoughts.

In this experiment, Bateson raises our consciousness to a higher level of thinking (meta-logue or meta-consciousness) that affirms that we cannot think of "summer" without thinking of "winter". In a similar way, the ecology of systems thinking invites us to think and orient thoughtfully to the relationship between guests and hosts. Hence, insofar as it takes "two to know one", what he is saying is that it is the relationship and the connectedness of two thoughts that completes the distinction (Flemons, 1991).

## Ecology of Systems Thinking

Within the context of Covid-19, the ecology of systems thinking moves us to understand the relationship between an unwanted guest and



unsuspecting hosts in ways that allow us to move beyond the tyranny and oppressiveness of our afflictions - not to extinguish its trace, or submit to its oppressive power, or to be demoralised by what afflicts us - but to understand how to integrate our afflictions, and suffering what we did not ask for, into our own lives. It is an understanding that orients to this uninvited guest as “a guide from beyond” and not as a “thing” out-there imposing itself on us. This suggests that we need to maintain a collective focus and discipline to orienting thoughtfully to the presence of Covid-19 in ways that are not distracted, for example, by reactions like blaming which may be driven by concerns like who in particular is responsible for its presence. Within the context of an American response to Covid-19, blaming, we would suggest, politicises our afflictions. In saying this, we do not mean to ignore the causes of this pandemic disease for the sake of preventing further outbreaks of this kind. We are, however, interested in the human story of blaming within the context of both Covid-19 and from within the lens of systems theory.

Senge (2006), an organisational learning theorist, affirms that there is “in each of us a propensity to find someone or something outside ourselves to blame when things go wrong” (p. 19). He formulates this propensity to blame as a way of thinking that rests secure with the idea that the “enemy is out there” (p. 19). Accepting responsibility (not blaming) for Senge, however, “comes from seeing how we contribute to our own problems” (2006, p. 21), namely, by orienting to an enemy that is “in-here”, and within ourselves. This human punctuation of “in-here” and “out-there”, and the separation of both concepts, however, distracts us from seeing how the two are interconnected. It attracts us instead to perpetuate the division or separation between “in-here” and “out-there”, or for that matter “hosts” and “guests”. Blaming distracts us from orienting to our afflictions as a problem that is neither “in-here” or “out-there”, but in the relation between the “in here” and “out-there”.

One real consequence of blaming is that it distracts us from orienting thoughtfully to diseases as a part of the cycle of living and dying, and it distracts us from thinking about our relationship to both living and dying. Indeed, living and dying is our human condition. From a non-indigenous

American context, for Lewis (1978), a “biological watcher”, as he refers to himself, part of the problem is that

The long habit of living...has become an addiction: we are hooked on living; the tenacity of its grip on us, and ours on it, grows in intensity. We cannot think of giving it up, even when living loses its zest – even when we have lost the zest for zest.  
(pp. 45-46)

Part of the problem, as Lewis (1978) ascertains, is that in hiding our thoughts about dying, and in self- congratulating ourselves “with all the marvelous ways in which we seem now to lead nature around by the nose”, (p. 45), we, as mortal beings, can ignore and avoid this central fact of life. Human beings can pretend to believe that they can become a little smarter and expect cures for all diseases. In so doing, they become more addicted to convincing themselves as being in control as they exert more control over nature. We, as human beings, tend to become full of ourselves. As we “conquer” each new infectious disease, we can, for example, be seduced by large pharmaceutical companies into believing that the era of infectious disease is over or that we can live longer. We can be seduced into thinking that we can control nature, and that we are in control.

It is here that we need to pay heed to the voice of systems theory. If we are a part of nature, the challenge is: how do we control ourselves as the part that may well have created the conditions for the evolution and migration of this uninvited guest to us as hosts? Perhaps it may be appropriate to first understand how human beings came to believe in their ability to “control” everything around themselves, including nature.

### **The Industrialised Model**

Over the course of human history, and especially since the age of Industrialisation, humans began to punctuate themselves as separate from and of a higher-order species than nature. Recall, for instance, Marx’s (1856/1978), a political theorist, reflections of the surprise and drastic results of industrialisation:

On the one hand, there have started into life, industrial and scientific forces, which no epoch of human history had ever suspected. On the other hand, there exist symptoms of decay, far surpassing the horrors of the latter times of the Roman Empire. (p. 577)

The life of industrialisation is a life that attempts to control. Like Protagoras, industrialised human beings believe that they are the “measure of all things” (as cited in Plato, *Cratylus*, 386) And, as Marx, noted, “no earlier century had even a presentiment that such productive forces slumbered in the lap of social labour” (1978, p. 477). Today, we continue to exploit and desecrate the limited natural resources available to us on Earth as if they are unlimited. Curiously, for Marx (1856/1978), human attempts to control nature, is not driven by arrogance but rather by their total addiction their own success.

The success of the “bourgeoisie”, as Marx noted, is a result of the productive capacity to create “massive and more colossal productive powers than have all preceding generations together” (p. 477). It was indeed the addicted success of a total “subjection of nature’s forces to man” (Marx, 1978, p. 577), that moved the industrialised man to “embellish” themselves with, as the sociologist Weber (1958) noted, a “sort of convulsive sense of self-importance” (p. 182). In the face of our socially addicted conditions, Marx (1856/1978) makes a passionate plea: it is time to sober up, and “face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his real relations with his kind” (p. 476). For Marx, individuals who are addicted/intoxicated are incapable of understanding the real conditions of their lives because they are too busy being intoxicated.

Whereas intoxicated people punctuate themselves as separate from and independent of nature, the sober person, understands the real condition that we are part of nature. Indeed, where in this world can we be and not be a part of it? According to Bateson (1979), the belief that total control is possible is a pathology of Occidental epistemology. It seduces humankind to continue exerting an autocratic control over all interrelated systems. The presence of this unwanted visitor called Covid-19, however, makes real the

reality that human beings are not in control and that they cannot escape diseases or death because these are parts of nature's being.

Conceptually, the addicted person's concept of "the novel coronavirus as a disease" is meaningless when viewed in context of relationships. In truth, we, as human beings, live only because other creatures and plants live and die. At the same time, creatures and plants live because they have other "hosts" to feed on. Their "hosts" die so that they can live. All species are gifts and are sacred. All species should be our gift to our children. But the style of life we have evolved for ourselves is deadly for other species, and we continue to poison the world for future generations by our behaviour as consumers.

### **"It is like I Pressed the Reset Button"**

Within the context of the addicted life-style as noted above, the appearance and presence of this uninvited visitor, has however, triggered the development of another story. For example, in a virtual gathering of friends, through the technology of Zoom, several shared their experiences.

- "I realise that I did not have to rush in to work or get mega-stressed contending with the traffic. Yet, I got my work done."
- "I realised that my calendar was simply too full of things "to do". My "to do list" was so long that it did not allow me time for myself or my family. My life was simply too complicated."
- "You know it is like I pressed the "reset" button."

There is much to be unpacked in the "realisations" expressed above. First, when Covid-19 entered our lives, we have become more aware of the way we lived our lives previously. There is an affirmation that life is simple. Ironically, in our attempts to simplify our lives, we have done much to complicate our lives. Perhaps the addiction of our "busy-ness" is our signature of being "hooked on living". Second, it appears as if this pandemic disease has not only raised our awareness of what is important

in our lives, but it also has reminded us of (resetting us to) the flaw in the design of our own lives. In our age of technology, and in particular with the use of our Android or I-Phones, when things go “wrong”, or where a technical “flaw” is discovered, there is always the possibility of “righting the wrong” by pressing the “reset” key. This returns the phone to its previously constructed “factory settings”. Returning to Rumi’s poem, could these realisations be Covid-19’s way of violently sweeping its “guest’s house” empty of its “furniture” – could it be its way of resetting our priorities - for the sake of clearing us out for some new delight?

From a systems theory perspective, perhaps the crisis of this pandemic disease is clearing us out to become aware of the “flaws” in the systems that govern our relationship with disease. Perhaps it is clearing our minds (furniture) out of our state of addiction/intoxication to a state of being sober? Hegel (1970), a 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, offers us a way of thinking about what it means to be afflicted by a disease. “In disease”, he notes, “the individual is entangled with an external (non-organic) power and is held fast in one of its particular organs in opposition to the unity of its vitality” (pp. 440-441). The force of disease is such that it can “flaw-fully” hold an individual fast or be fixated on its “external non-organic power”, to the point of opposition to a unified vitality. By seducing us to the point of making paramount the survival of our bodies - as if that is all there is to being in the world - disease and singular attempts to cure us from disease, distracts us from purposefully orienting to the relationship among the “external non-organic power” and a unified vitality of life which sees disease as a part of living. Consequently, in the presence of disease, we are seduced to rely heavily on medical professionals who specialise in freeing the individual from suffering this external non-organic power. In this sense, prescribing pills is medicine’s way of controlling and eradicating the negative effects of this external non-organic power. Consuming the prescribed pills becomes the patient’s way of colluding and conforming to this medical story. This is one way through which patients act on their belief that they can regain control of their own bodies and survive the disease. Ironically, while taking the prescribed pill is one way of returning the diseased individual back to a previous state of health, the third leading

cause of death in the United States is connected to medical errors (Sipherd, 2018).

The “realisations” that we alluded to earlier, however, offer a different story. In the attempt to “reset” their lives, it appears as if this disease called Covid-19 has moved some to alter their priorities differently. They have chosen *not* to be determined by the foreign power of Covid-19 – the unwanted guest/visitor. They have chosen instead, to orient to what is important or meaningful in their lives. This shift affirms that there is more to life than survival. It affirms that individuals are able to respond to the “unity of its vitality”, by not giving away their power to being determined by this disease and hence not allowing this disease to take possession of their thoughtful response to living a unified life – with zest and vitality, and especially when they have lost the zest for zest. In fact, the realisations noted above suggest that this disease offers us the opportunity (possibility) to clear our thoughts (furniture) to the point where we can now make a coordinated effort to reclaim that which is important and meaningful to living a good life. Indeed, they have pushed their “reset” buttons.

### **Not a Return to the Good Old Days**

We would further suggest that this resetting, cannot and does not mean that we begin to return to the way things were before the glitch that necessitated the reset button. It is not a return to the “good old days” or to a previous understanding of “normality” because the context has changed. It is not to return to more of the same which will only produce more of the same. It is in effect a re-turning to a forgotten state of being, and to a sober relationship with one’s real conditions. It is as if Covid-19 is offering the addicted person the possibility of “recovery”. It is here that we are reminded of Heraclitus, the “weeping philosopher’s” fragment, as it was noted by Socrates: “Heraclitus is supposed to say that all things are in motion and nothing at rest; he compares them to the stream of a river and says that you cannot go into the same water twice” (Plato, *Cratylus*, 402). Insofar as all things are in motion and nothing at rest, Heraclitus could be heard as saying that we cannot return to our stream of our consciousness

(river) twice, because our consciousness (river) has changed (constantly flowing) and because our experience (intellectual context) has changed. Because both the river (consciousness) and the individual (experience) are in a state of systemic flux, we cannot “go into the same water twice”. We have changed and our intellectual climate has changed. At the same time, viruses and bacteria also evolve and mutate to fit changing circumstances. Indeed, our attempts to control them may have stimulated their need to evolve and mutate in order to survive. While they will ever be with us, and while viruses, bacteria, and creatures are a part of what makes our lives possible, it is ironic in that our singular attempts to control them are also what makes them possible to evolve and mutate.

The inability to press the “reset” button would, in effect, mean that all one can do in the middle disease, is to be overwhelmed by its presence and be subjugated to its power. Pressing the “reset” button, on the other hand, is one way of detaching oneself from its overwhelming power. It is one way of reconnecting ourselves to inquiring into our relationship with that which afflicts us as a problem that is worth examining. The inability to do so would mean that we surrender ourselves to the influence of the disturbing power of the non-organic. In so doing, this would result in humans surrendering themselves to simply suffering the effects of this disease and rely more on medicine to cure them from those effects. By implication it excludes alternative means to boost our immune systems.

The inability to press the “reset” button also moves one to a state of panic – namely where the hearts of individuals become pervaded by the fear of death, or, in the language of Hegel, by the fear of the extinction of their vitality. It would only affirm that one’s highest aspiration is the absence of fear. Perhaps this is it what it means to be truly *dis-eased*. The ability to press the “reset” button, on the other hand, affirms that the sober awareness of one’s own mortality - because we are all finite beings - can move individuals to orient to what is important and meaningfully live with a “unified vitality”. While there is the realisation that we will all die from our diseases and that our human organs will over time deteriorate, breakdown, and die, there is also the realisation that pressing the “reset” button offers us the possibility of living with our afflictions in ways that are

not determined by our afflictions. It offers us an opportunity to inquire into and develop a healthy relationship with our afflictions (our diseases). The inability to do so, would in fact, condemn us to living our lives as victims of our afflictions. As victims, we surrender ourselves to only feeling the negative effects of the external force of disease. In giving away one's own power to the negative effects of disease, we create higher levels of anxiety and asking for a pill and yet more pills, is one way of freeing oneself from anxiety. This experience of our afflictions continues to be perpetuated by our "culture" which defines the failure to be free from anxiety as an anomaly.

Pressing the "reset" button, would also move us away from a focus on self ("I") to a focus on the collective ("We") – namely to an appreciation of our parts and roles in the generation of these afflictions. It enables us the opportunity to mindfully "hold" our breathing between inhaling and exhaling. In this "holding environment", we give ourselves the gift to pause and recursively reflect on our constitution of our world. This brings us to a conversation of the individual (observer) in relation to what is being observed.

### **The Observer and the Observed**

Unlike first order cybernetics (the cybernetics of the observed system), which separates the observed and the observer, pressing the "reset" button moves us to the realm of the cybernetics of observing systems (second order cybernetics, cybernetics of cybernetics) which includes both the observed and the observer. The latter makes a fundamental epistemological shift from considering oneself as an independent and detached observer who watches the world go by, to considering oneself as a participant in the drama of mutual interaction, of the give and take in the circularity of human relations (von Foerster, 1990). Second order cybernetics asserts that we cannot be in the world and not be a part of it. It also asserts that while we cannot *not* be a part of it, in our attempts to "know" we again assume a position outside the system. As finite beings without a God's eye view of the world, our human fate is to be both a part



of and outside of a system simultaneously. Covid-19 may indeed be clearing us out of the furniture of first-order cybernetics. It may be preparing us for the new delight that comes from second-order cybernetics.

Once we accept the fact that we are a part of nature, our attempts to correct “flaws” would take a different turn. We might just see that the “flaws” we attempt to correct are “flaws” because of our attempts to correct them. Thus, instead of attempting to seek to bring things under our control, we might seek ways to participate in this world in ways that complement and respect the rights of other creatures who have equal rights to be in this world, while acknowledging that our attempted solutions may well have precipitated the Covid-19 problem. For example, the clearing of the habitats of wild animals or killing them for food, are bringing us more into contact with those animals and their “dis-eases”. Consequently, one hypothesis in relation to Covid-19 that needs to be addressed is our relationship that that which we kill for food .The belief that we are the only creatures endowed with conscious awareness fosters the belief that we have the right to attempt unilateral control over our relationship with nature. Attempts at unilateral control over that which is multilateral will fail. It licenses us, to use Rumi’s language, to *not* treat our uninvited guest/visitor honourably.

### **Shift to an Ecological View of our World**

If we are to learn from this from Covid-19, our new arrival, we need to develop a more ecological (egalitarian) relationship within all that exist in our world – with other human beings, with other creatures, and with nature. The natural resources of this world necessary for sustaining life are not unlimited. Lopez (2019) writes, “Australian philosopher Val Plumwood has written that humanities task now is to resituate non-humans in the ethical and humans in the ecological”. Lopez continues,

Having an ecological - - rather than a solely political or economic - - view of *Homo sapiens* and knowing that the physical environment exerts a selective pressure on the human genome lead to a straightforward observation: to care for the environment is to care for the self. To run roughshod over the

environment is to subscribe to the belief that humans are free to remain indifferent to their physical environments, that natural selection doesn't apply to them (p. 263).

Arguably, Lopez's observation reverses our previously assumed ways of thinking about the natural world which gave us permission to exploit nature without restraint. As Browne (2007) notes, "ecological thinking, expression, and action all involve the willingness to limit our use of power and to check our intellectual arrogance, to leave some room for wonder and for the world" (p. 147). To check our intellectual arrogance is to (a) check our addiction to control, (b) check our attitude of indifference to our own physical environments, and (c) check our convulsive sense of self-importance. It opens us to the possibility of developing a moral/ethical and ecological relationship with both humans and non-humans (creatures included). It opens us to care for both the environment and for ourselves. For Lopez (1986), it opens us up to restraining ourselves from running roughshod over the environment. And it is precisely the lack of restraint that troubled him and made him uncomfortable as he walked across the tundra, "in a region of chirping birds, distant caribou, and redoubtable lemmings" (p. 38), which he shares in his book *Artic Dreams*.

Because mankind can circumvent evolutionary law, it is incumbent upon him...to develop another law to abide by if he wishes to survive, to not outstrip his food base. He must learn restraint. He must derive some other, wiser way of behaving in the land...Not because he must...but because herein is the accomplishment of the wisdom that for centuries he has aspired to. Having taken on his own destiny, he must now think with critical intelligence about where to defer (pp. 38-39).

We notice that Lopez punctuates a distinction between control and restraint. Systems theory, as we noted earlier, would say that we cannot talk or think of one without the other. Whereas humankind can circumvent evolutionary law, their arrogance and addiction seduces them to believe that they can survive by outstripping their food base (life of control). To "play" with Marx's (1843/1978) understanding of sobriety, soberness, on the other hand, enables mankind to think with critical intelligence and with

a “knowing” that accepting a life of restraint would necessitate paying attention to how we choose to participate with the world, *for the sake of the world*, and for everything in it, including caring for the self - again, for where can we be in the world and not be a part of it.

To shift to an ecological view of the world, then, is to shift to an ecological way of living that includes the critical intelligence of restraint, namely knowing “about where to defer”. It is because we have the technology and the artificial intelligence to control, “use-up” and consume just about everything in our world, the wisdom of critical intelligence moves us instead to think about our moral and immoral relationship with our world (people; natural resources; creatures). To shift to an ecological view of the world and to an egalitarian relationship with all that exist in our world, is to shift to a moral/ethical relationship with all that exists with us in this world. In this we cannot be neutral or indifferent. To shift to a thinking “about where to defer” - to a life of restraint - is a moral undertaking. It is only in this way that we can treat uninvited guests honourably. One startling discovery is that if we remain complacent in relation to our previous ways of trying to control our lives, our relationships, and our environment because of our individualised addiction to greed and over-consumption, destruction and pollution, quick fixes, and bad nutrition, then we are doomed to fail.

## Conclusion

Perhaps the language of “conclusion”, is misleading. We would like to “conclude” our thoughts on the relationship between this pandemic disease called Covid-19 and people, by suggesting that we need to begin anew. The fundamental problem that we raised and addressed in this paper, is the problem of understanding our relationship with our afflictions in ways that are uniquely influenced by our understanding of such afflictions. We captured where we need to begin anew through our conversation about shifting our attention from an occidental epistemology to systems theory. In our paper we argued that systems theory

- (i) Reminds us of the pathologies of epistemology that may preclude learning from our relationship with Covid-19.
- (ii) Offers us a way to examine the relationship between guests and hosts particularly in the light of Rumi's formulation of being human, namely, as being a "guest house". While we may never get to a place where we invite Covid-19 into our lives, we can at least respect the fact that it will exist in our lives, as afflictions do, and with this awareness we can begin to find ways to co-exist with it, in the same way that we must do with all other creatures and nature on our only home – Mother Earth.
- (iii) Opens us to telling a story about our afflictions in ways that are uniquely shaped by such afflictions. In this regard we examined several human responses (stories) to Covid-19 within the context of our system that continues to change and evolve.
- (iv) Uncovers the need to recover from our state of addiction to a state of sobriety. The state of sobriety returns us to an awareness that we cannot just do one thing because each movement or perturbation necessarily resonates throughout the system.
- (v) Allows us to shift to an ecological rather than a solely political or economic view of *Homo Sapiens*. This ecological shift moves us into a moral/ethical realm (we use them interchangeably here) whereby humankind learns to abide by another law. It is a law that is itself punctuated by the distinction between control and restraint. The punctuation of this distinction enables us to become more aware of our attempts to establish a unilateral control over that which is multilateral. These attempts will not only fail, but they would also create different, and perhaps more serious problems. This development of another law to abide by, suggests that we surrender ourselves to being governed by the law of restraint.

Covid-19 and the desire to live our lives well, necessitates a shift to paying attention to a three-way relationship between Covid-19, people, and "another law to abide by" - the law of restraint. To abide by anything is to

suggest that we accept and give ourselves over to that which governs us. It is a life of surrendering. It is to surrender oneself to *being governed* by the law of restraint rather than control. But what is curious about this surrendering, according to Lopez (1986), is that we surrender not because we must, “but because herein is the accomplishment of the wisdom that for centuries he has aspired to” (p. 39). It is in essence an accomplishment of the wisdom of our human aspiration to live wisely. Said differently, one critical lesson that the presence of our uninvited guest/visitor is teaching us, is that it is calling us to surrender to the wisdom to which we aspire because it is wise to do so.

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## In Relationship with a Virus

An argument for “new” materialist thinking to be introduced into systemic thinking and an argument for why it has always already been there.

Mark Huhnen

*“This bl\*\*dy virus took my job away”*

*“I quite like it, it offered me a chance to be more reflective.”*

I caught this short snippet of conversation, of course, in a queue, the new place where at least for a while we actually encounter and talk to people outside of our own bubble. Although the experiences that the two statements refer to are very different, one more positive and one more negative, they both have two important things in common. Firstly, the virus is seen as an agent, the subject of the sentence. It does something. It takes away or offers something. It does this to the person talking, the object of the sentence. Thus, the person describes a relationship, or rather (re-)constructs one, with the virus the active part and the self of the speaker, the passive one.

In this chapter, I reflect on our relationship to the COVID-19 virus. Some developments in philosophy that have become known as *new materialism* and the *post-human* will help to investigate this relationship. Provoked by this reflection I will investigate some implications for and of systemic theory and practice. This article is also an investigation into or critique of the newness of “new” materialism, both with regards to systemic theory and practice and also to thought beyond that field.

Starting from how we speak of our relationship to the virus, in the vignette above, what “the virus” does is hugely important. It takes jobs away. But also offers chances. It can kill people and wreak havoc within our relationships. A few weeks ago, my mother died, having lived with Alzheimer’s disease for the last 20 years. “The virus” and the disease it spreads, COVID-19, were the main consideration in our family’s decision not to organise a memorial service in person. We would not want to find out a few weeks later that another potentially older relative or friend had contracted the virus and had developed serious health complications. This decision in turn impacts not only the relationships within our extended family but on service providers, caterers who now have one less customer. But we “know” from the news that there are so many examples of businesses having to adjust. Despite many businesses trying to avoid it, many people are being made redundant, as indeed the very first sentence in this article tells us.

On the other hand, what we do impacts on the virus and its spread. Maintaining a physical distance with each other seems to slow the spread of the virus as do other measures such as wearing masks. There are arguments that suggest human actions can trigger viruses to jump from one species as host to another (Zimmer, 2019). In a more poetic way Becvar and Amaladas (2020) say that

human beings claimed that they did not consciously invite a guest called Covid-19. But [...] they may well have created the conditions that can be experienced as an invitation (p. 33).

Whether we like it or not, we are in relationship with a virus: structurally coupled as Maturana and Varela (1972, 1987) would have said, as we are



mutually influencing and (part of) each other's environments. In that way a change in one self-contained and self-(re)-producing or self-maintaining system (or autopoietic system) triggers but does not determine a change in the other. That change is determined by its own structure that allows or disallows how to respond to the change in the environment. It also determines how the structure itself can change. In our case it seems an interesting question to ask: "What in our structure determines our responses to the coronavirus and how might we change these structures?"

For our systemic field, the question might well be: "How do we, as humans and as systemic practitioners, psychotherapists, coaches, organisational consultants, position ourselves towards this other autopoietic system?" and "How can we start to understand and contribute to change in the way we think?" Becvar and Amaladas (2020) have offered a systemic ecological view on how to position ourselves differently towards the virus and also to use this opportunity to reevaluate the way we think and live. In this article I hope to add to this another perspective that might fit well with a systemic ecological thinking: "new" materialism.

### **Social constructionism and its influence on systemic practices**

Currently, ideas of social constructionism (for example Berger & Luckman, 1967, Gergen, 1985, 1990, 1992, 1994) are very prevalent in the field of systemic practice. Narrative therapies (for example White, 2007), solution focussed brief therapies (for example de Shazer, 1994), collaborative language approaches (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988) and dialogical approaches (for example Seikkula, Arnkil & Erikson, 2003) see themselves or are being seen (Hoffman, 1993; McNamee & Gergen 1992; Minuchin, 1998) as influenced by social constructionism. Maybe the whole field has become social constructionist (Hedges, 2005) or has even moved away from the idea of "systems" towards social constructionism (Hoffman, 1993). This would of course raise the question whether these approaches are still systemic, but they are taught in courses that are titled "systemic" and Lorås, Bertrando and Ness assert that:

The systemic approach has been considerably developed throughout the years, incorporating elements from first- and second-order cybernetics, structural, strategic, narrative, solution focused therapy, constructivism, social constructionism, postmodernism, among others.

(2017, p. 144)

In the light of a global death toll it seems hard to argue that the Coronavirus Disease, and the actual virus that causes it, are *just* social constructs. Thinking about countries or their leaders that have tried to “construct” the virus as “harmless” to disastrous consequences, like Brazil or the US, seem to indicate a physical reality of the virus that also has some level of existence outside of or independent from the speech acts (Austin, 1962) that surround it. We cannot think of the virus as just socially constructed. On the other hand, we see a lot of social reality being constructed and created through language(s) and actions or speech acts. In May 2020, Dominic Cummings, now former Chief Adviser to British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, travelled from London to Durham, breaking the government’s lockdown rules. A debate and attempted legal proceedings ensued that questioned versions of what is allowed and what is right (The Guardian, 2020).

### **The post-human and “new” materialism**

In his later writing, John Shotter (2014) incorporates into his version of social constructionism the idea of agential realism from Karen Barad (2007), and with it some ideas from more recent movements in philosophy, in particular, the post-human (Braidotti, 2013) and “new” materialism. The term posthuman seems fitting for ideas that bring with them a decentring of the human (or “man”). “Man” can no longer be seen as the highest or most central entity in the hierarchy of acting entities – this would include the corona virus – that constitute reality. Rosi Braidotti (2013) comes from a Deleuzian perspective that eschews arborescent models, the metaphor of the tree and with it the idea of a hierarchy (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987)

preferring the metaphor of rhizome or network of decentred, interconnected entities. At any point, it is possible to create an entry point into the rhizome. A linear roots-trunk-branches view and causality does not make sense. In many ways, as also Nichterlein (2013) explores, there are strong connection points between this and Bateson's (1972) non-linear thinking. Bateson rejected the concept of power, and instead argued for circular, feedback-organised relationships. A linear cause and effect thinking would equate to an arborescent structure of mind rather than an ecological view of mind which foregrounded unanticipated inter-connectivities.

In my practice, I often encounter questions of "power". Clients tell me that they suffer under the power of someone else whether this a manager or parent or other person. I often start my work by enquiring into this "power thing" and where it comes from. Often if the sense of inevitability is in doubt, potentials for agency arise.

Jane (name changed) complained to me that she felt that her boss was preventing her from developing and trying out some innovative ideas within her team. She seemed to accept the power of the boss as a given, after all that is what hierarchies are there for. When we started exploring what 'constituted' power and what the interactions looked like, something different happened:

"Jane, what is it that your boss does that tells you she is powerful or has power over you?"

"One of the things she does, she interrupts me when I am speaking, particularly when I am taking a moment to collect my thoughts."

"And what do you notice yourself or others doing in response?"

"I shut down, I probably blush. And others in the meeting look away, look to her."

"What do you imagine that is like for her?"

"Oh, I think she loves that. Maybe she needs it."

“Ah interesting. What would happen to her if she could not fulfil her need in this way?”

“Maybe she’d fall apart [laughs].”

“So, just to check, are you saying she is threatened by you? She thinks that you could make her fall apart?”

Following this Jane started to develop ideas how she could invite her boss into her ideas, share them, see a benefit for both of them. At the same time she developed ideas about how she might respectfully challenge when being interrupted.

### **A false hierarchy**

Rosi Braidotti (2013) challenges us to not see the human, *Anthropos*, as central or in a more arborescent model as the top of a hierarchy with subjugated others. This hierarchy, dominant to Western thought, is the extension of a hierarchy between humans with white, middle-aged, able-bodied and cisgendered males – Vitruvian Men, as depicted by Leonardo DaVinci, *Man 2* (Sylvia Wynter & Katherine McKittrick, 2015) are seen as at the pinnacle. We find a Eurocentrism, racism and sexism inside of anthropo-centrism.

The hierarchical step between human and non-human others, like the corona virus, is something that Braidotti is interested in. This hierarchy of othering (Braidotti sees animals for example as earth-others) has made exploitation and ownership of living matter and information possible. One example that Braidotti uses for this is patenting and ownership of (parts of) genetic code – the commodification of life itself. It is interesting that the genetic code of the virus was sequenced very quickly and widely shared in order to create a vaccine, some kind of modified version of the virus, which will no doubt have patents and ownership attached, a potentially very lucrative state of affairs for those who own these rights. Yet we cannot know how effective any vaccine will be. This is one of potentially many points that might prompt us to rethink our relationship with the virus and

whether a hierarchical view with humans being higher in the hierarchy than viruses remains tenable. Indicative of this false hierarchy is the question of whether viruses count as life (Microbiology Society, 2016).

While this question might be less important to virology it seems more important with regards to our relationship with viruses. So far, approaches that seem to assume the virus as an agent in its own right, like wearing masks in response to it, have been more successful than approaches that assume us being able to control and own an inferior entity, something that is not even alive let alone with agency.

We are more and more influenced by nonhuman entities, and we can find many more examples beyond CoViD19. Algorithms recognise faces on social networks and make recommendations to target advertisements based on profiling of a previous user's (human) behaviours. With regards to CoViD19, the particular challenge not to establish a hierarchy between entities, ourselves and the virus, seems pertinent – at once new and already there in exchanges as quoted at the beginning of this article, that seem to locate agency within the virus.

### **Agential cuts – drawing boundaries between observer and observed**

Returning to Karen Barad (2007) and what John Shotter (2014) highlighted as an important further development is the idea of agential cuts, concerning the question of what counts as subject and what counts as object. To explore this question, Barad (2007) expands on Niels Bohr's concept of apparatus.

Differing from Werner Heisenberg's thought, known as the uncertainty principle, that a particle's two properties, speed and direction, cannot be *measured* or known at the same time, Niels Bohr thought that a particle does not *have* speed and direction at the same time. While Heisenberg remains epistemological, Bohr is clearly in ontological terrain, although both are referring to the process of measurement. According to Barad,

Niels Bohr saw an entanglement between observation or measurement apparatus and the observed/ measured, not unlike Heinz von Foerster (1975), who advocates seeing the observer as part of the observing system.

Barad writes about Heisenberg and Bohr's theories with regard to the well-known double slit experiment (Barad, 2007). Depending on the experimental set-up, light behaves either like particles or like waves. Unlike in Kant's (1787) split between phenomena and noumena, Bohr defined phenomena as this specific entanglement of measurement apparatus and what is being measured - in other words the entanglement of the subject (that measures) and the object (that is being measured). This entanglement is the reality. There are no underlying entities (noumena in Kant's, 1787, words) to our perceptions (phenomena). Bohr's realism looks at correspondence between theories and phenomena. Theories are embodied in the apparatuses that produce the phenomena. Here is a parallel to Deleuze's (1997) assertion that "Abstract ideas are not dead things, they are entities that inspire powerful spatial dynamism" (1997, p. 119).

Taking a neutral position towards different ideas of the seriousness (or even the existence) of the virus clearly does inspire spatial dynamism. Some people are very careful to maintain at least two metres of distance while wearing masks and others do not. Some news reports have suggested that some parties have been organised to infect participants based on the idea that infection generates immunity.

### **The world and knowledge about it united**

In Bohr's "proto-performative account of the production of bodies" (Barad, 2007, p. 129), reality is an "ongoing dynamism of becoming" (2007, p. 142). Phenomena are no longer merely perceptions (as Kant had described them) but real, albeit not fixed or separate, entities. Nor are phenomena merely constructions. At this point ontology and epistemology are united. The world / reality (ontology) becomes in the process of knowing (epistemology). Like some social constructionists (for example Leppington,

1991), Barad sees the dichotomy between epistemology and ontology subsumed in the challenge of representationalism and the

...correspondence theory of truth, which is rooted in subject-object, culture-nature, word-world dualisms. The separation of epistemology from ontology is a reverberation of these dualisms.

(Barad, 2007, p. 132)

Interestingly, according to Barad, Bohr left it open to define the boundary of the apparatus, so she now asks:

...where the apparatus “ends”. Is the outside boundary of the apparatus coincident with the visual terminus of the instrumentation? What if an infrared interface (i.e., a wireless connection) exists between the measuring instrument and a computer that collects the data? Does the apparatus include the computer? ...the printer attached to the computer...?

(Barad, 2007, pp. 142-143)

### **What is part of “the system” of life?**

Barad critiques Bohr for seeing himself outside of the apparatus. One can easily imagine Heinz von Foerster having a similar critique. Further, the sequence of questions is reminiscent of Gregory Bateson (1972, p. 465) asking about the boundaries of mind with his example of a blind man moving forward, whether the system includes the man (including his brain, nerves), the stick and the street.

Bateson and Barad might just come from different directions in their challenge of an inside / outside dichotomy. Bateson extends mind beyond the boundaries of the human, so that the blind man, the stick and the street are seen as a system of mind. Barad extends the notion of apparatus to include the person conducting the experiment. If we were to apply this logic to our relationship with the virus, Bateson might argue that we need to

include the virus in our ecology of mind and Barad would include us in the specific apparatus that is formed between us and the virus as constitutive.

I have referred to the debate whether viruses count as life forms. One important difference between Barad and Bateson is that Bateson (1972/2002) continues to advocate a separation of the world of living entities or *creatura*, and non-living entities or *pleroma*. Concepts from the world of *pleroma*, like linear causation (for example impact), can usefully be applied to non-living entities such as billiard balls (Bateson, 1972/2002) but are problematic in the world of living things. This contributed to his eschewing of the concept of power.

However, the question of whether a virus counts as a living or non-living entity has implications beyond the problem of transferring principles from one world to another. Barad (2007) asks exactly this question: Where is (if there is) the dividing line between living entities, or entities that are imbued with agency, and non-living entities or entities of which we assume no agency? Gregory Bateson uses the example of a (dead) crab and asks his students to collect arguments for the crab having been a living creature (1979). While this leads to very interesting observations of patterns, another interesting question would have been about this dividing line between living and not-living. When would we locate the time of death? When the crustacean's heart stopped? When the last nerve impulse – and I note that I am possibly doing the forbidden according to Bateson by applying concepts of *pleroma* to a *creatura*, as does a large part of biology – was sent? Or when it stopped interacting with other living entities? When would that be? When bacteria and worms (decomposers in biology) have finished with the carcass? Or when a future fossil fuel using creature uses the oil that is composed of the carbon molecules that were once the crab? This leads to the question of difference not only in time, but in space. Is only the crab as a whole alive, or every single cell? What about the molecules that form the cells, the atoms that form the molecules and the subatomic particles that form the atoms? Increasing the size one could ask is living confined to the crab? Or do we need to include the water around the crab, that moves it and is moved by it. This question is then similar to the question posed here in relation to the Coronavirus. Perhaps the



question of whether it is a life form becomes unanswerable, or rather our answer depends on how we draw the boundary. With regards to an infected person it might be very difficult to speak of inter-actions between separate entities.

Another difference is that Bateson thinks of interaction between pre-existing entities while Barad describes entities, (including the subject as well as the object) as becoming or being created in the processes or actions of observation or measurement – or maybe more systemically speaking in the process of relating within a wider system. Rather than calling them interactions – the term would suggest pre-existing entities or *relata* (entities that relate) – she calls these processes *intra-actions*. Entities are constituted inside of the process of relating to each other, for example, in observation, measurement or discourse. I cannot help but hear echoes of Maturana and Varela's (1987) assertion that a unit or object is "...brought forth by an act of distinction" (p. 40).

What would happen, I wonder, if we saw ourselves and the virus and the disease as becoming in the process of relating? If we started to account of "us" and "the virus" not as subjects relating to objects, not even as separate entities that inter-relate but as together constituting the particular entanglement or apparatus we might chose to call CoViD19 in which we *intra-act*? Would we approach CoViD19 as less of some "thing" that we need to dissect from the outside, in an approach that Shotter (2006, 2010) would call "aboutness thinking"? Or would we widen our view to other actors – feelings like fear, non- or multi-personal entities like the media or science – in the wider entanglement in which we can be more in tune with our own contributions or *intra-actions* in constituting the situation? This, Shotter (2006, 2010) might see as thinking from within, or "witness thinking". It might also resonate with Bateson's (1972) reflections on alcoholism, that point to what he would see as epistemic error of being outside and able to overcome alcoholism, if only one is strong enough, has enough will-power. We might also hear echoes of Braidotti's and Wynter's critique of the hierarchy in which Man – particularly Man 2 – sees *himself* as the pinnacle of the hierarchy able to overcome anyone and anything else. I am tempted to see the CoViD19 situation and struggle for social

justice and increased public awareness that “Black Lives Matter” as both questioning this hierarchy. But it does not seem quite so easy to “overcome” this current pandemic situation and I am wondering whether this partly due to this epistemic error, or should I say onto-epistemic error or just sheer arrogance, to not see ourselves as part of the ontogenesis of our CoViD19 world.

## **Boundaries and how they are drawn**

In contrast to more social constructionist ideas, Barad (2007) combines Bohr’s ideas with Foucault’s concept of discursive practices. She clarifies that “Discourse is not a synonym for language.” (2007, p. 146) as opposed to Anglo-American linguistics and some strands of social constructionism:

To think of discourse as mere spoken or written words forming descriptive statements is to enact the mistake of representationalist thinking. Discourse is not what is said; it is that which constrains and enables what can be said.

(Barad, 2007, p. 430)

and I would add “becoming material reality in the process.”

Discourses are therefore boundary drawing practices and in creating the boundaries between subjects and objects, subjects and objects are produced in discourse or apparatuses. I argue now that systemic practices form apparatuses as defined by Barad and that systemic practices can attend to or rather reflexively explore these apparatuses from within – across different therapeutic, coaching and organisational practices. Systemic practices can attend to the structures (Maturana & Varela, 1987) and belief systems that co-determine our intra-actions within the apparatus.

Earlier systemic ideas and practices focussed on circularity or mutual influence of related actors – with a focus on humans acting to mutually influence. We could use several models to justify exploring circular patterns: Bateson’s use of the example of the blind man that seems to map

so well on Barad's description of apparatuses is one example. Maturana and Varela's structural coupling that was also very influential for the development of systemic theory and practice could also be applied to Barad's apparatuses. Organised into apparatuses the structure of parts of the experimental set-up are allowing for certain outcomes or rather behaviours of other parts, as the double slit experiments show. Whatever gets defined as subject and object is structurally coupled in the same way behaviours of family (or group of "systems") members are structurally determined and coupled with each other. This in turn is similar to the complementarity that Minuchin and colleagues (1967) described. Complementary behaviours set up a structure (that is just as non-static as the structure that Maturana and Varela have in mind). The behaviour of the virus and the behaviour of the disease is structurally coupled in a bigger apparatus that includes us, the virus and everything.

An exploration of boundary drawing practices has happened for a long time, if we think of boundaries more generally than just the boundary between subject and object. Brown (1991) for example differentiates two types of circular questions: those that call forth similarities and those that call forth differences. Applied to the question of agency it would call forth the question of subject/object and creates (or constructs?) subjects and objects in the process.

What systemic practices may have fallen short of, from a "new" materialist point of view, is the *material*-discursive practice (Barad, 2007). What has been billed as the linguistic turn has particularly invited practices informed by post-structuralist linguistic thought. Systemic practice as talking therapy has become reflexively exploring words with other words, exploring and changing meanings and re-constructing social worlds and realities, excluding physical material entities and questions from the process or seeing them as merely constructed in language, therefore secondary to human beings. But matter matters. This is the critique inherent in the other headline often given to "new" materialism: post-humanism.

And we are surrounded by non-human entities that interact or rather intra-act with us. A mother and her 15-year-old son come to see me for therapy.

The mother is worried about her son's "excessive playing on the play station". She worries that "he misses out on education and friendships". He states that he is achieving reasonable grades and is learning a lot on the play station and has friends through playing games over the internet together.

Mother: Yes, what you learn is shouting and yelling and being aggressive. And the friends that you are having there aren't real."

Son: These friends are real. I talk to them. They respond.

Mother: You don't meet them in the real world. You cannot even see them. For all I know they might not even be there, only part of the game.

Mark: But the game is real?

Mother and son look puzzled.

Son: It's a game. What do you mean is it real?

Mark: Well, I guess the play station is real. It is there. You can touch it. The game ... I wonder. You cannot quite touch it in the same way, right? Maybe apart from if it is on a CD or DVD. But when you play it, it becomes a bit of a reality, right? You say you can learn stuff in it...

Son (enthusiastically): Yeah, absolutely?

Mother (more sceptically): Hmm.

Mark: Well I guess you think it is a real problem?

Mother: Yeah, sure.

Mark: Does that make the game real? Or become real or at least a real problem in your view, when he plays it?

Mother: I guess.

Mark: If the game was real, would it have its own ideas of what it wants?

Mother: Well I can tell you that. It wants to be played, constantly.

We proceed to explore what the game would want for the son and the family and what effects it has. We explore when the son has resisted the lure of the game and when the game has not been allowed to impact on the relationship between mother and son.

The little vignette at the beginning and the collective experience and individual experiences with the coronavirus bring something similar into sharp focus: we are in relationship both with the physical virus that is not merely constructed *and* the social reality constructed around it. In discourse we create subjects and objects, and what is afforded and constrained.

We can continue to interrogate and explore different possible discourses – not just with words – different possible boundaries. We can continue to be playful and try to see the world from the perspective of the virus, as narrative therapies might interrogate or deconstruct “problems” (White & Epston, 1990). We can use circular questions to navigate the complexity of intra-actions that constitute what we might chose to call apparatuses or realities. Picking up Becvar and Amaladas (2020) play on the word “host”, making the virus the guest, we could playfully ask” how (or how much) do we, as families, companies, countries and global societies want to cater for our guest? Or do we continue to search for technical solutions that go so well with “bash[ing] the virus over the head” as Uğur Şahin, one of the scientists behind a vaccine candidate said in an interview with the Guardian newspaper (Oltermann, 2020). Interestingly such a metaphor already anthropomorphises the virus. Could we accept part of the invitation that this metaphor extends? Interviewing someone with a similar view we might be curious: “If we see ourselves as hosts, the virus would be a guest. What do you think your guest would do if you bash them over the head? Will they stay, go, come back, want revenge? What about their friends? Would they get involved? What might you have done – maybe not that you have anticipated this – that was understood by the virus as invitation? Or was there even something that forced them to come to visit you? How would Coronavirus describe you as a host? Or neighbour? What difference would it make if you saw Coronavirus not an uninvited guest but as a family member, co-worker, powerful leader, friend or even as part of yourself?

What has Coronavirus got to teach you?" According to some scientists, the genes of a virus have been incorporated into our human genome. About 8% of our genome consists of endogenous retro-virus genes (mostly no longer functional; Subramanian et al., 2011)

Beyond what Burnham (1992) called the level of approach, there seems to be a "new" attitude called for. One of humility, of seeing oneself as part of. This is what Bateson calls for when he speaks of the epistemic error of the alcoholic – it would be better to see oneself as part of alcoholism. That is maybe what we would experience if we let go of our sense of being able to overcome, overpower or outsmart and we learn to live with and think "with" (rather than about) the virus as just one example and with(in) the world as an apparatus that we are part of at large. Maybe in the spirit of becoming we see ourselves and our world(s) not as separate nouns, subject and object but as verbs, as "transmaterial worlding" as Simon and Salter (2019) would maybe call it. Would we even play string figures with a new companion species (Haraway, 2016)? The more hopeful aspects of me/world can imagine at some point being grateful to the coronavirus for having taught us that.

With some movement towards humility, I need to explain the "new" in "new" materialism. Wanda Pillow (2019) opened my eyes to what she called a "whiting out" of theorising that went with "new" materialist thinking that neglected to give due credit to decolonial (feminist) theorist and scholars who have theorised before much of what is credited now to "new" materialism. Yet, I sense simultaneously something having always been there and an element of newness and urgency entering our nature/cultural sphere when, as I write this, I listen to the song "Blood of the past" by The Comet Is Coming featuring Kae Tempest's lyrics haunting me:

All the many corpses begin to speak  
 What ignorance is cannot be argued over anymore  
 It is too late for pleading white picket dreams  
 Print you off, the shemps, the world is shrinking

Rooted in a trivial concern, in interconnectedness  
In the need to make face and keep up  
And drown out the many voices within  
Imagine a culture that has, at its root  
A more soulful connection to land and to loved ones  
But I can hear the lie before you speak  
There is nothing but progress to eat  
And we are so fat and so hungry...

Kae Tempest, 2019

“New” materialism and the posthuman seems to be such a good fit and brings together different directions of thinking underpinning systemic practices. It might have the potential to offer a different way of overcoming the bitter epistemology / ontology divide that seems to have underpinned most of the philosophical thinking about our relation to our world and how we come to know each other (world and us). This virus might be the point in case.

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## S E V E N

# African Indigenous Oral Traditional Endarkened Feminist Practice: Indigenous Knowledge and New Materialism

Julia Jude

### **Introduction**

This chapter examines my relationship with objects, derived from African Indigenous (Dei 2011), African oral traditional ideas (Jude 2013) and Endarkened feminisms (Dillard 2012 which I refer to as AIOTFEP. These ideas stem from the dailyness of local people's use of everyday knowledge to include experience, remembering, practice, and ways of knowing embedded in culture, history, language, place and surroundings (Dei 2011; Some 1994). Others advocate that objects and our surroundings have the capacity to influence our responses, judgement and relationship with self and others. Objects are deemed to have presence – to be alive and to have ability to generate vital force. This way of thinking encourages the inclusion of both animate and non-animate knowledge.

One of the defining characteristics of AIOTFEP is grounded in the assertion that our ways of knowing are informed by social relationships: with self, community, others, space, place, objects, and our surroundings.

AIOTEPF scholars have rightly complained that their way of giving meaning to their lived experiences are accounts that Western European scholars and academics distance themselves from, actively silencing their ways of knowing by claiming frames used to make sense of their experience have no place in dominant academic discourse (Collins 2000; Dillard 2012; Du Bois 1990; Fanon 1993).

The debate as to what counts as knowledge continues. But academics are no strangers to being questioned and asked to account for positions taken. Feminist scholars continue to challenge academic theory and have been successful, not only in influencing dominant discourse, but re-visioning accounts that privilege feminist and marginalised voices.

I argue that there is a place for the entanglement of African Indigenous Endarkened Feminist ideas alongside the New Materialist ideas of Barad (2007 & 2003), Bennett (2010), Braidotti (2013), and many more who emphasise the vitality of matter (objects, non-human, stuff). The idea of bringing together ideas from AIOTEPF and advocates of the life of matter could be one way of creating multi-perspectives within systemic and social constructionist discourses that could offer ideas beyond Western European discourses.

### **Shifting position**

Barad (2007) maintains that one way of shifting the traditional route to knowledge-making could involve re-evaluating discourses of inclusion and exclusion; also, the way inclusion is talked about as well as the structures that support the way disciplinary positions are defended. She argues a way forward would be to break down the spilt between the value placed on certain positions, arguing for a way of coming together that embraces responses to fit otherness in a more diverse way. This shifting of position supports the views of African Indigenous and Endarkened feminist scholars. Moreover, it made me aware that I had never questioned the theoretical menu that I had swallowed during my professional academic journey until I found myself experiencing a sense of doubt I will expand upon in the “Potatoes and Yam” narrative below.

## Potatoes and Yam

*Potatoes and yam are root vegetables. The potato is a staple vegetable in Europe and used alongside many dishes. Yam looks like a bark of a tree and is grown in Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America and Asia. Both vegetables originate from countries outside Europe.*

*Yam and Potato have to be cooked before they can be eaten. They can be boiled, steamed, grilled, baked, roasted, fried and mashed. And yet the potato has been deemed the chef's most versatile vegetable and has gastronomic status. The yam, on the other hand, has never been incorporated into European cuisine.*

The potato and yam story is about my departure towards creating a diverse and cultural perspective to my systemic practice. As a systemic therapist and researcher working in families' homes, I had become aware of tension between my ideas (therapeutic skills) and their application. In my clinic-based sessions, I saw families at a particular place and time. During the pre-session before seeing families, I would hypothesise about what families might say and how I might respond. I would invite the team to watch out for ways in which I used a particular idea, technique or other ways of working. The videotape recording was there as backup to ensure every detail was captured, so it could be reviewed and learned from. In short, I learned to predict, measure, and develop good intentions. It was a method of working I believed could be adapted to any context. But this sweet sense of certainty and safety does not transport easily or even usefully. In families' homes there is no certainty, time runs riot and is rebellious. I often have no idea which members of a family might be present or what mood they might be in.

It is not surprising that I found it hard to transfer theoretical ideas that grounded my training into home-based therapy. Imagine arriving at a new town, country or village and having no idea what to expect. It was hard to come to terms with the notion that I could not plan for a neat outcome or choreograph the one-hour therapeutic session. Not knowing how to use my traditional skills purposefully, I found myself coming to the realisation that, words, theory or techniques do not,

*Bleed*  
*and*  
*Breathe*  
*and*  
*Fall ill*  
*and*  
*Laugh*  
*or*  
*Cry*  
*or*  
*Shout*  
*or*  
*Hug*  
*or*  
*Hurt*  
*or say good- bye.*

I needed a model that could breathe life into everyday family interactions. Feelings, emotions, responses, said and unsaid words are alive in families' homes. The fact that I was having this conversation in a culturally prescribed way started to make me feel uneasy. Had I lost my way around my professional nest? Yes. I found that I could not transfer my way of being a therapist in a child and adolescent National Health Service context to a family's home. Instead of my usual feelings of competence and knowing how to go on, I was experiencing thundering heartbeats, sweaty armpits,

and acute emotional doubt of my ability to do anything that would be remotely considered as therapeutic. My professional self had disappeared and left me empty of know-how. This started to become a regular occurrence which forced me to pause. I'm not sure that I could have done anything else but pause. I knew that something different needed to happen. That something different was serenading to feelings in the body as one way of understanding what was going on and seeing this, not as an infliction, but as a resource. To do this I had to reconnect with values from my cultural heritage. The intensity of difficult feelings was relieved once I had given myself permission to integrate Indigenous knowledge and know-how into my practice, alongside traditional systemic ways of working.

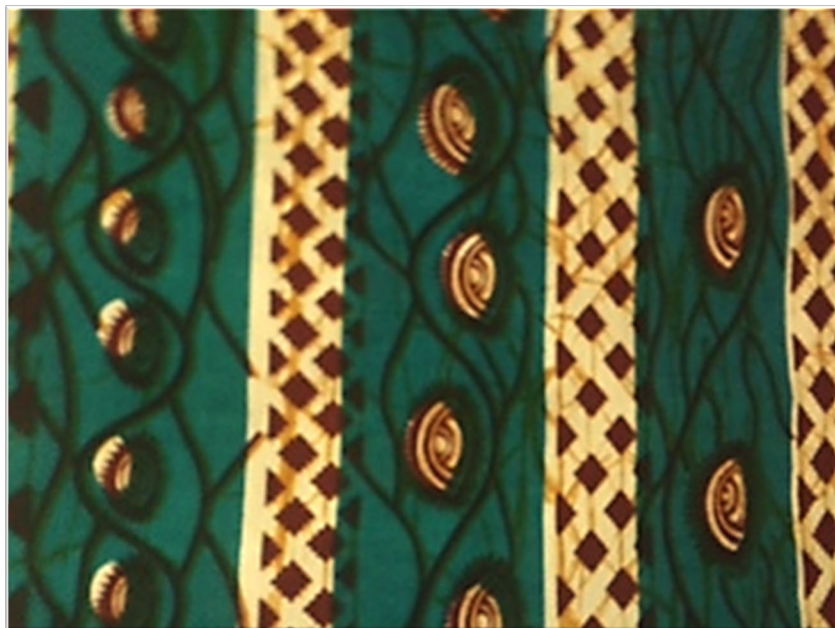
Dei defines Indigenous knowledge "as science, philosophy, and practice of knowing about one's existence as not conscripted and scripted by colonial and colonizing experiences" (2011, p.4), and noted that, "Indigenous knowledge speaks of the inseparability and interdependence of selves and the collective which includes mind, body and spirit connections and connectedness of society, culture and nature in the ways we come to know about ourselves and our work; based on a cosmological understanding that the elements of the universe are interrelated and intertwined" (Dei 2011, p.4). Dillard approaches the issue of African Indigenous ideas in ways that seek to illuminate the linguistic concepts that erase and make invisible black presence, and "attempts to unmask traditionally-held political and cultural constructions or constrictions, language which more accurately organizes, resists, and transforms oppressive descriptions of sociocultural phenomena and relationships" (Dillard 2012, p.662). Similarly, Womack (2013) argues that there is a need to punctuate negative stories of the other, and maintains that the dominant discourses invented by Western academics have tended to erase contributions of the lived experiences of black lives from the past and future, which has had the effect of hijacking the imagination and creativity of communities that do not fit the frame of dominant Western European discourse. Dillard (2012) suggests that this way of offering knowledge is oppressive and marginalising, as it implies that no black thinker is good enough to have their contribution acknowledged by the white male elite.

African scholars, however, continue to be divided on what counts as African Indigenous knowledge, and what this knowledge should look like. The debate has centred on whether African philosophy should conform to Western thinking and what counts as philosophy. As a result, African scholars have found themselves occupying different camps: on one side, there are the traditionalists (Carruthers 1995; Diop 1991; Some 1994), who argue that day-to-day values based on oral tradition should be privileged, while others argue that traditional ideas in the form that emerged from Western scholars no longer have a place in African discourse – that even what are known as African Indigenous ideas are illusions created by Westerners (Hountondji 1983; Karp & Masolo 2000; Nobles 2007).

Over the last two decades we have seen a rise in writing from a wide range of black scholars - philosophers, theorists, students and practitioners - all making a contribution by placing traditional and contemporary ideas into a conversational frame to be discussed, critiqued and expanded upon. However, I am interested in the works of scholars who encourage an appreciation of the traditional ideas rooted in aspects of everyday practice. When I refer to *Endarkened* ideas, I use the word as Dillard does, to challenge the notion of enlightenment and emphasise instead multiple, complex, varied African identities, values, histories, traditions and practices. I also want to acknowledge and honour the ancestry and tradition of African Indigenous ideas that relate to everyday practice and are not forgotten but live on in the mouths of aunts, uncle, elders and parents in a local community; that are lived/living, honoured/honouring and remembered/remembering through performance, everyday activity, speech, music, song, craft, skills, touching, rituals, poetry, storytelling and family tradition. Practices and ways of being that have been handed down over time, which everybody in the community is acquainted with and can take part in. The celebration of matter by the community (bodies, environment and objects), and the vitality that emerges from the entanglement of these different elements. In sum, practice based upon the idea of connectedness, material presence and our surroundings (Appiah 1993; Dei 2011; Doumbia & Doumbia 2004). Kente clothes offer a good example of the impact of material objects in our lives. Ross (2001) points



out that Kente clothing is not superficially decorative, as it communicates something about the wearer – displaying themes of the individual's identity, regional patterns and relational context within the local community. For example, this Kente cloth (below) conveys the message that there are things about the wearer's life that cannot be talked about in public.



“Eyes can see but your mouth cannot say.”

Miller (2000) considers the ways in which some communities can be geographically or tribally identified through cloth. He noted that in some communities there was a belief that truth resided on the surface, where other people can easily see it and attest to it, rather than in the hidden depth of self under the skin. What seems to be emerging is the idea that we cannot have both/and. That is, we are constituted by things and appearances which may appear soft/superficial and constituted by ideas of self, local knowledge or theory. Morrison (1993) and Smith (2012) noted the latter appears to be the more acceptable construction; as Western academic scholars hold on to a textual account of knowledge, this tends to leave knowledge based on practice in the shadows.

From Morrison's (1993) and Smith's (2012) observations, it could be argued that knowledge based on African Indigenous Oral Traditional and Endarkened Feminist Practice rather than Western European knowledge could appear to be too much of a difference in terms of what counts as legitimate knowledge. Despite the negative slant placed on Indigenous practice and knowledge, there is a movement by culturally diverse scholars, who in essence are challenging who has the right to speak for whom. In addition, the resurgence of a focus on objects as being and having knowledge, championed by contemporary thinkers, Haraway (2008) and Barad (2003), suggests that it is a worthy pathway to divert our attention. The examples below give a sense of the vital energy that comes from place, space and our surroundings – to consider *matter* and its impact on our emotions and judgement.

Through the example, I want to retain and build on the idea that material presence and objects have vitality and if we allow ourselves to be open to this silent knowledge, it has the potential to redefine the way that we give meaning to our experiences and relationships with objects and surroundings.

### **From clinic to families' homes**

*The journey to my clinic is a very scenic affair, near woodlands and a farm. The clinic is set in hospital grounds, the receptionist welcomes visitors and the clinic walls are covered with lovely artworks. My home visits, on the other hand, often leave me feeling that I have to be on guard as I navigate my way up and down the stairwells that refuse to let go of years of urine odour. I walk over wet floors and pass through walls covered in graffiti. This housing estate appears permanently in a bad mood. It stands big and bold, but old. It looks worn and tired. When she was built in the early 1970s, she was majestic! Everyone wanted to be housed in her. From 2010, she accommodates only new arrivals to this country; they are the tenants who are grateful to be there. The visual image*

*of this estate is unforgiving. The boarded windows are like sticking plaster on broken skin. As I walk towards the estate, I have this familiar conversation with myself about whether or not to take the stairwell or head for the lift. Neither of the options turns out to be a clear winner as they both cause anxiety and seem equally uninviting. "I am a family therapist!" I say to myself. "What am I doing here?"*

*It was starting to get dark and it was a chilly November day. Children of all ages seemed to appear out of nowhere, full of laughter, screaming and teasing. They shone like rays from the sun, giving the estate life. The children did not pause, ponder or hesitate about taking the lift or stairs. They just made their way home. So what the heck was I worried about? The estate was home to many children. When I repeat this statement – the estate was home to many children – I felt ashamed that I had feared it but at the same time I was humbled by my experience.*

Shotter (2013), inspired by Wittgenstein and Bakhtin, invites us to make use of our vision and develop a language that invites description as opposed to one that is cold and abstract. Talk that opens the door to description allows the listener to get a sense of what is happening in the telling. Descriptive talk is alive; it's living. It has body and character. Adding descriptions, alongside storytelling, is like having a stethoscope that allows closeness from within. The stethoscope gives depth to the sense-making; it provides another layer of inner voice and energy.

But these moments that get created contain many things I can't completely capture, such as time of day, season, the presence of others, location, buildings, stories associated with the community, my experience, the purpose of my visit, my mood, events that happened prior to my arrival, my journey to the location. All these different elements can be considered polymattering: evolving not one single line of my thought and feeling, but an entanglement of a collection of experiences, for how I come to make sense of this moment requires a diffuse, scattered kind of attention and

sense-making that appears absent in the way we usually dialogue and arrive at meaning-making (Shotter 2014). What I am attempting to show is the idea of enchantment (Bennett 2010; Gell 1996), and a sense that the vitality of energy in any given moment is complex. Moreover, this energy is not always immediately apparent or accessible, and can remain hidden from our awareness (Morton 2013).

The French philosopher Bachelard's (1994) work on the domestic home offers the elements mentioned above. He refers to the poetics of space as magical 'cosmos'. Home is framed within the background of childhood playful living comprised of much delight, rich in imaginary spaces, events, moments and curiosity. Bachelard (1994) is irreverent in the way that home is seen, with different tunes of praise, beauty and power all contained within home. What he demonstrates is the dimension of the aesthetics of objects (Morton 2013), which can be conveyed in the description of our surroundings and the power of the enchantment, spellbound affect and bewitchment that comes with the intimate interplay of human and non-human relationship. Bachelard's (1994) work typifies Barad's (2003), Bennett's (2010) & Tuan's (2008) ideas of energy in matter and connects with AIOTEPF's notion of spirit and soul that exist in objects (Castaneda 2000; Keeney 2005).

### **An example of practice**

Having considered Bachelard's poetic description of home, I want to take this opportunity to share an example of how I use the idea of objects taken from AIOTEPF in my practice. In this image, the participant was invited to select objects that they come into contact with that are important in their day-to-day context. The assemblage of objects depicts moments of the participant's life through the dailyness of stuff that they interact with.

- The participant was invited to pay attention to the objects chosen as well as to consider how together they contribute to a narrative of their everyday life.
- The relational image with object allowed the individual to create

their narrative of their experience from elements of their environment/surroundings that best describe the dailyness of their experience.

- The presentation of life captured in moments offers an alternative way of seeing aspects of everyday living through our interaction with the stuff around us, and offers a way of connecting with self through the dailyness of material stuff.
- The image attempts to show the relevance of objects in our life which I argue can enrich our understanding of our situated context when words fail. As noted by Bennett (2010) in her work on hoarding, the narratives of the hoarder can be performed and understood through the message of the hoard – matter.



This connects with the work of Miller (2000, 2008) who provides a moving account of how people express themselves through their relationship with objects and Turkle's (2007) work, which provides a collection of examples of the different ways we use objects to think. Miller (2000) noted that our sense of truth and reality can exist on the surface where other people can

easily see it, touch it and attest to it, or it can be located from within the inner frames of self. The point I want to make here is that expression of our experiences, sense of self and the dailyness of our existence can co-exist with language and objects. Neither is right or wrong - we can have both. It is an invitation to the viewer to look, look, and look again – to view the ever more complex realities of the here and now.

In the moment of looking I would encourage the individual:

- *To consider where their gaze arrests on the image*
- *To consider how the touch of their eyes on the frame makes them available to what gets seen and evoked*
- *Which part of self does this most connect with?*
- *What experience does it evoke?*
- *What that means for them?*
- *What other ways might they want to engage with the image?*
- *What do they find themselves getting caught in?*

The above questions would be one way in which I might encourage the process of curiosity of *becoming with the silent other* - otherwise known as objects, stuff or materialism. One way of departing on this pathway might be to consider the encounter as nomadic meeting points within a process (Braidotti 2013) inviting Lather's (2007) ideas of getting lost in the other's local habitat and being attentive to the implication of putting ourselves in conversational spaces which might be unfamiliar. Where we experience disquiet, where we are unsettled, these places open up the possibilities for the 'yet to be known' to emerge from the process. The notion of getting lost connects with the work of the feminist philosopher, Lugones, who advocates an appreciation towards travelling the world of others and being open to what emerges from the travel: difference, unfamiliarity and alienation, to comfort and familiarity (Lugones, 1994 in Madison, 2012). Braidotti (2013) also speaks of the value in taking a position that requires shifting from linear to multi ways of being and essentially being prepared,

and having the courage, to go outside the box. Madison gives a word of caution in that she notes, “Travelling to another world threatens arrogant perception” (Madison, 2012, p. 125). This rings true for me. When I first started publicly speaking of African Indigenous ways of knowing, I was met with fury in some professional circles which silenced me for a while as I had not anticipated the level of rage I encountered.

## Conclusion

The emergence of transdisciplinary interest in the matter of matter encourages new ways of being and knowing, and could soften the arrogant perception that Madison refers to, and could see the collapse of the binary that exists between animate and inanimate (Barad, 2007). This could drive and support the idea of social justice for the unveiling and acceptance of AIOTEFP as deserving the same status given to Western European knowledge-based frames. What I am advocating is an awareness and openness toward creating space for using different ideas of understanding human experiences from other communities, which could create space for multi perspectives from many corners of our globe to have equal footing in the lineage of traditional perspectives that influence what knowledge and what meaning-making practices should look like.

As researchers, scholars and practitioners we must be ready to work not only with the dialogue, tools and structures that we know and are faithful to, but must also be brave enough to include alternative ways of knowing to put our world and the world of others in an englobing dialogical frame.

It is important that we act to enable a co-joining of worlds rather than distance or force others to see the world through traditional dominant discourses. Implicit is the notion that the knowledge we impart needs to create space for many different forms of knowledge, which requires perturbing the traditional way we offer ideas that makes some knowledge more legitimate than others.

I have included my personal account of how I relate to the idea of bringing a sense of multi perspective into my practice. We now face how the question of how we might work to make multi perspective meaningful in practice and in our inquiry. But also to wrestle, perhaps, with what this response could look like in this new wave of thinking that advocates a more joined-up approach to practice.

One of the defining characteristics of AIOTEFP is grounded in the assertion that relationship with material stuff is informed by social relationships with self, community, others, space, place, objects and our surroundings. What is being constructed in this paper is the idea that our knowledge base needs to be more expansive to include practices that celebrate different knowledge, and challenges us to reinvent ways of inquiring into our practice. As a way of embracing and creating other ways of knowing, I offer AIOTEFP as one way of making visible practices and discourses from a particular cultural perspective.

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# Transmaterial Worlding Beyond Human Systems

Leah Salter and Gail Simon

*I find a parking space under some trees. Opening the car door,  
I turn up my nose at the smell of my car's diesel fumes and feel  
lost about how I can afford a less polluting car.*

*Around the car the ground is flooded. I take a big step onto the  
grass and see gleaming new-born conkers lying among the  
leaves. I look up at the canopy to see how the horse chestnut  
tree is faring given the spread of the new species-threatening  
disease. Far fewer fruits than last year. Was last year's bumper  
crop a farewell? My stomach contracts. I bend down and pick  
up six or eight differently sized conkers, put them in my pockets  
and head for the café in the woods.*

\*\*\*\*\*

*After talking with Callie for a while, she notices the conkers on  
the table by our mugs. I picked them up, I tell her, for us to use  
to see how you are all connected in your family. How you want  
to be connected. With her mother, we imagine configurations  
of Callie and her family when she is at home or at school and  
when she might want to move away from home. I want to  
move to a big city, she says and then adds, if I can afford to.  
What would the conkers have to say about that, I ask? Her*

*mother answers: They would say come and live near us in the countryside or parks. We can clear the air for you so your asthma doesn't, um, make you ill. Callie interjects you mean so the pollution doesn't make me ill. My asthma is triggered by others, by the way we all live. It's good to meet in the park.*

*When we are ready to finish, I want to offer Callie the conkers. She hesitates about taking them. The world, she says, needs trees. Let's plant them, I suggest. Callie divides them up between me and her. I have soil and pots, her mother says. Callie puts them in her pocket. We are all trying to save the planet and live well.*

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As an example from systemic practice, this might feel familiar. Many of us will have worked with stones or leaves or other everyday objects from nature that we might use to represent family or workplace systems, human beings in relation to each other. These elements offer us useful ways of describing relationships between things or people or parts of the world but it also runs a risk of overlooking their own vitality, contribution and place in and of this world. Systemic living involves more than a focus on *human* systems.

In this paper, we propose a development on a key concept in the pivotal work "Human Systems as Linguistic Systems" by Harlene Anderson and Harry Goolishian (1988) to *transmaterial systems as communicating systems*. We may live in a relational world mostly thought of as mediated and manufactured through human communication but we also live in layers and entanglements of different kinds of materiality. As systemic practitioners and researchers, when we study human life, we cannot see it or investigate it as separate from all else around it and us, whether "man-made" and/or naturally occurring. We are in a world of worlding (Barad, 2007).

## Transmaterial worlding

*Transmaterial worlding* extends the notion of “social” in social construction to include human *and* non-human participants – animal, vegetable and mineral.

Transmaterial worlding is a reframe of social construction in emphasising the continuous process of intra-becoming within and between species and matter (Barad, 2007). Transmaterial worlding describes processes we use to make sense of and create realities about human experience and the vitality of other matter, to show interconnectedness between humans and non-humans, to reframe life and death as not species specific but grounded in complex systems of animacies.

We are all involved in *worlding* processes (Barad, 2007) – bringing the world into being as we respond within it. Stories we generate have consequences for human and non-human life, for our environment, for how we go on together. Systemic theories arise out of more than the practices of therapy or leadership, they reflect and resist everyday and dominant values and practices for living in and understanding complex transmaterial systems. We use the term “co-construction” (Tomm, 1999) to describe joint, continuous meaning-making activities. We are always in the process of becoming-in-relationship and creating social worlds through our engagement with and as parts of the world, human and otherwise. We do not live *in* ecology, we *are* ecology.

Non-human parts of the world have their voices and experience interpreted by some more or less “expert” humans in many different ways which leaves most people perplexed about what counts as fact or how to use facts in a way that feels coherent with their lifestyles. The invention of terms such as “climate crisis” potentially connects and separates humans from the lived experience of their non-human co-inhabitants. As humans we have been taught to practice compartmentalised naming, selective hearing, selective processing and to decontextualise what we see, hear, eat, and consume. Living with not knowing what to do is no longer a practical or ethical option. Yet we must hold an openness to develop better listening abilities – not just

to grasp more fact in a world where fiction is promoted in the form of decontextualised truths – but to develop new comprehension abilities, to become translinguistic to hear our transmaterial family and see how we are making and unmaking this world together.

The idea that humans alone are able to develop stories about the world is anthropocentric, a man-made myth. Other parts of the “universe” also story humans. We need to learn to read responses from other material as communications of what we have been making. Together we create a multiverse of stories but human stories are what most people in advanced capitalism tend to tell and be told. Some of the most interesting and useful storying of the transmaterial world have come from Indigenous cultures. Most theories about how the world functions have side-lined this rich knowledge and promoted instead the unacknowledged ideological assumptions about the superiority of white people, particularly men and based on heterosexual, cisgendered, wealthy, male, westernised privilege. Stories, and those voicing them, from indigenous human cultures, have been systematically oppressed or erased but they have much to counter and extend the dissociative living of advanced capitalism (Braidotti, 2019; Pillow, 2019; Richardson-Kinewesquao 2018; Rosiek & Snyder, 2018).

The declaration in 2019 that Uluru (formerly Ayer’s Rock) can no longer be climbed by visiting tourists is an example of how decolonial actions, however delayed and inadequate, can reform westernised human behaviour and potentially restore sacred living landscapes for human and non-human inhabitants: spirits, living histories, flora, fauna, indigenous people. Uluru, to Australian Indigenous people, is an animate, sacred landscape that is not just a *site* of Anangu knowledge and culture, it *is* the living of stories of knowledge, knowing and know-how. It is living and breathing. Our actions are communications which open or close possibilities. The message given to local indigenous people by the last minute rush of climbers to Uluru before the legislation came into force shows disregard for people and place, and disconnect between “me” and “we”.

Several systemic therapists have developed ways of supporting the narratives of experience in response to concerns expressed by oppressed and colonised groups of people to counter falsehoods written *about* them, which have often led to the development of policies which have served to oppress these groups further and render invisible issues of concern facing those communities (McCarthy and Byrne, 2007; Reynolds, 2019; Salter, 2018; Simon, 1998; Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999; Visweswaran, 1994). First person and co-constructionist research act as a counter-movement to decolonise research practice (Dillard, 2000; Lather 1994, 2007; Madison 2012; Pillow 2019; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999; Wade 1997).

### **Reframing “me” and “us” and “them”**

To extend this idea of transmaterial worlding further let's take some systemic questions, apply them in another professional context and step into a different ecology.

Let us imagine for a moment that we are in the mountains in The Himalayas, surrounded by clean, white snow, feeling the burning sun on our skin and the biting cold in our bones. We are researching the impact of mountain climbers on Everest. Educational and policy led innovations have had only a limited effect on the demand to climb Everest. We are experimenting with an intervention that we hope might go some way to protect the fragile ecology of the mountain Sagarmatha (Nepalese) or Chomolungma (Tibetan). The boundary between Nepal and the “Tibet Autonomous Region” runs across its summit.

We are curious about the human impact on the mountain and the impact the mountain has on humans. The relationship is more complex than a simple two-way model of interaction. We are in the realm of *intra-action* (Barad, 2007) in which there is no separation of climber, mountain, photographer, competing economies, international power relations and air travel. Together they-we create a transmaterial ecology of all that is locally and remotely present in the material and narrative worlds. If, in this context, we were to ask transmaterial systemic questions about this, they might look or sound like this:

- *How could the snow at the bottom of Everest make its experience of being transformed by climbers heard in ways that climbers became more sensitised to the needs of the mountain over personal pursuit resulting in a change of climbing practice?*
- *How might we tell stories that move people about the tipping point between profit or gain of the individual, wellbeing of the mountain and its indigenous communities for human and non-human stakeholders in Everest?*
- *What kind of pre-booking preparation could there be for climbers to empathise with the mountain and its surrounding ecology before making a decision to book their trip?*
- *How does an international boundary between Nepal and now China affect the local exchange and practice of knowledge previously used by the peoples of Tibet and Nepal on the mountain, if at all?*

Palaeontologists have named this era the Anthropocene to witness how humans have affected the planet to such a degree that there is little left that is unaffected by humans. Philosopher, Rosi Braidotti speaks of the posthuman as a way of describing a shift away from anthropocentrism which allows for new ways of understanding and describing the implications of what it means to be human with the fast-moving sciences of biotechnologies, neural sciences, communication technologies, climate change and so on.

The posthuman predicament is... framed by the opportunistic commodification of all that lives, which... is the political economy of advanced capitalism.

Braidotti, 2019, p. 35





Art in 1995. Endangered species in 2019.

The artwork, Moss wall by Icelandic/Danish artist Ólafur Eliasson is made up of reindeer lichen (*Cladonia rangiferina*) an important food source for reindeer in Iceland and Norway. It is now illegal for humans to pick in Norway as reindeer struggle to find food. The artist spoke at the opening of his retrospective exhibition at the Tate Modern, London in July 2019:

The air that we breathe cannot be taken for granted as natural anymore. It is human, it is influenced by human activity. There's nowhere, not a rock in Iceland which has not been touched in some way or another by airplane pollution, or the change in temperature, the arctic moss that I photographed and documented so often, the rivers. Those glaciers for example. How different they are after 20 years. They really are unbelievably different. A whole glacier is just gone.

Ólafur Eliasson 2019

## Material-discursive practice

When we use language that says that we are *inter-acting* with someone or something, we are separating out parts of a relationship. The concept of “inter” assumes ontological distinguishability between entities: things or people, apparently separate *from* “one another”, as configuring *of* “each other”, as doing things *with* “each other”. Karen Barad argues, “humans enter not as fully formed, pre-existing subjects but as subjects intra-actively co-constituted through the material-discursive practices that they engage in.” (Barad, 2007, p.168).

What it means to be human has been changing. For example, humans can be understood as techno-humans. To say we “have” a phone perpetuates a distinction of separation, and ownership, between the human and the technological device. When we say, “My phone reminded me that...” or “I messaged...” these phrases still show phone and self as separate from each other and yet we have become fused with our gadgets (Haraway, 2004, 2015). Technology plays an increasingly significant role in how we interact in and with the world, how we communicate with others, in how our gadgets extend our memory, how we are remembered or lost by others, how we are identified by others, how we identify ourselves to our gadgets and remote systems, how we locate ourselves in the virtual-physical worlds, and how we are located by remote unknown others with or without our permission (Simon, 2010; Allinson, 2014).

The Guardian (October 2019) reports that a prototype phone has been developed by French scientists that is covered in a material that responds like human skin. You can pinch it, pull it, interact with it, as if your phone has skin, like you and I. Techo-human; human-techno. Where is the point of separation? Rosi Braidotti (2013) asks if prosthetic limbs are really “otherwise human”. Gregory Bateson (1972) previously asked if the blind man, his cane, and the environment he moves about in are not all one entity or act as one. Bronwyn Preece speaks of the intersections in embodied theory between ecology and disability, explaining how she engages “with the other-than-human world as alive... I do not segregate biota from abiota, organic from non-organic, the trees from the forest, the

ocean from the machines, the stone from mountain” (Preece, 2019, p. 76). These questions invite us to consider if the phone can be seen as simply an implement (other to “us”) to navigate the modern world (out ‘there’)? Or are humans enabling the phones to go about the business of remote corporations while the dominant narrative is of the phone enabling its owner? The mobile phone may not yet be a microchip under the physical skin of a human but proximity of humans and their devices is becoming increasingly intimate. Braidotti suggests that the relationship between human and technology has been extended to “unprecedented degrees of intimacy and intrusion” (Braidotti, 2013, p.89).

If *knowledge* practices are inseparable from the contexts out of which they emerge, then we must accept that *language* is never innocent or neutral. Social constructionism reminds us of the power of language which we extend to include the role of all matter and power that takes material forms through legislation or profit, for example.

Recognising the presence of power relations and which realities have more influence over others is critical to transmaterial worlding as a form of inquiry. In transmaterial worlding, we understand researching linguistic practice as a form of mattering. There are no final conclusions – though there may be useful knowledge – and the need to attempt to describe journeys of knowing in which contextualised, situated ways of knowing extend or close down ways of accounting and the potential for transformation of participants. Transmaterial worlding is a process of moving, constructing, deconstructing, reconstructing and reviving stories which include the voices of those normally heard through privileged channels and the voices of marginalised, silenced or exterminated peoples, places, human and non-human, across many matters, across context, across time. Inevitably, material changes depending on where the describer is standing, how they are dressed, how the light is falling or arranged. Any “apparatus” in use, is part of the world that is being co-constructed (Barad, 2007). Discursive mattering is inevitably influenced by the limits of the describer’s own apparatus - cultural lenses, filters which frequently result in a reproductive mattering of dominant white supremacist, patriarchal, heteronormative narratives and practices (Chen, 2012; Pillow, 2019).

How we *configure* “other” people, places or things can happen through taking an aboutness position (Shotter, 2011) and become an act of colonisation in attributing meaning or interpreting meaning. Acts of colonisation separate the knower from their knowing and know-how leading us into binary constructions of “us” and “them”, and stories of people who apparently know nothing. Histories are lost and communities fractured. This has resulted in catastrophic change such as loss of rainforests, sustainable communities, homelands, dunes, clean air, uncontaminated sites, the ozone layer and much, much more. So, it becomes an *ethical imperative* to ask, “What and who are in focus?” and “Why?” and “How can other silenced voices or erased matters be animated, rendered audible through our research?”

Transmaterial worlding evokes ecological and contextual curiosity and invites questions that pay attention to relational affect involving a more-than-human relating and a more-than-local focus. For example, a recently commissioned beach survey by Surfers Against Sewage (2019) found that Coca Cola and Pepsi Cola were together responsible for 25.8% of the plastic found on UK beaches (Pipeline, 2019). In this example, so many major world issues (plastic waste and water pollution, dune conservation, advanced consumerism, violence towards workers in low paid countries, bio-diversity, sugar addiction, wealth inequality and more) are in the frame and it becomes difficult to see them as isolatable issues. They are connected. The shock of half a million “hermit” crabs living on “remote” islands dying from plastic pollution shows us that we need to deconstruct narratives of geographical remoteness and isolated entities. Though the branding of the litter is often more visible to our consumer eyes than the litter itself, this, too, is changing. Consumers are beginning to re-brand it for themselves as “single use plastic”.

In the era out of which we are emerging, we are moving from recognising a “coke” bottle to seeing it as single use plastic or associated with workers’ rights. This is the transitional material world in which we are living-transforming. Slowly, perhaps too slowly, humans are trying to change their habits and environment by researching these items, reading about them, picking up their own and other people’s litter, to stop buying plastic, to

learn to connect local and remote contexts. To become a consumer under advanced capitalism often requires becoming dissociated from the context of production of the material goods one is purchasing. The opposite of dissociation is relational reflexivity which is an ethical stance. Joining dots is a systemic activity. We are unlearning compartmentalisation. We have a choice of who we listen to, who we believe. Are we listening to the “silent” deaths of other creatures and glaciers, rain forests and fields of lichen or have we trained our ears to filter matters out that apparently do not matter to us in our human and immediate time-frame? How do we listen, how do we listen in order to witness, to live with shock and concern, to not become numb, to be moved instead to alternative action, and to look after “ourselves” (*and* check who is included in “we”)?

Systemic therapy has produced a number of transdisciplinary questions which help bring forth others not present but who would understand the experiences of others such as internalised other questions (Burnham, 2000), outsider witness practice (White, 1997), wider system questions used with hypothetical audiences (Simon, 1998). These differing real life contexts and the threads that connect them can be understood as *transcontextual* material (Nora Bateson, 2016) and form part of the rich tapestry of “what counts” as “worthy of study” within qualitative inquiry (Denzin, 2017; Simon, 2018). Victims of injustice, their advocates, professionals, academics the world over struggle for their truths to be taken seriously in a world which uses 21<sup>st</sup> century technologies to amplify dominant discourses and fan preferred truths to generate simplistic dismissals of what, in another era, would have counted as fact.

### **Systemic living and ethical mattering**

We are using the term *systemic living* in lieu of systemic practice to emphasise systemic ways of being, doing, thinking, feeling, noticing and communicating. It includes systemic therapy and leadership and supervision and so on but systemic ways of thinking about things, conceptualising things go way beyond what takes place under the auspices of commissioned or employed professional practice. Systemic living means

being alert to incoherence between stories lived, stories told, stories ignored and stories re-written (Cronen and Pearce, 1999; McNamee, 2020 forthcoming). These are not activities which are separable from each other, which take place chronologically in different moments. Systemic living is a commitment to fluidly attempting integration of changing positions. Transmaterial worlding describes philosophically based ways of systemic being-seeing-doing-becoming in and of the world. It is living onto-epistemological coherence: we learn as we go; we become as we reflect on what we are doing; we write and learn, listen and change. All the time. That is the systemic ethic.

We understand systemic living as a form of social activist inquiry. This goes beyond observing. It reframes participant-observation (Anderson and Goolishian, 1988) as intentional, inevitably disruptive, preoccupied with social and environmental justice, and committed to collaborative transformation. Stasis is an illusory concept existing in a humancentric timeframe. Instead, we live in perpetual, hard-to-follow entangled movements for which we try to develop narratives depending on the ideological contexts affecting our investment in some theories of relational causality over others. The use of the term relational here is included purposefully, not superfluously, to render visible contexts for theories of causality. Theories do not randomly exist in isolation. They have their lobbies and investors expecting different kinds of return for distinct sections of the population.

Systemic living is guided by an ethical imperative to address practices of power by asking how stories are generated, why some truths are propagated over others, by whom, and to what end. Systemic practitioners are committed to understanding the relational effect of stories and how some stories carry more weight than others in different contexts. Transmaterial worlding reframes professional, personal and academic activities as bringing into being a diverse but connected transmaterial world. Systemic practice and research become an opportunity to understand *and* disrupt power relations in order to challenge and reduce injustice. It is an opportunity to pay attention to who-what matters, who-what is directing and who-what counts as mattering.

In her book, “Staying with the Trouble. Making kin in the Chthulucene”, Donna Haraway says,

It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories.

Haraway, 2016, p.12

As systemically informed people, we understand the power of fragmented or contradictory narratives and how to engage enquiringly in talk that exposes incoherence and helps to understand the context for why some narratives are problematic or enabling in dominant or subaltern discourses. We situate these challenges within relationships. Mainly within human relationships. But what if we don't think of externalising exercises (White and Epston, 1999) or internalised other interviewing (Tomm, 1998; Burnham, 2000) as human relationship strategies but as opportunities to build more understanding relationships with non-human life in our world? How would it have been to ask Callie and her mother to speak as a conker or cluster of conkers and explore interconnections between their futures?

Systemic mattering practices draw on social construction and narrative theory to open dialogical spaces in which we can deconstruct taken for granted terms and cultural constructs. Matter and what matters - whose voices we listen to and how we respond - can include many parts of our “universe”: trees, plants, mosses, plastic (and other) waste, drugs we pass through our systems and into the water table of the earth, chemicals which benefit, sedate or annihilate entire communities with growing medical punctuation of social and political problems. We are waking daily to long lists of interconnected environmental matters and in an ongoing state of shock or denial or compliance.

## Deconstructing animacy and inanimacy

Definitions of what counts as alive and dead are changing and also the rights accorded to non-human matter. Some human communities are realising we are killing other life forms and that we need to act to prevent further death.

“On 26 February 2019, a lake became human.”

Appalled by the lake’s degradation, and exhausted by state and federal failures to improve Erie’s health, in December 2018 Toledo residents drew up an extraordinary document: an emergency “bill of rights” for Lake Erie. At the bill’s heart was a radical proposition: that the “Lake Erie ecosystem” should be granted legal personhood, and accorded the consequent rights in law – including the right “to exist, flourish, and naturally evolve”.

MacFarlane, 2019

In Iceland, in August 2019, a hundred people gather at the funeral of a glacier. The Okjökull glacier was declared dead about a decade before but the symbolic funeral was arranged in 2019 and a plaque was erected entitled “A letter to the future” that read:

### A letter to the future

Ok is the first Icelandic glacier to lose its status as a glacier.  
In the next 200 years all our glaciers are expected to follow the  
same path.

This monument is to acknowledge that we know  
what is happening and what needs to be done.  
Only you know if we did it.

19th August 2019  
415ppm CO<sub>2</sub>



This is a profound message that draws on a dialogue between present and future timeframes as a mechanism to evoke emotions that might lead to action, now. It is open about accountability, about cause and effect. Many things in our material world are linear albeit part of complex systems. But how we maintain or disrupt linearity is a systemic challenge. Perhaps this paper is written for a moment in time, this moment in time: its message: let us take down the idea that systemic practice takes place within four walled spaces and bring systemic living into the streets, the mountains, the shopping centres and listen to other voices speaking back to us. We are still working on fighting for human rights. Now we have to extend this campaign to those living parts of the world who are not accorded human status but treat them as if they were a human with high entitlement for safety, survival and quality of life.

New materialist thinkers invite us to deconstruct the concepts of animate/living, and inanimate/dead (Bennett, 2010; Chen, 2012). These can be understood as socially constructed narratives which teach communities and their colonisers to disconnect their immediate local environment from remote global environments. Jane Bennett discourages the term “environment” in order to highlight what she calls “vital materiality” (Bennett, 2010, p.12). She points out that “We are vital materiality and we are surrounded by it, though we do not always see it that way. The ethical task at hand here is to cultivate the ability to discern nonhuman vitality, to become perceptually open to it.” (Bennett, 2010, p.14).

When Gregory Bateson and the Milan School of Systemic Family Therapy critiqued the notion of linear causality, they shifted their interest from how problems started to what maintained problems. The cybernetic theories of self-correcting systems and homeostasis proposed by Maturana and Varela (1992) and earlier by James Lovelock in relation to earth as a self-correcting system (1979) do not fully address what happens when the balance tips to the point that systems can no longer self-correct but are threatened with extinction (Braidotti, 2008). Sometimes things end, people are displaced, territories lost to their dwellers or dwellers lost to their territories.

Extinction Rebellion protests that started in 2018 have demonstrated the relevance of humans using their bodies to visually represent their concern for the earth and its' dwellers and to symbolise the fear that our world might be lost, permanently. People putting themselves in the way of cars or aeroplanes is one way to do this; but we also need to acknowledge that it is human activity that has created this "wicked problem" (Nora Bateson, 2016). The aeroplane and car (at this moment in time) are neither self-organising nor self-regulating; they are propelled by human activity. Human life is given more weight than other life forms including the earth itself as a living *entity*, not simply as a *resource*.

One consequence of the anthropocentric narrative is to categorise matter as *either* animate or inanimate (Bennett, 2010). Rock is not inanimate, it is alive. It hosts life, it protects life. It provides a platform for life. In terms of the time frame in which plants, animals and humans live, rock offers stability. We humans have a short life span compared to rock. Rock grows or changes in mostly a much slower time frame to the life spans of humans, flora and fauna. We don't notice the parallel time worlds. We think rock and glaciers are dead because they are not moving in ways we can perceive with our eyes. We tell ourselves simple stories. We say they are frozen, immobile, inanimate. But it is we who are frozen in time. Our own timeframe. A human timeframe.

Transmaterial worlding requires that we re-think our relations *with-in* our environment, that we re-position ourselves from in-habiting the world or co-habiting (both separate us from other materiality) to *co-inhabiting*. Co-inhabitation emphasises not simply collaboration and intra-action (Barad, 2007) but a humility to re-position humans as living *in* a vital-emergent-disappearing world, *alongside* and *as* vital-emergent-disappearing matter. We are all equal earth dwellers. Thinking in terms of co-inhabitation requires an active stance - to engage *in* and *with* our environment with an ethic of care and an assumption of having some responsibility. We are not sharing *our* planet with other forms of life; we are reconfiguring what it means to live, temporarily, alongside and with others, human and other material life forms.

In separating out human and non-human we recognise we are engaging in a particular way of viewing and storying the world. We have a long history of connecting with these ideas in systemic thinking. Gregory Bateson, in 1972, challenged the practice of categorising, and therefore separating, subjects and things; with the impact of creating a narrative that obscures relationality, highlights differences over similarities and foregrounds thingness over relational activity. New materialist thinkers might call this an epistemological error (Bateson 1972), critiquing the anthropocentric narrative of human as separate from the world around them. Karen Barad proposes that matter of *all* kinds is not separate but inevitably *entangled*. Barad explains,

The very nature of materiality is an entanglement. Matter itself is always already open to, or rather entangled with, the ‘Other.’ The intra-actively emergent ‘parts’ of phenomena are co-constituted

Barad, 2007, p.393

### **Transmaterial, co-constructive questions**

Transmaterial worlding as inquiry asks investigative, co-constructive questions such as,

- How can *we* show what matters, how it matters, and to whom it matters?
- How can *we* show others what is being constructed, how and with whom?
- How can *we* use our understanding of communication to show how relations in the world are being created?

The *how can we show* questions are not innocent or decontextualised research questions. Firstly, the “we” is a cynical we which needs critical and reflexive responsivity. The questions reflect some anxiety that facts and findings alone will not be accepted as evidence. They anticipate an

increasingly sceptical audience. Members of the public see politicians fighting with scientists over who is telling the truth. Black, minority ethnic and Indigenous communities struggle to have their realities of systematic and institutionalised abuse taken seriously by those in positions of influence. Evidence using what was traditionally considered robust research methods is no longer enough. On the one hand, methods often reproduce colonising values which serve to reproduce material which does not reflect lived experience for example, of oppressed and minority peoples. On the other hand, approaches that do reflect experiences of minority or oppressed peoples are often critiqued for being too subjective and insufficiently rigorous.

Systemic questions, and the theory behind them, extend the new materialist understanding of worlding by attending to emergent relationality and living contexts.

These questions address the voices of human and non-human life forms:

- How is material being defined?
- Which voices are being included or excluded?
- What are the politics of representation?
- What negotiations are involved in the process of knowledge generation and knowledge sharing?

There are different kinds of power to consider in transmaterial worlding:

- i) The power to influence how people configure realities through discourse and narrative
- ii) The power to create structures which solidify and embody those realities
- iii) The power to deconstruct and reconstruct material and linguistic structures
- iv) The power to recognise that truths are not representative of one's own, other people's or the material environment's experience

- v) The power to deliberately seek out first person experience and alternative truths

In order for systemic living to make a difference, we need to ask:

- What are the governing contexts that have given rise to the problem?
- How are imbalances of power maintaining this problem?
- How can systemic living disrupt the power relations that prevent social justice driven change?
- Which voices need to be heard and how can we extend what we can hear and see?
- Who-what is best placed to represent issues and how and with what support?

Transmaterial worlding needs to draw on systemic and posthuman understandings of context and power to explain:

- i) why is change difficult to effect?
- ii) Why is challenging the social construction of language in itself not going to result in systemic change - desirable, meaningful, sustainable change?
- iii) how can we create change and why it might be difficult?

Here are two examples of transmaterial worlding which use a range of systemic questions to bring forth both human and beyond human knowledges, to explore narratives and act as transformational practice by inviting new and empathic ways of knowing.

*Research driven by concern for young people at risk in their neighbourhoods could extend the framework of contextual safeguarding (Firmin, 2018) to include human and non-human voices and understand research as transformative of people, places, discourses and power structures:*

- If the voices of stairwells in housing estates were included as research participants, what would they say works well about them as spaces to allow effective intimidation of young people by people who lead them into trouble?
- How can research support young people to re-design the stairwells in their block of flats and empower them to make their views heard by those in power to make changes?
- How can research map where local people, landlords and local organisations say the threshold is between personal monetary gain and social gain? And how can research bring forth their ideas for what can be done where doing nothing is not an option?

*An inquiry into how current residents are affected by illness and lost relatives through radioactive toxicity brought into their worlds by local factories or nuclear plants (see the moving ethnographic research by Cathy Richardson Kinewesquao, 2018) could ask:*

- Do the spirits of your ancestors speak to you about their experience or yours? How do they communicate? What do they advise you to do?
- What are the languages that you feel local government officials are most likely to listen to when local people express worry about their sickness?
- How can research support local people to teach government officials local knowledge and practices of knowing?
- If local government officials understood your experiences and could listen to what the land has to say and took advice from your ancestors, what would persuade them to act on this understanding and knowledge? What would they see that convinced them that this had been a good thing to do?
- How have you managed to keep alive practices that give life and hope?

These examples of questions from practice remind us that questions are never neutral and are a contextual intervention for the person being asked a question (Selvini Palazzoli, 1980; Tomm, 1988). Some questions invite an “ethic of care” in “imagining the other” (McCarthy and Byrne, 2007). Others are hypothetical questions (Tomm, 1988), context setting questions, appreciative inquiry, hope oriented, narrative questions. Systemic therapy has a rich array of types of questions, and theories of transformation through dialogue and relational response-ability (for example, Burnham, 1992, 2000; Fredman, 2004; Hedges, 2005; McCarthy and Byrne, 2007; Tomm, 1999; Waldegrave et al., 2003).

## Summary

In this paper we propose how we can reframe systemic social construction to move away from a focus on human systems and human communication to transmaterial systems as communicating systems. This involves a fundamental re-think of who-what counts in decision-making and what counts as knowledge and know-how. Systemic living is a meta-position to *being* a systemic practitioner. It involves critically reflexive engagement in entanglements of *becoming-with* and has an eye or two for how power is present and to what effects. Transmaterial worlding is a process of becoming through learning. It takes place in and between human and non-human activity motivated by a concern for ecological survival and “social” justice where social is reframed to include a consideration of all peoples and ecosystems. This requires critically separating from anthropocentric ideology and moving into a new way of seeing oneself and humans in a world of vital matter with whom we are in communication.

Transmaterial worlding invites the development of fluid and shifting connections between experience and explanation, between theory and practice, language and matter, human and non-human relating. It extends social to include human and non-human matter; promotes co-construction as intra-action as onto-epistemological becoming with and through learning; co-inhabitation of a world of complex entanglements; and systemic living as a way of being open to and supportive of stories and

experience that make a difference across transmaterial contexts. Co-construction is not just a systemic activity but a systemic ethic and a systemic reality. We recognise the power of co-construction and its consequences. Transmaterial worlding is an important discursive and political tool. Firstly, it promotes understanding and support of decolonial, new materialist strategies to show, extend and disrupt relationships between language and material structures. Secondly, transmaterial worlding locates human activity as co-inhabitation within a wider fluid sphere of human and non-human environmental context. Examples of systemic questions demonstrate transformative possibilities for generating new and old knowledges that impact on daily practice; and extend curiosity for the purpose of promoting social justice and developing better social worlds (Pearce, 2007).

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N I N E

# Reclaiming the relationship with bodily knowing through movement in nature

Lorna Edwards, Andreas Breden, Chiara Santin,  
Justine van Lawick & Erik van der Elst

## Context

Lorna

I spend a lot of time walking in the local landscape where I live in South Wales. I use many things and metaphors from nature in my work as a systemic therapist and supervisor and I'm a member of the EcoSystemic Group. We discuss the relationship between capitalism and ecology and how systemic thinking can be of use. In our discussions, we also give time to thinking about ourselves as practitioners – how are we affected by the world in which we live? How can we connect more with nature to bring it into our work selves and relationships?

I hosted a workshop on the subject of reclaiming the relationship with bodily knowing through movement in nature at Brathay Hall, Ambleside in May 2022. The idea was to create a space for therapists to explore and deconstruct binaries that connect and separate us and nature. While we are nature, I am referring to the human/nature binary created by us humans.

We spread out over the peninsular, each choosing a tree or finding a space.



I read aloud a poem, “The Moment” by Margaret Atwood (1998), as a challenge to our dominant human-centric view of life:

Below are the final few lines:

“You were a visitor, time after time  
climbing the hill, planting the flag, proclaiming.  
We never belonged to you.  
You never found us.  
It was always the other way round.”

I invited us to start the practice by

- Befriending a tree
- Noticing what draws us to a particular tree
- Touching the tree and being touched by the tree

The second stage involved participants connecting with the 5 elements both internally and externally as represented in, by and through the tree:

- Earth
- Fire

- Water
- Air
- Space

The third part of the exercise invited participants to connect with our five senses:

- Seeing
- Hearing
- Touching
- smelling
- (possibly/probably not) tasting

The follow up invitation was to feel free to move or dance – or imagine moving or dancing, or simply rest in stillness.

After about 20 minutes I rang a bell and we all re-gathered and shared our experiences and reflected on this question:

“In what ways can this embodied knowing support us in our aspiration to practice decoloniality: both in our systemic work life and life outside work, in alignment with situational ethics?”

Below are some of our responses from that moment and since.

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### Justine’s reflections

I remember the tree at the waterside, calling me, welcoming me. And I sat there, musing over the water. Just observing and feeling. A swan swam up to me. We looked at each other and had contact. I felt something swan-like in me. She was just there, I was there. Tree, water, swan, earth, sky and me became one. I did not want to leave. As I walked back to the others, the swan swam with me...

### Erik’s reflections

A surprising and beautiful experience. So nice that Lenticular Futures has this workshop. Space for connection between hearts, bodies and trees. Wonderful.

### Andreas's reflections

At first, hugging a tree felt very uncomfortable. I was reminded what society think about "tree huggers". That feeling got wiped away after a few second of contact - skin to bark. Being in nature and connecting with nature always bring peace to me. Leaning against the tree was an active choice. I am contemplating about how our nature connection is seen as a passive act, but right now I am sure there are many ways to actively speed up the process of slowing down and connecting with nature. This workshop was one such way. And I believe most people can profit from being led into an active act of reconnecting with nature.

### Lorna's reflections

Since the session I've found both similar and different practices which I'd like to share.

Sunil Chauhan writes: "Imagine a world where we all have a friend in nature – tree, plant, flower, rock, river, mountain, clouds, blue skies, a constellation, the moon – just a friend in nature to keep us connected to our roots. A friend in nature also connects us to some of the core values of love, respect, community, and kinship that help us to live more harmoniously. Imagine, every now and then, we met friend of friends and create an ever-widening circle of nature friends. Imagine a festival of friends, a gathering of friends, a school of friendship, a celebration of kinship. Imagine!" (2021, p. 103)

Matt Hall (2021, p. 46) learned to listen in the way he was taught by the Aboriginal Elder and philosopher Bill Neidjie, taking the line, "that tree now e speak" as his guide (1998, p. 18). Sitting under a chosen tree, Matt listens.

"As I listen, I am trying to step back, to stop my own verbal commentary, to put aside my own human wants and desires and to allow the plants to take their turn at describing, shaping and living in the world. It is akin to botanical meditation, with space for other beings' flourishing as its object. Sometimes I feel like crying; other times I don't feel much. We have been



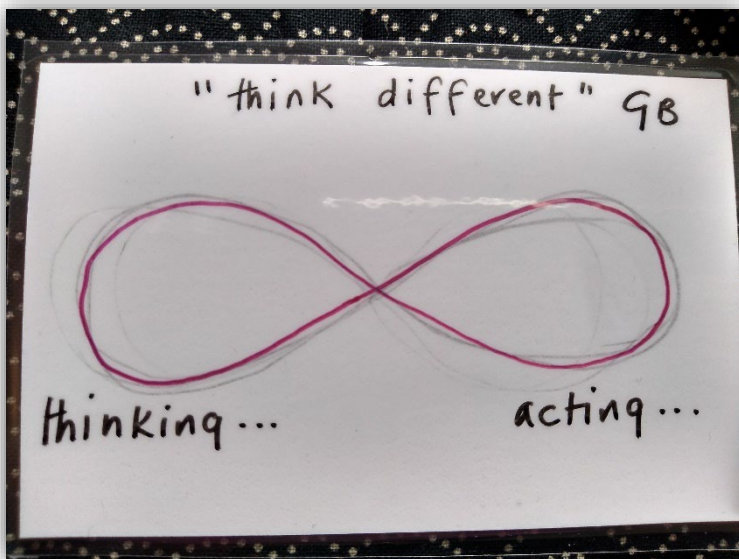
dominating plants for thousands of years, so this is bound to take a while.”

(Hall, 2021, p. 46)

Hugh Palmer’s recently published a paper titled “Think different’ to stop extinction. Gregory Bateson’s Cybernetic Epistemology with Posthumanism”. Hugh’s final paragraph challenges us to take a “both... and...” way forward:

“However, the urgency of societal changes required to prevent catastrophe leaves me with more questions. To engender systemic change in a congruently systemic way (non-coercive, neutral and so on) will require time, and little time is left. Is it enough to educate others, or could we think about implementing ecological, non-dualistic epistemology locally in our own lives and practices? Following in Bateson’s footsteps and considering his view of immanence of mind, perhaps it is through both our thoughts and actions that we can make a difference. I hope so.”

(Palmer, 2022, p. 25)



I was inspired by Hugh's paper to create an image which I keep on my desk to remind to keep my thoughts and actions in awareness and that I have choice in both ways of being.

I hope that the practices described above can help us all during this challenging time (the challenges that we created) of being human on planet Earth.

### **Connecting the workshop to our practice. Some reflections a few months later**

#### Erik's later reflections

Walking from the villa in the direction of the trees I could feel happiness and hope inside of me. Just walking there surrounded by nature and people I felt connected and that was already so good.

Should I feel the connection with the trees as well? Should I feel them and should they feel me? I remember entering the place of the trees like it happened yesterday. Feelings of happiness and hope.

And then it began. Walking, breathing and feeling. Should I choose a tree or should a tree choose me? I remember silence who somehow was filled with life and a strong kind of rest and peace. A prayer came up and "my tree" appeared. Making contact is not something you only do with your hands or with your eyes. It involves the whole body. The heart is such an important player in the field of connection. Not feeling the urge of being somebody else. To be just you is beautiful. Feelings of gratefulness came up even as images and dreams. And above all of this the feeling of connection. With a heart full of this all I started to walk back to the villa. Grateful...

#### Andreas's later reflections

Right now, I am lying in the grass in the mountains, leaning against a wooden piece that functions as a bench. The sun is warm, the wind is speaking its own language and my dog is sleeping beside me. I am at peace.

This is a perfect setting for recalling the workshop with you in Lake District. There seems to be an understanding that our connection to nature is something that just happens. Sometimes it might be so and that might be one of the wonders of life. However, I am not sure it is a connection to nature but rather a connection with. A connection to feels almost parasitic and hostile while a connection with is more a dual agreement. Was it possible to connect with the tree without the tree wanting it? Was it a mutual curiosity filled with mutual kindness that framed the bark-skin-meeting? Some of the feedback I most appreciate from the people I talk with is when I hear that they find me calm and that this calmness infects them as well. I know how I appreciate being calm and how nature helps me becoming calm. And I know I easily gain wisdom and insights in topics in my life when I am calm. My practice story is from a few minutes when nature helped me bringing calmness and wisdom into my therapy room.

### *Female Reindeer Antlers*

I don't remember which of them had petitioned the mediation, but I believe it was her. He had moved out after an argument and did not intend to move back in, not even if the circumstances changed. I had spent some time at the beginning of each of our three meetings checking out whether it was possible for them to continue as a married couple. It was not. I guess this urge of mine came from a hope for all the unassisted minor refugees I have been met during my career, for them to get their own family. They were under thirty years old. The interpreter sounded like he was my age, in his forties. The office had ordered interpretation via telephone with an interpreter from another city to ensure the parents privacy. Each of our two previous meetings had ended up with an agreement on when the father should meet their daughter. He was asking for as much as possible, and the mother kept him at arm's length, allowing him four hours on Saturday and four hours on Sunday. He was living with friends of his in a collective and she kept their apartment. Each time the mother came with an accusation about how bad a father he was, he tried to argue that he wasn't.

And after an accusation against the father midst of the third meeting, he started crying silently, and I just noticed this when he grabbed one of the

tissues on my table. It was obvious that he was in pain. “I just want to see my daughter as much as possible”, he said. “This is more of the same”, I thought, listening to my critical inner voice, and let my eyes wander around in my office. And there I saw it! This day, I had brought a tote bag full of reindeer antlers that I had found during my last walking trip in the Norwegian mountain range, Jotunheimen. The antlers were meant for an installation that my team and I are going to make as a part of an ecosystemic project we are running. I asked the parents if I could do something that most probably would seem very strange to them, and they gave me permission. I went to the tote bag and grabbed the antler that seemed to have belonged to a female reindeer. This knowledge was passed on to me from my father, who told me that the female reindeer antlers have a sharper angle than the more rounded antlers of the male reindeer. The parents looked at me, excited about what was going to happen in a way that also were sceptical, and I started:

Andreas:        *Do you see what this is?*

Mother:        *They are antlers.*

Father:         *Yes.*

Andreas:        *Do you know what animal they are from?*

Both shook their heads. The interpreter had stopped interpreting and were just listening.

Andreas:        *They are from a female reindeer. Did you know that they are the only deer in Norway where the female grows antlers?*

Both shook their heads. The same heads that now were raised a bit.

Andreas:        *Do you know why they have antlers?*

Both shook their heads again. I reminded myself of a teacher. One of those who got a fire in their eyes when they speak about something that matters to them.

Andreas: *The reindeer in Norway live in the mountains where it is a very harsh environment. And during the winter, as you know, there are snow and very cold. This means that the reindeer must dig through the snow to get down to their food. And the calves who are born in May are not strong enough to keep digging for their food.*

The couple were both listening, and the interpreter was quiet. I continued.

Andreas: *During the mating period in August and September, the male reindeer have antlers to fight each other so they can mate with the female reindeer who doesn't have antlers. And after the mating period, the male reindeer loses their antlers. This is when the female reindeer starts growing her antlers. And she uses them to headbutt the male reindeer away when they have dug down to the nutritious white and curly lichen that the reindeer prefer.*

They were watching me like they were waiting for my point, and the interpreter was still quiet.

Andreas: *Are the ways of the reindeer your way?*

Both were laughing, and they had caught my point. I handled the mother the female reindeer antlers.

Andreas: *Could it be so that in your situation, the father must prove that he is worthy as a father, before you as a mother can trust him? And until then you will keep on headbutting him to keep your daughter safe?*

I was eying the father, and he were nodding in approval of my metaphor and the mother said yes.

## Justine's later reflections

### *The next step*

When I was trained as a family therapist from 1975 on, I was invited to position myself outside the family, observe the family and think about strategies to bring change by effective interventions. I for instance had to “win” the battle of initiative in a session, I had to be in the lead, otherwise I would get lost. My national and international trainers had certain images, norms, and values about a healthy functioning family. The feminist movement entered the field at the end of the seventies and brought to the surface how much the white middle class family with a working father, a caring mother and two or more children were the starting point of theory and practice. They made us reflect on the influence of gender on the relational and personal problems in couples and families, and so on our practices. This marked a transition to the awareness that we are part of our therapeutic practices. We cannot position ourselves outside the people, relations, families, and communities we work with. What we as therapists regard as relational ethical influences our questions and interventions. In addition to gender, we became more aware of the influence of class, race, culture and other categorisations that are privileging some categories (male, heterosexual, middleclass, white, Christian, able bodied) above all others excluding them from resources.

This transition of working from an outside expert position to become part of our therapeutic practices was strengthened by the social constructionist influence in our field. According to social constructionism we live in worlds of meaning and create meanings in relationships and communities. Our personal history, class, cultural background, and gender identity influence how we understand the world, relationships and what we perceive as reality.

In the field of the academy and research a parallel development is taking place. We as researchers cannot do research from the outside, we are part of our research, the people we work with are our co-researchers.

The shadow side of the huge influence of social constructionism was that

language and meaning became so central that the body and the reality of experiences got out of sight. We are also animals with bodies and sensations.

Post humanism was a next step to take. The posthuman theory made clear how we human beings got on the wrong road when we assumed that the human being, and in particular the white able-bodied man, was on top of creation. This anthropocentric image made it possible that humans acted as if they own planet earth and can use everything in their own interest. This also created the feeding ground for capitalism, consumerism and the destructive market system that nearly ruined the world.

This marks the need for a new necessary transition. Can we be even more inclusive and become aware that we not only are interdependent with the people in our practices but also with the non-human living and non-living creatures? If we are ready to make that transition, we can enrich our practices with endless possibilities.

In *Murmurations: Journal of Transformative Systemic Practice* we can find many texts that are an inspiration for, or part of, this necessary transition (For example, Simon and Salter, 2019; Duncan, 2021; Kearney, 2021; Palmer, 2021).

The workshop of Lorna for me was part of this transition. She invited us to be with trees, to hug a tree that attracted us, to be with our environment, to leave our observer position (“what a beautiful tree” or “how fast that squirrel is”) and to relate to the beings around us as fellow guests on planet earth.

Looking back at my reflections at the time, feeling one with the swan swimming with me, I think of an earlier short text of me I wrote for *Murmurations: Journal of Transformative Systemic Practice* (2019, p. 83) as a reflection on John Shotter’s “Social Accountability and the Social Construction of ‘You’”.

“The red old cat Dikkie of my stepdaughter Geertje is a lazy cat at home. His garden is his territory where he can lay down and sleep. He is a regular guest in our house and

garden. When he arrives, he becomes very active and chases all the other cats from our garden. Geertje didn't believe he could behave that way till she saw it with her own eyes. I love Dikkie doing that because we have too much cats from neighbours in our garden that use our garden as a public toilet and spoil our fresh air and plants.

Where is the 'you', where the 'I', or is there a relational 'youme'?"

*One more example*

This autumn (2022) I was in the Amsterdam Zoo with my grandchildren, now 4 and 6 years old. I feel a lot of ambivalence looking at the animals in their cages, not as small as they used to be, but still... they are jailed by us. At the sealions we had a joyful experience, Luc (6) started to be in contact with a young sealion. Although the sealion was swimming behind glass they were playing together. Luc running along the long window, the sealion following him, making a circle at the end, biting his own tail, Luc also making a round of himself. They went on back and forth and couldn't stop. I tried to get the sealion following me, but he didn't. Where is the "me" where is the "you" or is there a relational "youme"?

The same is true for plants. We know how trees and plants communicate and help each other. Do we know that we can be part of it?

From childhood on I rescued plants that called me from the garbage, all the plants that I took home were generous in their sharing of beautiful leaves and flowers. We have a relationship, we greet each other, we talk, we strengthen each other's resilience. Where is the "me" where is the "you" or is there a relational "youme"?

And what about non-living material? I was happy with the lifting robot that could lift my mother out of her bed the last period of her life and bring her



carefully to another place. She (the robot) rescues many backs of nurses, and my mother loved her.

If we can look post- or beyond humans, our world becomes so much richer. Can we include this rich world in our practices? Dogs, horses, and small pets are already part of systemic practices, what do we learn from them, do we acknowledge their intelligence and healing powers? Do we use them from an outside position or do we really collaborate as equal but different participants? And when we include nature, gardening, walking and other outside activities in systemic practices, do we collaborate with the earth, trees, plants, leaves; can they be our co-therapists? And what about stones, mountains, the wind, material...

We take steps, we (re)search, we sense, we fall, we take more steps, we fail, we try again and sometimes we fail better (after Samuel Beckett).

### Chiara's photo and reflections

(a combination of her earlier and later reflections)

"Dance is the hidden language of the soul."

Martha Graham

#### ***Dancing with (my) special (?) tree***

Looking around to find my dancing partner

My eyes resting on this tree.

What's special about it?

Does it need to be special?

or is it ok to be like any other tree?

Growing, pushing life through its roots

Finding its place amongst

other brother and sister trees  
Reaching out to new heights and lights.  
Leaning as if jumping into the water.  
yet standing strong and tall to bear the weight,  
Grounded and yet exposed to the elements  
So entangled and yet elegant and ordered  
with its wavy branches.  
Near the water is its place  
Reflecting in the water like magical mirrors  
Calm waves meeting the liminal pebble shore  
Dancing with the water with lightness and joy.  
Wild sounds and bird songs filling the air  
Resting on the branches for a moment of reflection  
And then flying away searching for another branch,  
Another song, another dance.  
Will they come back to their special tree?  
The air touching the bark, so rough and yet smooth  
Giving warmth and freshness,  
its moss wrapped around like a protective coat  
for the worst of storms.  
Will it for ever belong  
to the forest and the water nearby?  
Will it keep dancing?  
Will it survive?



***A quiet inner dialogue***

I am not alone

I need water to refresh myself

I need the earth to nurture myself

I need the roots to find myself

I need my bark to protect myself

I need my trunk to feel steady

I need my branches to reach out

I need the air to ignite my fire  
I need other trees to find myself

***A whisper***

Stand back and see what's invisible  
Move away to see every movement  
Sit down to see the reflections  
Be silent and you will hear many voices  
The air the earth, the fire, the water,  
the trees and the forest,  
the bark and the bird songs,  
all the mosses and the old leaves,  
the intricate web of fungi underneath.  
Let's start a new dance!

As I was invited to dance with a tree in this workshop, I was reminded of the dancing metaphor (Minuchin and Fishman, 1981), familiar to systemic thinkers as a way to think about the therapeutic process.

When considering which tree I wanted to dance with, my choice fell onto this one. I am not sure why. A bit of an instinct, a pull towards, a fatal attraction to one rather than another? I was certainly intrigued and the tree sparked my curiosity (Selvini-Palazzoli et al., 1987). My innate wish to explore and my passion for dancing were ignited like fire.

It makes me think about how our clients find us, what they are looking for, their previous experiences of therapy, what information is available to them and what we provide for them to make a choice. Will they choose us based on someone else's recommendation? Or our expertise? Or our ethics? The fees they can afford? Our cultural background? Similarity or difference? A warm connection felt in the heart? Or most likely all of these things at the same time?

I often underestimate that going to see a therapist is a jump into the unknown; taking the risk of starting a new relationship when the very

reason for coming into systemic therapy is often because relationships have become difficult and a source of concern.

My initial question to the tree, i.e. whether or not it was a special tree, was a mirroring question about how special I need, and everybody needs, to feel when we engage in a relationship that involves intimacy and exposing our vulnerability. Being aware of my own needs, feeling nurtured and regenerated by nature in my own personal and professional life, allows me to be in touch with my own humanity, vulnerability and need for humility.

As I start the therapeutic dance with new clients, I am aware that my total focus and commitment is to develop a therapeutic relationship where they need to feel safe and special. It is often a dilemma and a challenge for systemic therapists, developing a therapeutic relationship with an individual and everybody within their web of relationships, both parties in a couple, each child and each parent at the same time. Through our systemic training and experience, we have developed the skills to hold the complexity of multiple relationships and perspectives, hold a family system in mind, even if they are not all coming to therapy, exploring intergenerational stories and meaning making in the light of the current situation.

I felt the tree was inviting me to dance and to move around, revealing itself slowly in all of its different facets. I was zooming in and out, moving around and look from different stand points. I got very close, touching the moss and the bark; then distanced myself, to see the context, to notice the surroundings, to gain a different perspective about its place and presence amongst other trees, the lake, and the more distant countryside. I became increasingly curious (Selvini-Palazzoli et al., 1987) about its own uniqueness, exploring the different parts of the tree, the trunk, the canopy, the leaves, the bark and the moss, listening to the birds singing, imagining the invisible roots and fungi underground. The tree revealed itself slowly through me engaging in this dance and felt special in my eyes.

The tree also invited me to enter into a dialogue with myself, to consider the ripples within my inner pond created through engaging with non-human beings, like the relational ripples created in the therapeutic space in between people (Karamatsouki, 2020, 2022). Again, it reminded me of what happens in the therapeutic encounter as we engage in deep listening with our clients, tuning into our inner conversation (Rober, 1998), constantly making therapeutic decisions about what could be potentially useful to bring into the outer conversation, with the possibility of starting a new dance!



Session participants: Erik, Andreas, Chiara and Justine

### Lorna's later reflections

This - the co-creation of these practice notes - has been a surprising journey over five months. When the five of us gathered for the workshop, I never imagined that we would take it forward in this way.

This process has mobilised me, together with others, to launch a project: Llanbradach Colliery Field as a protected green space. The field, once a coal tip, has been under threat for decades for housing and is now a park and ride.

I'm passionate about connecting communities in the care of Planet Earth and social justice. And local inspiration about community building - and much more - is from nearby Cardiff:

*Gentle Radical · Gentle Radical · Who · What · Why · Where; Projects. Turner Prize 2021 · Palestine Book Club · Doorstep Revolution · Decolonising Faith...* (<http://gentleradical.org>)

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T E N

# Stone Scissors Paper

## A Trilogy of Papers

Leah Salter, Lisen Kebbe and Gail Simon

### **Stone**

*for the land we walk on  
for the filtering and channelling  
of the water we drink*

### **Scissors**

*to re-draw maps  
and cut up the law  
to split our stories  
re-present them in relief  
to hack at the ground  
and grind it into powder*

### **Paper**

*for the accounts that are given  
and the maps that tell truths  
written over  
again  
and again*

This is a trilogy of papers about land and people and the ecology they create together. Leah lives on the coast in South Wales. Lisen lives on the island of Gotland in Sweden. Gail lives in Yorkshire in the north of England. What connects us and our writings is the land, its history, its place in industry and what we do and don't see. The cuts in the land reflect the cuts in our minds, unnegotiated edits in our stories, and disconnects in political discourses. This trilogy of papers documents some of these cuts and joins. We speak about the land we walk on and the stories told about it. We point to scars in the landscape and ask how they connect with those in the lungs and on the wrist. The landscape of the present holds clues about its past and its future. And the timescapes in the writings evoke a necessity to connect time and place, human and non-human colonising and liberatory methods and live with a maddening, flickering lenticularity (Pillow, 2019).

The cuts in logic or landscape that we draw attention to reflect separations in everyday life that makes people feel crazy, that there is not point in talking, in speaking truths. Language is losing value. What can we do in systemic practice to extend language into materiality? The cuts we make in these papers are agential, joining rather than separating, delineating and blurring.

We are not describing entities as if separate, like stone, scissors and paper but rather describing an ecology of ancient practical relations, relations of power and complementarity. We show how the physical cuts are an announcement of a power relation. Living physical structures are being physically attacked through the first stage of employing language to redirect attention, to erase history, to build narratives which reinforce the neoliberal idea of personal agenda. The second stage is to physically dismantle parts of a landscape, parts which affect more life forms than just the immediate hole that is being dug. To imagine that non-consensual attacks upon the earth, upon its peoples and upon truth do not affect the individual, familial and communal mind, do not affect bodies of people, is not only a separation too far but supports colonial epistemologies which maintain imbalances of health and power. The individual human then remains the site for treatment of "their" ill health in the rapidly increasing mental health industry.

We need to move beyond the romantic question posed by Gregory Bateson steeped in a paradigm of a natural world:

What pattern connects the crab to the lobster and the orchid to the primrose and all the four of them to me? And me to you? And all the six of us to the amoeba in one direction and the back-ward schizophrenic in another?

(Gregory Bateson, 1979, p. 8)

And treat this as an interchangeable question to invite new connections to fit the circumstances:

How can we connect the one-way screen to the PlayStation and the microplastic in placentas with sex trafficking and all four of them to me? And the Black Lives Matter movement to the Xiaomi smartphone? And me to someone born on the same day as me in another less well-off country? And all eight of “us” to economic structures and those experiencing something called mental health problems?

(Simon, The End of the Clinic, AFT-FoKCC Conference, 2021)

We offer these papers with a similar invitation: to read our stories and see what connections you make with the world around you.

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# Rambling Reflections

Leah Salter

In this first paper in the trilogy, I write from within the context of rambling/ walking along the coastline and in wooded areas in South Wales. I wrote differing pieces, condensed into this paper, over a period of months, with the intent to write whilst out/after walking or after meditation. Each subheading reflects themes that emerge from these moments in time and that connect me with my practice; and with the ecology of ideas that influence and intersect.

## Threads

Early morning. I'm lying in bed, trying to return to a state of sleep. A bird lands on the window sill outside. I cannot hear her call but she lands heavily and the sound of her claws on the plastic suggest to me- wood pigeon. They are common in my locality. I briefly wonder why she has landed here though. It is unusual. They are usually in the nearby trees. The sound of plastic grates on me. It is unnatural. I wonder how she experiences it and why she is not in the trees.

In my restless resting my mind wanders and I try to still my thoughts by focusing on the sensation of my body lying heavily on the mattress. As I do this my body loses its edges. I no longer feel it as "my" body but a web that is spreading outwards in ever changing form, continuously in movement, edges constantly being redefined, thin threads all caught up with each other, complex but somehow ordered.

I am not old but current illness is changing my ideas of time and age, of what it means to be living and alive. Different, but related. I am reminded of Mel Chen's (2012) critical writing about animacy from within queer theory. They invite questions about whose bodies are "worthy of life" and whose are not, inviting fresh thinking about race, sex, gender, ability and

disability, death and life, health and illness. I don't experience health and ill-health as a binary. There is always some part of each in the experience.

The threads keep on moving and in my mind's eye I see mountain peaks-sharp, craggy, alpine peaks, one after the other, after the other, like an image reflecting in an infinity mirror. Brutal, beautiful mountain peaks. I wonder if it is a metaphor for this phase of my life, brutal-beautiful. Illness is creating sharp focus in still moments but also invites reflections of decay, reminding me that what I think of as "my" life, is not a possession that I can cling onto, or a state on which I can depend. The mountain experiences the same decay, the same changes and uncertainties, but we have different timeframes. We are conceived and perceived differently. I am viewed as living, breathing, animate. The mountain is viewed as dead, still, static. My life could be seen as fleeting. The mountain as permanent. Our differences are highlighted, connection obscured.

## Mountains

I hosted a workshop recently, inviting reflections through the lens of relationship with what could be thought of as inanimate features of nature-those of mountains and stones. I showed photographs that held significant meaning for me, mountains I had climbed or gazed upon, sacred and ancient stones I had visited/meditated beside and places that have been important in my life. When people shared their experiences there were numerous intergenerational accounts of *co-inhabitation* within mountainous and rocky landscape (Simon and Salter, 2019). These reflections reminded me that landscape is never neutral. The shape, size, form of the land has multiple stories to tell, steeped in history, shaped by human and non-human activity. Some of the scars of human activity speak to love and reverence of the land but many more of the scars tell stories of exploitation of land and people. Outdated laws associated with land 'ownership' tell more stories still. Who or what has the right to roam, right to dwell, right to build, right to grow, right to protect, right to protest on etcetera? These scars and associated stories are linked to far more than geography and, though dated, are not assigned to history.

## Geography

I worked for over a decade in the Rhymney valley of Wales, an area that was industrialised for iron steel and coal and wears the marks of those industries. It also wears the marks of its decline. The area looks, sounds and smells of industry but many of the families who live in the valley are without employment. Many experience inter-generational, multiple markers of deprivation, oppression and inequality.

Where I live currently, I can smell the fumes of the steelworks nearby and can trace the yellow plume on clear days. I know the closer you get, the thicker the smoke gets, the more “affordable” the houses are and the lower your expectations might be for your future and the future of your children. You might expect to earn less, and you might expect to live a shorter life. The nature reserve that nestles between my house and the steelworks helps me to feel less threatened by the pollution and aesthetics of the nearby industry, especially knowing that many species, such as the endangered Fen Orchid, are thriving in the sand dunes within the reserve. The nearby windfarm, not without controversy, rests on the local hills and also provides some additional hope for the future. Not without discomfort, linked to the privilege I experience.

The rain is now coming down hard, disrupting my plan to get out for a walk later in order to be in nature, to walk and take pauses outdoors, to feel part of the landscape. I feel the call to be outdoors keenly. I feel it in my bones.

## Bones

I was at an archaeological excavation site last weekend. An unplanned visit. I was on a coastal walk and happened upon the site, in St David’s, West Wales. The site was mostly being excavated by volunteers, one of whom told us that the site is of historic and cultural significance, an archaeological site known as St Patrick’s chapel and burial site, situated within the sand dunes overlooking the beautiful Whitesands Bay. The chapel is believed to date from around the 11<sup>th</sup> century, but the burial site is believed to be 6<sup>th</sup> Century and, as its name suggests, is linked to the ministry of St Patrick and is thought to be where he set sail to Ireland in the 5<sup>th</sup> century.

Talking with the volunteer archaeologist was a touching experience. She told me about the women and children who were buried there- an above average amount for most burial sites. She movingly shares how she has delicately uncovered bones belonging to small infants, some in the arms of their mothers. A very human story.

Alongside this she tells me how they have had permission to undertake this work as the site is at risk of being lost forever due to coastal erosion. The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historic Monuments of Wales have been highlighting the problems of erosion on coastal sites that is “speeding up” due to climate change, destroying sites of significance for national heritage. They also highlight the loss of habitat and associated impact for wildlife and endangered species. Another kind of story. The hope for the excavations is that the stories that these sites hold, will not be lost.

## **Time**

I think about the idea of time and how human activity in recent years has changed the course of naturally occurring processes, altering timeframes. I also reflect on my preoccupation with stories/ personal narratives.

In my work for the NHS in Wales, I have been planning a follow up event to a project I set up last year called “not to be forgotten stories”. This project sought to hear from people whose stories about the pandemic might otherwise get lost, perhaps because their story was not seen as important enough or did not fit with the dominant narrative of the time. I reflect on how humanity and dignity can be eroded as readily as the soft rocks and sand dunes of St David’s. I wonder if this too is being expedited by insensitive, brutal activity.

I wept as I heard on the news that three young black men, football players, playing for England during the time of the COVID 19 pandemic, have been targeted for racial abuse and hatred following missed penalties at the European Final, won by Italy (2021). There was a saddening inevitability about this. Another human story, and a national one, a story about a nation that has not faced its colonial “past” and is not facing its colonial present.

Empty words from our leaders following the abuse sweep over the opportunity to turn and face the trouble (Haraway, 2016). Conversations, long overdue, get silenced again.

### **A new ethic**

I have been working outdoors more than usual lately. Partly this is because I need to do things differently to help with energy levels and partly this is because I hope that shifting therapy practices outside of the therapy room, and shifting supervisory conversations from an online platform, can be transformative. I hope this can assist in re-positioning people I am in conversation with into a place where their dignity can be met more expansively, where their story can be honoured, not quashed or sanitised within a clinic setting. This is not just about individual wellbeing, as important as that is. This is political, purposefully disruptive, actively dissident. Practicing outdoors is about practicing outside of the parameters that constrain- not to practice outside of ethical boundaries but to reset them within a frame of relational ethics/responsibility (Larner, 2015; McNamee and Gergen, 2009; Shaw, 2011) where nature is within the relational frame (Santin, 2021).

In a consultation session this week, I walked through a field next to my home, walking respectfully around the planted maize and the poppies that spring up through the maize this time of year. I noticed that my questions were different in this context. I invited my conversational partner (walking in her own space along the coast as we connected over telephone) to reflect on how her body felt moving around in nature, rather than being sat at a computer. We noticed that we both felt more reflective of our own stories, not constrained by stories from practice that we feel obliged to bring to consultation. This obligation can be vital to help us help others and keep people safe but can also leave us feeling overly scrutinised and constrained, as supervisors and supervisees, an experience akin to surveillance (Simon, 2010).





In this conversation, we talked about some personal challenges my colleague is facing, checking this out carefully to ensure we were both comfortable bringing this to the space we had co-constructed. As I navigated the maize, making sure not to damage any crops and also looking out for grass snakes and smaller wildlife, I became aware of the care I was taking in my movement as well as in my communication. I felt a sense of love and compassion towards my conversational partner and the environment I was moving about within. I could feel this flow through me and slow my movement-walking slowly, breathing lightly, talking tenderly. I felt more attuned than usual to the matters that matter for this person, right now, in this moment. I had an email the following day thanking me for facilitating a space that was experienced as healing and important. I am touched and encouraged.

## Animacy

I experienced something else encouraging in my practice this week. I met a family of four in a local woodland area where the river Garw runs. I feel alive when I am here. I know how lucky I am to live and work in areas such as this.

I am feeling connected to the trees, the river and the ferns as we walk together, talking. I invite them to collect artefacts from nature to create a 'living museum' and then ask them to display their items together to share stories connected with their exhibits.



This family I am meeting with rarely leave the differing houses they live in. They are visibly shaky when I meet them at the car park. It has taken significant amounts of courage to meet me here, though they know me well. The eldest sibling stands by her younger sister, in this gathering, as she tries to talk for the first time. She places her arms around her shoulders and says, "it's okay." What ensues is a poignant conversation about what

counts as living or dead. Leaves with holes in them are held in hand, branches that have fallen from the surrounding trees, empty horse chestnut shells, stones and slate all represent stories from their lives and their relationships.

The youngest member of the family, Emily, chooses a piece of wood. It looks more like driftwood than a branch. It is chunky but light in weight. Emily has not spoken before this, though we have been together for about thirty minutes already. She is clearly anxious, visibly shaking. When she looks at me I can see that tears are welling in her eyes. As she opens her mouth to talk, tears roll down her face. She just about manages to say “sorry”. Her sister, brother and mother encourage her to go on. A few minutes later, she starts again. “I chose this to represent my hopes for the future because it looks inanimate, but it isn’t. It is still living and has potential.”

Mel Chen says that “animacy is conceptually slippery, even to its experts”. It is a “craft of the senses; it endows our surroundings with life, death, and things in between”. Chen asserts we need to keep thinking about the binary language of life or death in the current climate. They argue that “animacy is especially current—and carries with it a kind of charge—given that environmental threats (even those that are apparently invisible) such as polluted air, poisoned food, and harmful materials are constantly being figured within contemporary culture...” (Chen, 2012, p.55)

I am aware of that slipperiness and the significance of the debate on animacy in the times we live in, and I am uncertain how best to respond to this young woman. I don’t want to get into a philosophical debate about animacy right now but I also want her to understand that I see life in the wood to. This is not an innocent metaphor or a purely linguistic exploration. This is fundamental to the liminal space we are constructing together in nature, somewhere we can stretch the boundaries that we are invited to live within. I tentatively offer a reflection that it is our individualised, constrained way of viewing life that encourages us to see the wood as dead, because we are not looking at it within its immediate context or within the wider web of life, of which it is a “vital” part. I tell her that I am certain that

the wood is living. She nods and smiles as she holds my gaze. Her eyes tell me she is scared and seem to ask me if I might be able to help her to keep going in her story. I nod slowly as I hold her gaze, attempting to show that I understand what she is telling/asking me. She seems to stand a little taller and smiles widely at her mother who takes the cue to say, “well done”. A new story emerges that speaks to future hopes and aspirations. She tells me, and her family, that she would like to be a teacher, to inspire children to grow to their full potential. Her voice is strong. Her feedback helps me go on.

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# The Water Table

Lisen Kebbe

In this second paper in the trilogy on land and people, I write from within a living and changing landscape as a local resident on the small island of Gotland. I am a systemic organisational consultant and psychologist working on the island where I was born, where I grew up on the land of my family's farm. In this short paper, I tell some systemic stories – facts and narratives and politics – each of which might make some sense in its own context – but when put together you see a systemic story – a disaster movie actually – of an ecology under attack through the dominance of business motivated narrative over indigenous knowledge of the land and local history. So the plot is about what happened when a cement factory tried to renew its permit to extract limestone from Gotland and make cement for another twenty years. It is a tale of an extraordinary battle between narrative and materiality - at local, national and international levels.

## **The Bedrock**

Gotland is a long thin island in the Baltic Sea. It's part of Sweden. It's fairly flat. What's it known for? Well, the capital, Visby, is a medieval city, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. We have a medieval fair. The island hosts the annual politician's week in Almedalen. It has a beautiful coastline. The northern end is a small boat ride away to Faro where Ingmar Bergman worked. His house is there. The southern end has Gotland sheep with their grey-blue curly coats. As you travel around the island, you see woods and farmland, 93 medieval churches built with limestone, windmills, and lots of tourists in the summer. Farming and tourism are the main industries of Gotland along with limestone mining.



Limestone is the bedrock of Gotland. The stone originates from the Silurian period, around 430 million years ago. During this Silurian period there was a shallow sea where Gotland is now located and the climate was tropical. At the coastline there was a rich wildlife. Over time, animals died and fell to the bottom of the sea their remains created a reef. After some more millions of years the water covering the reef disappeared and the island of Gotland, built of these limestone reefs appeared. We often see the sea lilies, trilobites, octopuses and corals, among many other creatures and plants, fossilised in the bedrock.

The limestone bedrock is between 500 – 750 m deep. It is the kind of stone you make cement out of and Gotland has the best limestone for cement making - because it is “clean”. The strata are only made up of limestone – very few layers of clay between them. This, and closeness to the sea for its easy shipping, is something highly prized. Limestone has also been the main building material for farmhouses, barns, and also the houses in the town of Visby which has a ring wall around from medieval times. So, the limestone bedrock and the use of it is an obvious, proud and integrated part of Gotlandic identity.

Now you have the story. The scene is set.



## The Lime Kiln

There is a long tradition of using limestone for buildings on Gotland. It has been done for at least 1000 years from the time when the first medieval churches were built. I read somewhere that the Romans started it in England. Villages would have their own small quarry and a kiln where the limestone was heated, a tower of five to six meters high. People stacked the stone in it, lit the fire and heated the stone at 800-1100 degrees for three days and nights. Then, when they took out the burnt stones, they poured water over it so it exploded to be ground into powder. Then you have the lime to use as mortar. Cement.

But there is also a long history of export, not huge, but it was part of the humble local economy. The first written document is from 1460 where limestone, lime, wood and tar was shipped to Danzig in Germany. Earlier, Visby had been an important member of the Hansa union with a lively trade in the Baltic, Holland and England. But the lime production seems to have started later by the local people on the countryside. The production and business were growing during the centuries all over the island and out of this also grew some fairly rich businessmen that there hasn't been before, as there has never been any nobility on the island.

But at the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the smaller businesses disappeared and was replaced by larger facilities. There was an increasing interest in the unique quality of Gotland limestone. The engineer, Lundberg who had studied the limestone said, "It is without doubt that the raw material is of particular interest for making Portland Cement, even better than in England. The stone can be fetched almost without any cost, and there is enough stone for many hundred years. There is a good site in Visby to build the factory on, the cost for building is small and the salaries are low." With these good predictions, three industrialists from the mainland of Sweden started "Visby Cementfabrik" in 1885.

So the modern, efficient production started and has developed since then. In 1919, the plant in Slite was built. Slite, on the north of the island, has the best stone. They built the factory on the harbour so the cement could be

poured directly into the ship. Everything was set for big business. At that time there was ten different cement plants in Sweden. Today there are two and they are both owned by the multinational Heidelberg Cement company, and one of them, the Slite factory, produces today 75% of all cement used in Sweden plus some export.



## Earth, Fire, Air, Water

There has been much focus by local people and politicians on reducing the CO2 emissions on the island. The second worst polluter in the whole of Sweden is discharged by the plant in Slite. Only a steel plant in the north of Sweden puts out more pollution. Whatever else we local people can do here on Gotland to reduce carbon emissions is nothing compared to the pollution by this factory

As production gets bigger and bigger, the effects of it get worse and worse. The industry people feel the pressure. They start to talk about *green industries* such as steel which could work with zero pollution. They start to talk about zero pollution at the cement factory too. In fact, the factory made many changes to reduce its pollution but two main problems remain.



Firstly, when they heat this enormous kiln, they don't use a few pieces of wood like the farmers used to do in their small kilns – they use rubber tyres, hundreds and thousands of burning rubber tyres. They have as good cleaning filtering as they can but it's not just the fire that creates the pollution. And just to say that when they consider heating the stone with electricity, the energy needed is enormous and would take an extra cable from the mainland of Sweden which would cost billions and paid by the state/people. The second contributor in the process of making cement is the actual extraction of the limestone from the ground. Quarrying releases CO<sub>2</sub> accounting for 2/3 of the release of the whole process. Then they propose that *this* problem will be solved by catching the CO<sub>2</sub> and transporting it by boat to Norway where there are plans for storing CO<sub>2</sub> deep beneath the sea. All big plans that are still at an experimental stage and will take at least ten more years to complete – no doubt, with new piecemeal problems to resolve.

The talk of producing “green cement” makes politicians very happy. It will put Sweden on the map, they say. We will be “the first in the world” to produce zero emission cement. This “green washing” has taken all the political parties by storm except the very small Feminist Party and the local Green Party. Our politicians are set to let the multinational business from outside of Sweden, with cement plants in more than 50 countries around the world, do whatever they want.

Secondly there is an even bigger problem that the business people and the politicians don't want to talk about/ The quarry affects the whole of the north of Gotland in other ways. Fundamental ways. Its natural infrastructure. It affects the water table. The water we drink and the ground water that keeps all of nature alive. No-one talks about that - that they would still need to take the stone out of the ground also with “green cement”. This is already having terrible repercussions for the ground water. The rock is porous. Humans cannot predict which way water will go or track where it goes. It doesn't just go down - it goes sideways, it travels in many directions. No-one can see what it does to the water table when they just dig out these massive holes. But when they disturb the ground, it affects hidden systems, the water comes out where it shouldn't and it leaves areas

of the island without water. The land gets dry, wells dry out, crops fail, industries cannot manage. Then, it gets even worse: the salt water from the sea gets into the rock and contaminates the remaining water for drinking and water for nature. It's a huge problem. In recent years, politicians always have said Water First! Protect Water! Conserve Water! But then this happened...

### **Realignments in the landscape: the grinding up of “truth” and law**

The cement factory submitted an application to renew their licence to mine at Slite for another twenty years. The local green activists on Gotland challenged the renewal of the quarry's licence in the courts. Those defending the stone company said no-one can know for sure what affects the ground water, and it is impossible to predict if or how the water will be affected in twenty years' time. The Supreme Court in Sweden refused the renewal citing a lack of proof that the ground water would not be affected by continuous extraction. They didn't get the permit. It felt like a great victory for local activists and a huge relief. But there now there are appeals.

But then two unexpected things happened. Firstly, all politicians at national level – from across *all* the parties, *including the Greens*, started to defend the quarry's application. Businesses which use cement in Sweden - builders, infrastructure developers and the other industries - stood up as one person. “300,000-400 000 jobs will disappear! The whole economy of Sweden will decline!” “The Slite factory provides the whole country with cement these days.”

Secondly, one local politician went further. He said, “It is a catastrophe for the whole country if the company doesn't get its licence renewed. We cannot have the Supreme Court make pronouncements about the cement production that the whole nation depends on. *We have to change the law.*” And all the parties from left to right agreed. They kept repeating time and again, “*We have to change the law*”. Only the local Green party on Gotland and the national Feminist party spoke out to support the decision of the supreme court. The national Green Party opposed the Supreme Court

ruling too. They all backed the quarry. We couldn't believe what we were hearing. The ombudsman declared it was not correct to go against the supreme court, to go against democracy but they don't have any power to order what should happen. They can only reflect on the situation. We feel we are seeing the end of democracy.



### **Singing as activism**

The threat to democracy prompted singer-songwriter, Vera Kebbe, one of the Gotland activists, to write and record a song in which she parodies the phrase, *"We have to change the law"*. But guess what? The radio stations which normally play her songs refused to play this one. They were scared to go against the establishment although many reporters sympathised with her. The only places where these subjects are discussed is on Facebook and on the letters pages in the local paper. And once in a while, there is an article in the national papers by a professor in biology, or former green party leader and the like who speak up to challenge what is happening both to the ecology and our democracy.

Vera sings:

*All industries are panicky,  
they never thought this could be.  
And politicians getting frightened,  
want to lend a hand  
instead of finding another way  
and they say:  
Go flat out with the bulldozers  
Wreck UN principle 7,  
Changing laws are in session  
Go flat out for industry and jobs  
Well Gotland was nice  
but its water we'll sacrifice.*



<https://fb.watch/9NDTXUtwsh>

## Studying local business ecology

The national politicians, in coalition with the national construction businesses, said they were concerned about the closure of the quarry resulting in enormous unemployment, the decline of businesses and the end of all construction projects in the country. That narrative is weak. Heidelberg Cement makes cement in more than 50 countries around the world. It could be imported. Then politicians say, “We have the cleanest methods here so if we import from China or Tunisia, the industry process won’t be as clean. And it’s a long distance away, transporting it will be bad for the environment”. But there is a factory in Poland which is the most modern and sophisticated in terms of environmentally friendly production. And there are cement productions in all the Nordic countries according to Heidelberg Cement’s website. And of course, there are other companies who also export cement. We have heard that the big construction companies on the mainland are already investigating where to order cement from, they are not sitting back waiting.

On Gotland there are 240 persons working at the plant. Beside those 240 workers there is around 400 entrepreneurs having their main income from the cement company and of course a closure would be a challenge for the island.

But how has the island coped in the recent past with industrial closures? The Ericson factory closed down making 1400 people redundant. More than a couple of thousand people lost work from Military bases closing. Large dairy and sugar factories have closed down. Still *Gotland has the lowest amount of unemployment in Sweden today*. What saved Gotland's social economy is all the small businesses who have taken in these people, plus some governmental inputs. *Gotland has a business ecology which so far seems to have coped with much larger major changes than the closure of this cement factory*. The history of changes in employment is very important. It's like a natural ecology in business, in the community. The unemployment is like the hole in the ground. Waters will run into it and fill it. There is a natural restorative response. Gotland's ecology is robust – until interfered with by outsiders. Then the theory of homeostasis fails. So, the unemployment is then not a reason to risk the ground water.

### **Fixing and tweaking as epistemological errors**

The next strategy taken by politicians and the cement factory is to propose fixes. Fixes to individual problems. Cleaning the water for drinking, for example. The top four politicians on Gotland said that it is possible to clean the water in the quarries so it will be fine for drinking. But they don't realise (or choose not to think of) that this is not simply a human drinking water problem but what else would still be threatened. The groundwater is required life for everything: for nature, animals, everything that is alive, including human beings. The cement factory says a huge amount of the ground water pours into the big holes as they dig so then they pump it out into the sea. Now they say they can save that water and clean it. But we have water in the Baltic which isn't very salty, and that desalination is already happening in two places on Gotland. Making water drinkable isn't the big issue, it is the total ecology that is threatened.

So, then some of us discuss whether we even need this big amount of cement. On Gotland and all over Sweden, all the houses and roads are made using cement made into concrete. And cement is used in many processes in industries as well all over Sweden and the world. At the 2021 Venice Architectural Biennale, Wael Al Awar made a installation in the UAE pavilion which provided an alternative to cement made of saline waste. They no longer talk about cement. Cement is finished. It's recognised as environmentally unfriendly. An architect friend in Berlin in said, "Cement is out. It's from the old world." So there are alternative ways of building and perhaps we don't need to build so much or not with lime.

Extracting limestone an example of the anthropocentric assumption that we can help ourselves to the things around us, the material lying in the ground. Just because humans can walk over it or mine it, doesn't mean it is ours for the taking. We humans need to get over ourselves and see how *we are part of an ecology in which people and land and rock and water are all interconnected*. But capitalism shatters that connection. The stone becomes a commodity and separated from its locality and destroys the local ecology. There are great earnings for some that have been doubled year by year – partly through incorporating all the smaller cement factories and then closing them down to centralise production.

It is obvious that this complex situation does something to our ability to reflect on our situation; capitalism take over our moral voice and becomes our highest context. This makes a lot of people say, "I do not know, I sympathize with both sides" and then put the very problematic questions out of their minds.

The narrative of zero emission cement takes all the politicians by storm. "This factory has been here for 100 years and we can see it still here in the 100 years to come", the CEO recently said at the 100 years anniversary. The groundwater on Gotland is struggling to compete.

The national economic interest in the cement production and the waving of the greenwashing flag makes all politicians short-sighted, not only the national but also the local ones. The groundwater is not visible in this equation. What happens to people when decisions are taking place really high above local peoples' heads?

What is becoming visible is the polished face of raw capitalism entangled with politics which would mobilise us to protests. Like Greta Thunberg and friends standing outside parliament. But not much happens. There is a feeling of alienation. “The questions are so complicated”, say even people who usually have clear views and opinions.



Great Thunberg. Photo from The Guardian 11/08/19

We are in the middle of this right now. It's on the table for anyone who dares to watch. The question now is how we can find a voice that can carry and express our worries and show how mother earth suffers and take a stand to save our ecology. We need to free our minds to be able to reflect and get hold of our agency.

# Moving Mountains

Gail Simon

I live in North Yorkshire where I often walk in the green and mustard hills. Aside from farming, the main industry is tourism and it requires the beauty of the landscape to be the thing visitors to the dales are most struck by. It is the thing I most enjoy too. This third paper of the trilogy is a mix of cuts and joins and wraparounds - storytelling, narrating landscape, stanza'd wonderings; some reflections on shifting landscapes and human disconnects; some theorising and some imagining the other. Come walk with me.

::::::::::::::::::::

When I cut  
It stops  
it all stops

breaking the skin  
allows release  
a flow  
a truth unspoken  
to be allowed  
privately seen  
silently heard

I remain mute  
my parents are speechless  
or at least  
I can't hear  
whatever they are saying  
I see them mouth  
Why Didn't You Say Something Was Wrong



But I am scared  
to trust  
anything  
people say  
So why listen?

I trust the dog  
I trust the blood  
it wakes me  
I feel alive  
I feel scared  
of the danger  
of my power  
Scared of them seeing  
my scars.

.....



I'm about halfway through my walk and pivot to take a track which will take me down to the valley floor. I stop to admire the view before enjoying the many roly poly slopes of this green lane. Before I carry on sinking lower into the valley and losing the sense of wider world, I pause to scan the skyline.

The drystone wall is already cutting off the lower part of the Wharfedale Valley so I balance on a stone and look over at the disappearing view. I scan right to left without a thought in my head just taking in the levelling green hills opposite marked out by these same stone walls. The shadow of the clouds is messing with the uniformity of the colour and the playing with the rooftops of Grassington over the valley. I'm taking it all in, no thoughts in my head. Just there, in it.

And then something strikes me, something that's out of place, and I feel some activity stirring in my thinking self. What is that thing? It's a long horizontal scrape of mid grey, lines running down it from sky to wherever it disappeared under the trees. Oh, another to its left, that's darker and bigger.

At first sight, I read them both as "scars", escarpments, naturally occurring cuts of exposed stone in the landscape. Dramatic, unexpected falling away of skyline, often worn by manoeuvres of the ice age or persistence of wind. There are lots of interesting and geological variations in Yorkshire. And I know that five miles further on is Malham Cove, an impressive cliff under the limestone pavement so common in the dales. I am smiling as I look towards it. In my mind's eye, I see the rare orchids and lichens. But as my eye follows the line around the top of these scars and register the shape, I realise I am looking at marks that belie human intervention. These are quarries, and these are hills in the process of being taken away. From this unique position of height and distance where there are no roads, I can see over the treetops and witness the slicing, the sharp drop which breaks the contour of a previous skyline. I am busy with what I am witnessing and what I don't know and am not meant to know.

I pan out my navigational eyes now mapping the distance from those scars to the railway line further down the valley. Too far away for me to see but I trace the line in my mind's eye. And I see and breathe in memory of the

dust and rage of hurtling trucks too massive for the narrow windy lanes between hill-being-deconstructed and the quarry railway station.

I have turned to carry on my walk. Up the undulating hill now on a tarmac road, I see the same undulations as the green lane I have just walked down. Oh, this was once a green lane, I say to the dog. They tarmacked it. He is sniffing the verges. The verges are where it's all happening. You won't be able to walk here when they build the bypass over this, I tell him.

On my way back, I drive past the final halt on that rail line. Between the sentinel trees, I see the train wagons are loaded up with white and grey stone. Like trolleys loaded with bodies headed for the morgue, I think.

.....

Do we know - do I know - or care about the sources of these tarmac surfaces or our houses?

A skirt of trees does the trick brilliantly in curtaining our conscious selves from seeing connections.

The more I look around me in my travels, the more I realise how trees are planted these days  
to hide industry.

You can only see what's really going on from the sky.

The birds know more than we do.

I wonder what I should do now that these drones have shown me the bird's eye view.

I stopped eating meat and fish when it was no longer possible for me to not see the relation between the life and death of animals with food on my plate.

.....



I wonder if perhaps this removal of our solid shapes and natural environment is okay.

Others more qualified than me will have assessed this.

They are the experts.

But there will have been local outcry, campaigns to prevent this.

It is not then just a quarry but a scar on all our consciences or bodies which have been taught to want more.

How can we live in such disconnected consciousnesses?

How do we make these cuts?

How can we not?

I wonder if we embrace our inner mountain - like Braidotti talks about embracing her inner cockroach in an attempt to consciously halt the theoretical separation of human from non-human and challenge the narrative of human superiority (Braidotti, 2009) then what do I-it-we feel? And what is our agency, separately and collectively?

How will I allow myself to be moved by what I can see, what I can share with others? Is telling enough? Or can it become an end in itself?

.....

"That's the mountain train," I nod towards the other side of the valley.  
"Well, I call it that."

My friends from London look up and see a goods train in the distance dipping behind some trees heading towards Skipton.

"The trains running from left to right are empty," I continue, thinking I sound a little crazy.

There's a pause.

I guess this is a bizarre conversation. Should I not say things like this to visitors?

But the Yorkshire Dales are not just greenery and skyline and this is my world.

Well, our world.

"Why?" one of them asks.

"When they run right to left, they are bringing mountain to the cities.

Hillsides deconstructed.

Stone."

My voice sounds matter of fact. That's even crazier.

The visitors nod. I can see they are processing that.

"They're getting more frequent.

There used to be just one or two a day. Now there are a few each hour.

Increase in demand for building materials."

I realise I am spoiling the view. But they have come to visit me, not just the countryside.

*I realise as I write this that the limestone isn't being used as stone. It has the same destiny that the people on Gotland are fighting. Cement. It is not passé – demand continues. My-our beautiful, ancient, wild flowered limestone hills are being dismantled and crushed and their ashes exported from a naturally occurring skyline to build a city skyline. Visualising the fine powder in its bags, I am in bits. I feel I am facing the reality of a funeral when you know that all that will be left is memories and ashes. What did I think? That they were somehow just relocating it and re-assembling it? I have not been emotionally engaged as much as I thought I was. I feel like my whole skin is crying and I feel confused.*



Here we are in a contemporary world of complex systems urgently in need of change, borrowing the metaphor of “moving mountains” to signify the apparent impossibility of making life saving, life improving global and local problems. Yet we humans can literally move mountains - using quite primitive methods: explosives, people, trucks, chutes and trains.

.....

## Understanding to challenge ontological and epistemological questions and their premises

While I was listening to Lisen Kebbe as she recounted the reactive and strategic narrative building between and within Gotland and the wider political-capitalist systems, I found myself becoming interested in the types of arguments in play, the discursive practices being employed. Simple kinds of questions challenge a segment of a context: they intend to separate the part from the whole, to move into a framework of lineal causality. Problems are *things* that need simple answers that relate just to the *thing*. This reminded me of the important shift that systemic theory and practice embraced in moving from first to second order epistemology. We are not separate from the systems we inhabit. We are participants and observers, affecting and affected, constantly in movement, repositioning and being repositioned. And we need to go a paradigm shift further, bring on an EcoSystemic Return. We need to understand social as including animal, vegetable and mineral (Simon and Salter, 2019).

For example, by separating out the “excess” ground water or airborne cement dust from the context of disruption that produced it, we are invited into a modernist space of separability, of first order knowing. The question of “What do we do about the problem?” is first order ontology.

Different types of questions have a place in our quest for understanding. They have different responsibilities and different functions. The types of questions are not interchangeable. And they each imply and embody moral positioning. In this era of proliferating fake news practice and the use of social constructionist theory without the social justice agenda, we all need to develop incisive questioning, transparency and inclusion of multi-contextual layers, of diverse and conflicting interests.

Here are some examples of questions which explore different types of ontology and epistemology to create the potential for different impact, reflection and knowledge:

First order ontological questions:

1. What is it?
2. How come it got there?
3. Who is responsible?
4. What can be done to get it back or take it away?

First order epistemological questions:

1. How can we track where the water came from?
2. How can we find out what kind of water it is?
3. How shall we explore solutions?
4. How will we decide who is responsible?

Second order epistemological questions:

1. How will the experiments we set up influence the kind of data we then find?
2. What difference will who we ask about the water flow, make to the answers?
3. Who is the “we” who will be discussing this question and what are the influences on that “we” that might influence their answers?
4. Who is the “we” that is invited to the design and implementation conversations, with what power, and how will that “we” extend or limit the concept of “problem” and “solution”?

Third order onto-epistemological questions:

1. How are contexts of influence affecting what we can or cannot do, see and learn?
2. How is what we are we doing affecting what we are learning?
3. How is our learning affecting what we understand as knowledge?
4. How is my salary affecting what I can notice and what I then feel I can do?



This merges ontology and epistemology (Barad, 2007) but is still potentially within a reflexive frame – meaning going back on itself. The knowing and knowledge practices could still be within colonising or pathologising bubbles. Knowledge isn't separate from the context of its production so just studying the *what* and *how* is in itself not enough as a strategy for systemic change. "We" often don't know what else there is to know until we step outside of familiar ways of thinking and doing.

Fourth order ethico-onto-epistemological questions

1. What are we doing together that is cha(lle)nging my/our first, second and third order thinking?
2. How is the flow of the water communicating the multiples changes in the landscape it experiences over time? And how are we hearing this?
3. How is my-our learning-doing-becoming changing as we work together to listen to what the old ecology is saying to the new ecology?
4. What happens when I act with ethical coherence to extend the range of what we can do, see and learn despite restricting contexts of influence?

The difference in these last questions is not simply their content. It is the diffractive flow between learning, knowing, doing and becoming drawing on Barad's idea of ethico-onto-epistemology (2007). All activities, all positions are in motion, mutually influencing as we go on with each other. These are questions for travellers, or, as van Hennik puts it, systemic nomads (2021).

The "*what is it?*" or "*what can we do?*" or "*how much of a problem is there?*" kind of questions are solution focused questions. They imply a hope that basic answers will lead to knowledge about what to do. For example, the water is running everywhere in the house because it comes from a pipe which burst after being frozen in very cold weather. The solutions are to turn off the mains, get the pipe fixed and insulate it better to avoid this happening again in future freezing weather.

In this burst pipe example, it is relatively okay to assume the problem is contained. You could possibly find such a method of problem solving within a self-contained factory. But you cannot employ simple thinking more suited to a domestic burst pipe problem solving in more complex settings. The danger is imposing on a more complex interface between industry and the natural earth.

The crucial point is agential separability. It matters whether or not we are "looking" inside the phenomenon [...] or viewing that particular phenomenon from the "outside"

(Barad, 2007, p. 347)

.....



Part of our human practice of valuation  
involves a “normal” binocular way of looking at time  
which makes things bigger in size  
closer to us.

Being the ones holding the binoculars  
we assume this is the correct view.  
What happens when we turn the binoculars  
around  
so we set human experience  
against the longer backdrop of mountain time?  
Not the mountain time zone of north America  
but the time frames in which mountains live.  
That’s something much longer than humans  
have the capacity to imagine  
or understand  
because we only live for up to 100 years.  
Mountains live for millions of years.

Interesting to reflect that mountains  
and humans  
can end life,  
kill each other  
very quickly.  
But when mountains kill people,  
it’s likely that they don’t intend  
to destroy life.  
Well, some might hear a mountain god

angered to action.

But humans

kill our mountains

with intent.

Except it isn't called killing.

It's called quarrying.

The killing acts of quarrying are justified

by a contemporary narrative of demand.

Sometimes by the narrative that this is

an age old practice.

Perhaps this is true.

Just not on this scale.

Not with this intensity.

Not without respect for the ecology.

And when ecologists evidence that there is

no need for those developments,

the reasons for killing our sister mountains

shift.

If we don't kill the mountains,

if we don't kill the exquisite ancient land on which we walk,

then we are apparently killing people

because there will be more unemployment

and therefore hunger

and more homelessness.

Then ecologists have to switch and play a language game.

Because the case for mountain life,  
natural life  
is not enough,  
not worthy of being left in peace.  
We don't see mountains  
as part of human life.  
They only exist for humans  
As a means to a human end.

Ashes cannot talk. We must.  
It's our choice.

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E L E V E N

The Systemic Crisis of Climate Change:  
Clinical and Political Reflections (2013)

and

The EcoSystemic Return:  
Clinical and Political Implications  
(2021)

Philip Kearney

# The Systemic Crisis of Climate Change: Clinical and Political Reflections (2013)

Philip Kearney

The ecological threats posed by climate change constitute the outstanding social, political and moral challenge of the 21st century. It is no longer in doubt that we are changing our world in significant ways and the consequences will be far-reaching, calling our very survival as a species into question. What role, if any, has systemic psychotherapy in responding to such a scenario? In an attempt to answer this question this paper gives an overview of the scale of the challenge faced by humanity and drawing on some foundational thinkers in the systemic tradition, argues for those with a systemic perspective to show leadership in formulating a radical response at both clinical and societal levels.

## **The crisis**

The evidence of climate science suggests that within a generation the world will have been changed almost beyond recognition. The rapid melting of Arctic ice in recent years is but one very dramatic index of the escalating pace of change that is occurring at a planetary level. This has happened at a much faster rate than predicted by the collective wisdom of the world's climate scientists in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (12). The oceans are absorbing the steadily increasing temperature but they cannot do so indefinitely. The incidence of extreme weather events continues to escalate and the consequences will be increasing social disruption, economic collapse, significant loss of life, species extinction and mass migration.

The ecological crisis we are facing is unprecedented. It is overwhelming and deeply alarming. It is about discontinuous, irreversible, planetary change. The understandable reflex is to ignore, challenge, deny or dismiss it. A recent report of the International Energy Agency says that if we have five more years of escalating carbon emissions we will bypass the possibility of staying within the threshold of a 2°C increase in average global temperature which is regarded as essential to maintain the ecosystems on which we depend (2).

All previous threats – plague, famine, war (including nuclear) - allowed for the possibility of continuity of the species even if there was massive attrition. This threat goes much further. James Lovelock, a British scientist, has predicted a huge reduction of the human population before the end of this century perhaps to one billion from the current seven billion (3). Those surviving will be in a largely ‘unlivable world’ - a phrase I have taken from Mary Robinson, former president of Ireland (and currently UN Special Envoy on Climate). Lovelock is best known for his theory of the earth as a self-regulating, living system. This hypothesis, which he named Gaia after the Greek goddess, has now become one of the foundations of much contemporary climate science.

My intent is not to be alarmist for its own sake or to spread panic. But such is the scale of the potential catastrophe that threatens many of our species and others that there is a moral imperative to declare the truth and not to soften the blow. Panic may be regarded as an appropriate psychological response to the factual situation.

At the same time I have a deep confidence and belief in the creativeness and resilience of humankind. The capacities to respond to the emerging ecological threats are there - both in terms of technology (although that will not be a panacea) but also in terms of learning to live with less and treading more lightly on the planet and its ecosystems. However the scale of the adjustment required in lifestyles and consumption has previously occurred only in wartime or in response to a major calamity. Is this threat equivalent to wartime? Not in the public mind but in other respects, perhaps. The onslaught on our essential ecosystems is just as fierce as if



we had deliberately decided on ecocide. The rates of deforestation, soil erosion, resource depletion, water wastage, glacial retreat, fossil fuel extraction and carbon emissions are continuing to escalate in spite of the accumulated scientific knowledge telling us that we are severely compromising the prospects for future generations.

This paper is addressed primarily to my colleague systemic psychotherapists. This modality of therapy is my professional home and I am pleased to have played some part in its development. We share many values with the other psychotherapies and health disciplines - i.e. seeking the reduction of human suffering, physical and mental, the enhancement of human well-being and the maximising of the potential of all, adults and children. Many of us chose to enter our professions precisely because of these principles and aspirations. A commitment to increasing health, happiness and well-being or reducing their opposites motivated us to undertake extensive and demanding training.

How do we now equate those initial impulses with the news that all that we take for granted is under threat, that we are part of an extinction process which is well advanced and the time available to redress the harm is reducing rapidly (4). At what level of risk do we as professionals have to act - collectively or individually? What do our codes of ethics have to say about this? Fundamentally as therapists we are engaged in professions and practices that prioritise and value human well-being and work to restore it where it is in distress or gone awry. Much has now gone awry in the ecosystems that sustain us:

- The oceans are overfished to dangerous levels where mass extinctions are predicted (5);
- The rate of global carbon emissions continues to rise annually;
- There is little prospect of binding international agreement to halt this escalation;
- The world's poor seek the lifestyles and commodities we, the wealthy, take for granted;
- The rate of extreme weather events with devastating impacts has increased dramatically.

The scale of denial of these facts at all levels is staggering, the official and political inertia frightening. The belief of some who have studied the science and have the training to read it is that collapse of all the principal systems which sustain us – economic, energy, food, transport and IT is an inevitability (6, 7, 8, 9, 16). The only uncertainty is when.

Given a potential risk of this scale what does this oblige us to do – either as citizens or as health care professionals? If, in our practice, we encountered an assessment of risk where extensive harm appeared inevitable what would we do? There would be an obligation to report and to act. I am now making such a report. I am obliged to report to you that the threat of massive loss of life and suffering has been identified and action is required. In this scenario we are both perpetrators and victims - to varying degrees.

If not immediately a state of emergency, it is at the threshold of one. Our children and theirs are at profound risk of serious injury and death and their life chances will be hugely circumscribed by the actions we are now taking and perhaps, more significantly, by the ones we fail to take.

### **The legacy of Bateson**

The systemic perspective is central to understanding the dynamics of climate and the delicate balances that have been destabilised by human activity - predominantly wealthy Western humans.

Gregory Bateson, ecologist and intellectual guru of systemic therapy, spoke of the circularity in all living systems and the critical balance between variables in an ecosystem (10, 11). He highlighted that there are optimal values of most variables in a given ecosystem. If those values are exceeded the system's survival is in jeopardy. Oxygen is a very good example: if the proportion of oxygen in the air we breathe increases by quite a small amount we are poisoned. CO<sup>2</sup> is another. Human population is another. We are disturbing the mix of variables - chemical and biological - that have sustained life on the planet in its present forms for millions of years and have allowed the development of civilisation over the past ten millennia. We are doing this both because there are so many of us but primarily

because some of us are consuming resources and generating carbon emissions at levels never before experienced.

The collective and conservative scientific consensus as expressed in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reports (12) is that the increase in global temperature is due to human intervention - anthropogenic global warming. Much of this is irreversible and of delayed effect so we and our children will live in an increasingly warmer world whatever we do.

There are now many texts (3, 6-9, 16) detailing the consequences of various possible levels of warming - of increasing levels of disruption to lifestyles, habitats and food production resulting in significant population migration as well an escalating rate of species loss. At the upper levels of 3<sup>o</sup>-6<sup>o</sup>C of average warming the scenarios are catastrophic for many parts of the world and call into question the continued functioning of civilised society as we know it. There is widespread agreement that we must keep average warming below a threshold of 2<sup>o</sup>C to avoid such consequences.

Bateson admonished us forty years ago that 'the unit of survival is *organism plus environment*' . . . 'we are learning by bitter experience that the organism which destroys its environment destroys itself.' (10, p. 483). He also spoke eloquently and frequently of the 'pattern which connects' by which he meant the endless tapestry of interweaving ecosystems from the micro to the macro of the planet itself that collectively constitute and sustain life. The pattern which connects living systems is currently being torn apart - perhaps irreversibly. We are on the cusp of an environmental catastrophe of huge proportions with major implications for all life forms on the planet.

Bateson described 'chopping up the ecology' as the most serious epistemological error. Most of our professional distinctions and political differences are predicated on chopping up the ecology and then shoring up the defences around our piece of territory. The sovereignty of the nation state has precedence over the integrity of the biosphere. Many of Bateson's ideas are echoed in the work of Lovelock who believes we have passed the point where the positive feedback loops can be prevented. They

are underway. We are heading for massive changes in the way that Gaia balances her ecosystems and our species will not be a beneficiary. (3).

### **The scale of the threat**

To be more precise we are already well beyond the carrying capacity of the planet. We have been floating on a sea of oil that is essentially concentrated solar energy distilled over millions of years. We are going to consume most of it in two centuries or less. Based on this oil we have had a huge explosion of food production that has enabled a similar population explosion. Oil underpins every aspect of our contemporary technological, industrial and commercial world. Without that lubrication we grind to a halt. It is a species-level dependency with all the worst features of the addictions we observe and treat in our clinical practice.

Because of our knowledge of systems and particularly of feedback processes the systems therapists ought to understand better than most the runaway escalations that are pushing us towards a tipping point. We ought to be well placed to discern, advise, interpret and warn but - like others - we are distracted by the pressing concerns of practice and teaching, academic demands and professional issues as well as significant financial constraints. As individuals or citizens the scale of the challenge may well overwhelm us. Its full import is an emotional and psychological tsunami.

### **Our systemic legacy**

It is good to remember that the pioneering phase of our field 50 years ago constituted a revolution in thinking and practice which expanded the prevailing understanding of human interactional behaviour and emotional functioning. It promised new ways of conceptualising multi-person communications and the relational domain. It was a quantum leap.

Using Batesonian theory many family therapists such as the Milan Associates went a long way towards breaking the mould of the focus on the single patient and opened up the window to a greater sense of the web of interconnections within which symptoms and problems arise and are sustained (13). It was a fertile period for our modality.

However there was limited follow through on the (eco)logical implications to expand this frame to include the wider social and political context in which the families were embedded. Milan took the Batesonian message but restricted its application to micro human systems only - as if they could be addressed apart from their contexts. Bateson would not have approved.

The systemic therapy revolution of the 60s, 70s and 80s can be seen as the psychological sciences' attempt to understand the wider human systems of which we are a part and to devise means of working therapeutically with those relationship networks. Our pioneers realised that we are born of relationship into networks and contexts of meaning which sustain or harm us and we them. However, unlike Bateson, they did not include the larger ecological context that is the cradle, the source of nutrients and energy and completes the systemic whole.

The effort to widen the lens continued in various forms but has largely succumbed to the constraints of the established order. We have not followed through with the logic of an ecosystemic epistemology. This would require us to widen our lens to include the other living systems with which we share the planet and that of the planet itself. That would have the consequence of us having to question our interaction with and impact on those ecosystems. Second-order change or collusive blindness would then be the critical options.

By revisiting our systemic origins we can be pathfinders for our professional peers and students and perhaps for others. We can reclaim the innovatory, paradigm-shifting inspiration of the early founders of our field. However to do this we must go beyond psychology, politics, and economics as presently construed. They are each dedicated to fragmentary territorial views, invested in individualism, polarisation, or worship of the market respectively.

The situation is dire – perhaps not as dire as Lovelock proclaimed - but certainly urgent. To repeat, it is an emergency. We are in a state of collective denial about the scale of the challenges that confront us which are either a) to turn things around or b) to face the consequences if we can't or won't.

## **Nagy and relational ethics**

Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy - my former professor in Philadelphia - was a major influence in my formation as a family therapist. He was the founder of contextual therapy and he, more than any of the pioneers in the field, sought to incorporate an ethical dimension into his model of practice. He spoke of relational ethics and of balances of entitlement and indebtedness between the generations. He saw the lack of reciprocity and trustworthiness in primary relationships as a principal source of pathology (14). Nagy's call for reciprocal fairness and accountability between and across the generations as foundational for healthy human functioning seems incontestable. He gave those intergenerational dynamics a greater ethical dimension and emphasis than any of the other leading figures in our field.

His model has not had widespread popularity but perhaps it deserves closer attention now as we consider the world we are bequeathing to our children. We persist with consumption predicated on an infinite supply of raw materials while knowing that we live on a finite planet where the upper limits of many essentials - water, soil and clean air - are being reached. The myth that each succeeding generation can do better than the last no longer applies. What will be the consequences for intergenerational trust and justice when our children discover that we have depleted these critical resources and compromised their futures? Should we withhold this information from them or try to share it? What will they believe and think of us when they realise they are growing into an unlivable world? Ban Ki-moon, UN General Secretary, has recently declared:

*"We are the last generation that can take steps to avoid the worst impacts of climate change".*

Nagy's wife Catherine DuCommun-Nagy has continued to develop contextual therapy and says 'posterity is the main client of the contextual therapist.' That is an interesting thought. What if we conducted our therapy with posterity in the room as part of the system? This is a form of child protection that upon which we could usefully reflect. What if our

practice included the entitlement of the next and future generations - what then, clinically and politically?

## Conclusions

The formulation I am proposing is to add the relational ethics of Nagy to the systemic rigour of Bateson at all levels of our practice and positioning as clinicians and as citizens. Nagy's perspective would require us always to take the emerging generations into account. This is a key principle of sustainable development as defined in the report of the Brundtland Commission in 1987:

*"Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". (15)*

Such an awareness of the claims of posterity would go some way to counter the delusion that we can carry on as we are and the denial of what we are facing.

How would our practice and our politics change if we took Bateson seriously and saw the organism plus environment as the indivisible unit of evolution, of life and of survival? Then we would not draw a boundary around the individual, the couple or the family in our clinical enquiries. We would not permit our politics to chop up the ecology. Such an expansion of our consciousness of the network of relationships in which we reside and on which we depend may be crucial not just to the future of our discipline but to the destiny of our species.

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# The EcoSystemic Return: Clinical and Political Implications (2021)

Philip Kearney

I am no longer a clinical practitioner, having taken a sabbatical from the clinic and directing training in the mid-noughties after thirty years and discovered I did not wish to re-enter. Since then I have focused my energies as a climate activist and organiser.

My 2013 paper (Kearney, 2013) was an attempt to convey the mounting concerns about the climate crisis to my former professional context. I spoke at various conferences and distilled my ideas into the paper. It is republished here for which I am grateful since it disappeared almost without trace on its first outing.

I support the intent of the Ecosystemic Return initiative - to reclaim our ecological roots - and I want to explore what the full import might be should we manage to do this.

Did we ever embrace the ecosystemic epistemology articulated by Bateson and briefly developed by Auerswald and Keeney? (Auerswald, 1968, 1971; Keeney, 1979, Keeney & Sprenkle, 1982). I suggest not. For a whole host of reasons. We were understandably preoccupied with defining the features and location of our new modality over against what had gone before. We used elements of the Batesonian paradigm and other sources to do so but we were obliged to find a place within the existing mental health infrastructure and industry with all the constraints that that implies. As Gail Simon says so vividly about the current dilemma for systemic therapists in mainstream services, “To be employed in a medical model renders us either

delinquent or magician.” (Simon, 2021, p. 11).

These preoccupations diluted the rigour and imagination of Bateson’s vision and his ideas were adopted only in fragments and partial arcs. Hugh Palmer captures this very well in his paper in this issue of *Murmurations* (Palmer, 2021). He and I share a common *homage* to the master.

I was given the privilege and opportunity to have sight of some of my fellow writers’ papers (Palmer 2021; McCarthy 2021; Simon 2021) as I prepared my own. That access influenced my thinking and helped me to reorient to the current concerns of systemic therapy practitioners and teachers. I ask my three colleagues’ forgiveness and indulgence as I have engaged in some critique of their papers to bolster my arguments. I invite them to do likewise with my claims and positions.

Gail’s paper is a visionary and potentially transformative account of the radical restructuring required to navigate a way through the multiple challenges and threats of the panmorphic crisis. It locates systemic therapy and training as potentially pivotal in that transformation but only if these practices widen their lens and accommodate a host of new perspectives, other voices and languages. All of the papers (including mine of 2013) acknowledge the scale of the multiple crises we face and all attempt in various ways to address it in the formulations and arguments.

The papers contribute enhanced visions of how our practice both as therapists, trainers and citizens might be transformed through a return to systemic rigour coupled with additional lenses of spirituality, inclusion and ecology. They are prologues to an as yet unwritten text that may more fully integrate the imminent demise of contemporary civilisation predicted by climate science and social and political inertia.

### **The planet as patient - does the Earth need therapy?**

The climate/biodiversity crisis is *sui generis*, a unique and unprecedented risk to most of the biosphere potentially ending human endeavour in all of its forms. It implies a conclusion of the world as we have come to know it.

It is not the death of the planet. This is vitally important to recognise as this ubiquitous mantra involves a massive displacement relocating our plight from anthropogenic ecocide to the idea that the planet as a whole is at some sort of risk. Myriad life forms and many civilisations have come and gone on Earth. We are simply part of the latest and very recent iteration. Our demise will pave the way for another configuration to emerge in a geological eyeblink of some millions of years.

The notion that we can or should “save the planet” is misplaced and avoids the reflexivity that would acknowledge our part in the mutually assured destruction that is underway. It is a serious distraction from the more urgent agenda of radical emissions reduction and reversal of biodiversity collapse.

Any planetary malaise is entirely of our making and those currently suffering and succumbing are the most vulnerable of our species and many other species besides. This process is very advanced and escalating. There are many excellent analyses of how it has come to pass, some referenced in my *Systemic Crisis* paper and many more since, especially the IPCC reports (IPCC, 2018, 2021). Very few of them fully factor in the inevitable consequences if we persist in our current economic and political practices.

The analyses in the various articles are articulate and visionary. While operating largely within existing categories of knowledge, science, language and practice, they seek to expand that envelope to incorporate transformative visions of justice, inclusion, indigenous knowledge and marginalised voices going beyond an anthropocentric fixation. All of these perspectives are vital to a transformed world order where the eco-apocalypse might be averted and ecosystemic balance restored.

In my view the shared missing elements are the prospect of apocalypse and the urgency implied by the short time remaining. To be fair, Gail says:

There is no linearity to this transition. It is not like any other change we can compare it to. It is an all-in-one explosion of Things That Must Be Acknowledged And Addressed Now.

(Simon, 2021, p. 8)

This is an unequivocal grasping of the nettle of the panmorphic crisis. It is then somewhat undone in my view by speaking of “sinking into a suspended state of systemic liminality” or hoping that stumbling blocks may trip us towards transformation. Do we have time for those luxuries? I don’t think so.

Without an acknowledgement of our vulnerability and precarity, it appears to me that the scale of transformation required and proposed in these four papers has little prospect of achievement within the short window still available to us. With that acknowledgement, the liminal space between our current rampant disorder and a world that lives within planetary boundaries may be glimpsed.

The papers in this special EcoSystemic Return issue are more than honourable attempts to address this challenge. I am presumptuous enough to declare that we all fail. They all articulate valid and valuable contributions to the task at hand - revisioning our practice and discipline while holding in mind the range of contemporary existential threats, but they continue to do so within existing clinical, academic and political parameters. A quantum shift is required. And that implies disruption, I assert. Again, to be fair, there are hints of disruptive potential - Hugh speaks of trouble-making and Imelda calls our attention to the capacity of equanimity to exert a profound perturbation at all levels, personal, professional and political.

My case is that all of us avoid the full implications of a final meltdown as expressed by @GretaThunberg in her call that the house is on fire and we should treat a crisis as a crisis.

We remain within our existing categories of the clinical (although with dramatically expanded definitions), the academic (in terms of the conventions of referencing protocols, peer review and paying homage) and the legal (not straying into the inflammatory or the subversive - although that is where we may be headed).

The knot cannot be unravelled from within its own confines. It necessarily requires the kind of observer position proposed by many in our field

building on Bateson's double description (Bateson 1979). My point is that the observer position must accommodate the full import of the current disastrous trajectory and its immediacy - the only question is whether it will be the climate crisis, biodiversity collapse, food riots, another more virulent pandemic or a cocktail of all of these that will trigger Armageddon.

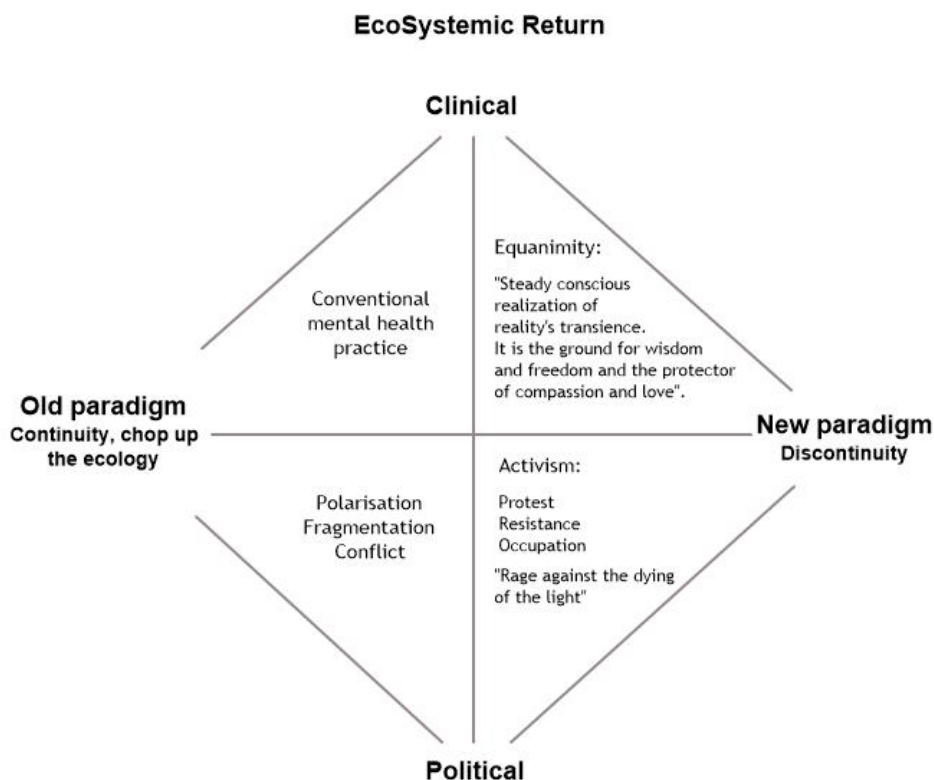
What would we say and write if we fully absorbed the scale and closeness of civilisational collapse and the possibility that we may not make it?

I am keenly aware of the potential charge of being an alarmist catastrophist. I have to accept the label but wish to argue that it is in service of change and transformation, not an end in itself.

### **A Fifth Province Diamond - the Ecosystemic Return**

In an effort to craft an addendum to my 2013 paper and address some of its limitations I have drawn on the methods and practice developed by Imelda McCarthy, Nollaig Byrne and myself over many years as a clinical research team (Kearney et al., 1989; Kearney, 2002; McCarthy, 2001; Byrne and McCarthy, 2007).

We devised a form of mapping to capture and express the key themes of the context, conversation and system in which we found ourselves. We used a diamond configuration to juxtapose (apparent) polarities in a two-dimensional frame. This then constructed or brought forth four quadrants of interaction and possibility that hopefully approximated the systemic complexity in which we found ourselves immersed. There are always a multitude of starting points and options and opposites. There is no right place to begin or route of travel. I offer a draft rough diamond below:



As a first set of polarities I opted for a crude and exaggerated distinction of old and new paradigm. This is very influenced by Bateson's work (thoroughly honoured in Hugh's paper) (Palmer, 2021) which offers a new paradigm of ecosystemic resilience that is not yet realised. His ecological vision and identification of mind and nature as a necessary unity have been validated by the passage of time. It has been reworked and enhanced but neither dismissed nor implemented. Many (most/all?) indigenous cultures lived in this way before the interventions and colonisations of our predecessors.

Most of the clinical (and political) literature remains embedded in the old paradigm of linear causality, expert discourses chopping up the ecology in the way that Bateson warned against. In spite of our best efforts to break out of that frame the constraints and inertia of commerce, culture and

practice keep us enchained. Equally, the repetitive, counterproductive and divisive methods of contemporary politics keep us fragmented, polarised and in conflict of various kinds. The momentum of the existing paradigm of consumerist, extractivist entitlement is irresistible with us all colluding to varying degrees.

My contention is that only a full absorption of the imminence and existential significance of species extinction - including our own - can catalyse a new paradigm response of greater collaboration at the level of human interaction and a return of humanity to its prior status as a part of the natural world rather than its nemesis. The Greek terms certainly offer insight and leverage. Bateson redefined *hubris* as the "lack of systemic wisdom," (Bateson, 1972) the tragic blindness that occurs when any part of an ecological system ignores the fact that it is participating in a system larger than itself, one upon which its very existence is predicated.

This is as precise a diagnosis of our predicament as I can find.

On my other axis in the diamond, I have placed "clinical" and "political". They may not appear as polarities. They are very personal options reflecting my own predilections. They are the defining categories of my adult life outside (and maybe inside?) the family. I mentioned them in the title of the 2013 paper, "The systemic crisis of climate change: clinical and political reflections".

This action now opens the four quadrants.

It is important to underscore that this is but one version. Had I drawn this diamond with my two Fifth Province colleagues, or anyone else, it would be different. It is of course much better to bring multiple minds to bear in prospecting for diamonds as a richer tapestry unfolds. This is not presented as a definitive map of anything, it is my projection and allows me some distance from the web in which I am ensnared. More hermeneutic than exegesis.

It allows me to see two pathways towards a new paradigm of practice - be it therapeutic, political or spiritual. There is the pathway of equanimity, a central concept in Imelda's paper (McCarthy, 2021), or that of activism, my

preferred medium. They are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but quite distinctive.

If I had a third axis I would have added extinction and survival as the parameters. (In the Fifth Province work we struggled with but never fully managed to achieve 3-D diamonds.)

### **The activist rant: the exigencies of ensuring survival**

This is a fight for the lives of our children. Most of us over fifty have had a good innings and will probably not see the worst ravages of climate chaos. But by continuing inaction, we consciously ensure that many of those now alive and all of those still to be born will endure an increasingly uninhabitable earth. (Chatham House, 2020; Wallace-Wells, 2019).

Therefore what follows becomes increasingly and unequivocally political. All of our existing categories of occupation and practice become secondary to the exigencies of ensuring survival. All choice to do otherwise is delusional and destructive.

Without doubt it is the overarching health risk of all human time (Lancet, 2021).

Those with particular skills in the area of human behaviour and psychology must deploy those resources to influence the radical shift required at all levels. The guilds of health workers must redefine their *modus operandi* to reflect the rapidly growing threat to the health and well-being of many millions in the short to medium term and to most of humanity in the longer-term - if there is a longer-term for humanity. I am aware that I am being strident and instructive, abandoning equanimity and balance with too much conscious purpose. Bateson would twirl in his grave.

Perhaps the activist quadrant is the epitome of the hubristic behaviour that Bateson condemned - one part of the system attempting to unilaterally influence or force a particular outcome? It is the antithesis of a recognition of the necessary unities and complementarities that make up the whole. However a paradigm of practice that fully embraces the complexities of



indigenous knowledge in terms of our relationship to the land, nature and food production and a reduction in our extractivist and consumerist preoccupations would be an informed and holistic activism with greater survival potential.

### **Planet as patient**

As already stated above but perhaps worthy of rehearsing in the domain of therapists, it is crucial to cast aside the widespread displacement meme of “saving” or “healing” the planet. The planet is in no danger whatsoever and does not require saving or therapy. It is indifferent to our presence or absence and will continue to host other life forms long after we are gone. The myth of caring for/saving the planet distracts from and disguises the reality that it is us and our civilisational conceits that are at serious, escalating and short-term risk and that we are also the perpetrators of the threats. For “us/we” in this context please read the wealthy of the West and elsewhere. Every flight, every steak and every flick of a light switch, in fact every purchase, contributes to the demise of others and compromises our collective future. Only comprehensive rationing of almost everything backed by draconian regulation now has any prospect of turning things around. I am not blind to the potentially dangerous negative consequences of such prescriptions.

It is clear that conventional politics and multilateral action by the world’s nation states is not up to the job. Incrementalism marginally delays meltdown and in many ways expedites it.

It appears that the rigorous intervention of governments and health authorities during the Covid-19 pandemic has been effective and may be the necessary template for the survival response. A radically different economics is being articulated by authors such as Kate Raworth (2017) and Jason Hickel (2021) promoting degrowth and operating within the constraints of key planetary boundaries (Rockström, 2009). This is, in effect, a new ethic of survival through a counterintuitive, “less is more” ethos, involving the deconstruction of consumerism and delegitimation of all fossil

fuel use, extraction, advertising and subsidisation. Much will grind to a halt as it did in lockdown. But health outcomes will immediately start to improve.

Isn't that what we health professionals are supposed to be about?

The crucial difference is that there is no vaccine in the pipeline, no science or tech-based quick fix that will rescue us. Either there will be a radical reordering of values and a massive collective revolution in our lifestyles by a substantial section of our developed country populations or it will be lights out for most if not all. All tinkering and partial response is merely soothing ourselves and whistling past the graveyard. We are already so far beyond safe levels on a range of critical measures as to seriously question whether a realignment of the kind I describe is viable. The pandemic response of communities, some governments, many health and other key workers suggests that in the face of a clearly understood global threat, widespread and sustained behaviour change is achievable. It requires visionary and trustworthy leadership. However, the rebound to business as usual is already well underway in travel, online purchasing and everything else. It poses an enormous threat to ecosystem viability.

Consequently, I propose that the terms of reference of every committee and the vision and mission statements of every organisation (therapeutic and otherwise) be rewritten with survival in its most basic sense as the principal and primary objective. Everything then flows from that shift.

Almost all current climate action plans are incremental attempts to retune the engine while in flight keeping the same long-haul destination on the screen. This is the core delusion. There is only one destination possible if we sustain our current trajectory - civilisational meltdown through a series of cataclysms within a generation or two at most. The underpinnings of our current economic and political operating systems are predicated on extraction leading to extinction.

Our present *raison d'être* is fundamentally flawed and must be disrupted. It is not a "reason to be" but a licence to extract and consume as if that is the purpose of life on earth. It is not just debased and destructive but also

the antithesis of a formula for flourishing as a species within a network of ecosystems. This must be the cornerstone of revised educational programmes at all levels - including for all health professionals.

I have attempted above to provide a diagnosis of the most significant health issue facing humanity and to sketch an outline of the essential prerequisites for remediation. We, the systemic psychotherapists, are a small subset of the health industry. The initiative for a radical repositioning must start somewhere. For the Ecosystemic Return to have validity and authority, those systemic therapists who claim an ecosystemic perspective must be in the vanguard of transforming their operations at every level from practice, to organisational to educational and in terms of lobbying and campaigning. Anything else is merely tinkering, potentially collusive and self-deceptive.

For me the overarching threat of extinction is primary as both a political and spiritual motivator and I find myself wanting to draw the attention of the wider public to this as a catalyst for action. I fully accept that for many this is currently and will remain a bridge too far. No amount of haranguing will persuade those who cannot contemplate an unliveable world or imagine an end to the chain of generations stretching out before us. But not admitting the scientific evidence or deluding ourselves about techno-fixes or magic bullets contributes to the escalating slide towards extinction - within a relatively small time window.

Of course, in the face of the transience of all things, it is entirely valid to choose equanimity and to cultivate balance and harmony in our daily lives, work and interactions as a primary response to the panmorphic crisis. That also moves the world towards a new paradigm of enlightened awareness and wholism. It may indeed be the better route to go and we may have no option. If only we had the time and political processes that could respect and respond to the values and practice of equanimity.

Where does ecosystemic therapy and training fit in this diamond?

Unless it includes ecology, bodywork, meditation and equanimity it will be likely to remain trapped in the upper left-hand quadrant, I suggest. Probably many of you would add other additional courses and

requirements to that list. It then becomes overloaded and blurs into training for life. But maybe that is fine, if it contributes to the continuation of the existing life forms on the planet.

To become preoccupied with survival in a benign, collaborative and activist modality strikes me as a good formula for creative disruption. It could only be enhanced by association with meditative practice informed by spiritual traditions and indigenous wisdom.

The EcoSystemic Return workshop in June included an invitation “to reclaim our relationship with subjugated Indigenous ecological wisdom and epistemologies to build a future based on both ecological and social justice”. The rupture and dislocation we are seeking to heal is of such significance and pervasiveness that it requires shedding anthropocentrism, abandoning techno-optimism, listening to the music of nature and eschewing the myth of “progress”. Otherwise we may lose everything.

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## T W E L V E

# “Think different” to prevent extinction. Connecting Gregory Bateson’s Cybernetic Epistemology with Posthumanism

Hugh Palmer

The creature that wins against its environment destroys itself

Gregory Bateson, 1972, p. 493

Agent Smith: I’d like to share a revelation that I’ve had during my time here. It came to me when I tried to classify your species and I realized that you’re not actually mammals. Every mammal on this planet instinctively develops a natural equilibrium with the surrounding environment; but you humans do not. Instead you multiply, and multiply, until every resource is consumed.

Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999

### Introduction

Gregory Bateson (1904-1980) left a stark warning to humanity; either change how we think or face extinction. He warned that three drivers are leading us to catastrophe; our reliance on ever-developing technology, population increase and the way we think. Bateson offered what he termed a “cybernetic epistemology” as an alternative way of thinking, and I will

offer some thoughts about how this might be made more accessible to help us find a route out of the panmorphic crisis described by Simon (2021) of multiple threats to our existence.

This is no mere philosophical exercise; I am not arguing about how many angels (or virus particles, for that matter) can dance on the end of a pin. If we do not change how we think in the face of the panmorphic crisis, we are finished as a species. Now is no longer the time for clever thought games; there is little time left, and our children and grandchildren will struggle to survive on a planet undergoing catastrophic climate change. Climate change is urgently pressing, yet it is inextricably linked to other aspects of social injustice. Changing the way we think might help us co-create a more just, as well as sustainable existence.

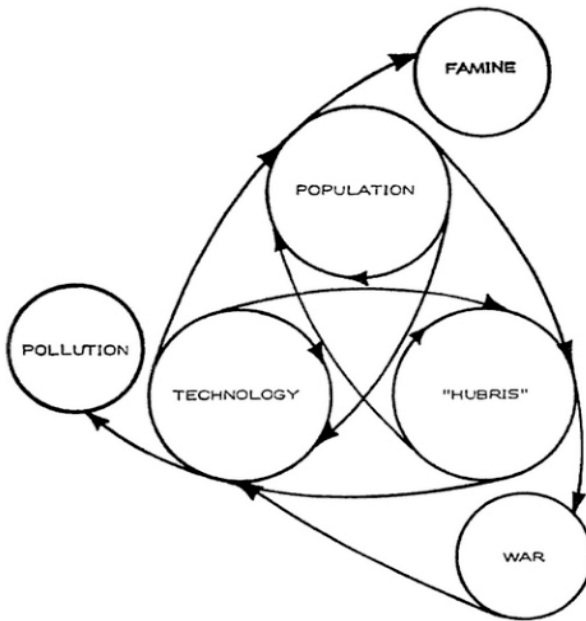
As part of the discussion, I will outline the concepts of conscious purpose, dualistic thinking, and other Batesonian ideas, including his understanding of “mind” and of schismogenesis, with the hope of encouraging the changes to our thinking that Bateson hoped we might make. I will connect with more recent posthumanist writers who have been directly or indirectly influenced by Bateson and identify common areas of concern, and I suggest that much posthumanist discourse is remarkably similar to Bateson’s cybernetic epistemology.

## **Revisiting “The Roots of Ecological Crisis”**

Bateson explained that due to the way we think (our dualistic thinking and conscious purpose), we are destroying the very ecology of which we are a part. We *are* nature, along with the rest of the planet and its other inhabitants. He frequently warned of ecological crisis in his writing, yet we still are trapped in the ways of thinking that have led to imminent disaster for our species and many others. In a 1970 paper entitled “The Roots of Ecological Crisis” (included in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Bateson, 1972), Bateson identified three root causes of the many current threats to our survival. These comprise of technological progress, population increase and what he described as errors in the thinking and attitudes of Occidental



culture (Bateson frequently used the terms “Occidental” and “Oriental” to refer to what might be broadly termed “Western” and “[Far] Eastern” thinking styles). All three of these factors interact together; population increase provokes further technological progress, and this mix of growth and progress creates anxiety which sets us in opposition to our environment. Simultaneously, technology enables further population growth and reinforces our arrogance (or hubris) towards the natural environment.



*Fig. 1 The Dynamics of Ecological Crisis, Gregory Bateson, 1972*

Bateson hoped that reversing any of these three drivers towards extinction might create change. He declined to make suggestions regarding limiting population growth or technology, but believed that changing the way we think about ourselves and our relationship to nature (wisdom instead of hubris) might offer a route to ensure the survival of our species.

## Conscious purpose and dualistic thinking

There are two broad themes that Bateson identified regarding the way humans think, and of course, these are interconnected. He described them as “conscious purpose” and “dualistic thinking”. These combine to create what Bateson frequently calls “hubris”, which is essentially pride and over-confidence, even arrogance, in one’s thinking. The concept of conscious purpose is reasonably self-explanatory; it is to seek solutions to situations without considering broader systemic implications. An example Bateson used was that of DDT (Dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane), an insecticide developed with the virtuous intention of controlling mosquitoes that spread malaria but brought unforeseen long-term ecological consequences impacting upon other creatures, including humans. This kind of purposive thinking is rife in current Western culture and is not helped by political systems where politicians have an eye on the next election and seek quick (and popular) answers to what often are complex problems.

Dualistic thinking is typified by Rene Descartes (in)famous splitting of mind and body – and Bateson comments:

If we continue to operate in terms of a Cartesian dualism of mind versus matter, we shall probably also continue to see the world in terms of God versus man; elite versus people; chosen race versus others; nation versus nation; and man versus environment. It is doubtful whether a species having both an advanced technology and this strange way of looking at its world can endure

Gregory Bateson, 1972, p. 343

Thinking non-dualistically means thinking in wholes and understanding that everything is connected. We tend to draw boundaries and frames around things, including “systems”, but these are merely conceptual tools that help us make sense of the world; tools which are undoubtedly useful, but double-edged in that they can contribute to the “othering” of groups of

people and creatures, or mask connections and relationships.

The kind of wisdom that Bateson asks us to develop is to become more humble and to accept that we cannot know everything; as the biologist, J.B.S. Haldane wrote, “Now, my own suspicion is that the universe is not only queerer than we suppose, but queerer than we *can* suppose” (1927, p.176). This wisdom means understanding that we are part of a dynamic environment that we affect and, in turn, affects us, sometimes in ways that may not immediately be apparent.

Yet, watching or reading the news or looking on social media, it is painfully evident that the attributes of wisdom and humility are scarce in public discourse. It is painful to witness the dualistic “othering” of people based upon difference; migrants, people of colour, gender, religion and so on, or the “safe” certainty (Mason 1993) of pundits who seek to blame others for complex and nuanced issues. This othering is particularly evident on social media (particularly Twitter) and in the national press in the United Kingdom, with what appears to be a broad attack on “the woke agenda”. Here is a recent example from April 2022 by a Twitter user who has over 15,000 followers, commenting upon an article in the Independent newspaper about the UK Home Secretary’s plan to criminalise English Channel refugees being at risk after peers rejected the legislation for a second time:

The Lords & @Independent are traitors & need to be removed from our lives These callous Woke bastards fail to understand or don’t care it’s Britons like the wigan rape victim who should be protected from the k’s of illegal parasites crossing the Channel.

@LittleBoats2020, 2022

It is worth remembering that the wokeness criticised above is about alertness to social injustice, particularly racial, and Ashlee, Zamora and Karikari define it as “...critical consciousness to intersecting systems of oppression” (2017, p.90).

Our culture of consumerism and the acquisition of possessions, often

disposable or with built-in obsolescence, our focus on the individual rather than communities, our overuse of the planet’s limited resources for profit and the accumulation of wealth are all symptomatic of the thinking about which Bateson warned us. Globally, we do not relate or connect with others in ways that enable all to flourish. Instead, we engage in the oppression and exploitation of humans and non-humans alike.

I believe that capitalism, particularly the version known as “neoliberalism”, that sees competition as the defining characteristic of human relations, is a destructive and toxic extension of dualistic thinking and conscious purpose. Neoliberalism is not easy to define, but Brown (2018, para 7) suggests that the term “...designates something very specific. It represents a distinctive kind of valorization and liberation of capital. It makes economics the model of everything [including the] economization of democracy.” Our collective lack of systemic wisdom has brought us to a situation that is desperately dangerous and divisive. Apart from the risk to the Earth’s climate, I wish to consider inequality of wealth and the current pandemic to illustrate Bateson’s thinking regarding a concept that he termed “schismogenesis”, as both of these issues are directly linked to hubristic thinking.

### **Schismogenesis as a symptom**

When I first began writing this paper, two white male billionaire members of the public (Richard Branson and Jeff Bezos) had financed trips for themselves to go into space. That a few humans with unbelievable wealth choose to visit space rather than care about Earth and its inhabitants - particularly during a pandemic that is costing the lives and health of so many people, especially those from Black and Asian populations and those living below the poverty line - suggests that we are getting closer to “schismogenesis”, another term coined by Gregory Bateson (1935). While I am not suggesting that redistributing the combined wealth of these two men would solve the problems of global poverty, their projects illustrate the massive divide between the rich and the poor, and schismogenesis describes a situation where a relationship breaks down, sometimes with lethal results. When “complementary” and “symmetrical” relationships are

left unchecked, the pattern of relating will escalate, leading to conflict and ultimately the breakdown of the relationship and even death.

A symmetrical relationship is one where two groups compete using similar behaviour. Examples might include boxers who are matched for weight, or in another context, the arms race of the last century where the US and USSR were heading to “mutually assured destruction” by matching or surpassing each other’s weaponry. Symmetrical relationships escalate with “more of the same” from each side — hitting harder, building more and more missiles, and so on until the relationship becomes unsustainable and one of the participants either changes behaviour or is annihilated. In contrast, a complementary relationship is where the two behaviours are not the same but complement each other. A crude example is a relationship between a sadist and a masochist, where escalating behaviours of both parties can ultimately lead to relationship breakdown or even death. Bateson proposed that most relationships maintain long term sustainability and prevent schismogenesis by correction — flipping between symmetry and complementarity — before escalation becomes too intense. It is important to note that the term correction in this sense is not about “right” or “wrong” but rather about *restabilising* a pattern oscillating dangerously.

A complementary relationship that has become unsustainable to the point of schismogenesis is the drastically widening gap between the rich and the poor.

According to the World Inequality Report 2022 (Chancel et al., 2022), “The poorest half of the global population barely owns any wealth at all, possessing just 2% of the total. In contrast, the richest 10% of the global population own 76% of all wealth”, and they add: “Since 1995, the share of global wealth possessed by billionaires has risen from 1% to over 3%. This increase was exacerbated during the COVID pandemic. In fact, 2020 marked the steepest increase in global billionaires’ share of wealth on record.”

Poverty is in this era not only experienced by “others” in distant countries. Despite being one of the wealthiest nations, food banks are commonplace here in the UK. A recent UK report notes that poverty and economic

inequality are closely linked problems that must be tackled together (Duque, McKnight, and Rucci 2021).

Alongside this disparity in wealth, we are also being led to schismogenesis by Covid-19, a virus so tiny that millions can fit on the head of a pin. A virus, an entity that is debatably not even “living”, unable to multiply unless it is inside the cells of living things, has opened wide the cracks in our social, economic and political structures. The pandemic has also highlighted our reliance upon technological solutions to complex problems, as Braidotti notes:

The COVID-19 pandemic is a man-made disaster, caused by undue interference in the ecological balance and the lives of multiple species. Paradoxically, the contagion has resulted in increased use of technology and digital mediation, as well as enhanced hopes for vaccines and biomedical solutions. It has thereby intensified humans’ reliance on the very high-tech economy of cognitive capitalism that caused the problems in the first place. (Braidotti, 2020, p. 465)

While the origins of Covid-19 are still unclear, what is known is that it, along with other viruses, was being studied at the Wuhan Institute of Virology, but it is also possible that the virus emerged due to human interference in natural habitats. Nevertheless, both the origins and development of the pandemic are arguably due to a lack of systemic wisdom.

The pandemic has highlighted that those with fewer resources are more likely to be impacted, and according to Whitehead, Taylor-Robinson, and Barr (2021, p. 372):

Covid-19 does not strike at random—mortality is much higher in elderly people, poorer groups, and ethnic minorities, and its economic effect is also unevenly distributed across the population... Exposure to infection is unequal. People in precarious, low paid, manual jobs in the caring, retail, and service sectors have been more exposed to covid-19 as their face-to-face jobs cannot be done from home. Overcrowded,

poor quality housing in densely populated areas have often added to their increased risk. Poorer communities have also been more vulnerable to severe disease once infected because of higher levels of pre-existing illness. Increased rates of infection have led to greater loss of income linked to disruptions to work and job loss, but the immediate financial pressure of covid-19 has gone far beyond this.

These discrepancies are particularly evident in countries like the United States and the United Kingdom, where government policies continue to give tax breaks to the wealthy while severely cutting public services. Many believe that the immediate responses of both the UK and US governments' administrations were to take actions that allowed the virus to spread to "weed out" older, ill and disabled people who require costly health and social care. If true, this must surely be as clear an example as any of the necropolitics that Mbembe (2003) describes.

I would argue that mortality and morbidity might have been considerably reduced in Europe and the United States had Western governments acted decisively in early 2020 and, like New Zealand, learned from countries in the East that had previously dealt with SARS outbreaks. In fairness, no Western countries had needed to confront a SARS outbreak, although this is precisely because of the efficient handling and limitation of previous viral outbreaks in the Far East.

### **Dishonesty in public discourse as a symptom**

I have become alarmed about the rise of misinformation regarding the use of vaccines and the wearing of face masks as being restrictions on individual freedoms that appear to emanate from broadly right-wing, libertarian sources. There are parallels with Donald Trump's use of the term "fake news" to discredit sources he didn't agree with and also the rise of conspiracy groups such as QAnon. Bateson (1972) identified one possible origin for the turn towards this type of dishonesty in his paper "From Versailles to Cybernetics", where he explains that the Treaty of Versailles was an attitudinal turning point because those that drew up the Treaty at

the end of World War One were dishonest. The peace terms were far more punitive towards Germany than initially indicated in those set out in the Armistice. Bateson tells us that:

It's not only that World War II was the appropriate response of a nation which had been treated in this particular way; what is more important is the fact that the demoralization of that nation was expectable from this sort of treatment. From the demoralization of Germany, we, too, became demoralized.

Bateson, 1972, p.478

Bateson went on to suggest that later conflicts were also a direct result of this dishonesty in making peace, citing the Korean and Vietnam Wars as examples. It is likely that more recent conflicts, for instance, in the Middle East, have some roots leading back to Versailles, and I would argue that in these times of turmoil and chaos, we have seen something sinister emerging; outright lies and deception from political leaders. Deceit was evident in the presidency of Donald Trump and is apparent in the United Kingdom now, with the current Conservative administration. As I write today, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has prompted much more dishonesty and disinformation; for example, the Russian Ambassador to the U.S. Anatoly Antonov said to the Russian state-run TASS news agency that reports of Russian atrocities in Bucha are “false accusations,” claiming that Ukrainian forces launched artillery fire on Bucha following the withdrawal of Russian forces (Kalatur, 2022).

This kind of dishonesty will have the effect of further diminishing public trust in political processes, leading to even more disengagement that will inevitably encourage and legitimise extreme and dangerous voices. Ted Gioia (2020, para 30) links this sort of dishonesty to Bateson's Double Bind Theory, asking “Why do politicians or shyster lawyers or spokespersons for big corporations say things they know aren't true? Well, the answer is obvious: these individuals are embedded in a larger structure that demands falsehood and, even worse, rewards liars for assimilating the party line with total conviction.” Gioia goes on to argue that these binds are pervasive and almost beyond anyone's ability to counter, and I would contend that this



further diminishes public trust and engagement in discourse. We are passively “living with” covid, climate change, corruption and conflict.

Cartesian dualism is found in the polarisation of views becoming increasingly apparent in current discourses. There are often parallels between issues; on the one hand, right-leaning commentators are more likely to support individual freedoms, for example, not wearing a mask to protect themselves or others from Covid-19 and, in the United Kingdom, to support Brexit (that was framed as primarily preventing migrants from entering the United Kingdom). In contrast, more left-leaning commentators emphasise collectivism, taking responsibility to protect others and tend to want a return of the United Kingdom to the European Union. Exchanges on social media can be extremely toxic from both sides. Perhaps having an adversarial form of government is yet another symptom of dualism. The “cut and thrust” of scoring points over opponents is valued more than collaboration and dialogue, both of which are painfully absent in many countries.

### **Capitalism as a (pathological) symptom**

Political and social structures, particularly those in the West, have developed and thrived because of the way we think. There have been considerable benefits to this, including technological advances that have made life easier and healthier for many of us. As a species, we are skilled at getting things done, but we are less adept at understanding the ecological and social consequences of our advances and actions. The concentration of wealth with the resulting concentration of influence and control to a tiny number of our species has become unsustainable, especially since the requisites to be a billionaire preclude any systemic wisdom. Simply increasing taxes on the super-rich won’t make a difference to the kind of thinking that led to this mess, as it is an intervention that comes out of the same faulty epistemology as is offering anxiety treatments to young people worried about the climate crisis (Baudon and Jachens, 2021). In terms of

global equality, implementing a global living wage system and a global system of environmental regulations might help, but as Hickel, Dorninger, Wieland and Suwandi tell us:

Such reforms are unlikely to be handed down from above, however, as they would run against the interests of geopolitical factions that benefit prodigiously from the present structure of the global economy. Structural transformation will only be achieved through political struggle from below, including by the anti-colonial and environmental justice movements that continue to fight against imperialism today.

Hickel et al., 2022, p.10

Political struggle and activism are indeed required to achieve the changes that are requisite to our survival, but so too is a change in the thinking that has contributed to the multiple crises that we face.

Capitalism - or perhaps more accurately, what Donna Haraway calls “White Capitalist Patriarchy (how may we name this scandalous Thing?)” (1988, p.592) - is a pathological result of thinking that affects all of us; the suffering may be disproportionate now, yet the wealthy will not be able to insulate themselves from the devastating impact of climate change. They may simply be the last human inhabitants on a planet that no longer can sustain us.

A cybernetic correction is bound to happen, but it might not be what we expect or want; the Earth will continue to orbit the sun regardless of whether or not humans or kin species exist upon it. If we are to survive, we must make a corrective shift from a predominantly lineal and purposive way of thinking to a more monistic and relational way. This shift might make the Earth a sustainable place for us all to live in peace.

## **Immanent mind: Towards posthumanism**

Unlike many other ecological writers, Bateson was clear that “mind” is not limited to humans and that Cartesian duality has not only disconnected us from understanding this, but set us against the environment and each other:

If you put God outside and set him vis-à-vis his creation and if you have the idea that you are created in his image, you will logically and naturally see yourself as outside and against the things around you. And as you arrogate all mind to yourself, you will see the world around you as mindless and therefore as not entitled to moral or ethical consideration. The environment will be yours to exploit . . . If this is your estimate of your relation to nature and you have an advanced technology, your likelihood of survival will be that of a snowball in hell. You will die either of the toxic by-products of your own hate, or, simply, of over population and over-grazing.

Gregory Bateson, 1972, p. 468

He goes on to elaborate that the larger mind – the ecology of which we are part - can be driven insane by our own insanity (hubristic, lineal thinking) and use of technology:

St. Paul (Galatians VI) said that “God is not mocked,” and immanent mind similarly is neither vengeful nor forgiving. It is of no use to make excuses; the immanent mind is not “mocked.”

But since our minds – and this includes our tools and actions – are only parts of the larger mind, its computations can be confused by our contradictions and confusions. Since it contains our insanity, the immanent mind is inevitably subject to possible insanity. It is in our power, with our technology, to create insanity in the larger system of which we are parts.

Gregory Bateson, 1972, p. 473

A colony of ants, the forest in which the colony lives, the continent they

exist upon, and the Earth itself are all mental systems containing individual minds within them. Bateson defines mind as “an aggregate of interacting parts or components” (Bateson, 1979, p. 92) which is immanent to a system. Therefore mind emerges from the communication of information across systems, and Bateson applies this definition of mind to practices of information processing that take place outside of the body. The concept of a bounded mind in the human, or even the notion that “mind” is solely a human feature, is thus flawed:

The individual mind is immanent but not only in the body. It is immanent also in pathways and messages outside the body; and there is a larger Mind of which the individual mind is only a sub-system. This larger Mind is comparable to God and is perhaps what some people mean by “God,” but it is still immanent in the total interconnected social system and planetary ecology

Gregory Bateson, 1972, p. 468

Rosi Braidotti, a posthumanist thinker influenced by Spinoza and Deleuze and Guattari, echoes Bateson’s view of mind in her suggestion that:

...it is important to remember that this “Life” that the posthuman subject is immanent to, is no longer “bios”, but “zoe”. Where bios is anthropocentric, zoe is non-anthropocentric and even non-anthropomorphic. Moreover, in the posthuman convergence, zoe embraces geologically and technologically bound egalitarianism, acknowledging that thinking and the capacity to produce knowledge is not the exclusive prerogative of humans alone, but is distributed across all living matter and throughout self-organizing technological networks

Braidotti, 2019, pp. 50-51

The idea of immanence is central to posthumanism, which emerged from Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy as “a multiplicity of immanent ideas that seek to reset our perspectives in order for us to come to terms with our

relations and our interconnections and thereby be more humble about ourselves” (Daigle and McDonald, 2022, p. 1).

### **Think different: Systemic wisdom and posthumanism**

Bateson said, “I think that cybernetics is the biggest bite out of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge that mankind has taken in the last 2000 years” (1972, p. 481), and Steve Jobs, influenced by Bateson (via Stewart Brand and the Whole Earth Catalog), used this idea to create the famous Apple logo. Apple also used the term “Think different” as an advertising slogan. How ironic that Apple became linked to pollution in China, poor working conditions and that their technology became known for built-in obsolescence, although the company is now making efforts to become more sustainable and eco-friendly. Perhaps they really are beginning to “think different”, but this is only a start in the changes we need to see.



Despite being an atheist, Bateson believed that religion was a symbolic way in which we could interact with the complexity and vast systems of the world in better ways. We could be humble, appreciating that we cannot know

everything. We could be in awe of the wonder of the natural world and marvel at how “mind” is apparent in the systems that comprise the world, and this is sacred. As Charlton notes:

The central concept originated by Gregory Bateson is his understanding of all the systems of the living world as being mental in kind. Each system, claims Bateson, is a mind. Such systems vary from the very small, perhaps bacterial, genetic, or cellular, to the very large: a coral reef and its inhabitants, a forest ecosystem, the mind of a nation, or the whole process of biological evolution. All these systems are interrelated and nested within larger mental systems so that there is an

ultimate interconnected whole, which is "the sacred."

Charlton, 2008, p. 29

Bateson's notion of the sacred here does not simply refer to physical nature, e.g., mountains, forests, seas and animals. Instead, it is "the integrated fabric of mental process that envelopes all our lives" (Bateson & Bateson, 1987, p. 200).

To begin to perceive the ultimate, interconnected whole is to appreciate what Bateson started to understand as sacred, not something with which to tinker. He asked us to have the humility to know that we never will be able to fully comprehend the totality of the universe, of the complex relationships between living and non-living entities. We are part of a sacred whole; we are part of the environment, and what we do to the environment will also impact upon us, sometimes in ways we could never have predicted. This is not just systemic thinking; it also very much aligns with posthumanist thought, as Karen Barad tells us:

Posthumanism, as I intend it here, is not calibrated to the human; on the contrary, it is about taking issue with human exceptionalism while being accountable for the role we play in the differential constitution and differential positioning of the human among other creatures (both living and nonliving). [...] Posthumanism doesn't presume the separateness of any-'thing,' let alone the alleged spatial, ontological, and epistemological distinction that sets humans apart.

Barad, 2007, p. 139

Posthumanism challenges the same assumption that somehow humanity is separate from the rest of the universe as did Bateson; however, posthumanism also considers of how human technological advances might bypass Darwinian natural selection as the prime driver of genesis. I think that Bateson would struggle with this aspect of posthumanism, as he argued that technological advances (that emerge from our dualistic

thinking) along with our hubris create problems rather than solutions, although Thomsen and Wamberg (2020) do suggest that there is a something of a split in posthuman thought between a focus upon technological, body-centred optimism and environment-directed pessimism:

Indeed, one of the most divisive questions in this expanded field of posthumanism has emerged between the “properly” posthuman—that is, the possibility of technology-aided development that would result in cyborgs, genetically altered humans, or even an artificial intelligence that wholly outstrips humans—and, on the other hand, a less specific post-anthropocentric understanding of the world that stretches from theorizing on the Anthropocene to diverse branches of new materialism, such as speculative realism and a generalized vitalism.

Thomsen & Wamberg, 2020, p. 2

It is commonly held that posthumanism emerged from Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy, for example, Braidotti (2022, p. 23) states her conviction that “both Deleuze and Guattari, as profoundly anti-humanist and post-anthropocentric thinkers, offer a significant new approach to the discussions on naturalism, the environment, ecological justice and the posthuman”. However, it is implausible that they would or could have developed many of their ideas without Bateson. Shaw (2015) has gone so far as to argue that Bateson was not just a productive source of concepts but was also a significant influence on the pair’s writing, and notes that this impact is barely acknowledged by Deleuze and Guattari, and I would add, nor by subsequent thinkers, too. Without any doubt, Bateson was a crucial precursor to posthumanism, and as I have argued, his thinking is still acutely relevant to us in these uncertain times. At this point, it is worth remembering Bateson was not alone in his revolutionary ecological thinking in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Influenced by Gandhi and Spinoza, the Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss felt that there must be a shift away from human-centred anthropocentrism to an ecocentrism, a “Deep Ecology” in

which every living thing is seen as having inherent value. He argued that humans are part of nature rather than superior and apart from it and, therefore, must protect all life on Earth as they would protect their family or self (Næss, 2008). Naess contrasted Deep Ecology with Shallow Ecology, which centres human beings as somehow more important than any other creatures or entities. Electric cars, greenwashing and so on might be thought of as Shallow Ecology. Another important contribution of Næss (1989) was the concept of Ecosophy, which (in my understanding) is an ecologically aware personal epistemology that sees all living creatures and entities as being of value. In effect, Ecosophy is Deep Ecology articulated in our thoughts and behaviour and is remarkably similar to Bateson’s cybernetic epistemology. It is interesting to note that Guattari (2000) also used the term “ecosophy” to link environmental ecology to social ecology and to mental ecology.

## **Concluding thoughts**

I have argued that dualistic, purposive thinking has led humanity to multiple crises. To live sustainably, to survive, we need to adopt a more cybernetic or systemic way of thinking about ourselves, others and the world. At the same time, I am mindful of Bateson’s ethical position, best illustrated by Jay Haley, who wrote in a personal letter to David Lipsett, one of Bateson’s biographers that:

[Bateson] didn’t like power. He didn’t even like the word ... anybody who said, “I’m going to change this person”. If they said, “I will offer this person some ideas, and if they change, it’s up to them,” then Gregory would have no trouble with them. But if you take responsibility for changing people, then you would have a problem ... Any influence outside the person’s range is odious to him. Any indirect manipulation is [also] out of the question.

Lipset, 1982, p. 226



Any thought of manipulating people to think differently, to embrace a non-dualistic epistemology -even to save lives - would be antithetical to the kind of epistemology Bateson proposed. This leaves us with the problem of identifying how we might invite, rather than coerce, others to think differently and thus promote cybernetic thinking that might lead to actions that help avert catastrophe. There are no easy answers to this problem. However, there are some promising beginnings, for example, the Bateson Institute's work in promoting Warm Data Labs (<https://batesoninstitute.org/warm-data-labs/>), Gail Simon's work in developing Lenticular Futures and Game B (<https://www.game-b.org/>), all of which are promoting systemic thinking and change.

Following a tweet of mine going viral (Palmer, 2022) with over 32,000 likes, nearly 6,000 retweets and lots of engagement, including TV interviews, I am currently exploring the use of Twitter as a platform for activism and finding myself part of a growing community of sorts; a collective that includes therapists, healthcare professionals, leadership consultants, climate scientists and activists and artists. I've found that adding photographs to posts increases engagement, and I try to use messages that invite others to think systemically.

It has been heartening to see others engaging with my tweets, but the reality is that, so far, my efforts probably have had little impact. I have also been engaging with people in other ways, offering webinars and workshops to systemic colleagues in the UK and abroad, and I am an active member of an ecosystemic psychotherapy group that has proved to be an inspiring and validating community that is now affiliated with Lenticular Futures (see the link above). In terms of my practice, I tend to think of clients and colleagues in the same way as I think of all living creatures and entities; as kin. We are all connected, a family of sorts, and to treat others as kin is to treat them with kindness.

However, the urgency of the societal changes required to prevent catastrophe leaves me with more questions. To engender systemic change in a congruently systemic way (non-coercive, neutral and so on) will require time, and little time is left. Is it enough to educate others, or could we think

about implementing ecological, non-dualistic epistemology locally in our own lives and practices? Following in Bateson’s footsteps and considering his view of the immanence of mind, perhaps it is through both our thoughts and actions that we can make a difference. I hope so.

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# BIOGRAPHIES

## **Andreas Breden**

Growing up in the middle of Norway surrounded by high mountains and deep valleys, I have always had a strong connection to nature. After starting on a doctorate study in the UK, I caught interest in eco-systemic thinking and am particularly interested in building a bridge between systemic ideas and Norwegian eco-philosophy. Inspired by Arne Naess, I am working on my own eco-sophy and find it very interesting to inquire into how my ethics relates to the biosphere. When in nature with others, hiking in the mountains, skiing or simply foraging mushrooms, I tend to build stronger relationships with them than in other contexts. This has inspired me to bring clients out into nature, often assisted with my dog brother as a support for the clients. I experience my connection to nature stronger when I'm watching and listening to water or when I am by a campfire. These experiences make me speed down, it's like slowing down, but faster. I believe most of us need to speed down and to re-establish, re-discover or re-learn to connect with nature and to cut down on our consumption to live better lives. And when I say most of us, I recognize that we don't live in an equal world, and that those of us who are privileged can learn a lot from those who are not.

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## **Chiara Santin**

I am a nature lover, a systemic family psychotherapist, supervisor and trainer, Director of Family Therapy Services and Rainbow CommUnity Projects CIC. I am white Italian, middle- aged woman, educated to Master level. My cultural roots are in the Italian Alps where I was born. I have been living on the Sussex Coast, Brighton for 25 years. After 10 years in Social Care, I now work as an independent therapist, providing tailor-made therapeutic interventions for adoptive families (12 years). Since 2019 I have developed a number of nature-based community projects e.g. multicultural ecotherapy walks, ecotherapy group programmes for vulnerable adults and ecotherapy for mental health in deprived areas of Brighton. I have been a systemic lecturer and tutor for 12 years and I have published several articles on Context, Human Systems and Murmurations and presented at national and international conferences. I am passionate about developing EcoSystemic therapy,

based on my commitment to social justice, ethical practice, creativity, and diversity. I have been developing systemic ideas about rewilding systemic practice, recognising the power of nature, re-positioning us as guests and custodians of our Planet. I see myself as an activists-therapist with a socio- political responsibility to respond to the current ecological crisis, climate change and likely social collapse. I am committed to depathologising, decolonising and challenging the current mental health systems and traditional ways of delivering therapy, to offer ethical and innovative practices and meet the increasing need for mental health support and community building.

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### **Erik van der Elst**

I am Erik van der Elst and I have my own private practice in The Netherlands as a systemic family- and couple therapist. From origin I am a drama therapist. In my work I try to involve the whole body and what surrounds us because I strongly believe and experience that this is all connected and that there, like Bateson said, 'is not such a thing as a thing'. I always find it difficult to find words to describe what the most important fundament or base of me standing in my work is. When I say it is God than I'm always afraid that people will have other associations than what I mean to say. Maybe when I say that I try to open up to His love that connect us all. This is the most important and essential force in what I try to do. So this is why I start every day with a prayer if I may be a mirror of His love, an open window where His light can shine through on other people around me. That His hands may carry and bless through my hands. So that light, love and real connection can help to heal. And of course I do not always succeed in opening myself up for this. I strongly believe that there is not such thing as therapists and patients. I think that healing happens when there is connection and encounter. That is what I try to do.

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### **Gail Simon**

I'm a systemic writer, researcher and therapist. I've been involved in a number of trainings in the UK as a tutor and course organiser. I enjoyed ten years of leading the Professional Doctorate in Systemic Practice at the University of Bedfordshire until 2022. My therapy home is *The Pink Practice*, a LGBTQIA+ systemic therapy practice in the UK which I co-founded with Gwyn Whitfield in 1990. In 2014, I founded *Everything is Connected Press* which is now a community interest

company supporting *Murmurations: Journal of Transformative Systemic Practice* co-founded by Elizabeth Day, Birgitte Pedersen and me in 2016. I am most at home in the countryside exploring old paths, looking for clues of how people live in landscape, and making connections with systemic ideas.

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### **Hugh Palmer**

I'm a systemic practitioner and writer influenced by social constructionist, dialogic and more recent posthuman theories and practices. After many years working in Higher Education and the NHS, I work independently. Much of my recent clinical work has been with a local authority, with families who have adopted children and support foster parents and staff who work with looked after children. I have a particular interest in trauma, bereavement and the therapeutic relationship. A main love is in Gregory Bateson's work, leading me to write several papers focused upon the continuing relevance of Bateson's thinking, culminating in a PhD by publication based upon some of these publications. This has deeply influenced my thinking about ecology and how all of us can take a greater responsibility in caring for the environment that we are part of ourselves.

<https://hugh-palmer-therapy.com>

### **Imelda McCarthy**

In this chapter I outline, in part, my own systemic journey of engagements in and away from a more natured inclusion in my life and work. Looking back, I can see that from childhood my life was filled with sustainability practices in that I had parents who planted much of our food and never threw away anything that might be useful in the future. In my team, the Fifth Province Associates, one was a farmer's daughter and the other was an ecological and climate activist. Also my colleagues and friends in the EcoSystemic group we call, 'Ariadne's Thread' have all facilitated me to re-member experiences around nature practices, the possibilities for love and colonisation in my work, the co-creation of an indigenous Irish therapy practice and my experiences of a deep spiritual practice which I have seen over and over again to foster resilience and equanimity not only in my own life but also in the lives of clients and those in a Sangha I facilitate. Right now, we are in a time of "in between" the old world and a world not yet. What do we call it? I call it a Fifth Province – a space between, a liminal space and imaginal space. I feel it is a time for going within and of looking beyond our familiar Western ways



of seeing, thinking and doing. This is my start and of imagining greater equanimity in our world moving forward, if there is a future...?

<https://imeldamccarthy.com>

### **Julia Jude**

I'm a passionate advocate for decolonising systemic practice, theory and inquiry.

At the heart of my work lies a commitment to exploring the 'minor' – making connections between seemingly unrelated ideas and challenging entrenched preconceptions. I believe that a decolonising responsive curriculum is not just important, but imperative for resonating with the experiences of historically marginalised communities. My approach to these discussions is deeply collaborative, engaging diverse mediums such as dialogue, performance, and personal narrative to enhance understanding and connection. Central to my practice is the use of improvisation and media as alternative pathways that diverge from established social norms and structures.

Beyond the confines of traditional academia, I extend my inquiry to intersect with pressing global issues, particularly the ecological crisis. I argue that this crisis is intrinsically linked to the legacy of colonialism, resulting in othering, inequality, and the degradation of both human and non-human lives.

A pivotal aspect of my practice is my call to shift away from the refusal of the 'I' towards more inclusive and holistic ways of thinking. I challenge normative platforms, inviting our ecological neighbours to participate in the dialogue and envisioning alternative modes of interaction that resist othering and promote equality.

My academic journey is underscored by a deep engagement with Caribbean, African American, indigenous, and Global South cultural histories. Drawing from the rich traditions of black radicalism, feminist theory, indigenous knowledge systems, critical racial and ethnic studies, I push the boundaries of contemporary thought and encourage critical reflection on externally imposed standards. More importantly, I envision knowledge and existence beyond the constraints of European and Colonial conceptions of humanity.

In addition, I am a systemic therapist, supervisor, tutor, artist, filmmaker, and advocate for social justice and equality. Through this plurality of roles, I'm committed to creating spaces for doing difference differently without separation

and participating in practices that are drawn to inquiry around what it means to live in the places we live and labour with human and non-human.

### **Justine van Lawick**

As a child I rescued plants and talked with dogs and horses

As a student I became a political activist

As a psychologist I was fascinated by family therapy

I found my professional home in systemic and dialogical practices

I co-founded the Lorentzhuis (1984) in Haarlem, the Netherlands, to create a healthy

context for these practices

I found pleasure in doing therapies, teaching, writing, researching and developing the

field, always with colleagues

To resist high conflict and violence in families always were and are in my attention

Children are with me and in me

My doctorate research on practices of hope opened new landscapes

I am worried about the long-term effects of the capitalist and neo liberalist system and

the related anthropocentrism that created multiple devastating crises in the world

I find myself rescuing plants again

<https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Justine-Lawick>

### **Leah Salter**

I am a systemic, social constructionist practitioner working in multiple contexts in the UK - as a systemic psychotherapist and supervisor in the NHS Wales; as a doctoral supervisor at the University of Bedfordshire's Professional Doctorate in Systemic Practice and as a teacher and Co-Director for the Centre of Systemic Studies, home of The Family Institute Wales. I have worked in coalfield sites and valleys communities most of my working life. I live on the coast in South Wales, a landscape/seascape where I feel most at home- walking, swimming, exploring coastal terrain- though the mountains and hillsides often call me. I have research

interests in transmaterial worlding, EcoSystemic practices, Celtic, Indigenous and personal storytelling, narrative group work, motherhood, research as resistance, solidarity practices and action research with human and beyond human participants. I am co-editor for Murmurations: Journal of Transformative Systemic Practice.

<https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Leah-Salter-3>

### **Lisen Kebbe**

My work has quite a wide focus, on individuals, families, working groups and with a special focus on succession in family business. As a systemic therapist my aim is to find my clients strengths and ways to go on in all their different lives. What holds my work together is the living on Gotland, where most of my work is done. On this island we are all dependent on what happens here. Everyone is aware of the history, nature, future and what happens to the island and is affected of the whole situation. So the colonial type plunder by the multinational company Heidelberg Minerals Cement who is digging out enormous parts of the lime stone ground and threatening our ground water and of course polluting the air. And then recently the growing of the military plant, in relation to the war in Ukraine. American bases and cooperation with NATO are likewise invading our island without considering the people living here. We are just a strategic very important spot that is used. All of this is the part of our EcoSystemic world that our lives are tangled in.

<https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Lisen-Kebbe>

### **Lorna Edwards**

I am a systemic, social constructionist, independent psychotherapist and supervisor living in the South Wales Valleys. I know that caring for planet Earth and working for social justice is the only way forward - as an alternative to our previously deluded (anthropocene centred/human dominated) way of thinking/acting. And that we can do this through community connection/action - both local and virtual. I offer eco-systemic workshops for colleagues, therapy sessions for clients and walks in nature for the post mining community in which I live.

**Mark Huhnen**

I grew up in rural Germany where I experienced every year how humans arrogantly intervened with nature, when some farmers over-fertilised their fields for short term profit, turning the whole region into a stinking mess. When I started studying towards becoming a family therapist, particularly Bateson's ideas about human arrogance and hubris resonated with me and the need to see oneself as part of a wider system that we cannot never fully understand and much less control. Living now in London and working as a family therapist, trainer and coach, I am very interested in flattening all sorts of hierarchies between and among people and other entities.

<https://systemark.co.uk>

**Phil Kearney**

I am one of the first family therapists in Ireland having completed a Masters in Family Therapy in Philadelphia in 1980. Together with Dr Ed McHale, I founded the Clanwilliam Institute in Dublin in 1982. It recently celebrated its 40th anniversary. I was also a member of the Fifth Province Associates clinical research team together with Dr Imelda McCarthy and Dr Nollaig Byrne. Alongside my work as a psychotherapy pioneer, I was and remain a political and environmental activist helping to found the Irish Green Party in the early 1980s. Having established the Institute as a premier training centre with an MSc in systemic psychotherapy in the mid-noughties, I retired from clinical practice and concentrated on environmental activism with a strong focus on climate breakdown. I have been involved in An Taisce - The National Trust for Ireland for the past decade establishing a climate committee and serving as chair of the An Taisce Board for the past four years. I'm a part-time farmer with a focus on forestry, growing vegetables, biodiversity restoration and rewilding.

<https://ie.linkedin.com/in/philkearney1>

**Ray Becvar**

Systems (cybernetics) theory has been the primary paradigm for my personal life and my life in academia. Systems theory is a very simple concept, but it appears complicated relative to prevailing worldviews in which the individual is the primary unit of analysis. It offers a way of knowing - epistemology and a way of living.. Fundamentally, it is amoral, a-aesthetic, and apolitical which stand in contrast to

traditional worldviews which reflect attempts to solve problems that the ideology created. It was in a seminar on systems theory that my friend and colleague Stan Amaladas and I met. Viewed through the lens of systems theory, our relationship is recursive and reciprocal--neither of us seeks to prevail. At first, I was the teacher, but teaching well requires learning from students. I learned from Stan's depth of knowledge and experience in life. Throughout our relationship each of became more than we were separately. Our collaboration on this project reflects this respect. This article reflects the different resources that we brought to the project. We sought to view the pandemic through the lens of systems theory rather than the linear-causal disease model. Alan Watts noted that problems that remain insoluble should be suspected as asking the wrong questions. We raised different questions. We suggested that disease is not an anomaly in a totally conjoined universe. Everything in the universe deserves respect-and with respect a different kind of relationship evolves. This article evolved out of our respect for each other.

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/ray-becvar-a5602643>

### **Roger Duncan**

I am a Systemic Family Therapist, supervisor, and author. I originally studied biology and later trained as a Waldorf teacher and Wilderness rites of passage guide with The School of Lost Borders before becoming a Systemic Family Therapist. I was one of the pioneer tutors of the Ruskin Mill Education Trust and worked outdoors with adolescents with complex behaviours for over 10 years, and was involved in the development of innovative therapeutic education programmes for adolescents including a experiential therapist educational woodland management curriculum and a wilderness experience programme. I am currently working with adolescents within the Child and Adolescent Health Service (CAMHS) within the NHS in the UK and also in private practice. I have been exploring nature-based practice for more than 30 years and I write and lecture internationally on EcoSystemic approaches to nature and mental health. My book 'Nature in Mind, systemic thinking and imagination in ecopsychology and mental health' was published by Routledge. I was the creator and director of the Confer Diploma 'Eco-psychotherapy and the Emerging Adolescent Mind - A Systemic Integration of our Relationship with Nature into Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy Practice' and the Confer Eco Psychotherapy webinar 'Reclaiming our Indigenous Relationship with Nature. An introduction to the Systemic Integration of Nature into Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy Practice'.

<https://www.kithandkintherapy.com>

**Stan Amaladas**

Ray Becvar's and my chapter is an outcome of a storied relationship between us over the last 23 years. In my mind, heart, and soul, three aspects deserve mention. First, I met Ray when he was my professor in a systems-thinking seminar within the circumstance of a doctoral management and leadership program that was dominated by instrumental and transactional thinking. Systems-thinking inspired me to want 'more.' Second, over time, our relationship transformed from professor-student to seeing and accepting ourselves as friends. If, as Aristotle noted, friendship requires each person to impress upon the other that he is worthy of affection, and that each person has won the other's confidence, then, our transformed relationship, based on intellectual curiosity, trust and reciprocity, deserves the name "friend." Finally, we continue to stay intellectually connected because we both share a deep passion for the place and power of stories in our lives and in our capacity to transcend storied conditions that limit growth and change. In sharing our stories, we were able to mutually celebrate our joys and bear the burden of our afflictions. The writing of this chapter was an opportunity to talk about the problem of understanding our relationship with our personal afflictions, and our understanding of our understanding of what it means to be afflicted. The 'meta' story of my biography is that this chapter is a result of eco-systemic-thinking, friendship, and an openness in sharing our stories.

<https://ca.linkedin.com/in/stan-amaladas-a1029ba6>

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