## Editorial

# Entanglements:

## Working with the Invisible Dimension of Systems Transformation

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Crafting an Editorial is not a trivial undertaking. Rather, it is a task of deliberation and synthesis which causes us, as an Editorial Team, to reflect on the entanglements of our own *becoming,* as individuals and a team, with and alongside the journal's evolution. As we take pause and look back on the archives of our past issues, a pattern emerges: we see a collectively written script that weaves contemporary and poignant analysis, global context, and thematic exploration, all serving to guide readers in their own inner and outer work, whilst also delineating and articulating further the contours of the emergent, evolving praxis of Awareness-Based Systems Change.

In a previous Editorial, we wrote, "The complexity and multi-dimensionality of our existence is at odds with the way the human mind has been taught and learned to behave" (Koenig et al., 2022, p. 2). This feeling of being at odds with a complex and multi-dimensional reality has only intensified since that time. In his blog highlighting the way in which pervasive, accelerating crises have come to interact, Tooze (2022) writes, "What was once a relatively legible map has become a tangled mess" (para 4). Perhaps the better term for it is "intra-act"—a term coined by Barad (2007). Through it, she captures the mutual constitution of entangled agencies, both human and non-human, which in the context of our

polycrisis ridden situation deeply challenges our ability to cope, and thus threatens our ability to be in contact with a shared reality and shared sense of that which wants to break through. Rosi Braidotti (2019) eloquently summarizes this collective sentiment:

> Fatigue and fear overlap and accumulate to produce a feeling of utter impotence. This closing down of the horizon of possible actions is the symptom of negativity of our times. Negativity expresses itself in a (...) dimming of a sense of possibility, which triggers a systemic fragmentation and a shattering of our relational capacity. This weakening of the desire to act often feeds an appeal to external powers to take over the tasks of organizing how to live our lives. This negativity ultimately brings about a shrinking of our ability to take *in* and *on* the world that we are in, simply because it hurts too much. (emphasis in original, p. 179)

We feel these entanglements manifest viscerally in our individual and collective reactions to the resurgence of escalating conflict in Israel/Palestine, where entrenched division and collective trauma has sparked new cycles of revenge and retribution. In the thick of it all, the polarizing force of this and other conflicts not only forges divisions between nations but also fractures alliances within movements dedicated to regenerative and peace-supporting causes. From an Awareness-Based Systems Change perspective, these fractures underscore the profound impact of the relational dimension in collaborative systems change endeavors.

A recent opinion video showcased in the New York Times (Goldbaum et al., 2023) aptly portrays social media's role in this polarization, noting its algorithmic tendency to simplify complex issues into binary choices, effectively becoming a place "where nuance goes to die" (Goldbaum et al., 2023, 3:30). This highlights the need for careful consideration of technological advancements, like artificial intelligence, as both transformative and potentially divisive tools. While most of us are still grappling with the societal impacts of these technologies, most would agree: annihilating the 'other' is not a solution. Yet, this understanding does not shape what's happening collectively now. Humberto Maturana's concept of "the legitimate other" (Maturana, 1988) seems crucial in this context. Embracing this concept requires us to respect different realities and be curious about their origins, rather than seeing them as threats. It's a perspective that calls for reconciliation that begins within, acknowledging *the other that resides in each of us*, which, if not addressed, perpetuates the external and internal patterns that re-produce conflict.

To break free from this deadlock, we must overcome the barriers that confine us. In his book, *Crack Capitalism*, John Holloway (2010) writes "The need for a lasting and radical reorganization of society is more urgent than ever, but we can only get there if we recognize, create, expand and multiply all kinds of ruptures in the structure of power" (p. 42, translated from the German version). Equally, Awareness-Based Systems Change is not about *breaking down* but about

*transcending and opening up* into the fissures and ruptures—the cracks, not just in a physical or political sense but also in the context of different ways of thinking that segment humanity into isolated enclaves of thought and identity. In order to do that it becomes necessary to not only rethink, but also reimagine, the intellectual, epistemological, and ontological foundations of our civilization as well as our own make-up as individuals. Such decolonializing endeavors do not simply involve intellectual work, but also *affective* work and *relational* work which "entails mending broken relationships in ways that honor the integrity of this difficult process by focus on the development of deep respect, reciprocity, trust, and consent rather than prioritizing the end or outcome in transactional ways" (Stein et al., 2021, p. 7).

At the heart of Awareness-Based Systems Change lies a profound recognition of the complex and mostly invisible interconnectedness of our actions, thoughts, and the built and natural (eco-)systems we inhabit. Cultural anthropologist Marilyn Strathern's (1995) profound insight resonates strongly here: in order to understand what is happening beneath the surface of the unit of any analysis, neither the individual nor the system in isolation is sufficient but rather, it is the web of relationships that extends beyond the human sphere that sheds light on lived phenomena. When we extend this understanding to Awareness-Based Systems Change, where the unit of analysis—and intervention—is systemic change, the implication is that change at any scale is initiated, supported and sustained by changed relationships.

Change of this nature, relational change, can never be mandated let alone managed. It is through attending and connecting the quality of our inner-outer relationships that we are able to create the conditions—an open mind, open heart, and open will—for the relational changes that undergird systems change. This demands approaches that lean away from static, pre-determined future outcomes into creative, embodied and dynamic processes, that emphasize connection to a collective sense of purpose actualized in the present moment. The curated articles in this issue highlight such approaches and their potential for activating and supporting systemic change.

This issue is a call for conscious engagement with the complexities of our systems, a call to make visible the invisible and a call to create pathways that enable us to sense into collective purpose and shape a future in resonance with it. We see the evolution of our journal as a microcosm of this call in its own right as it brings together and connects a confluence of actors and efforts already seeding the future. Most importantly, as we read and work with the contributions to this issue we hear a dialogue among diverse voices engaging in, and experimenting with, individual and collective ways of sense-and world-making as well as *being in* the world.

Circling back to the beginning of this Editorial, we confront our intense connection with the world—a connection that often leaves us feeling overwhelmed and numb. Yet, it's precisely in this state of overwhelming entanglement that we find the urgency to re-examine and reshape the systems

that define our reality. This process involves recognizing the intricate web of relationships we are part of and the critical need for regenerative systemic decolonization. It's a journey of transforming our vulnerabilities into strengths, a theme that Rosi Braidotti (2019) captures compellingly:

> Accepting one's vulnerability is the starting point for a process of transforming, it collectively and socially, expresses a sort of epistemological humility that reiterates the never ending nature of the process of becoming. It defends community-based experiments to transform the negative conditions and states into affirmative alternatives. It is a praxis that promotes action and knowledge out of negativity and pain. This pro-active activism manifests the living being's shared ability to actualize and potentiate different possibilities. This transformative energy is the core of affirmative ethics. (p. 175)

We, ourselves, are inspired, challenged and humbled by the work, thought and praxis represented in this issue.

## Articles in This Issue

This sixth issue is the most extensive of all our issues, with more submissions and more accepted articles than ever before. Time will tell whether this is a blip in the journey or a reflection of the continued maturation and increasing recognition of our journal. We feel optimistic: just before the release of this issue, we reached the milestone of more than 100,000 abstract and article reads, and in less than three years since its inception JASC articles, collectively, have already been cited almost two-hundred times.

At the beginning of this Editorial we wrote about the journal's co-evolution, to which this issue is testament: we are delighted to introduce the first article of our new format co-curated and developed by our new supporting editor Fiona McKenzie together with Editorial Core Team member Megan Seneque. This new section of the Journal is entitled *Innovations in Praxis*. It serves as yet another expression of the journal's intention "that we cannot democratize the ´know-how´ that underlies this work until we can illuminate and articulate what is happening in deep systems change and how it happens, and then make that knowledge widely available" (Koenig et al., 2021, p. 2). The new format is intended to foster a space for practitioners who want to share their work in an explorative and authentic way, but are not seeking a standard and peer-reviewed journal paper submission. This section will showcase stories of change that recognize and link to the relational field and the context in which new practices are being initiated. In utilizing the term *Praxis* we emphasize 'change in action,' the ever evolving practical application of concepts and ideas in the real world. Praxis constantly evolves through *the doing* and reflexivity in relation to the doing, just as it influences the doer (Freire, 1968). We distinguish this from 'practice' which tends to imply established or repeatable routines or acts. With

praxis, we welcome the inevitable complexity and messiness of learning and transformation.

This issue opens with a *Commentary from the Field*, from our newest Editorial Board member Injairu Kulundu-Bolus. In her lyrical thought piece "On Regenerative African Futures: Sovereignty, Belonging, Death and Forgiveness as Fertile Paradoxes for Decolonial Soul Work," she explores into the dynamic complexities of African futures. Through a sensorial engagement with the paradoxes that often hinder progress, Kulundu-Bolus challenges the binary thinking that limits our capacity for radical transformation. Reflecting on the collaborative journey at Rhodes University's Environmental Learning Research Centre, this Commentary argues for a soulful grounding to navigate and embrace the paradoxical realities of sovereignty, belonging, death, and forgiveness. It proposes that understanding and integrating these elements can create a sanctuary for expansive personal and communal growth, and lays the groundwork for a living decolonial project that transgresses outdated norms and fosters creative nourishment for emerging futures. As an Editorial Team, we experience Kulundu-Bolus's commentary as an embodiment of the core tenets of Awareness-Based Systems Change.

This issue features our second *Invited Article*, an occasional format that allows us to showcase pathbreakers in the field whose writing represents a significant body of work developed over time and across multiple contexts. In his article, "Radical Collaboration to Transform Social Systems: Moving Forward Together with Love, Power, and Justice," Adam Kahane takes the readers on a three-decade journey of transformative practice and theory, in which he articulates an innovative approach to social change. Drawing from diverse stakeholder experiences across various international contexts, this piece narrates the evolution of radical collaboration. This method seeks not just to reform but to fundamentally transform social systems by harnessing the universal human drives of love, power, and justice, navigating through social complexities with the intent to enact swift, scalable, and equitable change. With a perspective that embraces conflict and experimentation, this approach serves as a compass rather than a prescriptive route, offering a strategic map for understanding and moving within our social landscape towards collective transformation.

This issue includes six original *Peer-Reviewed Articles* in total. The first, "The MAP to Compassion: A Systems-Based Model of Human Needs," by Deborah Heifetz was initially inspired by her fieldwork in Israeli-Palestinian peace processes and could not be more timely or necessary. In her article, she introduces the Human Needs Map, a diagnostic tool derived from decades of Praxis, designed to decipher the complex interplay of human needs and emotions that often disrupt relationships and incite conflict. This systemic model illuminates our protective instincts, demonstrating how unmet needs and emotions dynamically interact, influence behavior, and can perpetuate conflict. By providing a language to articulate the interconnectedness of needs and emotions, the model offers new pathways to understanding, healing, and

narrative transformation. Heifetz draws attention to the model's broader implications for designing societal and cultural structures that more effectively consider human needs and emotions, offering insights into peacebuilding and conflict resolution, and applying it first-hand to the deadlocked context of Israeli-Palestinian relations.

In his seminal piece "Social Poetry: Introduction to Foundations and Tools," John Stubley opens us to an approach to social arts both theoretically derived and embedded within a lineage of praxis. Through this piece, Stubley offers a deep dive into the transformative power of the human imagination in understanding and shaping social realities. He proposes that by developing our capacity to perceive the dynamic interrelationships and growth of social phenomena through metaphor and conscious image perception, we can align our cognition with the living processes of society and nature. The concept of Social Poetry, as explored in the article, moves beyond traditional ideologies and aims to strike a balance between seeing social phenomena as purely external or entirely human-created and viewing it as internally and socially constructed. This novel approach, borrowing from Goethean phenomenology, seeks to reveal the inherent theories within phenomena, offering a holistic vision of social unity that can inform and inspire the responsible evolution of civilization. More than just an intellectual project, the article also offers numerous concrete and practical starting points for those wishing to put this work into practice.

Olen Gunnlaugson in his article "Advancing the Field of Presencing: Five Principles to Inform the Development of Emerging Presencing Approaches" proposes a development in the field of presencing research that moves beyond the established and widely-used Theory U framework. Introducing the concept of Emerging Presencing Approaches (EPAs) and drawing insights and discoveries unearthed from stewarding the lineage of Dynamic Presencing, Gunnlaugson presents five foundational principles aimed at nurturing a more diverse, trans-disciplinary exploration of presencing. These principles are designed to embrace different epistemological, ontological, and teleological perspectives, as well as to deepen the embodied consciousness within presencing practitioners. This article serves as a call to broaden the conversation around presencing, inviting new insights and methodologies that could enrich the mastery and application of presencing in both personal and professional realms. Gunnlaugson's work invites practitioners to embrace the liminality of presencing and to discover deeper insights that emerge from a more profound engagement with the 'U' process.

Lukas Hermann's article, "A Deep Dive into Social Field Shifts: Examining Field Autonomy and Malleability During an Awareness-Based Change Program," utilizes the concept of a social field framework recently developed by Pomeroy and Hermann (2023). The study investigates how social fields—that are characterized by a certain degree of autonomy that sustains interaction patterns—can be influenced and transformed. Through longitudinal research conducted in three schools participating in an awareness-based change program, Hermann illustrates the power of relational awareness to disrupt entrenched

cycles of de-generativity in relationships and foster generative, responsive interactions. The findings reveal varying degrees of field malleability, with some institutions experiencing extensive transformation and others retaining persistent patterns, thereby providing valuable insights into the conditions necessary for effective organizational change. The study calls attention to the importance of understanding and navigating the inner dimensions of organizational life to achieve authentic systemic transformation.

Antonio Starnino's article "Nurturing Activism: Addressing Relational Tensions Through the Social Field" also makes use of social fields as an analytical framework, examining the impact of relational dynamics within activist groups. Starnino references the social field as a framework to understand and address the ideological and social tensions that arise from power inequalities, which are identified as significant barriers to achieving activist goals. Drawing from social movement literature and employing Scharmer's concept of social fields, the article explores how the foundational conditions of individual group members influence their interactions and can either foster alignment with group values or create conflictual tensions. Through a personal case study, Starnino demonstrates that by shifting the group's social field to prioritize relationality, activist groups can improve collaboration, navigate strategic shifts more effectively, and maintain solidarity to prevent dissolution. The social field is thus presented not merely as a theoretical construct but as a tangible, embodied practice vital for the success and adaptability of activist movements.

This section closes with a co-written piece by Rebecca Freeth, Akanimo Akpan and Mahmood Sonday who confront the pervasive issue of structural racism within organizations in their article "Dismantling Structural Racism in Organisational Systems." They challenge the adequacy of the terms "diversity" and "inclusion," arguing that these may inadvertently weaken efforts against racism's deeply entrenched nature. The article posits that a more robust approach, aimed at dismantling structural racism, necessitates a comprehensive understanding of its historical roots in colonialism and its perpetuation through economic exploitation. With a heightened awareness of how racism is embedded in organizational systems, Freeth, Akpan and Sonday guide us through strategies for systemic action towards its dismantling. They share insights from their work in systems change in the context of South Africa, focusing on navigating structural and cultural shifts in organizations, especially those with social justice missions, where unaddressed structural racism undermines foundational goals. By scrutinizing the systemic roots, purpose, and culture of organizations, the authors aim to move beyond the superficiality of DEI initiatives to achieve a deeper, more authentic eradication of racial inequities.

This issue's *In-the-Making* features Francisco Miraval and Herlinda Quintana's article "Adaptive Humanism: Moving from Limiting to Quantum Narratives to Connect With the Emerging Future," in which they inquire into the concept of transformative narratives within the human experience. Drawing on

their experience working in the Latino community in Denver, Colorado, they argue that individuals can become trapped in "limiting narratives" that hinder the exploration of new possibilities and impede proactive engagement with the future. The authors introduce "Adaptive Humanism" as a methodology to transition from these restrictive stories to "quantum narratives"—dynamic and self-correcting stories that are forward-looking and rooted in future potentialities. Leveraging the principles of Theory U, they suggest a non-judgmental space and process that focuses on the emerging future can facilitate this shift. The article digs into the psychological, philosophical, and sociological facets of limiting narratives, enriched by real-life examples compiled through interviews conducted by the authors. They explore how entrenched narratives continue to shape our collective mindset, emphasizing the need for a conscious reorientation towards narratives that align with an evolving future.

In the accompanying Discussant Commentary, León Staines-Diaz and Marysol Uribe build on Miraval and Quintana's piece by examining the broader socio-historic context from which limiting narratives arise. They nest the creation and emergence of narrative within cultural epistemologies, made particularly relevant through the case example that forms the basis of the *In the Making* article: individuals from the Global South (America) relocating and making their way in the Global North (USA). The authors point to the tendency of epistemologies of the Global North to place responsibility for narratives heavily on individuals, overlooking socio-cultural and historical context which not only shapes limiting narratives through histories of colonization and oppression, but can also be a source of guidance for new, more expansive narratives. Drawing on transformative models from both the Global South and North, they urge for the inclusion of a plurality of diverse voices, including dissonant and contested perspectives, and the creation of pathways that bring into relationship narrative and knowledge created by underserved communities with those shaped by central institutions.

In the aforementioned new article format *Innovations in Praxis*, Antonio Casado da Rocha presents "The Extended Citizens' Assembly Model for Collaborative Governance," detailing the progressive shifts in political culture towards collaborative governance in Gipuzkoa, Basque Country, Spain. The piece is informed by participatory action-research and data from two Citizens' Assemblies, highlighting the potential transformation that such deliberative processes can induce, evidenced by increased action confidence, enhanced capacity, and the co-creation of a shared vision for the future. The article posits that the growth in confidence to take action among participants could be an indirect result of the collaborative effort to forge a common vision. It engages with the broader discourse on the efficacy of standard Citizens' Assembly models, addressing identified barriers like outcome dependency and scalability challenges due to limited resources. To overcome these hurdles, the article introduces a prototype for an Extended Citizens' Assembly, which aims to institutionalize and broaden the transformative impact of these assemblies through frugal, hybrid online-onsite deliberation methods. This model marks a

significant contribution to the praxis of collaborative governance, nurturing democratic experimentation and vision-building at the urban and regional levels.

This issue's *In-Dialogue* curated by Eva Pomeroy with Dayani Centeno-Torres, Carolina Da Rosa, Viviana Galdames, Laura Pastorini, Janine Saponara, and Mariana Suniata-Miranda, is entitled "Ecosystem Activation in Latin America: Embracing the Complex Edges of the System," and centers around a reflective conversation following the Presencing Institute's Ecosystem Leadership Program in Latin America. This program, a striking example of grassroots action, saw 160 leaders from fourteen countries in Latin America convene to foster collaborative action through awareness-based system change methods, including an interweaving of Indigenous knowledge and ceremony throughout the program. The dialogue follows the collective reasoning and effort to create an inclusive space that integrates various stakeholders and sectors, aiming to catalyze ecosystem activation within a region that is challenged by complexity, polarization, inequality, and violence. It emphasizes the transformative power of connection, trust, and collective intention in post-pandemic times, and in a context where healing trauma and systems change are deeply interrelated. Furthermore, the dialogue touches upon gender dynamics and feminine archetypes within the program, acknowledging a significant female presence and leadership that fostered an environment conducive to creativity, mutual support and exploration. Through the conscious cultivation of an inclusive, collaborative and non-patriarchal space, participants engaged in both healing and activation and, through shared experience, fostered relationships and collaboration on local and regional projects.

With this issue, we bring our third Volume of JASC to a close. This editorial, alongside the assemblage of articles in this issue, individually and collectively point to the essential but often unseen elements that underpin transformative processes in these tumultuous times: power, relationship and the hidden structures that support or hinder each. Each article, in its own right, provides an angle on nuanced and entangled forces that drive systems change, offering not just new understanding but potential practical gateways to scale out, scale up and most importantly, scale deep (Riddel & Moore, 2015).

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