

Journal of Awareness-Based Systems Change



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4D Mapping

Sebastian Jung and
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Nurturing Transformative Capacities

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Walking Toward Relationality

Brian Grant

Listening Across Differences

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Invisible Dimensions of Systems Transformation

Manish Srivastava

On the Gifts and Perils of Choreography

Aftab Erfan

Knowing in the Bones

Pomeroy, Hayashi, Jung,
Mount, Odugleh-Kolev,
Scharmer, Toledo-Zurita, and
van der Crujjsen

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<https://doi.org/10.47061/jasc.v5i1>



JASC
JOURNAL of
AWARENESS-BASED
SYSTEMS CHANGE

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Editorial

Relational Praxis and Regenerative Possibility:

An Introduction to the First Special Themed Issue on Social Presencing Theater

Oliver Koenig, Eva Pomeroy, Megan Seneque, and Otto Scharmer

As we contemplate the landscape in which the work of awareness-based systems change takes place—sensing through the pervasive political, economic, social, and spiritual (or inner) chaos that is quickly becoming the new normal—there is a deepening awareness of the degree and scale of fragmentation characterizing our systems and societies. In our last editorial (Koenig et al., 2024), we wrote of an era not simply dawning but firmly taking root—an era defined by ruptures rather than shifts and marked by the resurgence of authoritarianism and the closing of civic and relational spaces. It is within this context that JASC marks a notable milestone: our first special-themed issue, dedicated to the emergent social art form of Social Presencing Theater (SPT). Alongside open-themed contributions, this special-themed issue features a selection of articles that delve into the role and potential of SPT as an embodied, relational, and aesthetic methodology for exploring not only the current moment, but also possible emerging futures. Each contribution to this issue is embedded within our current planetary moment. In writing our bi-annual editorial, our task is twofold: we seek out the red thread running through the individual contributions, each of which shines a light on a specific dimension or place-based practice field of awareness-based systems change (or both), and we consider what the collection of

articles tells us about what is alive, pressing, and in need of attention in the world. One way of reading this editorial, then, is as our understanding of the way in which the field of awareness-based systems change is evolving and clarifying in response to this moment.

As a frame for understanding the deeper dimensions of the social fragmentation characterizing this moment, we draw on Scharmer and Kaufer's (2025) concept of *social soil*—the deeper space of connection with each other, with the land, and with ourselves. In the 20th century we gained wide-spread awareness of the degradation of the planetary soil, perhaps best represented in the seminal work *Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al., 1972) which sparked the environmental movement that continues today in a variety of forms, albeit one which has arguably lost (societal) traction.¹ What we are becoming acutely aware of in the 21st century is a similar soil degradation, but now the damage done is also on the level of systems, institutions and society—the social soil. Connecting observable characteristics of social systems, or social fields, to their less visible dimension, Scharmer and Kaufer (2025) write:

All social contexts are characterized by a specific *relational quality*. Just as the quality of the soil determines the quality of the harvest, the underlying quality of the social field—the quality of the relationships in the space—shapes the quality of the practical results in social systems. Relationships include relationships to others, to nature, and to ourselves. Just as the regenerative farmer focuses on improving the *quality of the soil*, the key task of leaders and changemakers is, in our view, to improve the quality of the *social soil*. (p. 29)

Regenerating the quality of the social soil has always been at the heart of the work of awareness-based systems change. What we experience in our respective practice fields, and what we read both explicitly and between the lines of the contributions to this issue, is a widespread yearning for *being and doing systems differently*, and we see this expressed in the various articles through practice and praxis (Kemmis, 2010; McKenzie & Seneque, 2024; Ulrich, 2000). Each author responds to their experience of fragmentation, polarisation, and disconnection at different levels, and offers ways to bridge relational disconnects. What binds them is a shared understanding that the (research) practices themselves are not peripheral but constitutive. These are not just methods for studying or intervening in systems—they are worlding practices (de la Cadena, 2018), shaping the very realities they seek to transform. In that sense they manifest a contextualised understanding of what it means to create the conditions for human and more-than-human flourishing (Redvers et al, 2023). Each contribution to this issue also reflects a recognition that navigating any crisis is

¹ As an illustration, we highlight the fragmentation that occurred post-covid amongst the Fridays for futures movement. (Meyer et al., 2023; Gruber, 2025).

political, especially when we are searching for justice—and that a plethora of responses is inevitable. Navigating crises is not a technical matter. It is, in fact, the moment of crisis that creates the willingness to open to the possibility of worlding. De la Cadena and Blaser (2018) note that “the moment of the realization of the destruction of the Earth, the current historical moment, can be one when people reconsider the requirement that worlds be destroyed” (p.4). Changing course will involve what these authors refer to as: “the practice of a world of many worlds, or what we call a pluriverse” (p. 4). The contributions to this issue explore how divergent knowledges and practices make worlds.

The intention of such (re)generative spaces is to create the conditions for mutually respectful engagement and mutual co-existence, without seeking homogeneity. Critical research in relation to transformative, relational methodologies like Ubuntu, and its emancipatory potential (Praeg et al., 2015), reveals the challenge of working across difference and addressing historic inequities. Those researching in the context of pluriversality note that dialogic practices have the potential to bring ‘heterogeneous worldings’ together as a “political ecology of practices, negotiating their difficult being together in heterogeneity” (de la Cadaner & Blaser, 2018, p. 4). Part of the “difficult being together in heterogeneity” is deeply influenced by imbalances of power and sensitivities to extractivism, which heighten the need for attention to the relational field. This is the call for a relational response in the current moment, one that moves us beyond the cognitive and analytical, and beyond individual agency, into an embodied and collective space.

Such spaces create the possibility of a collective coming to know its collective self—and the emergent possibilities that this creates. This knowing comes through the dynamic movement of relationality. Bringing collective awareness to this movement creates the possibility for something genuinely new to emerge. Artist-philosopher, Erin Manning (2016), describes the gesture of relationality, and the process of research-creation, in this way:

Minor gestures recast the field, open it to contrast, make felt its differential. They do so by activating, in the event, a change in direction, a change in quality. The activation of a change in quality is what Bergson defines as freedom. Freedom is here not linked to human volition, nor is it allied to intentionality or agency. Freedom is instead allied to the in-act, to the decisional force of movement-making, to the agencement that opens the event to the fullness of its potential. Freedom is how the event expresses its complexity, in the event. (p. 23)

Regenerative holding spaces are relational holding spaces for emergence. These spaces can be thought of as lifelines to the new, or microcosms of a possible new whole. For the new to be realized, new (re)generative spaces and practice fields are needed, shared spaces where people can step into a relational space that is quite different from those dominated by the analytical brain. The core of

these new spaces is embodiment and the direct relational experience of listening, awareness, and dialogue.

Social Presencing Theater—a form of awareness-based emergent movement and embodiment—is all these things. It is a form and method that intentionally steps outside the discursive noise that (ever more often) saturates contemporary public and organizational life. Rather than adding to the noise amplifying machines, SPT cultivates a more spacious and gentler—a more feminine (Hayashi, 2010)—mode of exploration and engagement: participants use mindful movement and stillness to hold space together, making visible the otherwise invisible dynamics in a system. The question then is: How can such quiet, subtle practices hold radical transformative potential in today’s fragmented world?

According to Manning (2013), bodies do not pre-exist as objects within a pre-existing environment (or world); bodies as subjects co-become with the world they move in. Building on the works of her collaborator Brian Massumi, Manning writes: “movement moves individuation, and in the process makes that ultimate chunk we call our body an event requiring a verb—bodying” (Manning, 2013, p. xxiii). Hence moving is at the heart of bodying and worlding, and it is through relational movement that the subject-world is constituted. As Manning (2009) describes, by moving together, we are bodying each other. Seen through this lens, practices like SPT tap directly into the formative fabric of experience. When a group engages in SPT, collectively sensing and enacting social experience with their bodies, they participate in what Manning refers to as the creation of space through movement. She writes, “we move not to populate space, not to extend it or to embody it, but to *create it*” (Manning, 2009, p. 12—emphasis added). In an SPT session, participants might wordlessly sculpt the “stuck” current reality of a social system, then allow the embodied sculpture to gradually move to a possible and emergent future state. In doing so, they are literally making a new space of possibility within and between themselves. The relational space that opens is a “holding space” where new meanings, identities, and relationships can emerge through embodied enactment.

As such, rather than overpowering systems from the outside, SPT reconfigures them from within. In this sense, it aligns with what Brian Massumi (2009) refers to as micropolitics: a mode of affective engagement that does not aim to control outcomes but to reveal and amplify the conditions under which new potentials become perceptible. “Micropolitics, affective politics, seeks the degrees of openness of any situation, in hopes of priming an alter-accomplishment,” he explains (para. 20). These alter-accomplishments—Massumi’s term for subtle shifts or openings that bring forth previously unimaginable possibilities—emerge not through confrontation, but through modulation. In other words, the task is to surface latent possibilities that exist in a given social context by making tiny adjustments that allow those seeds to grow. In SPT participants might be primed to notice what is usually unfelt or unseen in a social system (e.g. the unspoken tensions), which can serve as an alter-

accomplishment: a shift in the affective (social) field that makes space for systemic transformation to take visibility and root.

Importantly, SPT offers a way of working through affect to circumvent the polarized defenses typical of verbal discourse. Drawing from Spinoza, philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1988/1970) distinguishes between *puissance*, which refers to the immanent capacity to affect and be affected, and contrasts *puissance* to *pouvoir*, which denotes power as domination or command. In an SPT session, participants exercise *puissance*: they affect one another through shared movement and attention and allow themselves to be affected by the collective field that emerges. This mutual openness can dissolve rigid boundaries and enable a form of collective becoming. As Massumi (2009) puts it, “an invitation for an indefinitely constructive thinking of embodied, relational becoming,” one that carries “an immediately political aspect” (para. 8). Change, from this view, need not begin with top-down structures; it can emerge in the qualitative shifts that arise within embodied group experience—herein lies SPT’s quiet transformative edge.

The “container” that SPT offers, then, is one that begins with intercorporeal experience (Pomeroy & Herrmann, 2024) that creates a space for different, more generative, and more relevant conversation that draws from different angles, perspectives and experiences, including that of the more-than-human (see the *In Dialogue* article, this issue). SPT encompasses everything we describe as holding spaces: the integration of inner and outer, of personal and systemic. It provides a rigorous method for inquiring into experience, cultivating deep attention, and surfacing insight, understanding, and knowledge, which begins with the body and the inter-body or, what Hayashi (2021) refers to as the social body.

Bringing intentional, conscientious, and methodological attention to the relational and emergent in this way is a science. These relational, transgressive, and transformative (research) practices are gaining increasing prominence (Goodchild, 2021; Kulundu-Bolus et al., 2020; Redvers et al., 2022). A central part of our work at JASC is to bridge between emerging knowledges and knowledge generation forms, and more established traditions—making visible the rigour and integrity in emerging approaches that center epistemologies often relegated to the margins. Inherent to these new forms is an underlying ethic of epistemic justice (Fricker, 2013), opening to wider and more complete participation in knowledge creation through multi-modal knowledge generation, and avoiding the risk and tendency in some traditional forms of research to “wrong people in their capacity as epistemic agents” (Meisch, 2024, p. 383). Explicit to each contribution in this issue is purposeful engagement in systems with the intention of supporting their flourishing, in the broadest sense of the term. The existential urgency of the moment is actually our opportunity, the crack that creates an opening for new transgressive forms of research (Temper et al., 2019; Koenig et al., 2024) that are emerging—embodied, purposeful, relational forms that draw on an expanded epistemological base—because regenerating the social soil will be impossible without them.

The practices and practice fields illuminated in the articles that make up this issue contribute to the regeneration of the social soil by bringing awareness and attention to our relationship to ourselves, to the land, and to each other. They create spaces and conditions for a quality of relating that, in turn, opens the possibility for something new to emerge. Practicing these relational ontologies and epistemologies in different contexts, and re-coding systems through the very process, is the call of this time.

Articles in This Issue

In keeping with the special theme of this issue, the majority of featured articles focus on the practice of SPT. However, our practice is to also make space for and include timely peer-review article contributions not directly related to the special theme. Each contribution to this issue shines light on a relational (research) practice, be it with land, with one another, and/or with the collective as a social body. Through this work, each evolves the diverse praxis of awareness-based systems change.

Appropriately for this special themed issue, our first feature is an *Invited Article* from Arawana Hayashi, *Streams of Origin for Social Presencing Theater and Its Contribution to Social Transformation* (Hayashi, 2025). In this piece, Hayashi shares the origin and foundation of SPT which weaves her experience as a dancer, meditation teacher, and ensemble performer and which she describes as having “grown out of a longing to shine light—to see, feel, and create healthy social systems based on embodied presence and awareness” (Hayashi, 2025. p. 16). Drawing on the framing logic from her study and practice of Buddhism, she shares the *view* (foundational framework), *practice* (experience to deepen understanding of the view), and *result* (embodiment of view and practice in everyday life) of SPT. In doing so, she helps us to grasp, with depth and multi-dimensionality, the underpinnings of the form, one which aims to support the natural synchronization of inner knowing and outer systemic transformation, without bypassing the suffering and grief of human experience. Various forms provide a methodology to practice integrating awareness (both openness of mind and the mind’s innate ability to know), deep attending to our current reality, and attention to the unfolding moment and the creative possibilities it holds. As such, Social Presencing Theater provides us with a (research) practice for emergence.

This issue features four *Peer-Review Articles*, the first of which reflects our special theme for the issue. Sebastian Jung and Arawana Hayashi take us into a deep exploration of one practice and its application in their article, *4D Mapping: An Awareness-Based Approach to Organizational Development* (Jung & Hayashi, 2025). Building on Looss’s notion of intervention as intensified field awareness, a conceptualization of the *social field* as the interiority of systems (Scharmer, 2016; Scharmer & Kaufer, 2025), and Rajagopalan’s call to bridge discursive and aesthetic epistemologies, the authors argue that 4D Mapping (one of the many expressions of Social Presencing Theatre) offers a regenerative approach to systems intervention. They make the case that engagement through multiple

ways of knowing inherent to 4D Mapping bridges systems thinking and systems sensing, enabling those who enact and embody a system to cultivate a deeper awareness of what sustains stuckness in the system, and what enables its renewal. Illustrating with specific examples of 4D Mapping in different contexts, they reveal the ways in which such practices allow for an integration of embodied systems *being and doing*. An emerging framework is offered for 4D Mapping as social field intervention, which allow for an exploration of this practice as a (research) methodology for “bridging the analytical and the intuitive, aesthetic and embodied dimensions of knowing” (Jung & Hayashi, p. 66).

Our second peer-review article, Adriene Jenik’s *Nurturing Transformative Capacities: An Analysis of the ECOTarot as Method and Practice Supporting Sustainability Transformations* (Jenik, 2025) describes an arts-based research approach that works intentionally with emotional, aesthetic, and relational dimensions of knowing often neglected in conventional climate discourse. Set within the context of a turn toward inner transformation in sustainability science over the past two decades, the article builds theoretical and methodological links between sustainability transformation literature, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, and the contemporary art practice of Climate Focused Socially Engaged Art (CFSEA). Jenik adapts tarot, a card-based cultural form often associated with occult and fortune-telling, for the purpose of facilitating conversations and personal reflection in relation to the climate crisis and climate action. She describes a dialogic methodology for surfacing knowing (cognitive), feeling (affective), believing (spirit), and doing (material/embodied) related to climate change, making the case that it is through an expanded and integrated epistemological approach that new, co-created narratives can emerge.

Brian Grant’s article, *Walking Toward Relationality: An Autoethnographic Inquiry of Inner Work for Personal and Systemic Change* (Grant, 2025), is similarly located within sustainability action and research, and the shifts that have taken place in that domain, driven by the existential threat of climate change. Reflecting on the turn toward relationality and inner transformation in sustainability research, he reveals his own journey as a sustainability scholar to learn relationality and cultivate relational awareness as he transforms his (research) practices. He gives an account of how his experience of critical, relational walking methodologies have been a form of decolonial praxis: a vehicle for enabling “epistemological openings to affective and embodied ways of knowing that are inherently place-based” (Temper et al., 2018, p. 10), as we enact and embody our responsibility as deeply relational beings. The *relational turn* that he gives expression to is a profound invitation to research as worlding practice; as itself a practice of pluriversality, as we unlearn and relearn what it means to contribute to human and more-than-human flourishing and reconfigure “sustainability” research in the process.

Our final peer-review article from Rosa Zubizaretta-Ada, *Listening across Differences: Facilitators’ Perspectives from Austrian Mini-Publics* (Zubizaretta-Ada, 2025) moves us into the realm of public dialogue and collective governance.

The article centers on an iterative, inductive research engagement with facilitators involved in mini-publics in the state of Vorarlberg, Austria—with dialogue spaces open to the public. She explores the complexities, challenges, and joys of facilitation in the context of deliberative design and decision-making. Through this exploration Zubizaretta-Ada curates a mosaic of voices to create a rich understanding of what it means to hold spaces for difference and a different kind of conversation, as she explores the ways in which “listening and care [are] at the heart of deliberative design: the work that accompanies reconnection and collective meaning making” (Zubizaretta-Ada, 2025, p. 130). These reflections are born (as she says) from her deep experience of working across difference; from practice and presence (Scharmer, 2018) and from reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action (Schön, 1979). Her nuanced understanding of the nature of the power held by facilitators, and their capacity to hold difference and *bear witness* rather than seek consensus or homogeneity, offers significant emerging insight for current deliberative theory.

Once again in this issue we feature a book review, and in honour of our special themed issue, Aftab Erfan offers us *On the Gifts and Perils of Choreography: A look at Arawana Hayashi's Social Presencing Theater: The Art of Making a True Move* (PI Press, 2021) (Erfan, 2025). Reading this thoughtful and personal review is a delightful experience, as it weaves between relationship, shared history, reflection, and review, all in relation to the field of Social Presencing Theater as represented in *The Art of Making a True Move* (Hayashi, 2021). Praising the clarity, structure, and accessibility of the book, Erfan also reflects on the limitations of learning embodiment practice through the written word and wonders aloud how books might embody the same aesthetic principles they describe. Ultimately, the review honors SPT as both a methodology and a way of being—rooted in awareness, simplicity, and authentic movement.

Included also in this issue is the fourth *Innovations in Practice* feature, our newest format in JASC. In this issue, Manish Srivastava brings rich reflections on his contribution, *The Invisible Dimensions of Systems Transformation: Field Notes from Social Field Cultivation in the Law and Justice Sector in India* (Srivastava, 2025). In his article, Srivastava inquires into a seven-year journey of exploration of the question: How can we transform the fragmented social field of law and justice into a regenerative ecosystem? His field notes capture the delicate and complex journey, which he has held with Ashoka India and Agami, a field catalyst organization that connects ideas and people working to transform the experience of justice in India. Six cohorts over this time have manifested in a closely-knit community of over 100 change-makers. They are not responding to questions of how to “scale” this work; rather, they recognize that regenerative work, based in deep authentic connections, is slow and needs to allow for organic unfolding. Srivastava’s field notes provide rich insight into the nature of containers needed (at multiple levels) to hold diverse (and potentially conflicting) perspectives, and what it means to work with the visible and invisible dimensions of social phenomena, as one creates the social body and the social field through the very process of engagement with arts-based and embodied

practices. Such processes are what were referred to earlier in our editorial as micropolitics, that mode of affective engagement that does not aim to control outcomes but to reveal and amplify the conditions under which new potentials become perceptible (Massumi, 2009).

The final article in this issue, as has become a tradition at JASC, is the *In Dialogue* feature. In this dialogue, titled *Knowing in the Bones: Embodying and Uncovering Systems* (Pomeroy et al., 2025), JASC Co-Editor, Eva Pomeroy convenes four leaders who have integrated 4D Mapping in their broader systems change initiatives, Beth Mount, Asiya Ogdoleh-Kolev, Ericka Toledo-Zurita, and Joost van der Crujisen with Arawana Hayashi, Otto Scharmer, and Sebastian Jung of the SPT team. Through an exploration of each experience and themes shared across all four, the dialogue—a relational research practice itself—highlights the potential for collective, embodied knowledge generation forms to reframe and shift shared understanding of what constitutes a system and the relational and power dynamics that shape it, while simultaneously providing a path for personal and relational regeneration through connection with a knowing that is embodied and intuitive. Particularly striking was the way in which the practice brings to awareness, centers and, arguably, gives access to, the more-than-human elements of a system.

We began this editorial by locating ourselves within the societal fragmentation apparent in our various contexts in a myriad of ways. While discerning the source(s) of this fragmentation is essential, our gaze—as expressed with the collection of articles that make up this issue—is set predominantly on paths that hold the potential to work through the fragmentation and toward forms of enacting that are more integral, relational, and centered on meaning. By advocating thus, we are not implying a homogeneity of form, values, or purpose, but rather spaces that bring awareness to the complexity, contradictions, and heterogeneity inherent in social experience and systems. Relational (research) practices, such as those reflected in the contributions to this issue, offer the possibility of holding our collective attention there long enough, and with enough openness, for new forms of enacted systems to emerge.

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Invited Article

Streams of Origin for Social Presencing Theater and Its Contribution to Social Transformation

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Abstract

Social Presencing Theater is an art-based methodology that supports social and institutional change processes. This paper considers some of the influences that have shaped Social Presencing Theater, offers a glimpse at how the practices reflect the core framework, and a few ways that this work contributes to awareness-based systems change. As the future becomes more uncertain, both socio-economically and environmentally, being well grounded in personal and social embodied presence and knowing is key to collective sense-making and skillful action. Over these past twenty years, we have found that introducing Social Presencing Theater practices of stillness and movement into leadership, facilitation, coaching, and teaching increases trust in sense experience knowing, fosters connections, and brings the creative process into everyday work and personal life. The practices, embedded in presencing work, support the natural

synchronization of inner knowing and aspiration with outer systemic transformation. This paper contributes to the research on how art practices can support teams, organizations, classrooms, and communities to affect quicker and deeper shared understanding and to engage in more significant and beneficial change work. It is an invitation for others to join that conversation.

Keywords

embodiment, presence, meditation, performance, dance, performance art, improvisation, social

Introduction

In this paper I outline the view, practice, and result of a body of work called Social Presencing Theater (SPT), a set of social arts practices for supporting awareness-based systems change. SPT is one of the core methodologies in the systems transformation work called *presencing*¹, and the system of framing used here—view, practice, and result—I draw from Buddhist studies. This logic is very applicable for any process of learning and transformation. *View* is a foundational framework, *practice* is experience that enables one to question, clarify, and deepen understanding of the view, and *result* is the full embodiment of the view and practice in everyday life.

Maybe this could be likened to a tree: the roots hold the view and the wisdom or philosophy. The tree trunk holds the practices and practitioners. The branches are applications of the practices that yield results or fruits. Prior to meeting Otto Scharmer and contributing to the founding of the Presencing Institute, my work was largely as a dancer, dance teacher, and choreographer.² Using the frame of view, practice, and result, I will describe the origins of Social Presencing Theater and the influence of my experience as a dancer and a meditation practitioner on its creation and evolution.

Social Presencing Theater is a series of movement-based practices that support individual embodied presence and heighten the capacity of a team or organization to see and sense itself as a living social system. Awareness of somatic experience heightens what we might call “heart-intelligence,” the natural capacity of humans to connect and care for others. Attending to non-verbal body postures, movements, and spatial relationships is a form of communication that often goes unnoticed in our highly verbal, concept-oriented society. Social Presencing Theater rests on the understanding that shifting attention to the non-verbal dimension can loosen limiting concepts, foster

¹ See Scharmer, C. O., & Kaufer, K. (2025). *Presencing: 7 Practices for transforming self, society, and business*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

² Dr. C. Otto Scharmer is a Senior Lecturer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and founding chair of the Presencing Institute, www.presencing.org.

relationships, open access to intuition, and make visible current blind spots, wisdom, and seeds for innovation and creativity in a system.

The name “Social Presencing Theater” defines the work. Social indicates that most of the practices engage more than one person, inviting reflection on shared embodied experience. *Presencing*, as defined by Otto Scharmer, is a blending of the words “presence” and “sensing.” It refers to the ability to sense and bring into the present one’s highest future potential as an individual and as a group (Scharmer, 2016, p. 161). The original meaning of theater, from the Greek *theatron* is a *place of seeing*. The practice of Social Presencing Theater enables us to see and feel our potential to create good teams, organizations, and communities. Social Presencing Theater creates the conditions for bringing a greater awareness to our individual and shared experience.

Awareness is both openness of mind and the mind’s innate ability to know. It is a natural human resource. Awareness-based systems change affords a framework for exploring the journey of transformation, without bypassing unfathomable suffering. It posits that by attending deeply to our current reality, we can become aware of the emergence of creative possibilities. Attending deeply requires the body—as a perceiving, sensing organ—to open to the possibility that we can see, hear, and feel without filtering our perceptions through judgments, opinions, assumptions, and past learning. What we sense through our embodied perceptions may be subtle or vivid, but it is trustworthy experience. When sense perception experience is free of the limitations of mental models, our world is fresh and resonant—full of beauty, heartbreak, and possibility. Can we be fresh, tender, and full of possibility for each other? Can this open perception be the ground for creating a good human society in harmony with all beings and the Earth herself?

This paper explores some of the roots of the work and offers ways that Social Presencing Theater brings awareness, social knowing, and action-confidence into systems change. My path to this work rests on the generosity of teachers and dancers who have inspired, on the joy of co-creating with those who bring their own experience and share the journey, and the aspiration that it be of benefit now and to those who are yet to appear.

My Path to This Work

I meet people who say that when they first read or saw a talk about presencing, it was profoundly resonant with something they already knew. This was true for me as well. The ideas and practices rekindled a faith that I personally, and that we collectively, could contribute to creating a better world, and that awareness—as open, unbiased knowing—was the key to sane and compassionate change. The nature of reality is moment-to-moment change. When we approach experience with open awareness, it allows us to bring non-aggression and non-manipulation into transformation work. Hearing about practices based on the change theory, Theory U, and the concept of presencing, connected me with teachings I first

heard in the 1970's on "creating enlightened society" from the Tibetan meditation teacher and social visionary, Chogyam Trungpa.

Ever since I first heard those teachings, I have been provoked and inspired by this topic. What captured my interest was not that there might have once been such a society in Central Asia or even that there might be such a society in the far-off future. I was interested in the notion that the enlightened society might be present now, but that we do not notice it. Might it be present but hidden from the usual ways that we perceive and experience? Was there any truth to this, and if so, could we collectively cultivate the capacity to see it and feel it? This was a deeply resonant idea and highly provocative.

Without a doubt, there are examples of good communities and institutions in the past and today. However, the words "enlightened society" seem completely incongruent and out of touch with current social reality. We hear, "my workplace is toxic," or "fear and uncertainty are paralyzing our team." Children are the victims of a massive systems breakdown in education. This unstable world of geopolitical aggression, wealth inequality, degradation of the natural world, racial injustice, displacement of people, youth mental health issues, etc., seems to be irrefutable evidence that enlightened society is a fantasy—a dreamer's delusion. The feelings of pressure, distrust, and overwhelm arise daily. What do the words "enlightened society" even mean?

One aspect of the word "enlightened" could mean shining light, like the sun, onto something to see more clearly, making something more visible, bringing it more fully into our attention. Along with the natural illumination of sunlight comes warmth. An enlightened being is one who is wakeful, clear seeing, and radiates compassionate warmth. That being naturally sees goodness in others and in the phenomenal world. The question becomes how might we, ordinary beings, cultivate trust in our clear seeing and care for this world? Can we illuminate the basic healthiness and wisdom of the people and groups we meet every day—people who, like us, aspire to create good families, good classrooms, organizations, and communities. How do we best accompany others who teach, lead, facilitate, parent, organize, or coach as we co-create a world that we want for our children and grandchildren? How do we, ancestors of the emerging future, engage today?

Social Presencing Theater has grown out of a longing to shine light—to see, feel, and create healthy social systems based on embodied presence and awareness. As individuals, we have first-person knowing or awareness of our inner experience. We have a somatic experience of the sensations of our body, and we can be aware of our feelings and thoughts. This self-knowing enables us to connect with both ourselves and our world. It supports wise choices and engagement in beneficial actions. The practices of Social Presencing Theater make visible the inner self-knowing of groups of people, social "beings" that also have both corporeality and an intangible array of feelings and thoughts.

The Birth of Social Presencing Theater

In 2001, I joined a Creative Process Team at the Shambhala Institute for Authentic Leadership (later named ALIA, Authentic Leadership in Action) in Halifax, Nova Scotia. The founders, headed by Michael Chender, were pioneers in offering week-long gatherings that brought together organizational change leaders, spirituality, and the contemplative arts (Chender 2015). Change leaders—Peter Senge (Center for Systems Awareness and author of *The Fifth Discipline*), Margaret Wheatley (Warriors for the Human Spirit), Adam Kahane (Reos Partners), Bill Torbert (Action Inquiry), Juanita Brown (World Café), Toke Mueller (Art of Hosting), Otto Scharmer (Presencing Institute and author of *Theory U*) and others offered learning modules. Each morning, the participants met for meditation and a talk on its application to leadership and the creation of an enlightened society. The Institute's conviction that the creative arts were key to systems change invited every participant to engage in an art practice— theater, movement, or brush calligraphy.

Otto Scharmer began offering his work at the Institute in 2003. I was a participant in his module, offering an embodiment practice. Otto saw some potential in my work of which I was unaware. He asked me to join him and Beth Jandernoa in what is now the Presencing Foundation Program (Presencing Foundation Program, n.d.). When I began working with Otto, I offered practices called The Art of Making a True Move. They were designed as mindfulness-awareness practices to bring artfulness into everyday life. The practices were useful in that they could bring ideas from Theory U (such as suspending, letting go/letting come, attending to the whole) into experience.

A description of Social Presencing Theater as an event with a short performance followed by a generative dialogue appears in the 2007 edition of *Theory U*. Although we began by creating these performance events, Social Presencing Theater has now primarily developed into practices supporting personal and social transformation and institutional interventions. Most Social Presencing Theater practices invite groups to co-create embodied social change processes. Non-verbal activity creates a fresh ground for self and collective reflection, for a sense of deep connection, for intuitive knowing, and the cultivation of social field skills to support and enrich everyday life and work.³ Today there are Social Presencing Theater teachers offering courses world-wide and year-long training programs in Europe, the US, and Latin America.

³ Most of these practices are described in detail in Hayashi (2021). The corresponding videos are open source. <https://www.u-school.org/offerings/spt-self-paced>.

Freedom in Forms

I have great respect for forms as containers for experience. Dance forms can be like poetry forms—the sonnet or the *haiku*. There are containers, a set of restrictions, that invite us to deepen, to break habits, to access our innate creativity. Ballet, meditation, and *bugaku* (Japanese Court Dance) are relatively strict forms, each created centuries ago in three different geographies and cultures. I was interested in how these forms enabled me to experience freedom from the restrictions of my definitions, past experiences, wounds, stories, and all that I think I know. Repeating the practices within the structure of the form, i.e. following the instructions without changing the form, enabled the experience of freedom. I found this paradoxical. How do forms enable the experience of openness and freshness?

These dance and meditation forms were boundaries that invited mindful attention and open relaxation. If I held my attention too tightly, enjoyment and spaciousness disappeared. If attention was held too loosely, precision disappeared. When balanced, there was no space or time to get captured into habitual thoughts and emotions. The constantly shifting somatic experiences and outer phenomena (other dancers, witnesses, environments) emerged without obstruction, creating a sense of play. Because the form required both focused attention and open relaxation, there was no room for the weight of habitual responses or conditioned ways of seeing and engaging.

This experience led to my interest in creating forms that invited anybody, not just dancers or meditators, into an embodied sense of openness and freedom. This sense of freedom manifests as a sense of unconditional belonging and connection. There is no need to try to make connections. When open awareness is present, connection is always present. Great appreciation is present. Social Presencing Theater is a series of movement forms created to invite fresh and powerful non-conceptual gestures to arise. They train us in the freedom of not-knowing as an intelligence vital to societal change work. It is a practice of relaxing into expansive and inclusive awareness and trusting that there is no need to try to “fix” this particular moment of life. Resting with moment-to-moment unfolding provides perspective, wisdom, and strength to engage in the work of systems change.

Later in this article, I will describe some of the practices and how they create embodied expressions of systems that bring attention to the quality of relationships and to social, felt knowing. The group can poignantly feel its own vulnerabilities and strengths and can let deeper sources of wisdom and creativity guide the transformation process (see Scharmer & Pomeroy, 2024). Individual and collective embodied presence is the ground out of which confidence arises as a recognition of the fundamental wisdom and strength in ourselves and each other. Although we experience struggle and suffering, our individual body-mind system and social systems long for health and for connection to the core of our humanness. Layers of personal and collective harms, beliefs, habits, and fear cover over our innate trust and confidence. However, now more than ever, we

need the courage to come out of our comfort zones, to bring loving attention to our “stuck” places, and to engage in the learning and healing necessary to co-create a good world.

Social Presencing Theater invites us to look clearly at our blind spots and to make visible the good world that is already here. This is not just how we see the world, but also how we feel this world. The root of the word aesthetic is from Ancient Greek *aisthētikós*, which means “perceptible, sensitive, pertaining to sensory perception.” The body is a perceiving, sensing organ. The practices of Social Presencing Theater invite embodied knowing and confidence in sense-knowing. Sense experience does not have to be filtered or defined by what we already think we know. For a moment, what we see, hear, and feel can be free of conceptual frameworks. It can be fresh, insightful, and full of beauty. We can be fresh, insightful, and full of beauty for each other. The world needs that from us.

Many people have contributed to, and continue to engage in, the emergence of Social Presencing Theater, bringing diverse training, lineages, and inquiries to the practice. My journey into the world of systems change is supported by the dance forms that live in my bones, in the possibility of creating enlightened society.

View: Sacredness of the Moment

It is possible to go beyond personal interpretation, to let vastness into our hearts through the medium of perception. We always have a choice: we can limit our perception so that we close off vastness, or we can allow vastness to touch us. When we draw down the power and depth of vastness into a single perception, then we are discovering and invoking magic...the discovery of innate and primordial wisdom in the world as it is.

—Chögyam Trungpa, *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior*

The view, or basic principles, of Social Presencing Theater were born from both the dharma art teachings of Chögyam Trungpa (see Trungpa, 1996) and from Japanese Court Dance, *bugaku*. The basic view is that there is vast space of awareness and possibility in every moment. Trungpa called this Nowness “the magic of the present moment” (Trungpa, 1978 p. 96). We do not have to operate out of habit and conditioning. Social Presencing Theater does not resemble the formal style of *bugaku*; however, the view or purpose—connecting to the open moment—is the invitation of our current work. The view connects to the word, presencing, and is like an open sky, a blank canvas, an empty stage, full of potential.

In ancient Sino-Japanese culture, the “highest aspiration” was represented as the Heaven principle. This Heaven principle is expressed in Japanese Shinto as *kami*, sacred spirits. According to my teacher, Suenobu Togi, *Bugaku*, the ancient Japanese ceremonial dance, accompanied by the music, called *gagaku*,

was created to bring *kami* down to Earth. *Bugaku* expressed the innate harmony between the *kami*, humans, and the land (Ono, 1962).

Many years ago, I performed a solo concert of contemporary dance which Trungpa Rinpoche attended. He said that, when he was at Oxford University, he heard a UNESCO recording of *gagaku*, the “elegant music” of the Japanese Court. He remarked at the unusual sound and that he thought there was an accompanying dance form. In 1977, I began studying *bugaku*, the accompanying dance, with Suenobu Togi, who was teaching at University of California in Los Angeles. I continued as his student until he passed away in 2009. Our practice groups performed at festivals, museums, and schools for over twenty years. Today, a small group of his Western students on three continents meet weekly on the unlikely and inadequate space of Zoom to continue to practice together.

This ceremonial dance was created to bring the vast space of spirit (Heaven) down to Earth. The music and dance were the medium. Removed from its cultural context, centuries after its popularity, performed by our amateur practitioner group—this ceremonial dance and music nonetheless has the power to bring a sense of sacredness to us and to our very earth-bound audiences. It was, and continues today to be, performed at the Japanese Imperial Palace to join Heaven (a traditional Asian principle) and Earth. It was in ancient times and is today the role of leadership to bring vision or highest aspiration into the challenging earthly role of caring for the well-being of people and the land on which they live.

In *bugaku*, the form never changes. It cannot broaden out into something else. The experience of the dance deepens into the bones. It has no other place to go. Despite our mistakes, forgetfulness, self-absorption, and distractions, the synchronized music and dance emerged moment by moment, creating a sense of space in which ordinary sacredness can land. The body is moving; the music continues. The experience is one of openness and stillness. Openness is not a blank void. It is full of emerging movement and expression. Stillness lives in the movement, timelessness in time. The ancient lives in the present. The present is a sense of freedom in ordinary sacredness.

Bringing openness and ordinary sacredness into the present lived moment is the view of Social Presencing Theater. We invite a gap of mind space that gives us access to the vast space of the Heaven principle. As we stay with that sense of openness, something emerges—an unexpected gesture of movement, a surprising insight, a heartfelt calling. It is ordinary sacredness because it is completely accessible—not a big deal. It is a moment of immense appreciation and connection. Inviting the view of ordinary sacredness enables us to trust in the boundless inherent health of our body-mind system and the social body-mind system.

Most of us think that creativity is only about producing something new, inventing, innovating. But *bugaku*, an art form which has barely changed since the eighth century, invites us into another aspect of creativity. As we attend and relax into the form, we notice the moment to moment arising of experience—each

moment is new. A gesture, performed a thousand times over many years, is not the same this time. I am not the same. My body, mind, the dancers, the environment are unique to this moment.

I have practiced these dances thousands of times. I have engaged in Social Presencing Theater practices thousands of times. But each time I learn new things about the forms, about myself, about others, about creativity. Perhaps there is no visible change, but there is a deepening of knowing and connection. Change is happening every moment. In some sense we do not create change. Change is the nature of reality. As we become aware of the moment to moment unfolding of our life, we sense ourselves as an interconnected part of ever-changing systems. We forget the habit of thinking of ourselves as separate entities trying to connect. We have a sense of the fragility of this moment, impermanence, and innate connection to the whole.

Practice: The Art of Making a True Move

The practices can only be done by doing them.

—Francisco Varela, *Interview with C.O. Scharmer:
Three Gestures of Becoming Aware*

If the view of open awareness is a blank canvas or an empty stage, then practice invites us to put our marks, colors, lines, and shapes on the canvas or to create a diverse array of social expressions with our gestures, movements, and spatial patterns on a stage. Practice is the method for bringing the view of open spaciousness, Nowness, into activity. The practice of Social Presencing Theater grew out of decades of ensemble movement improvisation, influenced in the 1970's by New York postmodern dancers. It was and continues to be an inquiry into “the art of making a true move.” The true move is a genuine gesture that is not contrived or habitual. Genuine expressions arise from trust in Nowness, being in the now. Dance improvisation continues to be my practice for bringing the view of Nowness into a collective creative process.

Practice begins with the body—our body and the Earth's body. We always start there. We feel the connection of our body, placed on and held by the Mother Earth's body. She holds us close. We always have a place on Her body, and we can rest there. But we forget. So we invite our conceptual mind to step back so that our somatic feeling-knowing can come forward in our field of attention. We notice when thoughts and expectations pull us away, and we let our attention rest on our body connected to the good Earth's body. When our mind's attention rests on the body, we feel grounded. We remember that our body is the home where we live. Returning to the body and connecting to the Earth's body is the foundation practice. It brings a natural sense of being, even an unconditional sense of well-being.

When our body and mind are synchronized, awareness naturally extends out. We are naturally curious, interested. We see others around us. We can see groups of people as *social bodies*. Besides seeing them, we feel them. We sense the quality of relationships of the social bodies of which we are a part. This social knowing arises naturally from a grounded body, aware of perceptions and sensations. We stay open to the feeling-knowing, without immediately interpreting through our habitual interpretations. Like our body, the social body can also feel grounded or disembodied—connected or disconnected. Relaxing our sensing antennae out, we can feel the quality of relationships which we call the *social field* (Scharmer, 2018, p. 14).

Practices increase trust in embodied presence and in the sense of connection and potential in the social field. However, there is another field of awareness, often ignored but always available to us, that is vital to the creativity process. When we pause, we can sense the open space of not knowing, of non-confirmation. We are aware of our own unlimited, possibly bewildered, space of mind. Not knowing, which might seem like a negative experience, is actually the ground for what we call the true move.

There is so much unpredictability in the world today. We hope our day will unfold smoothly. We can be distressed by reading the news, changes in plans, words that we do not want to hear. When facing unexpected challenges at work, we often fall back on familiar patterns, habits, and assumptions. We can go around and around in our minds, trying to figure out the right way to proceed. But maybe uncertainty is an invitation. Can we become comfortable with the fact that things are changing—falling apart, shifting? The forms in Social Presencing Theater provide a safe container in which to make friends with the uncertainty of not knowing what comes next.

We feel vulnerable in moments of not knowing. However, Social Presencing Theater encourages us to celebrate the awkwardness of not knowing. Yay for awkwardness! Allowing fresh gestures to emerge from not-knowing is the practice of genuineness—the heart of our work. We discover that movements and words arising from open, nonjudgmental space are genuine expressions that create healthy social transformation. When there is stability in the body and trust in the social space, gestures arise spontaneously from openness. This is true creativity that applies to everyday work and family life. Simple gestures and words hold the power and beauty necessary to cultivate healthy and creative teams, organizations and communities. For me and many others, art practices are a bridge between contemplation and everyday work, family, and societal demands. These practices celebrate the intelligence of the body and the aesthetics of being a social human. As we said earlier, the root meaning of the word “aesthetic” is *feeling*. Gestures arising from a trust in embodied feeling-knowing are “true moves.”

Field Dance

The Field Dance is an investigation of the relationship between a presenter (teacher, facilitator, leader), someone standing in front of the room, and those sitting in the room attending to that person. It questions the conventional assumption that the person in the front must offer information, entertainment, or inspiration to a passive, judgmental audience. It uses this “performance” mode to explore the co-creation process of presenter and viewers and the potential for social transformation in that context.

Each person is invited to enter a “stage,” pause in Nowness, then offer a spontaneous gesture to an “audience.” The gesture arises from the body, the shared social field, and from the open space of not knowing. Then there is another moment of stillness to receive back the non-verbal felt sense of being seen. We may try to plan. We may be so self-conscious we can hardly gesture at all. We may try to please, get a reaction, or do what we think is expected. We may make our gesture and flee off the stage without receiving a response from the viewers—a one-way conversation. All of this is human—appreciated and welcomed.

However, as we continue to practice, we gain trust that our spontaneous gestures, coming from nothing, without self-referencing or manipulation, communicate overwhelming power and beauty. We practice being seen and seeing with the heart. We practice vulnerability and courage. The Field Dance highlights the value of stillness and accessing the larger social field as ground for expression and confidence. The audience practices holding space with loving attention. There is never any “feedback,” only a non-judgmental reflection on the process. Ironically, the theater, often seen as artificial or contrived, has been a safe practice space for many of us to cultivate the bravery necessary to be genuine.

The Village

The Village is one of the core Social Presencing Theater practices for cultivating social field awareness and making visible the social dynamics of groups. It simplifies movement choices to support the collective co-creative process. Village participants attend to mindfulness of body, the connection to others in the social body, the felt quality of relationships, and the open space of not knowing what will emerge. The practice inquires into the conditions enabling or hindering the co-creation of coherent and healthy social contexts.

The Village, as an ensemble improvisation form, has early beginnings. I began improvising with a small group of student-colleagues in Boston around 1970. Like many dancers at that time, I was interested in ordinary “pedestrian movement” as dance—blurring the line between art and everyday life. Our group met several times a week for several years to practice together. In our early days the studio practice included dancing, ordinary activities, everyday objects, music, sharing personal sufferings and delights. Anything that happened in the studio was an expression of the boundarylessness between dance and life. It was our way of making sense of who we were and of the world we lived in. We had a high tolerance for chaos.

Hearing dharma art teachings on non-aggression and panoramic awareness brought mindfulness-awareness into the process of spontaneous dance-making. The Village emerged as a way to attend to the whole and better understand our choices—what to do, how to contribute, where to move. These were not deliberate, thought-out choices, but were “almost-choices,” arising from attending to the present moment of experience. We wanted to make improvised work that was like jazz, in which the quality of the process and the product were inseparable. The unique gestures of each individual were seen and honored without losing a sense of the inclusive well-being and unfolding of the whole. Village practice brought attention and relaxed awareness into the process of spontaneous co-creation.

We discovered that *how we paid attention* was key to allowing each person to shine, enabling the ensemble as a whole to unfold with coherence, clarity, and beauty for dancers and for audiences. Occasionally, during these early years, we experienced a dance emerging from a space in which we were operating as a single “being.” We recognized it but had no words to describe the experience. Each of us, in our uniqueness, belonged and were visible. And yet the “dance” was its own being, not simply the sum of its parts. I found written in my notes, “You cannot go back to something you remember from the past, but from then on you have confidence that it is possible to operate from a collective unencumbered unfolding.”

All of us make non-verbal, largely unconscious, movement choices continuously everyday—where to stand in a room, how far or close to others, when to move and when to stay still, whether to join, to move to where power is, to be on the periphery. These everyday physical choices are forms of communication that often go unnoticed yet are sensed and contribute to a non-verbal knowing held in the social field. Capacities of noticing and engaging that are cultivated in the Village inform and enrich our personal and professional life. The Village is a foundation practice for cultivating the social field awareness necessary when addressing complex challenges and transformation processes of organizations or society.

4D Mapping

4D Mapping uses the capacities of the Village to see and sense into a particular social system or eco-system by attending to the relationships of stakeholders in that system. Participants embody individual or institutional stakeholders, including the Earth, those marginalized from the system, and the highest aspiration of the system. They create a current reality sculpture. By attending to embodied-knowing and space awareness, they move to a second sculpture. This sets the ground for a generative dialogue, revealing insights, blind spots, empathy, and seeds of possibility in the system.

4D Mapping in person, as well as the Virtual 4D Space, are powerful practices for presencing the emerging future. As a reminder, we earlier defined the word presencing as the ability to sense and bring into the present one's highest future potential as an individual and as a group. The 4D Mapping practice clarifies the stakeholders in a system and creates a map that clearly reveals both restrictions and potential leverage points that can enable that system to move skillfully, compassionately, and powerfully toward its highest aspiration.

4D Mapping enables us to see the movements, both conscious and nonconscious, that we make in the process of social co-creation. Where we go and what we do arises from seeing the choices others make, feeling our own body, sensing the relational space, and opening to what is emerging from the present moment. Our “almost choices” are more like callings than decisions. These actions communicate and build a field of relationships. From the process of collective “almost choices” we can deepen capacities that contribute to the creation of a generative social field—capacities in how we attend, how we create spatial coherence, how we enrich the quality of relationships, and how we shape time.

In non-verbal experience, as in verbal conversation, confusion and disconnection can ensue when we project assumptions and inaccurate interpretations. Often, we are living in our own individual, team, or sector bubble, unaware of what others are offering, zeroing in on what attracts us, making choices that inadvertently exclude others, always seeking comfort, wanting control, being dissatisfied—an endless array of very human habitual patterns that can be obstacles to creating healthy teams and organizations. 4D Mapping reveals our habitual patterns which can be painful and saddening. Feeling these painful moments in the collective, without blame or judgment, is a starting point. We cannot jump to creating a generative field without feeling the earthiness, rough edges, and stuck places revealed in practice. Willingness to be with and feel our current situation, often reveals that under the confusion lies wisdom and possibility just waiting to be attended to and called forth.

Stuck

Stuck is a practice that draws our attention to interdependence—how outer systemic forces and mental models mold and shape us and how much our presence influences others. It moves our stuck situations from being problems to being starting places for learning, healing, and creative transformation. Participants build social sculptures to embody “stuck” situations and attend as these social sculptures move into a second sculpture that can reveal a hidden direction, insight, or empowerment.

The Stuck practice invites leaders to activate their body intelligence. In one case, leaders of a small non-profit organization said, “We would like to have more young people come to our programs, but we are not attracting them.” That is a current reality statement. Youth are not attracted today, coupled with an aspiration that youth will be attracted in the future. The team had thought about it, convened meetings to talk about it, did some research—all useful, but they were not moving forward. They decided to invite body-knowing into this conversation—a fresh perspective.

Together they created a physical sculpture that embodied the felt sense of the current situation. We call this Sculpture 1. They visualized the systemic forces pulling, pushing, or blocking in their current situation, and embodied those forces as a sculpture. This is not acting or pretending, not psycho-drama. If the body is the situation, does it feel weighed down, stretched apart, pulled in opposite directions? They engaged the physical body to sense the multiple interdependent systemic forces—both outer societal forces and inner mental models—shaping the current situation, preventing it from transforming into its aspiration.

They leaned into the discomfort of Sculpture 1. They stayed with it. Then, without thinking about a goal, they let their bodies guide them to a second sculpture. They had no idea where they were going. They trusted their embodied experience as they moved from their first posture to a second still shape, Sculpture 2. From there, without planning or thinking, each one spoke a word or short phrase to give voice to their embodied sculpture. Finally, they reflected together on their experience. Sculpture 2 is not a solution to a problem, but the process can reveal an insight, direction, or empower a next step. The “stuck” situation, as familiar and habitual as it seems, is often not sustainable. The system wants to move to a more open, aligned, creative place—its own true move.

We have now joined the view of Social Presencing Theater—awareness of open space of possibility—with practices that give birth to genuine expression. We practice with others to bring the view of not knowing/open space into our everyday life. We practice to increase our trust that embodied knowing can bring benefit to the day-to-day challenges in teams, classrooms, organizations, communities. Practices are repeated over and over to gain competency,

relaxation, and confidence. The place of practice (even if it is your office or living room) is the studio. The studio is a place to make, practice, gather, repeat, deepen, fail, refine, doubt, stumble, be surprised. It is a place for training in genuineness—the place for discovering the true move. By practicing we gain confidence to skillfully apply these embodied methods in places that are not familiar with this way of learning. Grounding in the view and practice is the only way to gain the skill and confidence necessary to share this work with organizations and communities that could benefit from this awareness-based approach to transformation.

Result: Spaces for Social Transformation

Art takes nothing from the world: it is a gift and an exchange. It leaves the world nourished. Poems, novels, plays, with their great deep minds of story, awaken the Heart of Compassion. And so they confound the economic markets, rattle the empires, and open us up to the actually existing human and non-human world.

Performance is art in motion; in the moment; both enactment and embodiment. This is exactly what nature herself is.

—Gary Snyder, *Writers and the War Against Nature*

We touched on the view of Social Presencing Theater as the open space of Nowness. The *practice* is the movement forms in which we cultivate genuineness—the true move—through embodiment and awareness. *Result* is the capacity to fully manifest the view and practice in our personal and work life. We have found that joining the view of openness with embodied practice has enabled us to create spaces that host moment-to-moment transformation in our families, teams, organizations, and communities. These spaces are “theaters,” in that resonance is created by seeing and being seen. The “theater” can be any place where those “doing” and those “witnessing” co-create an event or experience, after which they are invited to reflect together. The result is collective seeing and sensing out of which arise fresh insights, clarity of intention, deep sense of connection, and confidence to step forward—the components of social transformation.

The marks on the canvas, the gestures on the stage, are seen by viewers, by the community. The theater has long been a place where communities gather to collectively celebrate, delight, shift perspective, mourn, and deepen a sense of what it is to be human with other humans in community. Together, performers and audience co-create a shared experience that has the potential to open and transform. Social Presencing Theater invites us to be both “doers,” those offering movements and gestures, and witnesses, those offering attention. The theater is the place of resonance between those “on a stage” and those who attend. Our theater could be a classroom, office space, conference room, or community space.

They are gathering places in which seeing and sensing ourselves can give rise to co-creation and social transformation.

The theater is a space for social transformation—a place to share stories, to entertain, to uplift, to heal, to protest, and to gain new perspectives. It is a space of generosity. Performers give what they have learned and practiced. Audiences give their attention. In this space of collective resonance between performers and viewers arise beauty, humor, wonder, celebration, thoughtfulness, provocation. In my own life, whether I was on a stage or in the audience, I was part of a community that shared an experience as we journeyed together from beginning to end of the event. Our human-heartedness had been touched, both individually and collectively.

Social Presencing Theater developed at the Presencing Institute in parallel with and is in service of awareness-based systems transformation. The practices are offered to teams, organizations, schools, and communities that express a need for fresh and powerful ways to embody a saner future. Today many Social Presencing Theater practitioners are creating spaces for social transformation based on this exchange between “players” who enact, and those who hold space and witness, as they co-create a social experience that can deepen and expand a sense of collective care and agency.

I hear many stories of the benefits or results from engaging in Social Presencing Theater. The practices have helped many cultivate embodied-knowing. Some leaders say they can trust the space of not knowing, that they are learning to sense the social field as a ground for intention and action, to be more present under pressure. Others say they are more aware of their habitual patterns in interactions and more willing to shift perspectives and behaviors. In this issue, the In Dialogue article details a conversation with four change leaders who share insights and potential from their 4D Mapping practice. Recently I heard the story of a woman whose Stuck practice revealed a direction that she felt directly led to her promotion to General Manager of a global corporation. These are stories of individual or team shifts in perception and engagement. However, the work of these individuals and teams weaves a larger fabric of social transformation—positive change on the planet.

Transformation

Transformation is a big word that implies a major change in form, nature or function. We probably have all experienced mini social transformations that occur when a group of strangers share a retreat, workshop, or a camping trip. We gradually open up, soften, become more honest. We feel seen, connected. Sitting quietly on the porch, walking in nature, conversing, and learning together can transform us from a collection of individual body-minds to a social body and a social field of relationships. We are not the same at the end as we were at the beginning. We hold an intention that this quality of exchange can occur in our work environments and community engagements to address the social and environmental challenges that face us all.

Today many people know that personal reflection and cultivation are prerequisites for impactful work in outer systems change. However, there may be hesitation to engage in embodied movement practices in professional or educational settings. There is vulnerability in being seen. People ask, “I know it can be of benefit, but how do I apply this in my organization of disembodied people or with my skeptical client.” We could come up with a list of suggestions; however, that might be missing the point. Certainly, holding the view of open possibility, and practicing regularly with others in a Social Presencing Theater practice group can result in skill and confidence. Then we listen deeply to the challenges and aspirations of people who we have the privilege to support. We trust ourselves and the practices. The result can be quite surprising in professional and community contexts where thinking and talking is so much more familiar.

There are many reasons for wanting to offer to others—to pass on what one has learned from a teacher, to perform something one has made for an audience, to share what has been meaningful to us. On reflection, I think that my motivation for performing dances in theaters was to invite guests into potential spaces of aesthetic-transformation. This is still true today. We have seen that Social Presencing Theater has enabled leaders, educators, and changemakers to create these spaces of aesthetic-transformation. I would like to point out three such spaces—the empty spaces of stillness, the space of beholding innate connection, and the space that welcomes the richness of diversity. These spaces invite the emergence of deep recognition of the innate wisdom, care, and courage in the social field.

The Capacity to Attend to Empty Spaces of Stillness

In the 1980’s and 90’s I made performance work with visual artists and dancers, largely driven by an interest in the aesthetic principles of traditional Japanese performance arts and the films of Yasujiro Ozu. I was interested in applying the aesthetic principles of *ma* (an open gap or interval in time or in space) and *jo ha kyu* (a shape of time) to the process of contemporary dance-making for the theater. I was interested in the beauty of ordinariness, in ceremonies, in empty spaces, in bringing together things that did not obviously fit together, and in improvisation as a generator for choreography and as a performance form.

In many of my choreographed dances there were times when very little was happening. Two men share a coffee from a thermos on an otherwise empty stage. Several people build structures of bamboo poles and rocks. They were not heightened special moments, but ordinary activities with spaces of stillness. By pausing, the “doers” invited the “viewers” to share a moment of resonance, to be touched and enjoy the beauty of simple gestures, illuminated on a stage.

One result from the practice of Social Presencing Theater is a tolerance for, trust in, or even appetite for gaps of “not much happening.” This may not seem to some as a legitimate result; however, I have observed that these moments of

stillness provide sanity in this time of polarity between hyper-urgency and paralysis. These gaps are powerful spaces to open to the natural resonance that is always there but frequently missed.

Duets is a Social Presencing Theater practice that deliberately includes gaps of non-action. We explore the principle of *ma*, and the power of stillness in everyday conversations. The Duet is a non-verbal conversation in which the first person offers a movement and holds their ending posture. Instead of the partner immediately responding, there is a gap—an empty space of non-movement. There is space for deeper resonance. The partner's gesture arises spontaneously out of a shared openness—free from habitual or conventional reacting or responding. Stillness boycotts habitual flow, enabling the true move to arise.

Recently a coach attending a workshop shared that she found that pausing in the practice created discomfort and that forcing herself to stop did not allow flow. She said that if she had to stop, then she did not know what to do next. The *ma* interrupts the habitual flow of ideas and movement, making a space for something fresh and unknown to enter. It is a practice of letting go of what we think we know and can control and inviting a surprise. I think this coach speaks for many of us. We live in a time when the cultural norm is to keep moving, keep producing, keep focusing, and to become an expert. Doing nothing, even for a few seconds, can be unwelcomed. It can cause anxiety, irritation, and boredom. Bringing this gap of silence into today's organizational culture can feel dissonant, even threatening. Sometimes that open gap brings a moment of panic. For a fraction of a moment, we lose our conventional reference point of “me.”

However, I am certain that these gaps of stillness are key to social transformation. We have seen and heard from many that deepening the trust in spaces of stillness is one result from engaging in Social Presencing Theater. We can leave still spaces before acting and silent spaces before speaking. We can open to wonder, listening to nature and to others for what we do not already know. These gaps enable a heightened visibility between doer and viewer, a shared resonance between speaker and listener. Those spaces devoid of facts and figures enable us, collectively, to listen for what has not happened yet. It is a moment of “not knowing.” However, this not knowing opens a space of deeper knowing, a wisdom space of heightened awareness. We can sense the presence of ordinary sacredness in these gaps. Gestures or words arise from the big space, not confined by all our reference points. This is true creativity and innovation. Social Presencing Theater practice trains us to include stillness and silent spaces of not knowing at home and in work settings, enabling freshness, something unexpected, to enter and surprise us.

The pause of non-doing and not knowing can be awkward or relaxing. No pressure to keep moving, a rest. However, it is a moment in which ordinary sacredness can appear. In the Duet practice we allow a movement to end, to fade away. Out of that open space a partner's gesture arises that is not “thought up,” not “keeping the ball in the air.” The gesture arises from open stillness. The result of this non-verbal two-person practice is the courage to bring these

moments of stillness into our work, allowing gaps in conversation, bringing moments of grounded stillness into meetings and into coaching, pausing to stop and look out the window between activities. I am certain that these pauses, embodied spaces of attention, are needed for genuine communication and creativity. One result of Social Presencing Theater is that individuals and groups have gained the capacity to do nothing—to leave gaps of simplicity and presence in the contexts in which they live and work.

The Capacity to Behold Spaces of Belonging

Performance is of key importance because this phenomenal world and all life is of itself “not a book, but a performance.

—Gary Snyder, *Writers and the War Against Nature*

Earlier I said that the root of the word theater is literally “place for viewing,” from the Thai “to behold.” The stage is a place of heightened visibility for enacting, presenting, performing, showing. Viewers see, hear, and receive the doing, enacting, presenting. They offer their attention. These two, the performers and the witnesses together, create the theater. Several Social Presencing Theater practices challenge what we “download” from past experiences onto this setting, so we can investigate how genuine co-creation can arise.

Recently I worked with a group of high school students in California. In small groups of four, students created sequences of movement, and then each group showed what they had made to the others in the class. I asked those who were watching, “What is your role as an audience.” We had talked earlier about “holding space for others.” A young person quickly replied, “to judge.” Some students giggled. Some agreed, but some disagreed, opening a reflective conversation in the class.

Being seen is the basis of feeling valued by others and leads to a sense of belonging and connection. Yet many of us feel that being seen and seeing is adversarial. We want to be acknowledged and yet being seen evokes anxiety that we will be judged. Why do we as witnesses feel that we need to become critics and judges? Where did we learn that being intelligent means that we can quickly find flaws in other people? The scenario in which the person standing in front of us is obligated to teach, entertain, or inspire us, as we sit passively in judgment, does not establish fertile soil for co-creativity, healing, or learning. It is not a generative social field.

Fortunately, those attending can change this paradigm by practicing beholding. Beholding is not a quick peek—looking that bounces off the surface. Beholding is slowing down, attending, allowing resonance and felt-knowing to arise. Beholding is seeing with the whole body, with an open heart. It enables a sense of deep connection and communication. Even if we do not like what we see, we can stay with the feeling called “not liking,” without immediately shutting

down, jumping into criticism. Not-liking need not be mean-spirited. It can be kind and curious. Beholding is awareness that holds the space for emergence, for what will appear. It is not a transaction between a seller and a buyer. A beholder is not asking, “is this worth my time and money?” The beholder is willing to be moved; to appreciate.

In our everyday life and work, there are many opportunities to perform and to behold. It is any designated space that invites a performer to do and be seen and a viewer to behold—to see and to feel. Many people think quite negatively about the word *perform* because it connotes faking, showing off, or manipulating. But that is not how I am using the word. We may not identify as trained actors or dancers, but I am positing that every day we are all performers and enactors, as well as beholders.

Anyone who designs and engages in meetings, projects, birthday parties—events that have a beginning, middle, and end—is a performing artist. Anyone who stands in front of people to facilitate, teach, tell a story, lead, inspire, offer a toast, influence, or entertain is on a stage, no matter where the location. Whenever we deeply listen, hold space, or see, we behold. Awareness that lives in the space between performer and beholders creates an atmosphere of trust that can support social co-creativity. A second result of Social Presencing Theater is that it creates spaces for beholding, for making humanness visible and felt. One ancient meaning of beholding was to see the sacred, the fundamental purity and brilliance.

The Capacity to Build Spaces of Richness

As a choreographer I was interested in an aesthetic in which several incongruent activities were going on in the space at the same time—moving sticks or rocks while more recognizable dance movement was also happening. In my years of dance-making, high school students and adults, dancers of diverse ethnicities and abilities, visual artists, musicians, and community members co-created a social reality together. The stage became a place where diverse elements not only lived together but complemented each other. The space made visible the unique beauty held in the ancient Japanese and the Western contemporary, the ordinary and the formal, the natural and the designed. The smallest gesture expressed vast space. Diverse elements found their place of integrity and beauty.

Over the years of offering workshops in Social Presencing Theater, we facilitators have noticed that people often say they feel connected when they make eye contact, do movements that are the same as others, when they are physically close to others in or near the center of the space. This is not surprising. What does surprise us is how frequently people express a feeling of disconnection when they cannot make eye contact, do movements that are different from others, and are at a distance from others. This interested us in terms of creating spaces for diversity.

Several years ago, social designer-researcher Ricardo Dutra and I created a set of Aesthetic Language Cards to explore what we called “social aesthetic patterns” in the Village practice.⁴ The cards were designed to create a pattern language for making visible the deeper structures of social fields. They increased our awareness of three levels of experience—what we were seeing, what we were sensing or feeling, and the quality of our awareness. We discovered that by using the cards to reflect on our experience, we could broaden the sense of connection from dependence on sameness, closeness, and eye contact, to a sense of connection based on open awareness of the whole. This allowed for greater inventiveness in movements and spatial patterns, as well as the freedom to experiment without disconnecting from the others.

The practice of extending our “awareness antennae” made visible and honored the diversity in our social systems without privileging sameness, closeness, or eye contact. We cultivated a collective intention to attend to the well-being of the whole Village. Soft eyes and peripheral vision brought knowing into the side and back body. We noticed what people did in our side space, their movement and spatial choices. Communication and coherence were established as people not only included or imitated but also contrasted and changed what others had offered. Choice making arose from awareness of the whole space—picking up on the diverse array of gestures, directions, groupings—all arising spontaneously in the space.

It is a cliché to say that social richness is created by a community of diverse ethnicities, identities, ages, beliefs, geographies, socioeconomics, abilities, and privilege. We say that, and yet one challenge in the world today is intolerance and an inability to listen to, or even to be with, people “not like us.” The topic of belonging and othering are prominent in our social discourse. The aesthetic concept of *contrast* suggests that different, even opposing, elements (colors, shapes, movements) can more vividly bring out the unique qualities of each element and expand our awareness to see a space that holds both. Using aesthetic principles when reflecting on shared experience broadens the conversation from psychological-social or political language and concepts. This shift in language to an aesthetic frame provides a spaciousness that holds difference and allows us to move into difficult conversations with more bravery and empathy.

Recently a team of nine Social Presencing Theater practitioners met to design a space to explore polarization—differences that solidify into fixation and push forward a particular view without capacity to even hear, much less consider others. We acknowledged that polarization was not just “out there,” but lived in our team and in each of us. We used the Social Presencing Theater practices to create small “moments.” I had learned to use Moment Work as a way of devising theater from Greg Pierotti who had been a creator with the Tectonic Theater

⁴ See <https://www.u-school.org/spt> for more information.

Project. Although we did not apply this method with the vigor of this innovative theater company, the method has supported our performance work since we first began making small Social Presencing Theater performances. The embodiment practices provoked stories of hurt, anger, and cynicism. They also opened a space to feel under those to a sense of broken heartedness. We listened for the soft tenderness under the surface. We shared the result of our process in a short performance, followed by a hosted conversation with the audience. The social field included our individual bodies, our ensemble body, and the audience body—all engaged in a journey to learn and heal.

In a series of practice gatherings of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color), we noticed that tenderness, shared knowing, and natural creativity lie beneath our protective shells. I have heard people say, “it’s not real life, it’s theater.” There is something useful here. We can think of theater as a lab where we can try things out. We have seen that Social Presencing Theater can offer forms that hold very diverse experiences. When people enact something together and then reflect together, the form establishes a safe space for sharing emotions. It is not a theoretical or idea-driven conversation. We have embodied, enacted, and felt something together. It is brave work. Dialogue arises from shared experience rather than from ideologies. Brave dialogue opens compassion.

Enacting and beholding our genuineness are ordinary human capacities, and yet they take courage. They move us out of the speed, comfort-driven, results-oriented aspects of life. It takes courage to feel. It takes courage to soften, get off our “high ground” and extend warmth and care particularly to those we do not like, trust, or agree with. It takes courage to let those in the world who suffer the most into our hearts. But we can practice and gain the capacity to be fully human. One result of Social Presencing Theater is that it has become a practice field for deepening our courage and care. Any social space—at home, at work, or community gatherings—has the potential of being a sacred space in which a glimpse of a brave caring society can unfold.

Conclusion

The goal is to reconnect to the nowness of reality, so that you can go forward without destroying simplicity, without destroying your connection to this earth.

—Chogyam Trungpa, *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior*

This article offered a brief look at the view, practice, and result of Social Presencing Theater in awareness-based systems transformation. We began by considering a longing to connect with our genuine selves, with one another, and with the good Earth. We suggested that Social Presencing Theater fosters connection by staying present, lightening the weight of our conceptual and habitual frameworks, shifting our attention to the sensing body, and giving us

the courage to open our heart-knowing and engage in the moment-to-moment process of transformation into a caring, compassionate future. The key is welcoming not knowing, celebrating awkwardness, cultivating unconditional trust, and being brave. The practice cultivates relaxation-based attunement with the environment and is a vital support to awareness-based systems change.

We establish the view of ordinary sacredness when offering Social Presencing Theater in organizations, classrooms, teams, or client contexts. We take the attitude that this team or organization is a being that has wisdom and caring at its heart. We examine with kindness our individual, historical, and collective blind spots and prejudices. We gently support our organizations in acknowledging blockages and failures. However, we do not lose sight of the larger field, or that hidden in the stuck situation is basic healthiness, sanity and care of the collective. It is bigger than the collective. The system has a longing to transform, and the longing itself is the basic wellness present now in the system, unseen and unfelt. Ordinary sacredness lives in every moment. That is the basic approach that we bring to awareness-based systems transformation.

The word *systems* often suggests an image of large, institutional social systems, such as public education or the United Nations. Thinking of the magnitude of challenges—the falling apart of institutions and countries, extreme weather, displacement of children and families—can feel quite overwhelming, requiring us to work directly with our fear and sense of helplessness. One definition for the word *system* is “interconnecting network.” I suppose we could say that there is nothing but systems—the body-mind system, the imaginary individual-all living beings’ system, and the all living beings-Mother Earth system. But do we feel the truth of systems, of the interconnecting network?

Likewise, we could say that there is nothing but change. We and everything around us is constantly changing. Every day we experience things coming together, being born, and things falling apart and dying. Awareness knows the truth of both interconnection and of impermanence and change. Perhaps awareness has no boundaries and simply illuminates. We say that presencing is awareness that attends so deeply to the present moment that it can sense an emerging future. Once, many years ago, I heard Otto, speaking about transformation, say, “Sometimes the only thing we can know is which direction to face and where to put our next step.”

Awareness-based implies being present now. Social Presencing Theater is the practice of staying in the present, knowing which direction to face, and where to put our next step. The body holds the past; however, it lives in the present. My stomach feels this way now. My feet on the floor feel this way now. My mind knows that it is not yesterday’s stomach or tomorrow’s feet. It is Now. What I see is Now. What I hear is Now. Social Presencing Theater is training us how to fully show up for life Now—in our body, in our social bodies, on our planet body Earth.

Our presence affects and moves others; their presence moves us. This movement is change. But maybe the change is not innovation in the conventional sense, not coming up with solutions to problems. Maybe the change is fuller

resonance—facing the direction of our own wisdom, and the step is motivated by our longing to fully care for this world and each other. We enter organizations not as experts or saviors, selling Social Presencing Theater as a transformation tool. We enter knowing that whatever happens is a co-created experience that relies on the tremendous goodwill, generosity, and bravery of everyone in the room (or the zoom). Maybe awareness of being present together, seeing and being seen, in Now, is the ground out of which transformation emerges—the ground for creating enlightened society.

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Peer Review Article

4D Mapping:

An Embodied Awareness-Based Approach to Regenerative Organizational Development

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Abstract

This paper examines 4D Mapping, a methodology within Social Presencing Theater (SPT), as an awareness-based approach to regenerative organizational development in an era of polycrisis. When working with complex systems change, practitioners face the fundamental challenge of navigating transformation beyond predictability and control, where the intervention is not ‘made’, but rather emerges from a relational field. While organizational development offers numerous theories and tools for planned change, we propose that transformative practices require integrating systems thinking with systems sensing—an embodied, felt-sense approach that activates both heart and sensory awareness, enabling systems to see and sense themselves.

We develop the '4D Social Field Matrix' as a theoretical framework that shows how 4D Mapping integrates multiple ways of knowing as a social field intervention. Drawing from case examples across Latin America, North America,

and Europe—ranging from water management, forest conservation governance, Indigenous organization, and youth empowerment—we illustrate the theoretical and methodological foundations of 4D Mapping and how it gives voice to more-than-human stakeholders in complex systems challenges. By making these foundations explicit, we aim to deepen practitioner awareness regarding this social field intervention, including the underlying view of the practice, and clarifying its epistemological foundations. Our findings hope to contribute to both theory and practice by articulating how embodied methodologies and Social Arts can support emergent organizational change, tapping into regenerative potential and vitality of systems.

Keywords

4D Mapping, Social Presencing Theater, systems sensing, social fields, embodied knowing, regenerative organizational development

Introduction

In an era of polycrisis and systemic disruption, systems change practitioners are increasingly called to engage with complex societal challenges where ecological degradation and social polarization become ever more visible and felt. Our systemic interventions, even on a small scale, must recognize global interconnectedness, fostering shifts from egocentric to ecosystem awareness (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013) that includes marginalized and more-than-human actors (Abram, 1996).

The transition toward a regenerative paradigm requires what Wahl (2005: 74-75) identifies as multiple epistemologies:

We are in a process of a fundamental shift in society's guiding paradigm, as our motivation for achieving knowledge changes from an aim to increase our ability to predict, control and manipulate natural processes to an aim to increase our ability to make the complex dynamics and relationships in nature more intelligible in order to participate appropriately in the health and wholeness sustaining processes of Nature... The fabric of life is unravelling with humanity as a conscious witness but also a cause of the disintegration. We are desperately in need of what Goethe called “knowledge utterly in tune with the nature of things.”

By recognizing the need to shift our ways of operating beyond “predict and control,” we face what Fazey et al. (2018) describe as the second-order transformation challenge: the need to transform our ways of understanding transformation itself. Current developments in the regenerative paradigm and awareness-based systems change call for new frameworks and intervention practices that access collective intelligence, reveal invisible system dynamics, include more-than-human stakeholders, tap into regenerative potential and design for emergence (Reed, 2007; Wheatley, 2007; Sanford, 2017; Scharmer,

2016), bridge multiple ways of knowing (Flood, 1998; Rajagopalan 2020), decolonize systems thinking, and reconnect with Mother Earth, thus disrupting global patterns of trauma (Goodchild, 2021).

How do we advance systems thinking beyond merely rational analysis (Rajagopalan 2020)? Advanced systems thinking requires not only understanding a system but also sensing it in ways that honor both the visible and invisible dimensions of transformation, including what is emerging and not yet visible (Scharmer & Pomeroy, 2024). Here intervention is not “made” but rather “emerges” and thus can no longer be understood in a Cartesian sense through causal-effectual reasoning and pre-conceived models (Fuchs, 1999). Instead, it emerges from an "intensified field awareness" (Looss, 2003) in-between the actors, emphasizing the intervener's role in intensifying perception of the emerging field. While conventional management approaches often stop here, lacking cartographies for perceiving field effects, Looss directs us towards exploring arts and their reception as disciplines with experience in field effects and collective co-creation.

Following this direction, this paper examines Social Presencing Theater’s 4D Mapping as an example of how social arts practices can serve as a training ground for sharpening practitioners’ sensing capacities for social fields (Hayashi & Dutra, 2020) and as a systems intervention that integrates multiple epistemological dimensions to access what Scharmer and Pomeroy (2024: 23) call “the collective interior” of social fields - thereby addressing the soil dimensions of quality of awareness and relations in systems (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2025).

Our article unfolds in three complementary parts: Part I establishes the foundations and origins of 4D Mapping within the broader context of Social Presencing Theater and Theory U, detailing its methodological principles and three-phase process structure. Part II positions 4D Mapping within the ongoing evolution of Organizational Development, highlighting its alignment with emerging regenerative paradigms and developing the "4D Social Field Matrix" as a theoretical framework for understanding it as a social field intervention. Finally, Part III explores the embodied dimensions of 4D Mapping practice through diverse case examples—examining how it accesses the collective interior through representative perception (Weber, 2000), embodied shape-making (Hayashi 2021), intercorporeality (Merleau-Ponty, 1964), and generative dialogue (Bohm, 1996; Isaacs, 1999; Scharmer, 2016).

We illustrate how 4D Mapping enables transformative shifts in understanding and action by integrating analytical, relational, and intuitive ways of knowing. By making explicit the theoretical foundations and practical applications of this approach, we aim to deepen practitioner awareness regarding what we are doing (systems intervention and methodology), the inner place from which we do it (awareness, attitude, view), our ways of knowing and assumptions (epistemology), and how we understand transformation (theory of change)—all essential dimensions for navigating today’s complex transformation challenges.

Starting Point of the Inquiry and Case Examples

The collaboration leading to this paper emerged when the COVID-19 pandemic challenged us to translate 4D Mapping—an embodied systems mapping practice—into a reliable online format. This challenge brought together a team at the Presencing Institute in 2021, including Otto Scharmer, with support from SPT practitioners in over 15 virtual facilitation processes.

Our complementary expertise proved essential for the research and development process. I (Sebastian) brought my background in Organizational Development, Social Presencing Theater and systemic constellations; I (Arawana), as SPT founder, contributed my choreography background and bringing dharma art practices into the creation of performance work. Through four years of joint research and development, we clarified 4D Mapping's essential principles and core mechanisms. The result is this paper and the Virtual 4D Space—an online design surface supporting virtual 4D Mapping sessions.¹

To illustrate our theoretical framework, we draw from personal facilitation experience and action research data summarized below. These diverse cases contribute to understanding the phenomena we describe in this primarily theoretical and methodological paper. Our approach involved comparing emerging interview data and published dialogues with existing session reports and facilitation experiences, allowing for an iterative process that informs our framework.

Case Example	Case Date	Interviewee & Interview Setting
Beth Mount – u-lab 2x ² - Disability Services Case, USA	April 2021	Beth Mount's In-Dialogue conversation on Virtual 4D Mapping published in this issue.
Ericka Toledo – u-lab 2x - Forest Conservation Case, Mexico	March 2023	Two interviews conducted with the u-lab 2x team—and use of the automated report created by the Virtual 4D Space.
Ecosystem Leadership Program, Latin America – Youth Case, Colombia	March 2023	One micro-phenomenological interview (Petitmengin et al., 2019) around the perspective of a viewer regarding the Social Field in the 4D Mapping.
Joost Van de Crujisen – Regional Waterboard Case, Netherlands	October 2023	Joost Van de Crujisen's insights from the In-Dialogue published in this issue and use of the automated report created by the Virtual 4D Space.
Ecosystem Leadership Program, Latin America – Witoto Institute Case, Brasil	March 2024	Three interviews conducted on 4D Mapping experiences, after the ELP Chile program.

Table 1: Data sources for the article.

¹ To learn more about 4D Mapping and the 'Virtual 4D Space', visit <https://www.u-school.org/4dmapping>.

² u-lab 2x is a 4-month u-school program designed for teams to activate prototypes for systems change, using the tools and methods of awareness-based systems change.

Part I: The Origins and Purpose of 4D Mapping

Developed by Arawana Hayashi, Social Presencing Theater (SPT) is an interplay of everyday meditation and embodiment activities paired with reflection that supports personal and collective transformation and creativity. Through physical postures and movements, practitioners access insights beyond conceptual limitations, revealing and visualizing embedded systems patterns of both current realities and emerging possibilities (Hayashi, 2021).

4D Mapping originated in 2010 during the Occupy Wall Street Moment in Boston, when Otto Scharmer and Arawana Hayashi brought together interdisciplinary practitioners from dance, the Presencing community, and Systemic Constellations. Through experimentation, it evolved into a distinct approach to systems transformation, synthesizing contemplative practices, Theory U processes, systemic constellations and organizational change applications (Hayashi, 2021). The practice takes its name from the four dimensions it engages: three spatial dimensions plus time, allowing participants to track potential evolutions of systems.

Like all SPT practices, 4D Mapping is a "form" with a specific view, purpose, and process. In the context of SPT, a "form" refers to a structured activity or exercise with clear process instructions, designed to facilitate embodied awareness and social presencing. Its primary purpose is to enable a "system to see and sense itself," facilitating deeper understanding of systemic patterns and force dynamics that maintain current structures in organizations, governmental bodies, or other systems such as healthcare or education, while simultaneously exploring emergent future potentials (Hayashi, 2021). The methodology is particularly valuable for groups, teams, organizations, or in multi-stakeholder settings seeking systemic insights beyond conventional analytical or dialogue formats.

The approach's value lies in three key attributes: efficiency in rapid sensemaking when resources are limited; depth in uncovering both intellectual complexities and emotional dynamics between stakeholders; and establishment of a shared language through which systems develop self-awareness—creating opportunities for field-level transformation and previously unattainable collaborations (Scharmer, 2018).

4D Mapping aims to reveal systemic shifts between Sculpture 1 (current reality) and Sculpture 2 (emerging future). This transformation process (from one Sculpture into another) underlies the view of what Beuys and later Scharmer termed "inversion"—a fundamental shift from ego-centric awareness, where actors operate from their own bubbles, to ecosystem awareness where they open to the well-being of the larger system (Scharmer, 2016). Beuys' concept of "social sculpture," positioning practitioners as active sculptors of social reality, is a key inspiration for 4D Mapping.

The Three Phases of 4D Mapping

4D Mapping unfolds through three distinct phases that align with the Theory U-Process framework. The co-initiation phase establishes the foundational elements: defining the Case Giver's intention and identifying key stakeholder roles. The sensing phase begins with the creation of Sculpture 1, with Players (participants embodying stakeholder roles) representing current reality, followed by a critical presencing moment where participants let go of preconceptions, allowing the system's emergent future to crystallize in a movement toward Sculpture 2. This crystallization continues through collective sense-making in a generative dialogue focused on identifying leverage points and future potentials. The final co-creation phase involves an integration session with the Case Giver team, supporting their transition from insight to strategic action.

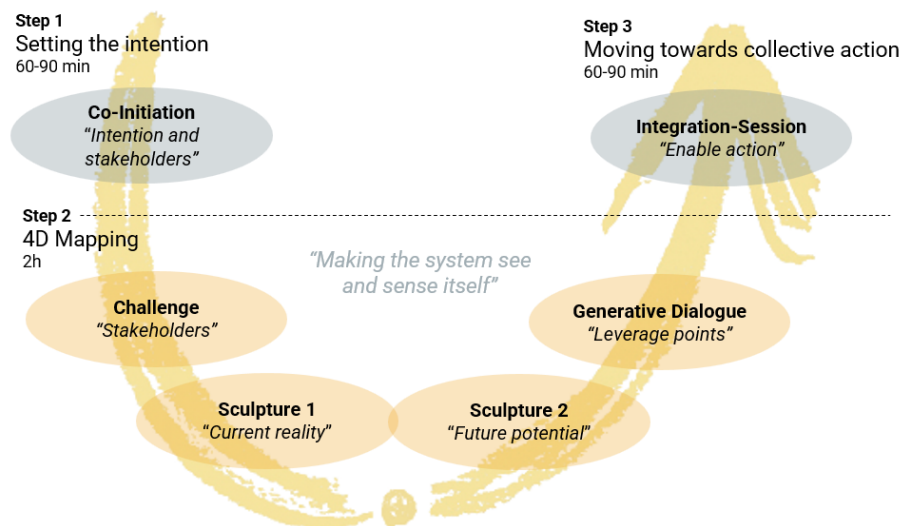


Figure 1: The three phases of 4D Mapping along the U-Process by the authors.

Preparation-Phase: Setting Intention and System Boundaries

The mapping process begins with the Case Givers and Facilitator clarifying their intention for the mapping and defining system boundaries through stakeholder roles. This initial step is already a critical first intervention, often yielding significant insights as the Case Giver must articulate both their deeper intention and guiding question, as well as identify the key stakeholder roles.

Beth Mount emphasizes the value of this phase as a first systems intervention in the *In Dialogue* article in this issue:

As I thought back on it, it was more than just the 4D map itself. The formulation of the question was hugely important. We spent a huge amount of time between us trying to really clarify. What is the question we're bringing to this 4D map? What is the question that we're really living with inside of ourselves? (Pomeroy et al., 2025, p. 192)

4D Mapping situates each system within its global context, addressing the polycrisis by incorporating Scharmer's (2007) interconnected "three divides" as stakeholder roles in each map:

1. *Ecological divide*: Nature disconnection, represented by Earth, a region, or specific place
2. *Social divide*: Inequity and exclusion, represented by marginalized stakeholders
3. *Spiritual divide*: Self-disconnection, represented by "highest future potential"

Inclusion of these divides ensures awareness of global connectivity, fostering shifts from egocentric to ecosystem awareness including marginalized and more-than-human actors. All roles are specific and represent actual stakeholders (people, groups, or more-than-human actors) rather than concepts, values, or ideas. The pre-session concludes by establishing the sequence in which the roles enter the mapping during the process, typically starting with elements holding most power or attention in the system.

The 4D Mapping in Three Steps: Embodiment, Surfacing the Dots, and Generative Dialogue

The process begins with all participants sitting in a circle as Viewers in 4D Mapping, creating a collective holding space to witness the mapping. After the Case Giver presents key challenges, intentions, and roles, participants volunteer to embody stakeholder roles as Players. With embodied awareness participants step into these stakeholder roles, sensing and discovering their place, level, and direction in the system. Each Player settles into a position and physical embodied shape, expressing him or herself through a word or phrase

Once all Players find their place, the result is Sculpture 1, representing the current reality of the system. Figure 2 shows an example of the Ecosystem Leadership Program 2024, Chile.

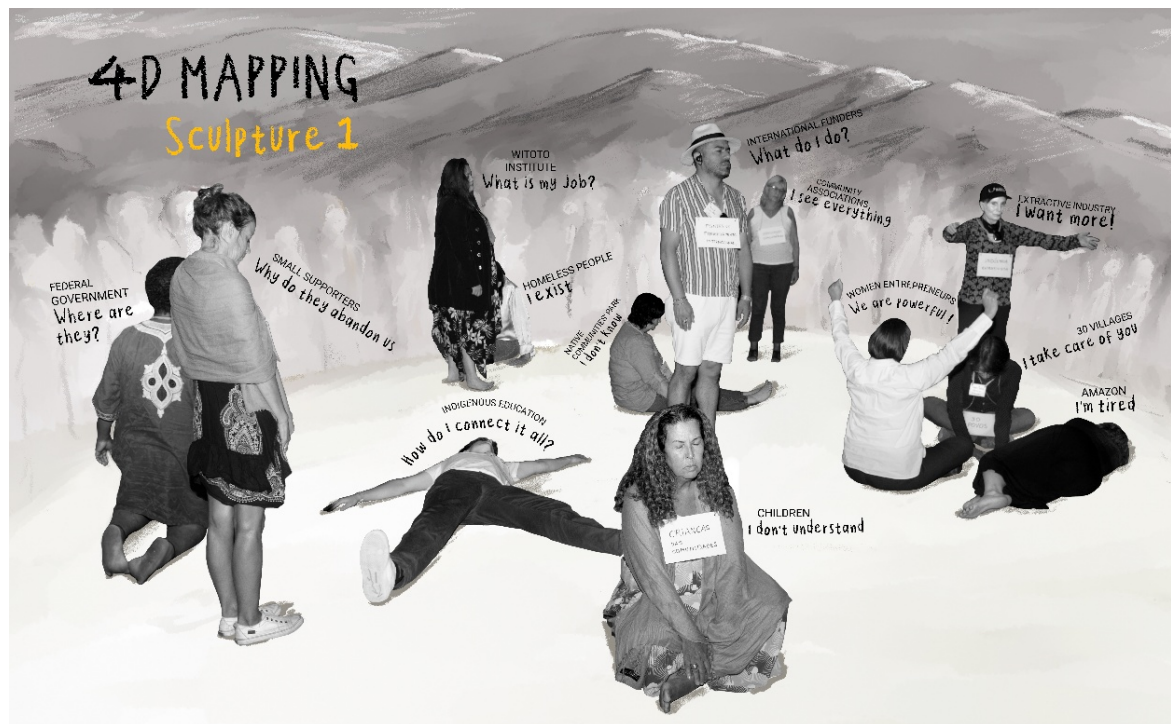


Figure 2: Sculpture 1 of the Witoto Mapping in the ELP Chile (Barbara Lehnebach in Jung & Miranda, 2025).

Sculpture 1 makes visible both restrictive forces (blind spots, marginalization patterns) and enabling forces, while Sculpture 2 represents the emerging future. Between Sculpture 1 and Sculpture 2, a moment of stillness occurs where Players suspend thoughts and opinions, remaining in their bodies while extending awareness to the whole system as its own being (Hayashi, 2021). The transition process between these sculptures aims to help identify enabling conditions and crucial shifts necessary for system evolution (Scharmer, 2018).

The sensemaking process consists of two steps: “Surfacing the Dots,” by which we mean the surfacing of individual phenomenological lived experiences, and a generative dialogue where the group harvests collective intelligence to identify what keeps the system stuck and what future seeds and leverage points moving forward might become prototypes.

Post-Integration Phase: Moving Towards Agency

The integration continues beyond the actual 4D Mapping session, allowing systemic insights to mature organically. Through follow-up session(s), typically a few weeks after the mapping and continuing as needed, facilitators help maintain a balance between addressing identified blind spots and nurturing emergent seeds so they can move into prototypes and agency. The timing and frequency of follow-up sessions can vary as 4D Mapping may not be a single intervention, but part of a dialogic process consultation for systems change (Schein, 1999), adapted to the Case Giver’s needs and system complexity.

Part II: 4D Mapping within the Evolution of Organizational Development

Organizational Development (OD) is inherently eclectic, drawing from diverse disciplines including psychology, phenomenology, cybernetics, group dynamics, neurobiology, Buddhist philosophy, sociology, and ecology. This multidisciplinary foundation gives rise to different types of interventions. Reflective practitioners adopt pragmatic approaches, selecting tools and forms of interventions based on the context and their demonstrated effectiveness, rather than adhering to single theoretical frameworks (Looss, 2003).

Traditional organizational approaches reveal significant limitations in uncertain and complex environments. As Snowden and Boone (2007) argue in their Cynefin framework, complex domains require fundamentally different approaches than complicated ones—exclusive dependence on linear thinking and cognitive reasoning proves insufficient for addressing interconnected challenges.

The field of OD has undergone significant paradigm shifts, or "gestalt switches" in reference to Thomas Kuhn (Varetza-Pekarz, 2025, p. 56), requiring new forms of processes and methods to open up spaces for transformational change. These shifts represent fundamental reorientations in how practitioners conceptualize and engage with organizational change.

The Emerging Regenerative Paradigm

A first significant shift moved from expert-driven, diagnostic OD approaches that view organizations through the "machine metaphor" (Morgan, 2006) toward dialogic OD approaches positioning practitioners as enabling facilitators rather than controlling experts—emphasizing collective experiential learning and the understanding that social reality is continuously constructed through dialogue (Bushe & Marshak, 2015; Schein, 2015).

Catalyzed by the global climate crisis, a shift beyond sustainability recognizes organizations as embedded within larger social-ecological systems, requiring approaches that foster both organizational vitality and broader systemic health including more-than-human stakeholders (Hutchins & Storm, 2019; Muñoz & Branzei, 2021). In Laloux's (2016) evolutionary perspective, a new metaphor emerges: the organization as a living system. The regenerative paradigm emphasizes three key principles: cultivation of life-affirming conditions, integration of multiple ways of knowing, and activation of collective potential for systemic ecological renewal (Reed, 2007; Sanford, 2017). Contemporary theorists emphasize self-organization and emergence (Wheatley, 2007; Bateson, 2021), and integration of inner and outer transformation (Scharmer, 2007; Wilber, 2000).

These developments call for interventions that bridge multiple ways of knowing, access collective intelligence, reveal invisible system dynamics, include more-than-human stakeholders, and tap into regenerative potential. 4D Mapping

emerges as one possible practice specifically designed to address these needs, bridging systems thinking and sensing through embodied knowing and social arts, offering an aesthetic language to describing social fields (Hayashi & Dutra, 2020).

Towards a Theoretical Framework for 4D Mapping as a Social Field Intervention

The paradigms through which practitioners approach organizational development determine not just their actions but their very perceptual capabilities. Our epistemological lenses reveal certain aspects of systems while rendering others invisible—a phenomenon that transcends our methodological preference. Without addressing this deeper epistemological challenge, efforts at systems change remain constrained by invisible boundaries.

To address this challenge, we integrate three complementary theoretical frames: Looss's (2003) work on intervention in OD as emerging from "intensified field awareness"; the Social Field approach developed through Theory U (Hayashi & Dutra, 2020; Scharmer & Pomeroy, 2024); and extended epistemological frameworks from Rajagopalan (2020) and Langer (1942) that bridge analytical and intuitive, arts-based approaches to systems knowing.

Intervention as Emergent Field Awareness

Looss (2003) bridges systemic consulting with Gestalt approaches, emphasizing how intervention aims to build a field, providing the client with new, growth-promoting experiential possibilities. Interventions then no longer arise primarily from the consultant's conceptual knowledge, steps, and solutions, but from perceiving what emerges in the current moment through contact with the client's system. Consulting tools become auxiliary aids that bring consultants and clients closer to unbound perception, enabling them to notice, describe, and forge interventions from current observations.

In this view, intervention is not "made," but emerges from an "intensified field awareness" (Looss 2003, p. 51). Looss emphasizes the intervener's role in intensifying perception of the emerging field, which requires a practice of "continuous self-emptying" instead of imposing predetermined organizational frameworks, a wisdom that can be found across traditions from Zen to Gestalt approaches (Frambach, 1993). At this juncture, Looss points beyond conventional OD to the arts and their reception—practices deeply versed in field phenomena and collective emergence.

Social Fields: The Collective Interiority of Systems

The social field can be conceptualized as a social system's inner dimension—the interconnected web of relationships and interactions that imparts a distinctive quality to any social space or system. As Scharmer et al. (2021, p. 634) describe, social fields are "the entirety of the social system with an emphasis on the source conditions that give rise to patterns of thinking, conversing, and organizing."

Social fields focus on the interiority of the social system, an aspect of organizational life that has been largely overlooked both theoretically and methodologically (Pomeroy & Herrmann, 2023). The concept of fields has been explored in Western frameworks by various scholars and practitioners (Bohm, 1980; Capra, 1996; Lewin, 1951; Laszlo, 2007; Mindell, 2001; Sheldrake, 2009) and non-Western cosmologies including Buddhism's notion of 'empty field' (Leighton, 2000, p. 23) and the deep relationality in Indigenous knowledge systems (Goodchild, 2021; Kimmerer, 2013). Despite different approaches, these inquiries share a common idea or principle: a deeper layer of "*mindful interconnection*" (Rajagopalan, 2020, p. 81).

Building on Looss's call for turning towards the arts in OD, Social Arts approaches such as SPT enhance practitioners' ability to perceive emerging field patterns. Through extensive research Hayashi and Dutra (2020) developed an "aesthetic language" for describing social field qualities, identifying three interrelated structural dimensions:

1. *Visible structure*: Physical arrangements showing center/periphery positioning and movement patterns
2. *Relational structure*: Social field qualities characterized by relationship qualities like warmth and inclusion
3. *Deep structure*: The awareness dimension associated with direct knowing beyond thinking

These dimensions provide practical perceptual frameworks that enhance practitioners' capacities and introduce fresh visual and somatic vocabulary to describe the shifts from Sculpture 1 to Sculpture 2 in 4D Mapping.

These structural dimensions are powerfully complemented by Scharmer and Pomeroy's (2024) four person-perspectives of knowing:

- *First-person (subjective)*: Individual interior experience
- *Second-person (intersubjective)*: Emerges through dialogue and relationship
- *Third-person (objective)*: Observes external patterns and structures
- *Fourth-person (trans-subjective)*: Accesses the emergent whole through resonance-based sensing

Each way of knowing offers a distinct pathway for accessing corresponding dimensions of the social field: third-person objective knowing naturally aligns

with visible structures through observation of spatial patterns; second-person intersubjective knowing resonates with relational structures through dialogue and connection; while first-person subjective knowing and fourth-person trans-subjective knowing access deep awareness structures through individual experience and collective resonance respectively.

This integration creates a comprehensive social field framework for understanding how 4D Mapping bridges systems thinking with systems sensing by accessing multiple dimensions of the social field.

Bridging Systems Thinking and Embodied Systems Sensing

We conclude our theoretical framework by distinguishing how 4D Mapping integrates complementary epistemologies through social arts, presence, and sense-making in its intervention.

Rajagopalan (2020) bridges the divisions between sciences, arts, and practice domains, while integrating Western and Eastern epistemological traditions. His framework advocates for evolving beyond mere systems "thinking" toward an integrated embodied systems "being and doing." Heron (1996, p. 92) notes, purely discursive systems "obscure the world of primary meaning" by building elaborate conceptual superstructures while "forgetting and failing to extend its imaginal and empathic foundations."

This parallels Langer's (1942) identification of two fundamentally different representational forms:

- *Discursive/propositional forms*: Represent parts and explicit knowledge through sequential, logical, and analytical processes typical of conventional systems thinking. Discursive forms break down complex wholes into component parts and express them in linear fashion.
- *Presentational/aesthetic forms*: Represent wholes and tacit knowledge through simultaneous, non-linear, and embodied experiences that give us a unique access to the felt sense of things. Examples include visual art, music, ritual, and other non-verbal symbolic forms that communicate meaning through their holistic structure.

4D Mapping bridges systems thinking and embodied systems sensing through these complementary forms. The practice requires what Rajagopalan (2020, p. 141) terms "temporary suspension of the rational approach" to allow other ways of knowing to emerge—creating conditions for "Immersive Systemic Knowing" (Rajagopalan, 2020, p. 195) that transcends purely instrumental intervention-focused approaches. He privileges the term *knowing* over *intervention*, seeking to communicate a generative, rather than an instrumental, orientation that necessarily invokes both forms. This integration enables holistic knowing including both tacit, embodied wisdom and explicit, conceptual understanding.

Towards an Integrated Theoretical Framework for 4D Mapping: The “4D Social Field Matrix”

The "4D Social Field Matrix" emerges at the intersection of these complementary frameworks. The vertical axis maps how different social field dimensions can be accessed through multiple epistemological perspectives. The horizontal axis explores the relationship between Langer's (1942) "presentational/aesthetic" and "discursive/propositional" forms and Rajagopalan's (2020) “systems being and doing” and “systems thinking.”

It illustrates how the steps in the 4D Mapping process draw from, integrate, and embody these forms of knowing in the different social field dimensions:

1. *Embodiment Process* (Sculpture 1 and 2): Activates presentational forms of knowing, where Players suspend analytical thinking to access the collective interior of the social field through embodied knowing and shape-making (Hayashi, 2021), representative perception (Weber, 2000) and intercorporeality (Merleau-Ponty, 1964)
2. *Surfacing the Dots*: Bridges embodied experience and verbal articulation through phenomenological first-person data
3. *Generative Dialogue*: (Bohm, 1996; Isaacs, 1999; Scharmer, 2016): Engages discursive forms of knowing through collective sensemaking that moves toward actionable insights

This matrix serves as a framework for understanding how diverse epistemological dimensions interact in embodied systems interventions, offering a reflective tool for practitioners and researchers. It represents a step toward methodologies that can work with both visible and invisible dimensions of transformation. While this linear presentation provides orientation through the principles at work, these elements blur and collapse in practice.

Social Field Dimensions (Hayashi & Dutra)	Categories of knowing (Scharmer & Pomeroy)	Presentational and Aesthetic Forms of Knowing (Langer) SYSTEMS BEING & DOING (Rajagopalan)	Discursive and Propositional Forms of Knowing (Langer) SYSTEMS THINKING (Rajagopalan)	
		4D Mapping - Step 1 <i>Embodiment Part</i> (Suspending thinking)	4D Mapping - Step 2 'Surfacing the dots' (Surfacing phenomenological 1 st person data)	4D Mapping - Step 3 Generative Dialogue (Collective creativity and sensemaking through generative dialogue)
Visible Structures <i>Visible physical arrangements</i>	Third-person <i>Objective</i> (A focus on positive, measurable phenomena)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Embodied shapes and spatial patterns Observable body-shapes positioned through levels, proximities, and directions revealing systemic relationships that can be documented and analyzed Words or phrases from each Player in the Sculptures 	What did you see? Visible patterns: <i>e.g. open or closed shapes, duets or small groups, lines or circles, etc. within the space</i>	Where do you see visible patterns? Keeping the system stuck in its current reality? In the movement from Sculpture 1 to Sculpture 2?
Relational Structures <i>Relational qualities of the Social Field</i>	Second-person <i>Intersubjective</i> (Acknowledgment of the social construction of reality)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Intercorporeality (Merleau-Ponty) Through inter-bodily resonance Players explore living relationships between systems stakeholder roles (expressed by body-shapes, movements and spatial relationships) 	What did you feel or sense? Relational qualities: <i>e.g. inclusion or exclusion, connection or disconnection</i>	Where do you sense relational patterns? Keeping the system stuck in its current reality? In the movement from Sculpture 1 to Sculpture 2?
Deep Structures <i>Individual awareness – with a potential collapsing of the separated perspectives</i>	First-person <i>Subjective</i> (Individual sensemaking) Fourth-person <i>Trans-subjective</i> (Holistic worldview, actions are weighed against wellbeing of all beings)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Representative Perception (Weber & Hellinger) Accessing systems information through embodiment without prior knowledge of the system True move (Hayashi) Gesture of suspending thinking and past knowing, bending the beam of observation back onto the sources of collective emergence of the whole system 	What did you do? Inner experiences: <i>e.g. from the Players around perceptions, movement and choice-making</i>	Where do you sense future potentials? Seeds, leverage points or systems acupuncture points that might enable the system to move /shift towards its higher future potential

Table 2: 4D Social Field Matrix by the authors.

Part III: 4D Mapping as Embodied Practice

Systems Sensing: Accessing the Collective Interior of Social Fields

The social field encompasses the collective, internal experience of being a social body (Pomeroy & Herrmann, 2023)—a dimension that Social Presencing Theater (SPT) reveals through embodied presence. As Hayashi and Dutra (2020) note, embodied knowing is core to how we experience the world—beginning with the first-person experience of living in and through our bodies (Varela et al., 1991).

Embodied interventions assume significant systems knowledge is tacitly held within our bodies, accessible through methodologies like Systemic Constellations, Theater of the Oppressed, Psychodrama, and 4D Mapping. These approaches use somatic and inter-somatic experience as primary access points, employing intercorporeal relatedness to surface data existing "beneath the skin" of organizations (Pomeroy & Herrmann, 2023, p. 15).

While maps created through systems thinking reveal structures and relationships, systems sensing methods add the felt dimension—the quality, resonance, and aliveness within and between elements that inform and galvanize the social body (Ritter & Zamierowski, 2021).

We illustrate how 4D Mapping taps into the collective interior through embodied-shape making (Hayashi, 2021), representative perception (Weber, 2000) and intercorporeality (Merleau-Ponty, 1964), using a case from the Ecosystem Leadership Program in Chile 2024 (Jung & Miranda, 2025).

The Case-Giver team comprised Vanda, who was a participant on the Ecosystem Leadership Program, along with two other members from her Indigenous community, near Manus in the Brazilian Amazon. Their case focused on the newly established Witoto Institute—a non-profit empowering Indigenous women and children while preserving their cultural heritage. They faced challenges including lack of governmental support, insufficient funding, and educational barriers for Indigenous children. The intention for the 4D Mapping was to understand the Witoto Institute's ecosystem role and explore strategies for strengthening women entrepreneurs and cultural education for future generations.

Role Embodiment and Embodied Shapes in 4D Mapping

After the presentation of the case, stakeholder roles are called and participants volunteer as Players, receiving their stakeholder tag and taking a moment to connect with their assigned role. In this moment the facilitator usually emphasizes setting aside preconceptions and judgments about the stakeholder, encouraging Players to fully embrace embodied sensing and intuitive felt senses. Players intuitively explore their place in the space, considering three dimensions

of choices: level (e.g., lying down, sitting, or standing), proximity to others, and direction they face.

We zoom into the experience of the Amazon Player—a more-than-human stakeholder threatened by extractive industries in the Witoto case—illustrating how 4D Mapping enables embodied systems sensing. Once the participant entered as the Amazon, she immediately felt extreme tiredness and draining vital energy, as she reports:

The first thing I felt when I entered as the Amazon was like the sensation of running out of energy, like dying. It was tremendous, really distressing. And I lay down on the floor because that was all I could do. (Participant, July 2024, ELP Chile Interview)

The embodiment of stakeholder roles enables powerful experiences of stepping into the felt sensation of a stakeholder, through what in systemic constellation is called “representative perception.” Representative perception allows individuals to transcend personal identity and access systemic information beyond analytical methods (Rosselet & Senoner, 2013). Gunthart Weber (2000), who worked closely with Bert Hellinger (Hellinger et al., 1998), emphasizes that this phenomenological foundation enables stakeholder representatives to connect with and express essential qualities of systems without prior knowledge. In 4D Mapping, this serves as the gateway to the collective interior where boundaries between first-, second-, and third-person knowing blur, accessing the “beingness” of stakeholder roles and pointing toward fourth-person, trans-subjective knowing (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2025, p. 80).

A fundamental element of Social Presencing Theater is creating embodied shapes as aesthetic expressions of stakeholders’ felt sense within a system (Hayashi, 2021). Through our bodies, we engage with the felt sense of internal and external forces—similar to Lewin’s (1951) force-field concept. These forces may be consciously perceived or vaguely sensed. For instance, a Player representing a stakeholder in a conflicted position might physically express feeling pushed down, pulled in different directions, held back, or experiencing a draining of energy, as in the Amazon Player example, which felt the need to lie down.

The embodied shape-making process can be described as a field of forces molding the embodied shape—it is an invitation to physicalize aspects of the stakeholder’s situation, whether these involve constricting or enabling forces. The method asks Players to trust that insight will emerge from the body and the social body without prior planning or manipulation. By suspending judgment and embracing curiosity, Players attend fully to where the body naturally wants to move. Hayashi (2021) calls this “the true move”—an invitation to notice and release manipulative tendencies in our perception and movement. Players practice staying with not-knowing while maintaining acute attention to moment-by-moment experience as it unfolds within the social field.

This first-person experience can vary depending on the level of experience and predisposition of each Player. In the case of the Amazon Player, the

interviewee described how the embodied shape-making connected her to an emerging visual image:

When we were invited to make the first shape in Sculpture 1, I wanted to shape my body into a kind of C-shape form. I felt and saw the shape that my body wanted to make. I could see it. I felt like I had river streams in my hands and feet. I visualized in my mind how my hands and feet extended like that. (Participant, July 2024, ELP Chile Interview)

Figure 3 shows the Amazon Player lying down in a C-shape. The stance of Social Presencing Theater is that this shape-making doesn't occur merely through first-person experience but is part of a resonance within the whole system. This represents a kind of self-transcending knowing where the boundary between different forms of knowing blurs - where there is both overlap and differentiation between knower and known. As Scharmer and Pomeroy describe it, this embodied shape-making involves information that "moves through me, on a sensory level, but is not of me" (Scharmer & Pomeroy, 2024, p. 35).

Once shapes are complete, Players say a phrase or a sentence, "as if the shape could speak." In Sculpture 1, the Amazon Player says: "I'm tired," while Extractive Industries with extended arms declare "I want more!" and the 30 Indigenous Communities Player sitting between states: "I take care of you."

These spontaneous, pre-reflected phrases from embodied shapes provide intuitive information, and often express wisdom and direction from beneath consciousness (Hayashi, 2022). When a Case Giver, Players, or Viewers hear these phrases arising from stillness, they often recognize their truth—resonating beyond conventional understanding. An example of this kind of resonance by a Case-Giver can be found in the In Dialogue piece of this Issue, where Joost van de Crujisen reflects on his 4D Mapping experience with a case about a regional waterboard in the Netherlands. He mentions the goosebumps he got hearing the Farmer's words: "I will fight you if you hold my hand " (Pomeroy et al., 2025, p. 197).

The Relational Dimension of the Social Field in 4D Mapping

The key shift for the Player embodying the Amazon described above occurs in the movement from Sculpture 1 to Sculpture 2, when the Player representing the 30 Indigenous communities sat down beside her:



*Figure 3: Zoom-in of Sculpture 1 & 2, ELP Witoto Case
(Barbara Lehnebach, in Jung & Miranda, 2025).*

I just realize now, that in the first movement, the Indigenous Communities [Player] sat down at the level of my stomach. Let me tell you, the presence of the Indigenous communities helped me survive as Amazon in the mapping. Before that, I had a strong feeling that my energy was draining. It was a relief that I felt my energy starting to return. That was the turning point. There wasn't a physical movement from my end, but internally, there was a complete change of state. (Participant, July 2024, ELP Chile Interview)

Merleau-Ponty (1964) describes this resonance between bodies as intercorporeality, rooted in phenomenology. This embodied experience exemplifies intercorporeality in action—how the physical presence and positioning of the Indigenous communities created an immediate energetic and emotional shift in the Amazon Player, demonstrating the relational field dynamics at work in 4D Mapping.

For Pomeroy and Herrmann (2023), “intercorporeality” provides a key foundation for understanding social fields, and what Hayashi and Dutra (2021) call relational structures, a second-person knowing. Intercorporeality refers to how our bodies unconsciously resonate with each other (Fuchs, 2016). Rather than seeing interactions as separate actions and reactions, intercorporeality recognizes them as continuous, reciprocal connections that emerge between bodies. This shared bodily resonance creates what we experience as the atmosphere or felt sense of a situation. The quality of this atmosphere emerges through the embodied connections between participants in a social field (Pomeroy & Herrmann, 2023).

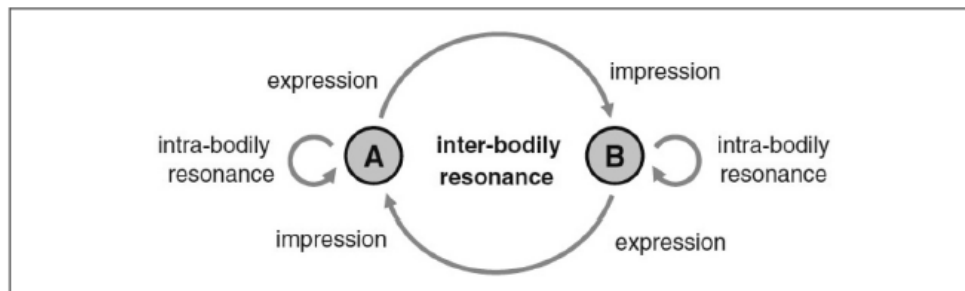


Figure 4: An illustration of the extended body (Froese & Fuchs, 2012).

When making spatial choices in 4D Mapping, Players navigate this dynamic interplay between representative perception, intercorporeality and embodied shape-making as essential aspects of embodied systems sensing.

Enabling the System to See and Sense Itself

The primary purpose of 4D Mapping is to enable a “system to see and sense itself,” facilitating deeper understanding of systemic patterns and force dynamics that maintain current structures, while simultaneously exploring emergent future potentials (Hayashi, 2021). We now want to illustrate how this seeing and sensing of a mapping impacts Case Givers and Viewers.

During Sculpture 1 setup, the Player embodying the Witoto Institute entered the mapping, seemingly unsure of its place. This resonated deeply with Vanda Witoto, part of the Case Giver’s team, whose young organization was trying to understand its institutional role in the wider system:

For me, it was an incredibly profound and complex experience. The 4D Mapping provided a perspective we hadn’t seen before, a perspective we now realize is crucial. We are in the middle of setting up the organization's statutes not knowing where the Witoto Institute is located in this whole system. The ability to build on the insights from the 4D map has helped us understand our performance better and given our institution a clearer understanding of our role as Indigenous women. (Vanda Witoto, April 2024, ELP Chile Interview)

We illuminate the resonance that embodied shapes evoke in observers. These shapes can trigger strong feelings, especially when they point towards dysfunction or blind spots. In Sculpture 2, the emerging future, the International Funders Player remained disconnected, standing in the center, bowing down saying: "I don't see."

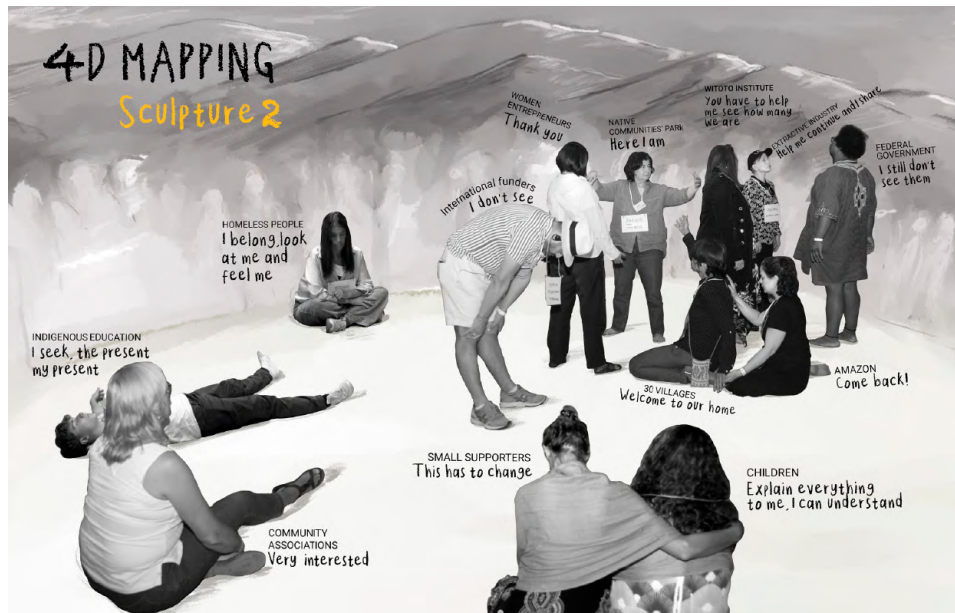


Figure 5: Sculpture 2 of the Witoto Mapping in the ELP Chile (Image by Barbara Lehnebach in Jung & Miranda, 2025).

When asked about this shape, Vanda expressed discomfort at observing this disconnect, as it reminded her of how small Indigenous communities are often overlooked by big global funding agencies:

Seeing international funders ignoring us, with heads down, gave me a lot of anguish. It made me very uncomfortable because I've seen the work and the importance of our Indigenous struggle. I see these large organizations acting globally but not supporting small, local communities and organizations. (Vanda Witoto, April 2024, ELP Chile Interview)

In the circle of Viewers sat Janaina Jatobá, herself working for an international fund active in Brazil. From her position as Viewer, she found herself looking directly at the back of the international funder in the map:

That image of looking at his back and seeing him looking downwards—he couldn't see the field, couldn't see what was happening there, wouldn't act, couldn't do anything. And this is the actor with the power to make things happen? Yeah, it makes me mad. I have to laugh, but I'm mad because we have the privilege of being in such a place that we can see. It's not hard for us as funders to see and get in touch with what is happening on the ground. (Janaina Jatobá, August 2024, ELP Chile Interview)

This rather distressing experience activated her agency:

I just needed to do something. When we got off the 4D Mapping, I met with Vanda and said, I do have an opportunity. We have an open call for Latin America to recognize organizations led by survivors of oppressed experiences who now lead the change. And I

said can we talk Vanda? (Janaina Jatobá, August 2024, ELP Chile Interview)

Janaina informed Vanda about the grant opportunity, which Vanda successfully pursued. While this synchronicity is unusual, it illustrates 4D Mapping's potential impact when the right system parts are able to see and sense themselves.

As Arawana notes on seeing and sensing the system in a 4D Map: “The map is not a crystal ball. It is not a solution to a problem. It creates an opportunity for reflection and learning. Sensing more deeply into a system can, and frequently does, reveal hidden patterns of thought and relationships that are more conflicted than what appeared on the surface” (Hayashi, 2021, p. 86). We don't necessarily seek a “good” outcome in Sculpture 2, where the Case Giver's challenges are solved. The invitation is to let go of our projections and see and sense our system, through shared wakeful presence, perceiving both its collective blind spots and emerging potentials.

Ericka Toledo was part of the Case Giver's team in the u-lab 2x 4D Mapping session 2023. Her team, comprised of the National Conservation Agency CONANP in Mexico and an environmental NGO, were concerned with supporting governance structures around the Arteaga Forest protection. She describes how embodying the forest and the water in their system revealed a collective heartbrokenness they share as environmentalists:

What we witnessed in the 4D Mapping resonated with the whole group. The scene I have in my mind is the final sculpture—this possibility of the highest future potential, how it lands. There was a lot of pain to be unpacked, a lot of disbelief, almost like lost hope. Seeing people having these feelings made me feel like we really needed to give space to this pain. It was there. No one talked about it. We all felt it, but somehow we just couldn't express it. (Ericka Toledo, April 2024, u-lab 2x 4D Mapping Interview)

She shares how the collective witnessing enabled a powerful shift in the relational depth of the team:

In our regular programs and trainings, we operate with a certain amount of hygiene—you contain yourself, you want to be rational. What I like about the 4D approach is that there's permission to just be present with what is. Those of us in environmental work carry so many hard feelings: rejection, oppression—you just numb yourself. But when you open yourself, giving yourself permission to feel, something shifts. This collective experience gives us permission to be more blunt about things. It becomes clear that it's not only my individual strength—it's collective power. It's about the depth of the relationships. (Ericka Toledo, April 2024, u-lab 2x 4D Mapping Interview)

Staying with the heartbrokenness of a system that might be revealed in a map, can be a way to deeply engage in the larger web of interconnection (Hayashi, 2021). Sadness and grief are directly connected to opening the heart, and once transmuted collectively, can become a fertile ground for soulful change (Weller, 2015). As Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013, p. 359) reminds us, “if grief can be a doorway to love, then let us all weep for the world we are breaking apart so we can love it back to wholeness again.”

Tapping into the Source Dimension of Systems in 4D Mapping

Having explored how 4D Mapping enables collective seeing and sensing, we turn to fourth-person or trans-subjective knowing. This dimension corresponds to what Hayashi and Dutra (2021) identify as the "deep awareness structure" of social fields. Scharmer and Pomeroy (2024, p. 29) describe this as "bending the beam of observation back onto the sources of collective emergence"—redirecting toward an open awareness of the whole. This shift from ego-centered to ecosystem awareness becomes a leverage point for deep change connected to the well-being of the whole system.

As Arawana explains, "Awareness is a direct knowing, a felt noticing. [...] However, when our mind is occupied with memories, opinions, assumptions, and imaging, open awareness can be obscured" (Hayashi, 2021, p. 11). This obscuring poses a significant challenge in systems work, as conventional analytical approaches often prioritize precisely those conceptual activities that block access to this dimension. This level of knowing extends beyond intellectual comprehension, requiring engagement through felt experience—an embodied understanding that resonates in our bones, hearts, and minds. Through Social Presencing Theater, practitioners cultivate an expansive awareness that extends beyond individual experience to encompass the entire social field.

Since fourth-person knowing is subtle and challenging to articulate, we used micro-phenomenological interviewing with Maximiliano Costa after a 4D Mapping in the ELP Uruguay, 2023 (Jung & Miranda, 2024). Costa was a Viewer of a case involving an organization working with youth in Buenaventura, Colombia—one of the country's most vulnerable areas, marked by high levels of violence, territorial disputes, and ongoing conflict involving armed groups that deeply affect young people's lives. His experience as Viewer reflected a decentering of perception, where the "self 'decenters' from a single point to a 360-degree sphere of awareness" (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2025, p. 81). Asked about the changes he perceived in the group and within himself during the mapping, he responded:

The 4D Mapping has a physical phenomenon and subtle sensation. I could feel the group's heart; it truly embodied the collectives' heart. Many of us were moved by the story of Colombia, but that experience also helped us connect with our own lives. It took us to a personal experience, to a collective-territorial experience of Uruguay or the reality of Argentina. From that perspective, it did

not matter who spoke; it was the perspective of the same heart manifesting in different ways. (Maximiliano Costa, August 2023, ELP Uruguay Interview)

Within the micro-phenomenological evocation, he was asked to describe what he sees in the moment of the 4D Mapping:

I see one of them looking towards the area where I am. I was outside of the conflict or the situation of the field. I am experiencing many emotions of what is happening in the mapping, while it is simultaneously related with my personal history. It is like I am entering and exiting that field while being there. The action is happening outside, but what manifests comes from within me. Sometimes, I focus on one of the participants and their body posture, but that stirs up my thoughts and breathing. Sometimes, I feel physical discomfort, comfort, and intense energy. (Maximiliano Costa, August 2023, ELP Uruguay Interview)

Inquiring deeper into what bodily sensations he is perceiving at that moment, he states:

It is like a channel from the earth, through the trunk to the sky, like an actively functioning stream. When I connect like this, with the whole, with that union, with what is happening inside and outside, it generates well-being, peace, and openness in the chest. (Maximiliano Costa, August 2023, ELP Uruguay Interview)

Maximiliano's experience of feeling “the same heart manifesting in different ways” exemplifies the shift from ego-system to eco-system awareness—no longer perceiving from an individual standpoint but from the field itself—where boundaries between self and system temporarily dissolve, enabling perception of the “deeper source knowing of the field” (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2025, p. 80).

Besides the conflict and presence of armed groups in the Colombian case, his bodily sensation of connecting to the 'whole' generated well-being, peace, and openness in the chest. This account points to a key philosophical foundation in 4D Mapping: the assumption that beneath surface-level conflicts lies an accessible wisdom, which Tibetan meditation master Chögyam Trungpa (1996, p. 14) describes as “basic goodness.” While acknowledging that empirical evidence might suggest otherwise, this view invites practitioners to look beyond fear, aggression, and confusion to contact the unconditional wholeness present in all systems.

Sense-Making in Two Stages: “Surfacing the Dots” and Generative Dialogue

From experiencing embodied Social Art practices, like 4D Mapping, we now move towards the collective reception and sense-making, in service of systems transformation. For Weick (1995), sense-making is not merely interpretation but

an active process where people create the very reality they are trying to understand, retrospectively organizing experiences into plausible patterns that inform future action.

This section explains how the method bridges different forms of knowing—what Langer (1942) terms "presentational/aesthetic" and "discursive/propositional" forms, represented on the horizontal axis of our 4D Social Field Matrix.

This need for bridging is well articulated by Mersch (2001, p. 276), pointing us to an artwork's "bodily presence" that is irreducible to signs. He is emphasizing its phenomenological nature: the artwork does "not speak" but "presents" itself. The connection between aesthetic perception, presence, and corporeality enables what Mersch terms "undivided" attention in artistic reception, operating "before the dissociation into particular sensitivities," generating experiential excess beyond conventional expression.

4D Mapping works with this dynamic tension: participants first engage in pure phenomenological perception, suspending interpretation, with collective meaning-making emerging only later in the generative dialogue. This seeing and sensing of the social sculpture, the embodied piece of Social Art in 4D Mapping, helps us to stand back, get inspired by what wants to emerge, and also contemplate our own role in the system. 4D Mapping methodologically distinguishes between embodied knowing, phenomenological inquiry, and a sense-making around noticing systems patterns, specifically through two steps: "Surfacing the Dots" and "Generative Dialogue."

"Surfacing the Dots": An Inquiry into What We See, Sense, and Do

"Surfacing the Dots" is an expression relating to the first part of the sensemaking of a 4D Mapping. The expression references Pointillist paintings: in standing very closely to the painting, we might only see different seemingly unrelated colorful dots. But in standing back, an image starts to appear in front of our sight. Another inspiration is Henry Bortoft (2012, p. 15) who reflects on the challenge of how to perceive a whole system (if possible at all). He argues that if "the whole presences within the parts, the only way to encounter the whole is within the parts through which it presences," rather than through a disembodied or detached conceptual "overview" of the system (p. 15). For the process this means: how do we surface a view of the system from within its collective interior.

The process step consists in surfacing of actual phenomenological first-person data about the embodiment experience of Players and Viewers, while avoiding interpretations of what it might have meant or signified. The sharing is guided by three questions: What did you see? What did you feel or sense? What did you do?

While all three questions address first-person knowing, they point to different social field structures and categories of knowing. Examples would be: *Seeing visible patterns* like open or closed shapes, duets or small groups within

the space; *sensing relational patterns* or qualities: e.g. inclusion or exclusion, connection or disconnection or *deep awareness structures* around doing in choice-making of movements.

In practice though, as Arawana notes in her book, these structures are continually interwoven:

What we see, what we sense, and what we do continually interweave and dance with one another. We see, for example, someone walking toward us. Without thinking about it and frequently without even registering in our consciousness, we have a felt sense of what we see, our sensing can motivate an action, such as stepping forward or looking down. And this action in turn creates a feeling in those who see it. Everything we do is communicative, often in ways we are unaware of, and we constantly make meaning from what we experience. (Hayashi, 2021, p. 137)

To illustrate this further, we present examples for statements on the question, “What did I see, What did I sense, and What did I do?” from the Artega forest case, by Ericka Toledo and her u-lab 2x team, which highlight the felt sense and choice-making of the Players in the map:

- Governance System: "I felt tenderness in the system, the quality of wanting to attend to whatever the experience is."
- The Forest users: "When conservation actions moved the hand, I wanted to move mine as well."
- The Forest: "I feel positive intentions from everyone, but I feel distant from everyone."
- The u-lab 2x Team: "I wanted to move when the Forest moved."

(Harvest of ‘Surfacing the Dots’, March 2023)

These statements represent genuine phenomenological descriptions that create a feeling tone of the stakeholders' subjective experience, before being subjected to interpretation.

The investigation of "seeing—sensing—doing" increases our sensitivity to how we engage in our social fields and heightens our awareness of the weaving together of these three non-verbal experiences (Hayashi, 2021). This phenomenological approach to “Surfacing the Dots” creates what Abram (1996) describes as a "return to the sensuous"—a reclamation of embodied knowing that organizational practices often neglect in favor of abstract analysis. By dwelling in what Bortoft (2012) calls an “atmosphere of phenomenological experience” before moving to interpretation, practitioners learn to trust the moments of silence and to acknowledge the world as we know it through our sense perceptions as embodied human beings (Hayashi, 2021). Moving too quickly to interpretation can collapse the richness of embodied experience into premature conceptualization.

The methodological progression from “Surfacing the Dots” to Generative Dialogue represents a carefully designed bridge honoring both presentational and discursive ways of knowing (Langer, 1942), while maintaining an essential connection to the embodied experience.

Generative Dialogue: From Phenomenological Awareness to Collective Meaning-Making

Within the 4D Social Field Matrix in Table 2, Generative Dialogue occupies the right side, engaging discursive and propositional forms of knowing related to systems thinking. While “Surfacing the Dots” creates a shared phenomenological experience, Generative Dialogue shifts toward collective sense-making (Weick, 1995) and future orientation. The second mode of inquiry in 4D Mapping moves from “what is” to “what could be,” tapping into the generative future potential of systems, a key intention of Theory U processes and practices (Scharmer, 2016).

Dialogue, central to Dialogic OD, creates a “holding space” for diverse perspectives without forcing consensus, drawing on Bohm (1996) and Isaacs (1999). Isaacs emphasizes “suspension” of immediate reactions, allowing deeper listening and collective digestion of ideas. This creates “safe containers” for expressing differences—necessary for adaptive learning (Schein, 2015) and facilitating 4D Mapping’s generative dialogue.

Scharmer (2018) identifies a shift from empathetic listening (open heart) to generative listening (open will) that activates our capacity to connect with a system’s future possibilities. This “presencing the emerging future” is the main purpose of 4D Mapping’s generative dialogue—cultivating the ability to see, sense, and act from an emerging future field.

Two Social Field Inquiries of Generative Dialogue

Generative Dialogue centers on two fundamental inquiries that engage participants in examining both the forces holding systems in their current reality and those enabling movement toward emerging futures. Following Lewin’s (1947) force field theory, sustainable change occurs when driving forces for transformation outweigh restraining forces maintaining the status quo. Alexander’s pattern language inspires our inquiry, where patterns are seen as “abstract patterns of relationships which resolves a small system of interaction and conflicting forces” (Alexander, 1971, Preface). Identifying these patterns reveals both the limiting forces and the generative potentials within the system.

4D Mapping aims to make these often-invisible forces explicit by inviting participants to identify specific patterns, relationships, and dynamics revealed through the mapping.

During this crystallization process, participants collectively explore:

1. "What patterns keep the system stuck?" and "What patterns enable the system to move from Sculpture 1 to Sculpture 2?"

Participants identify movements or moments they noticed that kept Sculpture 1 stuck in the current reality or enabled it to move. Examples of stuckness in a system can include body gestures closing down, sentences in S1 or S2 that point to stuckness, or in the visible structure patterns that indicate who is in the center or periphery, who is included in duos or trios, or excluded at the margins.



Figure 6: Sculpture 1 & 2 from the Virtual 4D Space report of the Waterboard case, 2023.

As illustrated in the systems map comparison above from the Netherlands waterboard case, these patterns become visually apparent when comparing Sculpture 1 and 2. This case, facilitated virtually for Joost van de Crujisen and his team, sought to create Waterlabs as deep holding spaces for conflicting stakeholder interests—farmers, water authorities, environmental groups, and citizens—regarding the polluted Zandleij stream. In Sculpture 1 the future potential as Waterlab is sitting at the margins, at the right—outside of the circle—while in Sculpture 2 it crosses the whole space to the upper left, building a relational cluster sitting in front of the farmers (a conflicting party), with the natural area and the nature intelligence of the water standing at each side.

2. Where do we see and sense seeds or leverage points as future potentials in the system?

This inquiry directs attention to emergent possibilities—nascent connections or transformative movements appearing during transition to Sculpture 2. These seeds, often marginal in current systems, hold dormant potential like seeds in soil (Scharmer, 2018). Participants naturally recognize leverage points—places where small interventions might produce significant change (Meadows, 2008), inspiring future agency and prototypes. The 4D Mapping yielded these transformative seeds in the Waterboard case:

- “Moving from a focus on the stream and the metrics it provides, to finding metrics that illuminate the unheard voices of nature.”
- “There is a sort of healing ritual going on between the Farmers, Nature intelligence of the River, the Waterlab 4.0 and the Natural Area.”
- “Bring to the farmers the wisdom of the land (e.g. Indigenous traditions, emerging new ways of agriculture, etc.) to help them be an agent of regeneration of the Land.”
- “The Lab could meet with 1) the citizens, then 2) the next "group" on Sculpture 2 and then Group 3 (at the top)—before getting people all together in one room.”
- “Supporting all the institutions and organizations to feel part of nature as a whole—rather than be focused solely on one aspect of nature, the stream, as this might perpetuate the disconnection.”
- “Something about surrender... letting go and softening into stances of care (rather than fighting or aggression... above all for the NGO's and health organizations).”

(Zoom chat harvest, October 2023)

These “future seeds” illustrate how 4D Mapping simultaneously accesses multiple dimensions of a system—visible structural patterns (center/periphery positioning), relational qualities (healing rituals), and deeper awareness shifts (surrender into care). By giving voice to more-than-human stakeholders (the Zandleij stream, nature intelligence and natural area) this case surfaced the need for Indigenous wisdom on water, alongside technical expertise. The seeds point toward systemic reconnection rather than isolated interventions, revealing leverage points where small shifts in relationship quality might catalyze significant system transformation.

The facilitator and scribe capture the insights surfaced visually, creating what Hayashi (2021) calls "harvest maps" that document the words and phrases of each Sculpture, as well as the insights emerging in the dialogue around limiting patterns and future potentials.

To capture subtle social field dimensions, we sometimes complement 4D Mappings with "generative scribing" (Bird, 2018), which extends traditional graphic recording by focusing on the emerging essence and energy of the map. This practice emphasizes the scribe's quality of presence and attunement to the group's collective energy and deeper intention.



Figure 7: Generative scribing by Olaf Baldini in the Waterboard case, 2023.

This Generative Scribing by Olaf Baldini in the waterboard case has become a valuable artifact that Joost and their team sometimes revisit when having ongoing dialogues about their work.

This integration of multiple ways of knowing, from phenomenological awareness to collective meaning-making, enables participants to engage with complex systemic challenges from a place of not-knowing, in ways that honor both the visible and invisible dimensions of transformation. In this way, the 4D Mapping process develops a literacy in embodied language that supports our noticing the connections between the stakeholder roles in the system. We shift from only depending on our conceptual and intellectual learning and interpretation, to knowing in the body and space, and an understanding of how these visible or felt social structures hold meaning, feeling, and creative potential.

Conclusion: Bridging Systems Thinking and Systems Sensing for Transformation

Through this research, we illustrate how 4D Mapping bridges the often-separated domains of embodied knowing, social arts, and systems transformation—connecting Systems Thinking and Systems Sensing through an expanded epistemological framework. Our inquiry is driven by the need in Organizational Development to navigate increasingly complex societal challenges requiring methodologies that address both visible and invisible dimensions of social transformation. Unlike solution-oriented consulting, 4D Mapping creates space for intensified collective awareness and generative dialogue without attachment to predetermined outcomes. It engages with Scharmer's (2007) deeper transformational levels, accessing collective awareness and system vitality directly through embodied practice.

A key contribution of this paper is the development of the 4D Social Field Matrix as a theoretical framework for understanding social field interventions that integrate multiple ways of knowing. By making explicit both theoretical foundations and practical applications of 4D Mapping, we hope to illustrate how

embodiment practices support transformative change in complex systems. Our aim is to offer an overview to practitioners and action researchers of how 4D Mapping approaches systems intervention, highlighting the inner place from which we engage, our epistemological assumptions, and how we conceptualize change.

We position 4D Mapping within the emerging field of awareness-based systems change and regenerative Organizational Development—that recognizes organizations as embedded within larger social and ecological systems requiring transformation approaches that foster both organizational vitality and broader systemic health.

Three distinctive capabilities establish 4D Mapping as an awareness-based, regenerative systems intervention:

First, it enables a "system to see and sense itself" by creating a container for systems self-observation, creating conditions for emergent, awareness-based change. This makes visible the typically invisible dimensions of social field dynamics.

Second, it integrates multiple ways of knowing—analytical, emotional, and somatic—through social arts practices, allowing interventions to emerge from intensified field awareness, suspending preconceived models of change. Connected to generative dialogue, this creates a methodological bridge between thinking and sensing.

Third, it gives voice to what Abram (1996) calls more-than-human stakeholders in strategy systems questions, strengthening life-affirming transformation by including Earth, rivers, or animals as stakeholder roles in the mapping process.

Through this paper, we invite the reflective practitioner to address the propositional, discursive knowledge bias that Flood (1998) identifies in management and OD, by exploring approaches that honor multiple ways of knowing, bridging the analytical and the intuitive, aesthetic and embodied dimensions of knowing. By offering insights from 4D Mapping as a methodology where different epistemological approaches interplay, we hope to contribute to further reflections, where practitioners and action researchers are seeking to develop practices that embody the very integration they aim to foster in the systems they serve.

In this era of polycrisis, where fragmented responses prove inadequate, we believe we need social practices like 4D Mapping that create collective holding spaces for sensing and sense-making, with the ability to support organizational transformations, as well as the convening of transformation systems (Waddock et al., 2022). For this work cannot be done by one individual or single institution alone but requires collectives to bring forth the transformative potential that lies dormant within our interconnected challenges.

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Peer Review Article

Nurturing Transformative Capacities:

An Introduction to the ECOTarot as Method and Practice Supporting Sustainability Transformations

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Abstract

Climate science points to the need for rapid and substantial social change. Such a fundamental social transformation requires new methods, paradigms and practices that address not only structural, technological, and systems change, but attend to the "inner"/subjective dimensions of transformation. In this paper I develop links between models of change in sustainability transformation literature that include "inner" dimensions of change and Climate Focused Socially Engaged Art, a subset of socially engaged art practice that addresses climate disruption. I then introduce a novel social art practice that attends to these inner dimensions: the ECOTarot. Since 2017, I have performed more than 1500 climate future readings with my ECOTarot deck in public settings throughout the United States and internationally. I found that the structure and form of the ECOTarot method catalyzes an intimate exchange where a new climate future story, connected to the seeker's life, is co-produced. By outlining the methods of the ECOTarot and placing them within inside-out transformation research for sustainability, I add to literature that insists upon "messier"

research methods that reflect lived experiences of our world and acknowledge the importance of senses, emotions, belief and imagination in processes of change. By making the links between Sustainability Transformations theory and Climate Focused Socially Engaged Art practice explicit, I encourage further research and investigation into art methods so that they may be leveraged more fully toward sustainability transformations.

Keywords

climate focused socially engaged art; inner transformation; ecotarot; holism; sustainability

Introduction

Climate scientists and scholars increasingly acknowledge that efforts to mitigate and adapt to human-driven climate disruption¹ though necessary, are not sufficient. Rather, the transition ahead of us will also require massive social and cultural transformation (Bentz, O'Brien, et al., 2022; Büchs & Koch, 2019; O'Brien et al., 2021). Defined broadly as a process of structural and systems change, transformation involves “a change of fundamental patterns, elements and interrelations in the system...and fundamental alterations in sense-making, worldviews, political and power relations, social networks, and ecosystems, physical infrastructure and technology respectively” (Feola, 2015, p. 382). Such fundamental social transformation requires new methods, paradigms, epistemologies and practices that address not only structural, technological, and systems change, but attend to the "inner"/subjective dimensions of transformation (Ives et al., 2020; Koenig et al., 2024; Manuel-Navarrete, 2015).

The connectedness of interior, exterior, and spirit worlds have long been made by Indigenous knowledge holders, storytellers, and scholars (Battiste & Henderson, 2021; Cajete & Little Bear, 2000; Goodchild, 2021; Kimmerer, 2013; Nelson, 2017; Nelson & Shilling, 2018; Orlove et al., 2023; Smith, 1999; and others). Furthermore, First Nations, Aboriginal and Indigenous activists and scholars have documented the ways that colonialist and extractivist thinking has separated us as a species; from our connections to land, to our communities, and to our full selves (Liboiron, 2021; Whyte, 2017; Whyte, 2020). Many scholars sharing these knowledge traditions assert that there is a vital need to address and heal this social and personal fragmentation through a transformation of our fundamental values and perspectives, so that we are walking in the embodied knowledge that we ourselves are nature.

¹ These methods to mitigate and adapt include: the development of carbon capture technologies, increased use of renewable energy systems, and supporting new/old methods of planting and harvesting food.

Within sustainability transformation literature, experimental art practices that engage with publics and “arts-based research” have been identified as potentially significant influencers of “deeper realms of leverage” within transformations (Abson et al., 2017; Muhr, 2020; Woiwode et al., 2021). The importance of reflective and relational methodologies and ethical, affective and aesthetic knowledges brought to bear within arts practices is now being called upon to help deepen human-nature connectedness (Ives, 2018; Muhr, 2020; Mullen et al., 2023), and motivate change (Lange, 2018; Wamsler, 2021). At the same time, that calls for embracing and integrating other “forms of being and knowing” (Gram-Hansson et al., 2022; Siquieros, 2022) are increasing within sustainability transformations literature, in the larger solutions-focused field of Sustainability both the arts and Indigenous perspectives are often overlooked, marginalized, or erased. I contend that this is in part due to the perceived “messiness” of approaches that embrace affective, aesthetic, embodied, and experiential knowledges, and their resistance to evaluation through traditional disciplinary tools that insist upon neutrality, value theoretical abstraction, and discount making as a form of thinking.²

In this paper, I develop theoretical and methodological links between sustainability transformation literature, Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Climate Focused Socially Engaged Art (CFSEA), a subset of contemporary art practice addressing climate disruption. As an artist/scholar, I introduce the emergent methodologies of one artistic practice, while making a case for transcending disciplinary strictures in the interest of meeting the complex needs of the challenges before us. This effort resonates deeply with the evolving field of Awareness-based Systems Change with its focus on research practices that embrace all aspects of knowing: cognitive, emotional-relational, embodied, and spiritual-intuitive, and its foundational connection to social arts practices (Koenig et al., 2021).

I begin by considering a proposed model of change drawn from a comprehensive review of sustainability transformations literature (Wamsler et al., 2021). Then, I briefly introduce CFSEA, and offer a case study of a “transdisciplinary, transgressive, and transcendent” (after Vogel & O’Brien, 2022) climate-focused arts practice: the ECOtarot. This process-based creative research practice is a public performance activity that utilizes a custom ecologically themed tarot deck to offer “climate future” readings in a variety of settings. I explore how the ECOtarot, which emerged through a deeply intuitive practice that I have cultivated for more than 40 years, aligns with theories of change and transformation related to sustainability. In this paper, I posit the ECOtarot as an example of sustainability transformation research, analyze components of its method and then situate it alongside other art methods and

² In addition to scientism and epistemic violence/hegemony discussed by other scholars like Kimmerer, 2013 and Whyte, 2017.

practices that enact elements of change and transformation toward sustainability.³ My larger research goal is to elucidate methods of art creation and engagement, to encourage greater leveraging of climate focused arts practices in sustainability spaces.

Values That Inform This Research

I am a desert dweller who has been stewarding a small area of land in the Mojave Desert that was stolen from its original inhabitants, the Cahuilla, Chemehuevi, Serrano and Western Shoshone peoples by the US government and re-distributed through the homesteading process.⁴ Over the decades I have resided here, this arid land has humbled me and taught me many lessons. Over time, I have been invited into ceremony and developed relationships with Indigenous knowledge carriers in Lakota, and California Bear Clan traditions. These connections to the land, beings, and teachings ground and inform my life ways.

In my creative and scholarly research, I am committed to developing anti-colonial practices. I ground these ongoing efforts (Janssen et al., 2018; Jenik, 2018; Jenik, 2019; High, 2024) in an understanding of colonialism as an ongoing force of oppression, not a historical event. As a White settler, my approach to anti-colonial sustainability science includes seeking out accountability through having my work undergo community peer review by Indigenous scholars; acknowledging and citing published Indigenous thinkers; only sharing wisdom that I've been encouraged to share; working in realms that do not solely privilege rational thought, but embrace relational, transcendent, affective, and proprioceptive knowledges; and engaging in an ongoing self-reflexive process. I acknowledge that I can't begin to reconcile the harm that has been and continues to be done in my name as a U.S. citizen, and that this process necessarily reveals many contradictions. I remain open to and inviting of correction as I add my voice to others moving in this direction.

A Proposed Model of Change in Sustainability Literature

In recent decades, and increasing in frequency over the past 20 years, sustainability scientists focused on transformations have turned toward "inner transformations" as an important, and even vital component of social-ecological-technical change related to human-driven climate disruption. Following from their comprehensive review of sustainability related literature (covering 2002–2020) that bridges "inner" and outer transformations, Wamsler et al. (2021, p. 8)

³ I use the terms “practice” and “method” interchangeably throughout this paper.

⁴ The Homestead Act of 1862 began a process of redistribution of land that was responsible for westward expansion in the US, which lasted through 1976.

propose "an integrated model of change that can serve as an agenda and roadmap for future research, practice and policy in the [sustainability] field." They make a strong case for a new research and policy agenda that focuses on the complexity of inner and social dynamics, which they argue are often downplayed or ignored in favor of more instrumental or behavioral approaches to transformation. Their proposed model of change, which emerges from their literature review, focuses on a cluster of "transformative qualities or capacities," including *awareness, connection, insight, purpose and agency* (emphasis mine) that work with intermediating factors (subjective well-being, self-efficacy, cognitive dissonance, and trust) to influence inner states (values, beliefs, emotions, and paradigms). This model of change aligns in an uncanny way with the 5 movements of the U-process introduced by Otto Scharmer: co-initiating, co-sensing, co-inspiring, co-creating and co-evolving (Scharmer, 2018; Seneque et al., 2024), as well as other models of change like the 9 dimensions tool proposed in Vervoort et al. (2024).

Awareness/Co-Initiating

According to Wamsler et al., the capacity of *awareness* can include presence, attention, self-awareness, and self-reflection. I also include "tacit knowledge" and intuition in this category. Tacit knowledge, according to Gibbons (1994) includes unwritten, unspoken, and often hidden knowledges held in practice within communities and individuals. A focus on engaging tacit knowledges in climate communication means that we acknowledge that people's knowledge about climate change, and their decisions about how to think and act in relation to it are shaped by more than climate data and projections or news reports. Authors who discuss the importance of tacit knowledge (Hochachka, 2019; Leichenko et al., 2022; Manuel-Navarrete, 2021) make a case for identifying the frames and values people hold and building processes of change from this standpoint. For Scharmer and other awareness-based systems change practitioners, the concept of co-initiating involves uncovering common intent through listening to oneself, others, and what emerges (Scharmer, 2018; Seneque et al., 2024).

Connection/Co-Sensing

Connection is an important transformational capacity that has been discussed at length in a broad range of sustainability literature. The capacity of connection is also a key ethic underlying many Indigenous Knowledge Systems through the concept of Relationality, and the insistence on a holistic conception of our world where nature and humans are fluid within the whole (Gram-Hanssen et al., 2022; Mullen et al., 2023; Orlove et al., 2023). Bearers of these knowledges (Battista, Goodchild, Henderson, Kimmerer, Krenak, Liboiron, Nelson, Whyte, Wilson, and many others), which have been protected and stewarded through centuries of colonization, have much to teach as we seek to transform our culture to support all beings and entities who find home on planet Earth. Often referred to in sustainability literature as "other ways of being, learning, and knowing"

(Nelson, 2017; Vogel & O'Brien, 2022), Indigenous knowledge systems are distinct across thousands of tribal entities. Scholars are situated and speak from the perspective of their own tribal knowledge systems (which always include place specific language) even as they acknowledge commonalities across these distinct systems that center relationality and connection with land, ourselves, each other, and all beings, over abstract outcomes. Because these knowledges are commonly passed through oral communication over time in relation to a specific place, they have been marginalized within modern academic discourse which focuses on reproduceable and generalizable knowledge, written documentation of evidence, and the distancing of the researching subject from the object of inquiry. These teachings, which have been shared with me in ceremony and through personal relationships and deepened in the course of my engagement with Indigenous scholars, challenge me and other scholars to radically re-think knowledge production as site-specific (not generalizable), collective (not individual), trans-systemic (Battiste & Henderson, 2021) and processual (not outcomes oriented).

In the U-process, co-sensing involves multi-dimensional observation and use of all of our senses. Co-sensing comes about through the opening of the mind, heart and will (Scharmer, 2018). Particularly in relation to the heart dimension, co-sensing reflects the role of affect as a driver for connection. Coinciding with the affective turn in Science and Technology Studies (Kerr & Garforth, 2016), sustainability transformations scholars have been widening their frames of understanding and analysis to include emotions (Hamilton, 2022; Moser, 2020). There is a utility to this attentive shift, as emotions are seen as powerful motivators and de-motivators of action (Moser & Dilling, 2007).

Insight/Co-Inspiring

For Wamsler et al. (2021), *insight* encompasses sense-making and perspective-taking. In the U-process, co-inspiring calls for a "space of silence that allows for emergence" (Seneque et al., 2024, p. 182), making space for insight. These capacities are explicitly called for in Moore et al. (2014; following Olsson et al., 2004) a text that proposes an analytical framework for understanding deliberate social-ecological transformations. Here they offer four phases of system transformation: triggers or pre-transformation; preparing for change; navigating the transition; and institutionalizing the new trajectory. In the Moore et al. (2014) text, preparing for change involves sense-making, visioning, and gathering momentum. Speculative and imaginative activities are included in this category, as well as processes that enable the "emergent future whole" (Scharmer, 2018).

Purpose and Agency/Co-creating and Co-evolving

Finally, *purpose* and *agency* involve the activation and reflection of one's values and intentions, a future orientation (purpose), and the co-creation of meaning

and action-taking (agency). A growing number of researchers insist upon the importance of co-production of knowledges within research settings, with an eye to this type of research having a greater impact on sustainability outcomes (Norstrom et al., 2020; Seneque et al., 2024). Co-creating and co-evolving research practices are not only processes of producing new knowledge, rather these processes force a re-thinking of how knowledge is created and used in the pursuit of sustainability (Abson et al., 2017). Because of this, the process also creates conditions that support emergence of new paradigms and possibilities where one does not only encounter ones' research subject but is also encountered by them and transformed in the process (Koenig et al., 2024; Wamsler et al., 2021).

Art and Transformation

Encountering Wamsler et al.'s proposed model of sustainability transformations research and the U-Process as an artist/scholar, I immediately recognized core tenets of my art practice and the subfield of CFSEA. Since Wamsler et al. (2021, p. 8) lament that little is written about interventions and enabling environments that support transformational capacities and call for developing environments that nourish a sense of interconnection, I became curious about the relative absence of arts-related publications in the literature cited in their comprehensive review (with only 3% of articles coming from philosophy and the arts). Furthermore, in sustainability literature that takes up the arts, authors are often focused on "arts-related research practices" or arts education programming, not on contemporary art practices.⁵ By introducing the category of CFSEA and the methods and practice of the ECOTarot, I invite deeper understanding of how contemporary art practices contribute to "inner" transformations toward sustainability.

Climate Focused Socially Engaged Art (CFSEA)

I use CFSEA to describe a subset of work by Socially Engaged artists that addresses and is motivated by human-driven climate disruption. Socially Engaged Art is an area of contemporary art production that traces its roots to Community-based Arts, Participatory Art, and Relational Aesthetics. It finds its recent (Western) history in the early 20th century with art movements such as Dada, the Situationists International, and Fluxus, and is generally understood to be grounded in experimentation, responsive to political realities, and engaged directly with publics, often beyond the walls of institutions (Apostol & Thompson,

⁵ I am referring here to omissions within literature in the field of sustainability.

Environmental humanities scholars, art historians, art theorists and artists themselves have been writing about contemporary arts practices that engage with sustainability for some time (see Bloom, 2022; Demos, 2016; Boetzkes, 2019; Gomez-Barris, 2017; among others).

2020; Bishop, 2023; Kester, 2013). Many globally situated feminist artists in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, were purposefully questioning frameworks of power and understood the need to reach beyond the artworld in order to develop awareness and encourage action around a broad range of social issues including violence against women, the US war machine, and environmental issues (Lacy et al., 2010; Lippard, 1997). These socially engaged artists (many of them women and feminists) have been working consistently on environmental issues since that time and are now joined by a large and growing set of CFSEA practitioners. Many CFSEA practitioners, including myself, have shifted their practices in recent years toward addressing climate issues, acknowledging the critical need to help usher in just social and cultural transformations.

Examples of CFSEA work include: *High Water Line* (Eve Mosher, 2007–present) “a public performance of drawing a blue chalk line around areas of a city or region indicating its future flood and storm surge vulnerabilities made more frequent and more dangerous by climate change” (Mosher, n.d.); *Swale* (Mary Mattingly, 2017-present) “an experiential and co-educational edible landscape built on a deck barge that utilizes marine common law in order to circumvent local public land laws” (Mattingly, n.d.); and *Making the Best of It: Dandelions* (2016–17, Marina Zurkow and Valentine Cadieux) where the artists led participants to explore “what it might mean to ‘make the best of it’ (‘it’ being climate change), using dandelions to think through eating differently, nimbly, with sadness, resilience, and even joy” (Zurkow, n.d.).⁶

To follow, I introduce the ECOTarot, an example of CFSEA in action, and discuss the elements of its method in relation to Wamsler et al.'s proposed model of change emerging from "inner" transformations in sustainability literature. I do this to more firmly locate artistic practices that have developed separately from these theories and dialogues as significant partners in "inner" transformations for sustainability.

The ECOTarot Practice

The ECOTarot is a novel social art activity that I began developing in 2014 and have since evolved and iterated in public sites throughout the US and internationally.⁷ During the past decade, I have come to understand the

⁶ It is important to note that in addition to these more recent examples of socially engaged art practices related to climate disruption, there is a rich legacy of artists who have been working in ecological and environmental art for decades (including Newton and Helen Harrison, Betsy Damon, Kim Abeles, Beverly Naidus, Carolina Caycedo, Basia Irland, Emily Johnson, Agnes Denes, and the hundreds of artist members of ecoartspace and the ecoart network).

⁷ Public venues include farmers' markets, public plazas, parks, pedestrian thoroughfares, cultural centers and galleries in Los Angeles, Joshua Tree, San Diego, Oakland and Berkeley, CA; Dallas, TX; NY, NY; Phoenix, Tucson, and Oracle, AZ; Akron, OH; Philadelphia, PA; Detroit, MI; Atlanta, GA; Abiquiu, NM; Scotland; Finland; Iceland; Chile; Mexico; Portugal; Canada; online.

ECOTarot as an art practice, a speculative exchange, a public performance, a collective improvisation, a tool for addressing ecological grief (Cunsulo, 2017; Norgaard, 2011), a novel climate communication method, a contemplative pedagogy (Gram-Hansson et al., 2022), a cultural probe (Gaver et al., 2004), an innovative data elicitation tool, a platform for enacting “right relations” (Goodchild, 2021; Gram-Hansson et al., 2022), a transformation system (Seneque et al., 2024), and a research technique for intervening in climate science discourse. Though the scope of this paper does not allow for a complete elucidation of each of these aspects of the ECOTarot, I enumerate them to acknowledge the expansive potentials and possibilities embedded in a single arts practice.

Below I discuss the components of the ECOTarot method: the deck, the spreads, and the reading, and consider the ways that each methodological component nurtures the transformational qualities and capacities called for in sustainability transformation literature as outlined in Wamsler et al. (2021).

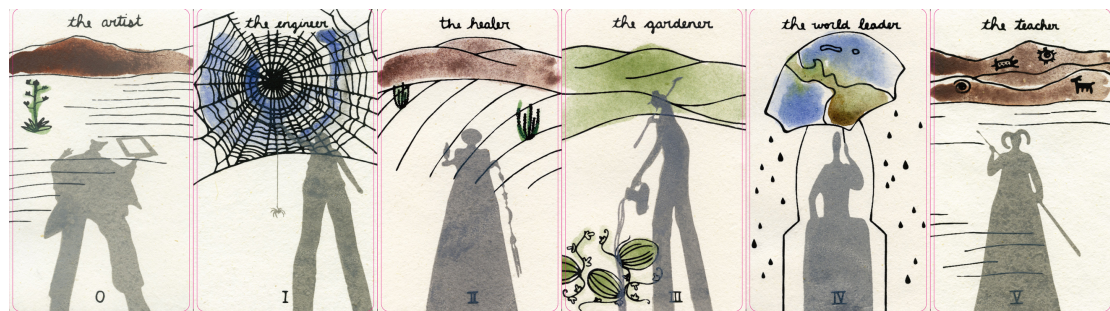


Figure 1: Images of a selection of ECOTarot Major Arcana cards.

The ECOTarot Deck

The ECOTarot deck serves as a boundary object, attracting the interest of people from many backgrounds and bridging art, climate science, spirituality, and futurity.⁸ The tarot, for those unfamiliar, is a cultural form, now often associated with esoteric and occult practices, that is traced to 15th century Italy. Over the centuries that followed its introduction, the cards’ imagery and uses evolved as they travelled, reflecting the culture, symbols and practices of each new context (Genetti, 1997; Pollack, 2009). The use extended beyond a card game, *tarocchi*, to fortune-telling and mediumship when taken up by Romani people who spread the practice as they migrated (Chaudhuri & Ward, 2025).

Traditionally, the structure of the tarot is comprised of 78 cards organized into major arcana (archetypal symbols) and minor arcana (numbered suits in

⁸ A term used in a number of fields to indicate a concept or thing that people from many different perspectives and disciplines feel they understand and can make use of (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2014).

ascending order). The most well-known deck of the 20th century, the Smith-Rider-Waite deck, is what I refer to throughout this text as the "standard tarot" because of its overwhelming popularity in contemporary culture. Though the Smith-Rider-Waite deck is familiar to many, the practice of creating new decks and performing readings was taken up by artists and esoteric practitioners throughout the 19th and 20th centuries and has veritably exploded in the 21st century (Smith, 2024; Tea, 2017; Umipig, 2018). Other writers have addressed the reasons for this phenomenon (Montell, 2024; Tea, 2017; Tideliu, 2024), but here it is important to note that what may once have been seen as a fringe practice has entered mainstream cultural consciousness in recent years. Coming from a lineage of tarot practice (my mother was a professional psychic), I understood the tarot as a guidance system used to navigate uncertainty and imagined it could be useful in our contemporary climate context.

The symbols on the ECOTarot cards (see Figure 1) emerged through a research process (conducted in dialogue with climate scientists) that evolved the popular vernacular knowledge system of the tarot by placing it in relation to climate science and ecological value systems and archetypes. Though the deck exists as a work of art in and of itself, it was created as a platform with which to perform "climate future readings" in public spaces. A note about its materiality: the ECOTarot deck was developed and produced over the course of two years (2015–2017) by me, with the support of artist Molly Koehn. Each of the 78 ECOTarot cards is screen-printed on paper handcrafted from locally harvested agave plants, recycled cotton, and linen and then hand painted with natural pigments. This materiality is important as the feel of the deck grounds the querents⁹ in their bodies, and traces of these bodies are imprinted on the cards as they are passed from one set of hands to another.

The process of creating the ECOTarot deck began with the re-conception of most of the 22 major arcana cards to reflect our current climate challenges. I wanted the readings to be recognizably related to environmental issues in ways that many of the original archetypes are not. Over the course of several months, I worked with a dynamic grid I created on my art studio wall that reflected traditional meanings and interpretations of the tarot, and a series of important "actors" and values related to our unfolding climate futures. During the time I took to focus in, step back, and iterate, the major arcana archetypes of the ECOTarot took shape. These archetypal symbols aid in sense-making and envisioning processes (Moore et al., 2014) that are part of the nurturing *awareness*, even as they serve as portals to the unconscious (Robertson, 1987) and so they needed to be recognizable to a broad demographic of people (see Table 1 for a selection of these symbolic and interpretive transpositions). Concurrent with this period gestating the ECOTarot symbols, I sketched out designs while Koehn was learning papermaking techniques. The final imagery on

⁹ Querants are people receiving tarot readings.

the major arcana cards consists of line drawn illustrations featuring shadow figures in various poses, and recurring motifs reflecting desert ecology (see Figure 1 for examples of this imagery). I chose desert ecology and shadows (caused by the sun's brightness) to "place" the imagery in my specific locale, acknowledging the importance of place and land in the formation of knowledge (Liboiron, 2021; Nelson & Shilling, 2018).

Std. Tarot Symbol	ECOTarot symbol	Std. Tarot interpretation	ECOTarot interpretation
The Fool	The Artist	infinite possibilities and potential; leap of faith	experimentation, Creativity, resourcefulness
The Magician	The Engineer	using past experiences to create a new future	intention and will; ability to manifest large plan
The High Priestess	The Healer	intuition, spiritual insight	balance with natural cycles; inner wisdom, spiritual prowess
The Empress	The Gardener	divine femininity; receptive, nurturing	fecundity; fertility; prepared and focused on growth
The Emperor	The World Leader	divine masculinity; security, ambition, power	power, authority, successful management, stability
The Hierophant	The Teacher	religion, higher education or learning; guidance	earth as teacher, considering long-term impact
The Chariot	The Bicycle	forward momentum and movement	self-discipline, momentum, austerity
Justice	Justice	fairness, responsibility, law and order	climate justice; fairness and accountability
The Wheel of Fortune	The Life Cycle	destiny, fate, aligning with higher purpose	values interdependence; downstream thinking
Death	Extinction	signals an ending that can't be avoided; catalyst for change	tipping point' threshold event; profound cultural transformation
The Devil	The Profiteer	hedonism, addiction, greed, subconscious	greenwashing; disaster capitalism, short-sighted solutions
The Tower	The Superstorm	breaking down old patterns and belief systems	reckoning; event that forces change; truth teller
Ace of Cups	Ace of Water	new beginnings in love, romance	we are water, water is life; new honoring of sacred power of water
V of Cups	V of Water	grief, sorrow, loss	loss of sea ice; coral bleaching

IV of Pentacles	IV of Earth	financial stability and solvency	small scale and organic farming; tradition
VIII of Pentacles	VIII of Earth	hard work, apprenticeship, work is main focus	extreme extraction
III of Swords	III of Air	heartbreak, despair, pain, poor health	increased frequency and intensity of atmospheric rivers and microbursts
VII of Swords	VII of Air	deception, lying, manipulation	airpocalypse
VI of Wands	VI of Fire	courage, negotiation, high-stakes situations	new battery technologies/ increased storage for renewables
IX of Wands	IX of Fire	roadblocks, sickness or injury; delays	fatal global heat wave
Page of Cups	la poeta del agua	good news afoot; romantic messages	Rachel Carson, writer
Knight of Pentacles	la guerrera de la tierra	patience, slow forward movement in right direction	Berta Cáceres, Lencan activist
Queen of Swords	la guía del viento	authoritative figure, cuts straight to the point	Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, US congress
King of Wands	la jefa del fuego	person of importance, success, change	Margo Robbins (Yurok), fire steward

Table 1: Examples of the standard tarot and ECOtarot symbols and interpretations.

Furthermore, foregrounding *connection* with the land, the 40 minor arcana ECOtarot cards (Ace through 10 in each of four suits), reflect the four elements: Air, Earth, Water and Fire which stand in for the standard tarot suits of Swords, Pentacles, Cups, and Wands respectively. This transposition made sense because one common layer of tarot interpretation refers to the elements and the conditions (cognitive, embodied, affective, and transcendent) each element represents. The minor arcana card imagery is comprised of simple line drawings that feature multiple instances of windmills (air), crystal formations (earth), a river and its deltas (water), and the rings of the sun (fire) that reflect their assigned number. This pared down imagery, compared with other tarot decks, embraces simplicity, discipline and restraint; values I have found are important when enacting one's responsibility to land and community.

In the ECOtarot, the sixteen court cards, represented in the standard tarot as pages, knights, queens, and kings, become *las poetas* (the poets), *las guerreras* (the warriors), *las guías* (the guides) and *las jefas* (the chiefs), respectively. I utilize Spanish text to acknowledge the existence of multiple languages and worldviews and to situate the deck in the context of the Americas, where it emerged. In a tarot reading, the court cards may be interpreted to represent oneself or a "type of person" and in the ECOtarot an additional layer of

interpretation assigns each of these cards to an ecological heroine. For example, *la jefa del fuego* (the leader of fire) is aligned with Margo Robbins (Yurok) founding leader of the Cultural Fire Management Council, a group that works to (re)introduce Indigenous ways of tending the earth with fire. In this way, I call attention to those who have been undertaking transformational practices. The overall aesthetic treatment of the deck, with its materiality, symbolism, and a palette that evokes the natural world, awakens the querent's senses, offering a heightened experience.

ECOTarot Spread/s

In tarot reading protocol, the “spread” refers to the order and structure of a reading. Readings may include any number of cards, which are then interpreted in relation to the meaning embedded in each card's position. Thus, each reading results in a layered narrative that emerges through overlapping symbolic and associative systems read in relation to one another. For the ECOTarot practice, I developed several custom spreads: a two-card spread (the simplest and briefest reading); a five-card spread, and an eight-card spread (offered only by appointment to people already engaged with environmental issues). Creating the spreads involved continuous iteration, as well as pulling from my experience as an innovator of narrative and performative systems (Balsamo, 2016; Curran, 1999; Jenik, 2001; Jenik, 2016).

An example of the way this structuring works: the ECOTarot two-card spread finds the cards divided by the querent into two piles; the first card drawn from the left represents what will unfold in the larger world related to climate change in the arc of the querent's lifetime. The second card drawn from the pile on the right then represents a role for the querent, or a helper card to assist them in navigating the world invoked in the first card.

Meanings of the ECOTarot cards, as with all tarot, are not fixed or absolute; they evolve in conversation with the querent, and aggregate meanings as each new card is revealed within the context (spread) of the reading. Interpretations emerge in relation to the position the card falls, both in the spread and in relation to the other cards in the spread. Additional layers of meaning may include whether a card is drawn right-side up or reversed; the frequency of a type of card that appears in the spread (minor arcana, major arcana, or court card); and the directionality of the figures pictured in each ECOTarot card's illustrations (i.e. where they are facing or pointing). As many different interpretations are possible, in the end, it is the querent who makes meaning from the placed cards, a true co-production of knowledge.

ECOTarot Readings

An ECOTarot reading is, at its core, a relational experience. It positions the reader and the querent in the same space of uncertainty, unknowing, and yet possessed of all the knowledge, experience, beliefs, emotional capacity, and

creativity that we carry as humans through our everyday existence. We, the reader and the querent, are both facing a shared climate future, and are witnesses to each other's understanding of what that means. For some querents, just offering a contemplative space to face human-driven climate disruption together brings tears and other strong emotions to the surface. The ECOTarot taps into emotions, experiences, and identities neglected by reductive scientific processes. It has been argued that these "inner" dimensions are exactly what is needed to tap into *purpose* and *agency* and motivate action (Moser & Dilling, 2007; Vervoort et al., 2024; Wamsler et al., 2021).

Each ECOTarot reading begins with an exchange of names and a brief introduction to my approach to tarot. Querents are then invited to shuffle the cards "in any way you want for as long as you want" and imbue the cards with their thoughts and feelings surrounding the changes happening in our world. While they handle the cards, I circle the mesa, them, and myself in smoke from sustainably sourced palo santo wood.¹⁰ This portion of the reading resembles a "traditional" tarot reading with the exception that the querents in an ECOTarot reading are not asking a question about their love life, health, fame, or fortune; an ECOTarot reading presumes that everyone is asking about their climate future, or what will unfold in their lives in relation to the changes going on in our world. In the brief pre-ambles to the reading, ECOTarot querents are encouraged to share associations and resonances they bring to the cards which add to interpretations I have evolved over my years of practice. It is within this interpersonal exchange that their co-created "climate future" story emerges.

An Example of an ECOTarot Reading

To illustrate my assertion of the ECOTarot as a system for nurturing transformational capacities, I offer a brief recount of a recent ECOTarot reading with K (see Figure 2). The reading is conducted in person, in public on an outdoor patio of a coffee shop. Storm clouds loom overhead as we settle in; they choose which spread they want, I offer my preamble, they shuffle the cards, and I place five cards face down on the cloth-laden table. Before turning over the first card I

¹⁰ We have been asked by our Indigenous relatives to cease the use of sage, palo santo wood, and other sacred medicine plants unless we have grown them ourselves, been gifted them by Indigenous practitioners or are assured that they have been harvested in alignment with sacred harvesting techniques. See the film *Saging the World* (Ramirez et al., 2022) that tells the story of the Indigenous-led efforts to protect white sage.

share the meaning of the position of the north¹¹—what they know about what is unfolding in our world—then turn over the card: the IV of earth. The earth cards, I explain, are related to all the magic and mystery of life potential we find on the earth. I expound upon this and then relate that this specific card represents traditional methods and approaches to agriculture. A conversation begins as K shares with me the deep knowledges they are stewarding and enacting around agriculture and food systems. The tone of the reading shifts from one of fear and uncertainty (that they express they have been feeling lately), to one of reverence of all they know about the abundance of the earth. It's an exciting and fortifying exchange, where I learn of their commitment to traditional foodways as they share how much they have benefitted from being in relation with the land and those who have stewarded these practices over time. After they finish speaking, I ask to move on, and remind them that the cards exist in relation to each other, so we will be revisiting this first card later.

I turn to the second card and share that it is in the position of the south, which in the five card ECOTarot reading represents the seat of the self, and emotions around climate impacts; how they are feeling about what is unfolding. The second card is turned over to reveal *la poeta del viento* (the poet of the wind or air), in a reversed position. I discuss the meaning of the air cards in an upright position—depending on where they fall and which card appears, they relate to the shift from fossil fuels to renewables, air quality, and thought or social dynamics (like the swords in the standard tarot). This is a card of communication—*la poeta* is the poet, the artist, the musician, the storyteller—but it is reversed, which indicates, in this position, some negative emotions. I relate my interpretation of frustration, fear, over-thinking, occluded vision, along with trouble speaking or communicating. K speaks very tenderly about how they have been feeling lately, finding themselves not making sense and feeling confused. I listen intently, holding space for all that is being shared.

We move on to the third card, in the position of the west, and I share that this position relates to the physical and practical; how their environment is affecting them at this time. The X of fire appears; a very intense looking card completely filled with orange fire rings of the sun. I share some interpretations of this suit: an increase in wildfires and the climate heating up, but also that these fire cards reference creativity and innovation (like the wands suit), with the X card indicating the end of a cycle, transcendent completion. K shares about the crossroads in which they find themselves, the feeling of shedding things and

¹¹ The five-card spread is laid out in relation to the cardinal directions (N, S, W, E) with a center card indicating the querents' "climate future." The meanings of each position (What one knows about what is happening with our climate, what one feels about what is happening, how the changing climate is impacting one's life at this moment, a new perspective on the changing climate) are drawn from cultural associations in North America that have evolved within esoteric practices and align with Indigenous teachings of the medicine wheel (McKinney, 2023; Nelson, 2017; Paul, 2023) that have been shared broadly with the larger culture.

leaving them behind for good that is happening in their life. They share their understanding of fire as both a destructive, but also a regenerative force, and their feeling that they will be leaving a lot behind in this next step they are taking. I underline that the card indicates this is a creative time and encourage them to step into their creativity to help guide them further into whatever is next. This is the first I have heard about this being a time where they feel a need to make an important life choice, so I hold that piece of information with care.

The fourth card is in the position of the east, the new day, and in the ECOtarot this represents a "new perspective" that K could consider as they move through this time and into their climate future (represented by the center card). *La jefa del viento* (chief of the wind or air) appears when I turn over the card. This offers an opportunity to talk about leadership, as the card is asking them to consider stepping into a position of authority. What follows is a heartfelt recounting of the ways they have resisted leadership in the past, and how they are feeling pulled by it now. We talk about what developing a new perspective on leadership would entail, and what type of leaders are needed in our world. K shares their disappointment in current world leaders, even as they acknowledge the importance of leadership in the climate space. We laugh a bit as they share another message they had received from a mentor that encouraged a similar consideration. We reflect on the ways that this particular leader, relating to air, is a strategic, thoughtful leader skilled in engaging with social dynamics. I share another layer of meaning embedded in the cards: *la jefa del viento* asks us to consider the qualities of Swedish youth climate activist Greta Thunberg. K shares their thoughts about Thunberg's courageous leadership, which opens up another way of thinking about "preparing" to be a leader, since Thunberg, as a teenager, had no preparation.

Finally, we turn to the center card. I explain that the center card is one possible climate future; it can picture what will unfold in the larger world as it relates to climate disruption in the arc of K's lifetime, or a role for them. It could also respond in some way to what may have been present for K while they were shuffled the cards. I turn over the card and we see *la guia del agua* (the guide of the water), another court card. She is reversed. This card represents an iconoclastic, visionary leader related to water. I share that in the ECOtarot, water symbolizes both water-related phenomena (floods, droughts, etc.) and water systems, while it is also associated with the Cups suit in the standard tarot which represent emotions. The reading cracks wide open, as K shares that the crossroads where they are is deciding whether or not to accept a position of leadership at an agency that stewards a major watershed in the northwest! Using the space of intimacy and honesty we have created together over the last 45 minutes, they open up about all their concerns and reticence around assuming this role. Using the language we have developed together, that brings in the larger world and the fullness of them as a person, they speak to the moment and their place in it. With humility they express gratefulness for all of the leaders who have mentored them, and we discuss the importance of imagining a new type of leadership that is equal to this time, and not just repeating the type of

leadership that leads to burnout and separation. The reversed card can relate to their hesitation to step into the role, or perhaps a delay in stepping into it. They share that they have some time before they need to start, and we discuss how they intend to use that time. Finally, I reveal that *la guia del agua* is associated with Nobel Prize winning economist Eleanor Ostrom. K's face lights up as they recount their knowledge of this impressive and dedicated scholar of the commons.



Figure 2: Post-reading images of K and ECOTarot reading and 5 card spread.

We wind down by considering the reading as a whole. I reflect that all four elements (earth, wind, fire and water) are represented in the reading, a rare occurrence that indicates they know how to balance and work with each aspect of self/collective (body, mind, soul, heart). As well, we notice that three of the five cards are court cards, centering human forms. I share that this indicates to me that they will not be doing their work alone but will be surrounded by others, and will need to rely on other's skills, talents, and capacities to step into all that is being asked of them.

A soft rain starts to fall as we finish up the reading, taking pictures and sharing a blessing with each other as we continue on our life paths.

As one can see from this account, were I to draw the same cards in the same positions in the same spread (a highly unlikely occurrence), the reading would still be different because of the personal nature of what the querent shares, and how the reader responds. Much of the ECOTarot reader's role involves radical listening (McKinney, 2023), where I listen to the whole person, taking in many details of their countenance, self-presentation, posture, speech, gestures, etc. Listening is an important element of enacting “right relations” called for by Indigenous knowledge holders within sustainability transformation literature (Goodchild, 2021; Gram-Hansson et al., 2022; Nelson, 2017) and also figures as a central activity in awareness-based systems change theories and practices (Koenig et al., 2024; Seneque et al., 2024). I liken this radical listening to a type

of improvisation where I am holding many possibilities at once for how to respond and the cards and system are an extension of my body, enabling me to be part of an exchange that helps the querent hear the voice inside themselves. The ECOTarot method helps the querent *connect* with themselves more deeply than they may be used to, reflecting back to them things they already know but need to hear and to root into in order to move through these times. As one can see from the anecdote of K's reading above and Table 2 below, the methods of the ECOTarot work together to foster transformational qualities of awareness, connection, insight, purpose and agency, and resonate with U-Process stages.

Transformation qualities and capacities (Wamsler et al, 2021)	U-Process stages and principles (Scharmer, 2018; Seneque et al., 2024)	ECOTarot methods
AWARENESS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • presence • attention • self-awareness • self-reflection 	CO-INITIATING <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • listen to oneself, to others, to what emerges • listen to what life calls you to do • high impact container / set the tone 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use of archetypes • one-on-one readings • invitation to participate • low barrier to entry (free, held in public) • special space for reading (mesa)
CONNECTION <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • compassion • empathy • kindness • generosity 	CO-SENSING <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • get out of one's bubble • all of senses activated • suspend voice of judgement, connect with sense of wonder • heart and mind open • generative listening (from which something can emerge) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • elements of minor arcana • radical listening • holding/making space • intimacy of reading • proprioceptive and material elements (smells, touch, etc.) • holistic practice (multiple overlapping meanings that can't be parsed cleanly) • process is oral/relational
INSIGHT <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • perspective-taking • sense-making 	CO-INSPIRING/PRESENCING <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • emerging future • willingness to let go of fear, be vulnerable • connect to the emerging future whole 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use of spreads (structure) to address cognitive, affective, physical, anticipatory states • connecting cards meanings (sense-making) • imagining future related to cards drawn (envisioning) • space to experiment with ideas that are not fully formed, safe space for reflection
PURPOSE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • activation • responsibility AGENCY <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • empowerment • courage • hope • passion 	CO-CREATING <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • crystallizing • prototyping the new (not a plan but something done to get feedback) CO-EVOLVING/ CO-SHAPING <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • relinking parts and whole (micro/self and macro/world) 	Interpretive readings are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • pluralistic (use of different languages, symbolic meanings from different cultures, ritual elements) • interactive (the core of the reading is a verbal and energetic exchange) • co-created climate future narrative

Table 2: Transformational qualities, the U-Process stages and the ECOTarot.

Observations and Next Steps

After conducting more than 1600 ECOTarot readings, I have begun to report on the impact of the work through mixed methods of participant observation, photographic imagery, and a small pilot study. Though largely anecdotal at this stage, early observations contribute to the understanding of the powerful potential of the arts' role in social transformation related to global environmental change. An ECOTarot reading differs considerably from an interview or survey responses to questions about climate change in its intimacy, proprioceptive engagement, and disruption of usual patterns and grooves of thought through the introduction of chance related to card selection. Throughout the course of the brief and structured engagement there is room for cognitive dissonance, contradictions, complex and intense emotions, and a multiplicity of meanings to come forward (Bentz, 2020; Moser, 2019). Furthermore, bringing aesthetic considerations to the fore, through the beauty-full and care-full creation of the ECOTarot deck and setting, as we share fears and anxiety around what scientific models predict about our future, can serve to remind us of the beauty of life surrounding us at all times, and enhance our *awareness* of our current moment, in which there is still time to act (Solnit & Lutunatabua, 2023).

Each ECOTarot reading elicits significant, intimate, and often lengthy narratives from the querent about what they know (cognitive), feel (affective), believe (spirit) and are doing (material/embodied) related to climate change. Querents have often expressed that they have never told anyone what they are telling me. Importantly, querents share details about personal plans and beginning efforts or directions to address climate change in their lives. I've listened intently to a desert denizen share an elaborate invention for recycling shower water, the president of a seminary share his visions of a climate-justice centered theological school, a young fashionista relate her understanding that she and her friends need to move away from purchasing wasteful "fast fashion," a Mayan healer describe how her community of indigenous women is organizing to resist the privatization of water in their village, and many, many young people expressing their desire to step into leadership in the political, activist and climate change policy space. These are just a few examples of the ways that the ECOTarot method fosters a sense of *agency* and *purpose* (two of the transformational capacities identified by Wamsler et al., 2021).

Perhaps most striking is the general attitude of querents upon completion of a reading. Since beginning this practice, I have been surprised at the extent to which querents leave a reading feeling inspired, rather than depressed, fearful, or anxious. In fact, a small pilot study (N=19, see Figure 3) using a survey instrument immediately following readings (Jenik, 2022), accurately reflected my anecdotal observations. In the survey, which also collected basic demographic data, participants were asked to choose the top three emotions they felt after receiving their ECOTarot reading.

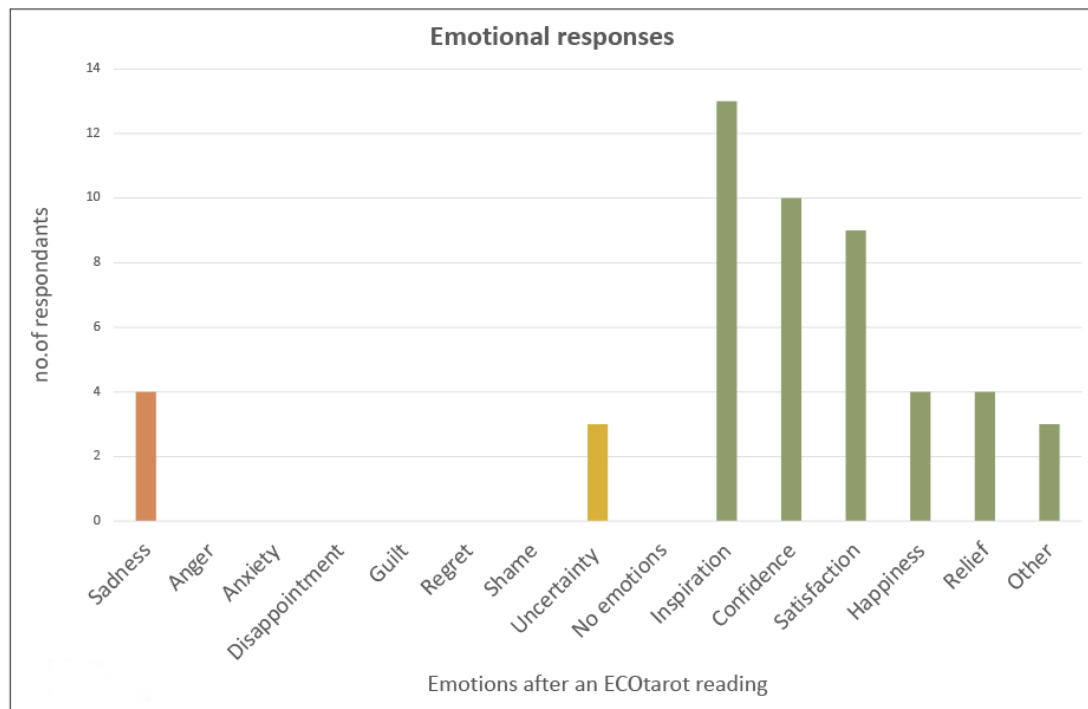


Figure 3: Data from Pilot Study (N=19) of post-reading survey instrument.

These responses were not the outcome I expected, as I do not personally feel “upbeat” about our planet’s future, nor are the card meanings overwhelmingly “positive” as they reflect increasingly dire consequences of human-driven climate disruption drawn from climate science and reported in Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports. Instead, similar responses emerge, time after time, from this multi-sensorial exchange. And, in the process of undertaking the readings, I have been transformed; the result of the cumulative, collective knowledge of all kinds, that is so generously shared with me.

In the aggregate, the hundreds of ECOTarot readings I have conducted reflect a high level of social will related to global ecological change that I intend to capture and report in future phases of research. Undertaking qualitative data analysis of transcripts of recorded readings, greatly expanding the sample size and breadth of questions in a pre- and post-reading survey instrument and comparing the ECOTarot method with other arts-based methods used in the sustainability transformations field will result in rich new insights and a deeper understanding of “inner” transformations supporting sustainability transformation. Additional research to catalogue and analyze other CFSEA works is also planned, to shine a light on this whole class of activity that is under-leveraged within sustainability solutions spaces and is ripe for collaboration with willing sustainability researchers. With this work, I join with a chorus of voices calling for further research on co-production processes and “embedded and embodied forms of learning and engaging climate change” (Bentz, do Carmo, et al., 2022; Norstrom et al., 2020; Seneque et al., 2024).

Conclusion

Though it was not born from a desire to enact theories of transformation driven by global environmental change, the ECOTarot method addresses much of what is called for within a broad range of sustainability transformation literature. During my more than seven years performing with this method in public settings, I have found that the ECOTarot is an effective intervention and an enabling environment that nurtures transformational qualities and capacities called for in Wamsler et al. (2021). As an artist working in an academic institution, I was initially frightened by what others would think when I decided to embark upon this practice, but I pushed through my fear, understanding that the world is demanding something different from us at this moment (Koenig et al., 2024). I was supported in taking this step through the clarity I gained in ceremony and encouraged further in exchanges with beloved community.

I hereby invite any amateur tarot readers reading this paper to take the risk of offering this practice to your social networks, or perhaps even publicly.¹² For those of you not versed in tarot, I challenge you to fold this or another knowledge co-creation method into your research toolset and see what happens. This is not just a playful undertaking. As we break free of the strictures of academic disciplines and take on unorthodox research practices, we open space for other forms of knowledge, resisting the epistemicide enacted by Western thought.

The ECOTarot, though a unique artistic practice, is not alone in its alignment with these necessary “moves” in research practice. There are hundreds, perhaps thousands of CFSEA artists and arts processes being undertaken globally (Apostol & Thompson, 2019; Bloom, 2022; Davis, 2015; Demos, 2016; Gomez-Barris, 2017; Serafini, 2022). Research partners are needed to collaborate with these artists, to analyze their methods and capture and reflect their impacts. This will necessitate increased attention to research on synthetic, holistic, “messy” practices, increased advocacy for arts and arts-based methods within research initiatives, a greater commitment to funding open-ended research projects that do not have predictable outcomes and being open to innovations in research reporting. This means drawing from an expanded range of epistemologies that acknowledge inner and outer experiences of systems, thus bridging affect, will and action. The ECOTarot and other CSFEA arts methods are nurturing transformational capacities, preparing the ground for massive societal change toward a just and sustainability world, and supporting individuals, communities and our own selves as we navigate these paroxysms of change.

¹² A reproduction of the original deck was created, with a how-to guide, to support the proliferation of the practice.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Dr. David Manuel-Navarrete, Dr. Melissa K. Nelson (Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians) and Dr. Alexandrina Aglora for their careful reading and helpful comments on this manuscript and guidance and encouragement in this ongoing research. Thanks also go to colleagues and directors of the Arizona State University School of Art and School of Sustainability who have supported and believed in this project from the very beginning. The author is indebted to her spiritual teachers Joanne Good Hands Woman Flory (Lakota), Arinna Weisman, Maestra Victoria Carella, and Marguerite Gavel and the lineages from which they received their teachings they so generously share. The author further extends her sincere appreciation to her Indigenous accountability review board members for their generosity and willingness to participate in this process.

Funding

The author gratefully acknowledges the support of the John B. Hurford '60 Center for the Arts and Humanities Tuttle Creative Residency at Haverford College, the Creative Climate Leadership Fellows Program sponsored by Julie's Bicycle (UK), the Elaintarhanhuvula Artist Residency, (Helsinki, FIN), La Wayaka: Desert (San Pedro de Atacama, CHILE), LabVerde: Speculative Ecologies (Amazonas, BRZ) and the Baltic Sea Lab Symposium (part of CREATures, a European Union Funded research project) in the ongoing development of the ECOTarot practice.

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Peer Review Article

Walking Toward Relationality:

An Autoethnographic Inquiry of Inner Work for Personal and Systemic Change

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Abstract

In this essay, I share an autoethnographic walking experience that is part of my *inner work* as an early-career sustainability scholar seeking to relate differently with land, people, and knowledge. This research began after I learned about the Exodus: the 1875 forced removal of Yavapai (Yavapé) and Apache (Dilzhé'é) peoples from their ancestral lands in today's Arizona, USA—the region where I, a white settler, was born and raised—which provoked in me intense shame. To unpack my relationships with settler colonialism and begin a process of becoming *naturalized to place*, I walked a section of the Arizona Trail that is part of the Exodus route. Employing a critical, relational walking methodology, as well as arts-based methods, I propose an autoethnography to illustrate six personal (un)learnings that aim to be insightful for the emerging relational paradigm in sustainability science. This includes drawing attention to the ways in which settler colonialism, intertwined with religions and science, may unconsciously orient relationships to land (ontology), people (axiology), and knowledge (epistemology) that are anti-relational. My walking experience underscores the importance of relational ethics as embedded in Indigenous relationality, which taught me that learning to relate differently with land in a more-than-human

sense necessitates healing relationships with the First Peoples. This situates the turn toward relationality as far more than an intellectual endeavor that includes embodied experience, embracing difficult emotions, and acknowledging inner work as important for systems change.

Keywords

relationality, awareness-based systems change, settler colonialism, decolonization, inner–outer transformations, walking methodologies, autoethnography

Introduction

Can settlers be trusted to follow Nanabozho, to walk so that each step is a greeting to Mother Earth?

—Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*

The emerging paradigm shift in sustainability science toward relationality is an invitation for sustainability scholars to bring our full selves into our work (Gram-Hanssen et al., 2022; Ives et al., 2023; Walsh et al., 2021). This seems to be a *next step* in unlearning positivist paradigms that assume Western ontologies as universally true and objectivity as the sole path to scientific knowledge. Scholars still hesitate to integrate personal experiences into our work because we are uncertain of how these are relevant to social change, and doing so may be dismissed as irrelevant to scientific research (Adams et al., 2015; Wall, 2008). Yet, relationality can be insightful because it “places sustainability scientists fundamentally in the complex issues they seek to address” (West et al., 2021, p.112). This perspective reframes our assumed detachedness from the systems we study and work within as symptomatic of particular mindsets rather than characteristic of reality. Hence, turning toward relationality means recognizing conventional Western ontologies as abstract constructs of reality, not objective truths.

Unlearning the hierarchical structure of conventional Western ontologies is an important inner process for relearning relationality. Discussing Indigenous-led conservation efforts, Campion et al. (2023) highlight how non-Indigenous partners can undermine self-determination by failing to recognize the differences between Indigenous and Western ontologies and prioritizing conventional methods over traditional knowledge. This concern is echoed in sustainability literature that weaves Indigenous knowledges with Western science (Berkes, 2008; Johnson et al., 2016; Zanotti & Palomino-Schalscha, 2016). Relationality creates space for letting go of *universal* assumptions toward *pluriversal* perspectives. This “letting go” invokes unlearning processes discussed by decolonial scholars (Gram-Hanssen et al., 2022; Mayuzumi, 2006; Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2012) that revolve around changing our ways of thinking, or

“decolonizing the mind” (Mbembe, 2016; wa Thiong’o, 1994). For non-Indigenous, Western-trained academics like myself, this necessitates serious engagement with our “inner worlds” (Datta, 2018; Goodchild, 2021; Gram-Hanssen et al., 2022; Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2012).

Scholars are increasingly studying inner dimensions of human experience, or inner worlds, as vital components of sustainability transformations and systems change (Bristow et al., 2024; Goodchild, 2021; Ives et al., 2023; Scharmer, 2018; Wamsler et al., 2021; Woiwode et al., 2021). Unlearning dominant paradigms and ontologies as objective truths seems to be an important inner–outer transformative process for non-Indigenous, Western scholars interested in relationality and awareness-based systems change (Goodchild, 2021; Gould et al., 2023; Gram-Hanssen et al., 2022). Considering how deeply these epistemological and ontological assumptions are *concretized* in our being, shaking them loose and creating space for pluriversality may require significant inner work (Datta, 2018; Goodchild, 2021; Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2012). From a systems perspective, we could consider this an engaging process with our own deep leverage points (Abson et al., 2017; Meadows, 1999) to become relational systems thinkers (Goodchild, 2021).

The following autoethnographic research illustrates the beginning of my unlearning process, which may resonate with other scholars—especially white settlers like me. This research was sparked by my learning about *the Exodus*: a forced removal that severed the Yavapai (Yavapé) and Apache (Dilzhé’é) Indigenous peoples from their ancestral lands in what is now Arizona, USA—my homeland. This awakening disrupted my sense of place and prompted a critical interrogation of my identity as an *Arizona native*. This unsettling inner experience provoked by the Exodus resonates with the concept of *settler shame*.

Kizuk defines settler shame as:

A personal experience related to the recognition of our identity as complicit in a racist and colonial world (being *bad*), as well as the concomitant realization that we might lose control over our identity and become defined solely as this bad self both by ourselves... [and as participants in] our social world at large. (Kizuk, 2020, p. 164)

The Exodus awakened this sense of settler shame in me, and my decision to walk a section of the Exodus route, now part of the Arizona Trail (AZT), was motivated by this deep emotional reckoning. I utilized a critical autoethnographic methodology termed “walking-with place” (Springgay & Truman, 2017), designed to promote critical reflexivity and connections with land as a more-than-human agent and co-participant. With the Exodus in mind, I walked-with the land as colonized land to embrace my vulnerability and “affective experiences” (Adams et al., 2015). Inspired by Kimmerer’s urgent call for settlers to “set aside the ways of the colonist and become indigenous to place” (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 207), I intended for this walk to be a step toward cultivating an authentic relationship with my homeland.

Despite approaching this walk with vulnerability and an awareness of the land in a more-than-human sense, I was unprepared for what emerged during this two-day walking experience. The land—particularly certain places along the trail—enacted a series of disruptions upon me, which initially provoked difficult emotions and intense insecurity. Despite the initial discomfort, these disruptions catalyzed a process of inner transformations. I have since come to understand that these disruptions were key to my personal unlearning process (Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2012), because they derived from new embodied experiences with the land.

Prior to walking, my unlearning process had been primarily cognitive, which limited my capacity for inner transformations toward experiencing relationality (Manuel-Navarrete et al., 2024; Polheim et al., 2024) and becoming naturalized to place. Thus, this autoethnographic research marks the beginning of an ongoing personal journey to cultivate relational awareness within sustainability research (Datta, 2018).

This transformative research experience was deep and multi-layered, offering numerous insights and (un)learnings for the field of sustainability—some of which I am not fully aware of yet. To put it succinctly, the following personal (un)learnings represent important accounts of inner awareness that contribute to systems change (Alexiuk, 2022):

- *Unlearning land as topography*: Despite intellectually understanding more-than-human agency, I found myself walking *on* land instead of *with* it. It took several disruptions from the land to open space for an embodied, relational experience of land in a more-than-human sense.
- *Learning settler colonialism as an ongoing process of disconnection*: Reflecting with the land revealed that the colonization of Indigenous peoples is inseparable from the ecological destruction and exploitation of their lands. The people who are ancestral to the land cannot be separated from it, and the more-than-human agency of the land is interconnected with them.
- *Becoming aware of Christianity’s impact on my embodied experience*: Being raised within a Christian worldview that situates land as a commodity shaped how I make sense of the world, even years after renouncing my faith—namely, taking for granted that humans are separate from nature, can study and completely *know* it, as well as control it.
- *Becoming aware of non-human relations*: Even if I am ignorant about it or not fully aware, I am always in relation with non-human beings.
- *Healing settler shame necessitates relational accountability*: My settler’s shame, triggered after learning about the Exodus, was

instrumental in this walking experience. Yet, while I consider this a first step toward processing this shame, it became clear that healing it requires being in relation with the Indigenous communities who have been impacted by my ancestors' actions.

These personal (un)learnings provide insights into the emerging relational turn in sustainability research (Walsh et al., 2021; West et al., 2020), especially in relation to inner–outer transformations (Ives et al., 2023; Manuel-Navarrete et al., 2024; West et al., 2024). First, they emphasize that advancing relationality requires *taking settler colonialism seriously* (Escobar et al., 2024; Gallegos-Riofrio et al., 2022; Gould et al., 2023). For settler scholars like me and for institutions created and maintained through settler colonialism, unpacking this phenomenon and healing our relationships with First Peoples on whose land we live is key for our relationality (Giovale, 2024). This dual process situates scholars' inner work, like healing our settler shame, as an important step towards building relational approaches to sustainability.

Second, these (un)learnings illustrate the importance of *embodied experience* in advancing relationality (Escobar et al., 2024; Manuel-Navarrete et al., 2024; Polheim et al., 2024). While an intellectual understanding of relationality is important for systems thinking (Raymond et al., 2021), relationality entails overcoming abstract concepts and making space for embodied experiences nurtured by sensations of interconnectedness that enhance relational thinking (Goodchild, 2021) and inner–outer transformations (Ives et al., 2023; Manuel-Navarrete et al., 2024).

Lastly, they demonstrate how *weaving inner work into research* promotes relationality (Escobar et al., 2024; Wilson, 2008). Methodologies that incorporate personal experiences and researchers' inner dimensions are important for cultivating our relational awareness (Alexiuk, 2022; Datta, 2018). Autoethnography (Alexiuk, 2022; Wall, 2008), relational walking (Springgay & Truman, 2017), and arts-based methods (de Araujo Goes et al., 2023; Leavy, 2020) can be rich modes of inquiry that facilitate inner–outer connections in sustainability scholarship.

Context and Positionality

Despite living my entire life in Arizona and taking pride in my knowledge and relationship with its lands, I did not know the names of Arizona's ancestral peoples until I began performing land acknowledgements. I had never been taught that I reside on the ancestral lands of the Piipaash and Akimel O'odham peoples (Martínez, 2023). The fact that there is very little acknowledgement of these peoples—now part of the sovereign Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community—as the ancestral stewards of this land is consistent with the settler mindset of land as ontologically separate from humans. Recreating on undeveloped “public lands” often gives me a feeling of “freedom” that resonates

with the notion of *terra nullius*, or “no man’s land,” which settler colonialism operationalizes to occupy land (Wolfe, 2006)¹.

However, when I learned about the Yavapai–Apache Exodus of 1875, it shook me to my core and disrupted my “settler ignorance” (Cook, 2018; Kizuk, 2020). This forced removal of Yavapai (Yavapé) and Apache (Dilzhé’é) First Peoples was pivotal in colonizing the Verde Valley in Arizona (Whittlesey et al., 1997), which paved the way for the construction of my home in metropolitan Phoenix, AZ USA (Herman, 2012). Arizona history is full of horrific acts perpetrated against the ancestral peoples of these lands, which settlers justified under the illusions of “manifest destiny” that still reverberate today (Stephanson, 1996). The majority of this shameful history is either sparsely detailed and situated in the context of settlers as noble conquerors (see Jackson, 1908), or is deliberately erased (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2023).

My knowledge of the Exodus began with a newsletter from the Arizona Trail Association, an organization that maintains the 800-mile Arizona National Scenic Trail (AZT). They had recently been made aware that a passage of the AZT is part of the route forcibly walked by 1,500 Yavapé and Dilzhé’é peoples during the Exodus (Arizona Trail Association, Personal Communication, October 12, 2020). Reading this struck me as both someone who recreates along the AZT and considers themselves an *Arizona native*. It disrupted my illusions of the AZT as a place *away from it all*, a place of *terra nullius* unaffected by colonization. It unsettled my “sense of place” (Springgay & Truman, 2017; Tuck & McKenzie, 2014) and pushed me to think critically about my relationships with these lands and the First Nations.

My initial response was to read all I could find about the Exodus. Historical literature detailing the Exodus is extremely sparse and mostly written by settlers (Braatz, 2003; Corbusier, 1969; Herman, 2012; McGivney, 2020; Thrapp, 1995; Whittlesey et al., 1997). This is consistent with settler colonialism’s efforts to erase such history in order to avoid guilt and shame (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2023). Most historical publications draw from the documentation of an Army surgeon who witnessed the Exodus and worked with the Yavapé and Dilzhé’é peoples held on the Rio Verde Reservation (Corbusier, 1969).

Taking seriously the atrocities described provoked intense remorse (Braatz, 2003; Herman, 2012). The few histories published by Yavapé survivors underscore the level of dehumanization enacted during the Exodus (Burns, 2012; Harrison & Williams, 2022), yet they also emphasize their peoples’ resistance. Their story did not end with the Exodus; 25 years later, they returned to their ancestral lands and formed the Yavapai-Apache Nation that continues to strengthen today (Yavapai-Apache Nation, 2024). Through the Yavapai-Apache

¹ The concept of *terra nullius* is symptomatic of the “doctrine of discovery” and “manifest destiny” that grew from particular interpretations of Christianity that gave European colonial powers the “divine right to conquest” (Deloria, 2003, p. 111).

Nation, I learned that they honor their ancestors and commemorate their return to their ancestral lands in an annual Exodus Day event (Utacia Krol, 2011). This gathering includes acts of resistance that reclaim this history through a commemorative walk and relay run covering the entire 180-mile route of the Exodus.

Learning about the Yavapai-Apache Nation and Exodus Day compelled me to attend the yearly event to show solidarity and perhaps process some of the deep remorse stirring in me. Amid COVID-19 lockdowns and with First Nations' increased vulnerability to outbreaks, Exodus Day was postponed and the Yavapai-Apache Nation closed to visitors. The more I reflected with the Exodus, though, the more I felt compelled to do something beyond reading historical texts.² It felt important to deepen my relationship with this erased history that is fundamental to my privileges and existence here in this settler state. Theoretically, it made sense to walk the passage of the AZT that had been uncovered as part of the Exodus route. This would mean approaching the trail not as a place of outdoor recreation aiming at connecting with nature, but as a place of colonial violence perpetrated by my ancestors.³ I began putting together a research itinerary (Figure 1) to conceptualize this autoethnographic experience, which would be guided by the following self-inquiries:

How will walking-with the AZT, situated within the Exodus, teach me about my relationship to settler colonization, research, and land? How might a critical, relational walking methodology create space for more-than-human agency and engaging with land as a teacher? How will this experience inform my perspective of relationality? What will this experience teach me about becoming a relational sustainability researcher?

² Through such reading I learned of numerous other tragic acts of colonial violence similarly hidden from Arizona history—see the Navajo Long Walk, Skeleton Cave Massacre, Bloody Basin Massacre, and Camp Grant Massacre.

³ Little has been shared with me about my ancestral history in general, let alone in the context of colonization and slavery. From a DNA test, I seem to be of majority English ancestry, as well as German and Norwegian ancestry. My relatives on my father's side seemed to have settled in Minnesota, while my mother's family settled in New York and California. I am not certain whether I have any relatives directly involved in the colonization of Arizona. Regardless, my societal connection with the collective history of European colonization, slavery, and ongoing settler colonialism is beyond question.

Walking-with Place as Methodology

Research Itinerary (Intentions)			
Research Inquiries: How will walking-with the AZT, situated within the Exodus, teach me about my relationships to settler colonialism, research, and land? How might a critical, relational walking methodology create space for more-than-human agency and engaging with land as a teacher? How will this experience inform my perspective of relationality? What will this experience teach me about becoming a relational sustainability researcher?			
Place	Beginning and Ending location	Duration	Distance (approx.)
Arizona Trail Passage 25 - White Rock Mesa (part of the Exodus route)	Hardscrabble Mesa Trailhead	2 days	24 miles (38.6 km)
Walking Methodology: Walking-with place (Springgay and Truman, 2018) which is a relational methodology developed from the Zapatista's (1994) concept "walking-with"; It situates place critically, is accountable to settler colonialism, and can be performed alone.			
Arts-Based Methods: 35mm B/W film photography (Leavy, 2020), inefficient mapping (Knight, 2021).			
Autoethnographic Methods: Voice memos recorded via phone, reflective journaling (Adams et al., 2015; Ellis, 2004).			
Data Analysis: Autoethnographic writing through poetry and narrative (Adams et al., 2015).			

Table 1: The research itinerary that guided my experience walking-with the AZT.

Walking as a form of critical inquiry was brought to my awareness through the concept of public pedagogy (Sandlin et al., 2010) because it oriented the AZT pedagogically, as a place for (un)learning my relationships with land, knowledge, and research. The Journal of Public Pedagogy's special issue "Walking in/as Publics" (Springgay & Truman, 2019) introduced walking methodologies as ways to engage in this critical (un)learning. Such walking methodologies are compelling for relational research because they are inherently active, embodied, and in relation with particular environments or places. Springgay and Truman describe walking as "an accomplishment of the whole body in motion...itself a way of thinking and feeling" (Springgay & Truman, 2017, p. 2). Walking is well-suited for relational research because it is an embodied form of "thinking in motion" that is inherently place-based (Ingold & Vergunst, 2008) with the potential for reconnecting humans and nature, mind and body, or thinking and feeling. Walking can also carry spiritual significance because it can cultivate contemplation, reflexivity, and "inner experiences" (Kabat-Zinn, 2017; Slavin, 2003). Walking methodologies may be useful for sustainability researchers interested in epistemological openings to affective and embodied ways of knowing that are inherently place-based.

The specific walking methodology I explored in this context is Springgay and Truman's "walking-with place," as presented in their book "Walking Methodologies in a More-than-Human World: WalkingLab" (Springgay & Truman, 2017, pp. 16-33). The concept "walking-with" was coined by the

Zapatistas to describe their practice of walking toward “a world in which many worlds fit,” or a “Pluriverse” (Sundberg, 2014; Zapatista Army of National Liberation, 1996). Springgay and Truman expand on walking-with through a variety of theoretical frameworks, each of which maintains walking as political, ethical, and resisting universal claims to knowledge: “Walking-with is accountable... a form of solidarity, unlearning, and critical engagement with situated knowledges” (Springgay & Truman, 2017, p. 11). Walking-with place specifically disrupts dominant representations of place that exclude Indigenous peoples and ignore traumatic histories of settler colonial violence (Springgay & Truman, 2019; Tuck & McKenzie, 2014), such as the Exodus. Taking seriously such historical traumas and deconstructing settler colonial narratives creates possibilities for meaningful engagement with Indigenous, relational concepts of *Land* that have long been dismissed by Western science (Simpson, 2014; Tuck & McKenzie, 2014; Watts, 2013; Wildcat et al., 2014). Thus, walking-with place opens space for challenging settler colonialism (Gallegos-Riofrio et al., 2022) and for being accountable to Indigenous relationality (Gould et al., 2023). While walking-with place has been carried out within group-based walking tours (Aoki & Yoshimizu, 2015; Truman & Springgay, 2019; WalkingLab, 2017), it can be carried out individually (Springgay & Truman, 2017). The emphasis on sensory perception and affective experience makes walking-with place especially potent for autoethnographic inquiry.

This research was carried out amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, which limited collective walking and invited self-inquiry. Walking has a long history as self-inquiry through contemplative (Kabat-Zinn, 2017) and spiritual practices (Slavin, 2003), illustrating the deep connection between the embodied act of walking and inner dimensions of human experience. At its end, autoethnography’s explicit focus of inquiry within the self inherently promotes increased awareness of these inner dimensions, along with deep reflexivity (Adams et al., 2015). Thus, walking and autoethnography form a natural synergy conducive to critical self-inquiry that is attuned to, and entangled between, internal and external layers of experience. Ingold and Vergunst (2008) highlight this entanglement by illustrating how emotional experiences, created through walking in a particular place, raise the question of “*where*, in experiential terms, is the emotion?” (Ingold & Vergunst, 2008, p. 120). Locating the emotion solely in the human denies the relational nature of the experience (Ingold & Vergunst, 2008). In this way, walking-with place as autoethnographic inquiry bridges the human-nature divide through a relational emphasis on inner experiences as co-creations with external places.

The relational context of both walking-with place and autoethnographic inquiry similarly bridges the personal–collective divide that is vital for awareness-based systems change (Koenig et al., 2021). Adams et al (2015) discuss the real risk of autoethnographic work being dismissed as irrelevant or not “scholarly,” and their response to this rests on the perspective that personal experience is invaluable for social change. This perspective maintains that the self is always in relation to larger social and cultural structures or systems. By

embracing our vulnerability and sharing our inner experiences and processes, we create spaces of “resonance, possibility, and activation” beyond the self (Calafell, 2013 as cited in Adams et al., 2015, p. 34). The emerging focus on inner–outer transformations for sustainability underscores this perspective and situates autoethnographic inquiry as important for systems change (Alexiuk, 2022). Autoethnographic research may be especially useful for early career scholars in sustainability and systems science, as this inner work promotes a holistic awareness of ourselves in relation to the communities and places (in) which we aim to study (Alexiuk, 2022). As someone just beginning my academic career in sustainability, I situate this walking experience as a personal orientation toward relational research inspired by Kimmerer’s (2013) call to settlers to “become naturalized to place.”

My intention to walk-with the AZT as a place inseparable from the Exodus forced removal obliged critical reflexivity and an openness to more-than-human agency. While both walking-with place and autoethnographic inquiry defined the methodology for this inner–outer experience, I felt compelled to also incorporate arts-based methods to foster deeper affective expression and critical consciousness (Leavy, 2020). Arts-based methods are particularly valuable for critical, relational research because the arts can unsettle dominant paradigms, challenge dualistic thinking, evoke emotion, and invite reflexivity (Leavy, 2020). The use of arts-based methods in qualitative research emerged from art therapy to tap into the inner dimensions of human experience (Malchiodi, 2011).

My personal experience with photography speaks to the arts’ healing and therapeutic potential. Prior to graduate school, I explored black and white, 35mm film photography and found that it evoked a quite distinct experience from conventional digital photography. Specifically, the tones and shadows of black and white photography communicate a deeper affective quality. I employed this style of photography during this walking research to activate the emotionality of the land and provoke affective, sensuous, and embodied reflections with specific places along the trail. The process of developing the film was important as the delay between taking the photographs and seeing the images several weeks after the walk prompted intense reflection through memory (Kuhn, 2007).

Cartography also emerged as an arts-based method for this research. In addition to using a conventional topographical map for wayfinding, I practiced an affective form of artistic cartography called “inefficient mapping” (Knight, 2021). Shortly before I began walking, Linda Knight presented inefficient mapping to a qualitative data analysis course I was taking. As she articulated this subjective approach to cartography that creatively *maps* affective experiences with places as entangled, unfolding processes (Knight, 2021), instead of static environments, the synchronicity with this research was clear. Inefficient mapping emerged as a way to create personal maps of specific places that express an affective relationship between animate, entangled subjects (Knight, 2021).

Traditional autoethnographic methods were also used to document inner experiences during the walk (Adams et al., 2015; Ellis, 2004). Voice memos

served to record my thoughts and feelings *in motion*. Reflective journaling during stops along the trail promoted self-awareness and emotional expression (Adams et al., 2015; Wall, 2008). Bringing traditional and arts-based methods together created a rich and holistic dataset of my inner experiences that reflected the unfolding transformative process. The data analysis furthered this inner transformative process around multiple layers of consciousness and relational awareness. For example, overlaying inefficient maps (Figures 8-10) with photographs (see Disruption 1) and reflecting with them while listening to a voice memo of the same place made space for deep insights into my inner experience. Moreover, I synthesized the data through an autoethnographic writing process that included poetry and narrative-style writing (Adams et al., 2015; Ellis, 2004).

The narrative and poetic writing of this walking experience promoted deeper reflection and allowed me to begin relating my experience with conceptual frameworks from decolonization literature. While this walking experience is itself not an act of decolonization (Springgay & Truman, 2017)—which should revolve around Indigenous sovereignty and repatriation of ancestral lands (Tuck & Yang, 2012)—concepts from decolonial scholarship clarify the disruptions I experienced in important ways. Specifically, decolonization relates to my inner processes of *learning to unlearn* (Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2012, *italics mine*). In this pedagogical context, decolonization is happening internally, or “in the mind” (wa Thiong’o, 1994). Importantly, this inner perspective of decolonization is connected with the external goals of decolonization to repatriate Indigenous lands and promote self-determination. Gram-Hanssen et al (2022) illustrate this inner–outer perspective of decolonization through the Indigenous concept of “right relations”:

Decolonization is not a metaphor for systems change more broadly but is tied to specific peoples and histories (Tuck and Yang 2012). Yet the concept and practice of “right relations” not only holds insights for how to generate respectful relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, but can help inform a broader notion of how we might relate to all living beings, to the Earth and to ourselves. (Gram-Hanssen et al., 2022, p. 683)

This approach to decolonization invokes “learning to unlearn” toward pluriversality (Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2012) and provides valuable insight into how settlers can seriously engage with Kimmerer’s (2013) call to “become naturalized to place.” Specifically, they identify four interconnected practices toward cultivating right relations: listening deeply, creating space, self-reflexivity, and being in action (Gram-Hanssen et al., 2022), which resonate with my walking experience. Thus, my analysis is guided by these practices to illustrate my process of relating differently with land, knowledge, and research.

Disruptions Toward Relating Differently

What people make of their places is closely connected to what they make of themselves as members of society and inhabitants of the earth, and while the two activities may be separable in principle, they are deeply joined in practice.

—Keith H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache*

In many ways, my walk began long before setting foot on the trail and continued long after leaving it. The weeks leading up to the walk, I read over and over again the sparse literature on the Exodus (Braatz, 2003; Burns, 2012; Corbusier, 1969; Harrison & Williams, 2022; Herman, 2012; Whittlesey et al., 1997). I took note of specific events and the places described, and I reviewed the topography map of the area to see if any of these places were part of the AZT passage I would be walking. Importantly, the names I read are the names given to these places by settlers. They are not their ancestral names in the languages connected with this land (Basso, 1996; Tuck & McKenzie, 2014). It seemed important to be familiar with the specific places and events I might be walking through so I could stop and acknowledge them (Aoki & Yoshimizu, 2015; WalkingLab, 2017). While examining the topography map in detail (Figure 1), the limited representation of the map became clear. Typically, I consider topography maps to be quite literal representations of land; however, taking seriously the Exodus challenged this preconception. The topography map, though useful for navigation, illustrates the land as static, inert, and outside of historical context. This reinterpretation of land as much more than topography prefaced the disruptions to come.

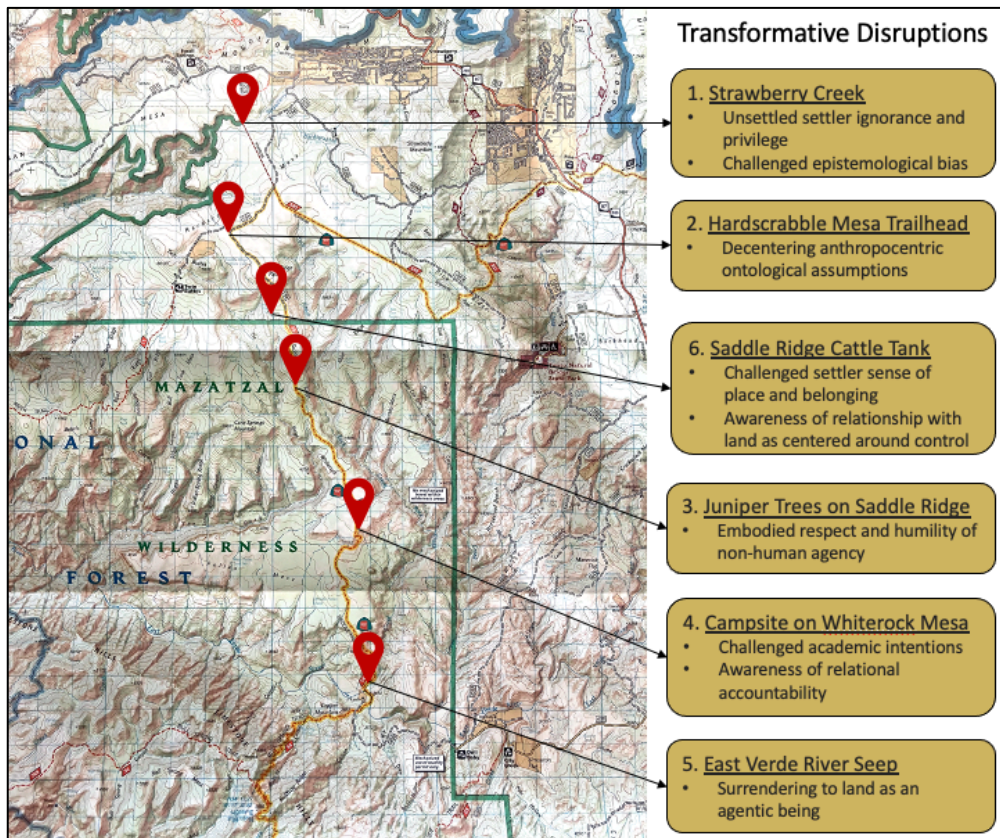


Figure 1: Places along the trail that enacted disruptive experiences toward personal transformation. Photographs and descriptions of each place are detailed below in Disruptions 1-6 (Figures 2-7).

The trailhead for this passage of the AZT is about three miles outside of a small settler town called Pine, AZ. I drove down a network of rugged dirt roads that are primarily used by hunters and off-road enthusiasts to reach the trailhead. Just before reaching the trailhead, I drove beneath an immense stand of powerlines that cut across the dirt road. Intrigued, I checked the topography map, which showed these powerlines crossing Strawberry Creek about a mile from this road. I recalled Strawberry Creek in Corbusier's (1969) account of the Exodus, and though this place is not part of the AZT passage, I felt compelled to witness it.

Disruption 1: Strawberry Creek

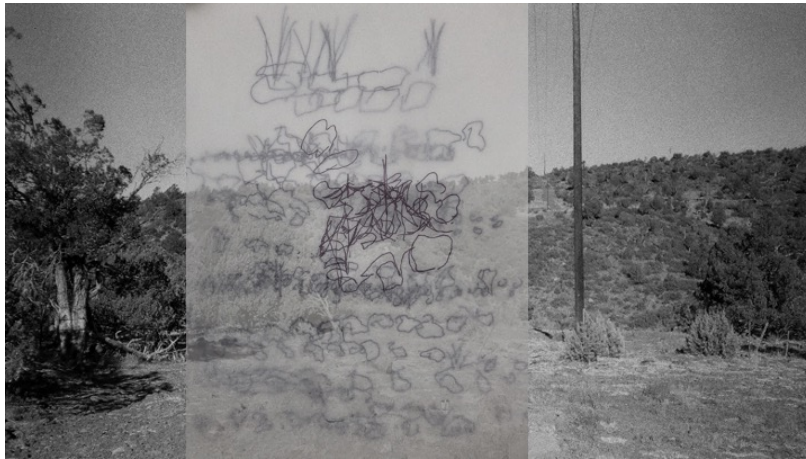


Figure 2: Disruption 1: Strawberry Creek with Inefficient Maps 1 and 2 (Figures 8 and 9) digitally superimposed to illustrate the physical landscape's role as co-creator of the affective landscape I experienced there.

As I walked beneath massive wires buzzing with electric current toward Strawberry Creek (Figure 2), I wondered whether this trail of powerlines was, like the Arizona Trail, originally part of the Exodus. The thought of a trail created by forced removal and later used to bring electricity to settler communities sparked critical reflection within me. It was already clear to me that forced removals like the Exodus were fundamental to the creation of settler communities; however, walking among the powerlines carrying energy generated from fossil fuels and extractive mining, the relationship between the colonization of Indigenous peoples and the exploitation of Indigenous lands for natural resources became even clearer. Settler colonialism is not an external event of the past or separate from contemporary life (Wolfe, 2006); rather, it is embedded in the fabric of the city in which I live, as well as the small towns like Pine, AZ that I consider vacation destinations. My lack of awareness of these relationships reflects the ways settler privilege often defines Indigenous-settler relationships (Irlbacher-Fox, 2014).

Reaching the edge of Strawberry Creek, I sat on a boulder overlooking the creek and listened deeply. There was no sound of rushing water as described by Corbusier (1969). Small streams such as this typically only have water after abundant precipitation, and the Exodus took place during an exceptionally wet winter making this a place of treacherous crossing. Reflecting on this context made me confront the otherwise peaceful scene I was witnessing. Then, the sounds of birds chirping and wind whistling through pine needles were disrupted by loud booms of distant rifle fire. This wilderness is popular for hunting, and the way the birds continued to sing made it clear that the gunfire was nothing new. My ears re-attuned to the buzzing powerlines hanging effortlessly over Strawberry Creek. Another shot echoed across the land, resonating with the

atrocities of forced removal. Familiar feelings of shame and anxiety welled up inside my chest.

My response to this was to map my affective experience with inefficient mapping, which “works closely with immanent and speculative theories, attuning to non-representational affects and energies of place, space, and event” (Knight, 2011, p. 225). I didn’t want to push these feelings away because they were crucial for me to visually map the sensuous, affective, and embodied experiences with this particular place (Knight, 2021). Still, as I began this affective mapping, my settler shame turned into harsh internal criticism and judgment. I criticized my lack of artistic ability and struggled to find the usefulness of this practice. This cartographic practice challenged my conditioned assumptions of what constitutes data and helped me come to terms with data as “messy, unsteady, and shifting” (Knight, 2011, p. 188). Reflecting now on my inefficient maps of Strawberry Creek (Figures 8-10), I recognize the affective attunements to non-human, inhuman, and more-than-human entities that guided these co-creations with place (Knight, 2021). The strong emotions I experienced were not *mine*—rather, echoing Ingold and Verngunst (2008), these emotions are entangled with Strawberry Creek in a relational sense. Even though my cognitive awareness was not necessarily attuned to the land during my inefficient mapping, this practice still produced qualitative data about this place.

Disruption 2: Hardscrabble Mesa



Figure 3: Disruption 2: The ominous tree stump marks the entrance to the trailhead at Hardscrabble Mesa.

The critical reflexivity that began at Strawberry Creek continued as I arrived at the Hardscrabble Mesa trailhead (Figure 3), where I would begin and end my walking experience. Powdery, degraded soils covered in tire tracks and the severed, decaying stump of an invasive tamarisk tree marked this place. Three diesel trucks, two with livestock trailers, sat parked. Adjacent to them was a dry stock tank for livestock to drink from. After I parked my vehicle, prepared my pack, and began walking, I noticed an ironic sticker displayed on one of the

livestock trailers. It read: “AND TO PROTECT AND CARE FOR ALL HIS CREATIONS GOD MADE RANCHERS, MINERS, AND LOGGERS.” This aphorism made me reflect critically about my own Christian upbringing and how it influenced my assumptions about the human–nature relationship, as well as its entanglement with the logics of settler colonialism (Mignolo, 2007; Wolfe, 2006).

On my father’s side, my grandmother and grandfather Grant were both raised in large, low-income families that worked farms in rural Minnesota. They were devoutly Christian. This side of my family remains deeply rooted in Christian faith today, and though I no longer share their religious beliefs, part of me nodded to the words on the sticker (I wouldn’t be surprised if my great aunt and uncle, still cattle ranchers, have the very same sticker). Yet, I also reflected on the notion of “dominion” and how it can be implicated in fostering the unsustainable relationships with nature that characterize much of Western culture (Deloria, 2003; White, 1967), as well as how Christian mythology is entangled with the colonization of Indigenous lands (Deloria, 2018; Mignolo, 2003; V. Watts, 2013). Reflecting on the scene at the trailhead—degraded soil trampled by automobiles, large trucks with trailers to transport livestock, and the ominous tamarisk trunk—the words on the sticker seemed to blissfully ignore such criticisms. As I thought about my ontological assumptions and mindset toward human–nature relationships, it became clear that the Christian religious beliefs I was raised with are entangled with the modern, substantialist ontology I continue to embody.

Disruption 3: Juniper Trees on Saddle Ridge



Figure 4: The juniper trees along the top of Saddle Ridge become denser shortly after descending the ridge from where this picture was taken, which is where the black bear encounters occurred.

It didn’t take long for the land to disrupt the anthropocentric ignorance I embodied as I walked the trail. I had intended to walk somewhat contemplatively with a slow pace and in relative silence as a way of acknowledging and bearing witness (Aoki & Yoshimizu, 2015; Springgay & Truman, 2017) to the trail as

embedded in the Exodus. However, this intention ignored the presence of non-human beings who live here and walk this same trail. Walking through the juniper trees on Saddle Ridge (Figure 5), I began noticing broken twigs and scattered juniper berries just off the trail, and I recalled that this place is home to black bears.

The thoughts that previously captivated my attention quickly disintegrated into feelings of fear and vulnerability. I had no bear spray or other deterrents, so I started clapping my hands intermittently. Upon smelling and almost stepping in one of two very fresh piles of bear scat, I sang loudly: “This land is your land, this land is my land, this land was made for you and me!” In the moment, this song seemed to burst out of me intuitively; however, with critical reflection and deep listening, I’m compelled to consider the lyrics as part of an unconscious response to feelings of settler shame I was walking with. Along with many American children, I learned this song as a child in school, but I cannot recollect the last time I heard it, let alone sang it. That this song unfolded in my awareness in this moment seems more than simple irony.

This close encounter with black bears was deeply unsettling because it reminded me that, despite my inclination towards relationality, my actions and behaviors are still largely conditioned by the settler colonial structure in which I’m embedded. Prior to the bear encounter, I was walking largely disconnected from this place because I was caught in my head. The inherent accountability to non-humans that comes with walking in shared places was outside of my awareness. This lack of relationship with non-humans seems a privilege of settler colonialism—one that has severely impacted many endemic animal species who have disrupted settler colonial endeavors.⁴ Interestingly, in the weeks after walking, I probed into potential extinct megafauna in the mountain range where I walked and found compelling evidence that, prior to the 19th century, the black bears I encountered may have lived alongside grizzly bears and wolves, both of which were eliminated by settlers to protect livestock (Bednarz, 1988; Brown, 1996).

Again, this reminded me of my ancestors who still farm cattle. My great aunt told me a story about a particular cow that “had a lot of personality” and would greet her every morning. She broke an important rule and gave the cow a name, symbolizing an emotional connection that was forbidden with livestock. When it was time for her to go to slaughter, my aunt cried and grieved her death. Like her, I have been taught to ignore relationships with non-human beings except for the extent to which they serve my needs and desires. However, the black bear encounter provided an embodied clarity that I am always in relation to non-humans even if I am unaware.

⁴ The near-extirmination of the American bison by settlers in the 19th century is perhaps the best-documented example.

Disruption 4: Campsite on White Rock Mesa



Figure 5: This haunting rock formation protruded from the soil just behind the fire ring within the campsite. It seems like a type of omen for the difficult night that awaited me after taking this photograph.

My unplanned visit to Strawberry Creek, coupled with a slow pace, meant that I would not reach the East Verde River, where I intended to camp, before dark. I was relieved to encounter an unknown campsite three miles from the river on the edge of Whiterock Mesa (Figure 5). After setting up my tent and building a small fire, I felt inner peace. Feelings of gratitude came over me as I sat amidst the silhouettes of juniper trees. This was a place of comfort, security, and connection with nature that resonated with previous experiences in wilderness areas of Arizona. The land warmed my spirit as the fire warmed my body. When the fire began to burn low, the inner peace started to fade. The cool silence of the night became loud as I sat alone in the wilderness, immersed in the utter darkness of a new moon.

I thought I was beyond the intense fear of the dark I experienced as a child. However, alone in the cold darkness, this place reawakened that fear. I thought that quickly crawling into my tent would ease the fear, yet as I lay wide awake in my tent, I experienced intense anxiety and a sense of alienation. Embracing the vulnerability of this experience proved too difficult at that moment as I quaked with anxiety and longed to be back home. I felt utterly out of place. Frightened, I interrogated myself aloud: “Why am I here? Why am I alone? What is the point of this?”

Before I began walking, I interpreted this experience as a personal process with social implications because I was acknowledging the Exodus, which made me feel solidarity with the Yavapai-Apache Nation. I thought about this walk as an extension of the land acknowledgment practices that take place in settler institutions like Arizona State University. The primary reason these practices are important is because they acknowledge the largely suppressed traumatic

histories that have enabled the development of settler society and institutions (Stewart-Ambo & Wayne Yang, 2021). As I learned about the history of the Exodus, I felt a need to go beyond an oral performance and embrace an embodied form of acknowledgment of this history and my relationship with it. Walking-with the AZT alone seemed appropriate in this regard, partly because of the ongoing pandemic and social distancing practices, and partly because I needed to do this exercise by myself. I was unsure how to perform this walk to genuinely acknowledge the Exodus while seeking reconciliation and healing. A few months earlier, I had reached out to the Yavapai-Apache Nation's Cultural Research Center to share my intentions and inquire about any historical documents I could review to deepen my understanding of the Exodus. I received no response and assumed this was due to the ongoing pandemic and lockdowns. Still, I carried on without hesitation.

This place disrupted my sense of isolated agency and revealed my lack of relationship with the First Peoples on whose ancestral land I lay and whose history I intended to walk-with. This is why I was there alone and afraid. Critiques of land acknowledgments speak to my experience here. Devised and performed within conventional Western thinking, land acknowledgments risk perpetuating colonial relationships with Indigenous communities rather than healing them. Tuck & Yang (2012) describe land acknowledgments as part of “settler moves to innocence” because they can function as “perfunctory and rote gestures that serve as excuses and alibis for settler institutions” (Stewart-Ambo & Yang, 2021, p. 42). Stewart-Ambo & Yang (2021) make it clear that if the intent of land acknowledgments is to cultivate authentic relationships between settler institutions and Indigenous communities, then they should be ethically grounded in Indigenous relationality and cultivate accountability to land and people. At the time, I was unfamiliar with Indigenous relationality and relational accountability and in the cold darkness, the land made this clear to me. I was walking to process settler shame and (un)learn colonial relationships, yet I had not considered ethical questions regarding relational research and relational accountability articulated by Indigenous scholars (Chilisa, 2020; Kovach, 2021; Wilson, 2008). I thought about how autoethnographies situate the self in relation to social and cultural systems (Adams et al., 2015), and the land was deepening my self-awareness of the ways in which my intentions and actions reflected a “self-out-of-relation” with land and people (Giovale, 2024; Kimmerer, 2013).

Disruption 5: East Verde River



Figure 6: Disruption 5: Amidst a dry winter, the waters of the East Verde River were slow and shallow. This is a tributary to the larger Verde River that is a major water source for the Yavapai-Apache Nation, as well as the Phoenix Metropolitan Area.

Slivers of sunlight awoke me from a cold, restless sleep, and without hesitation, I packed my things and began walking toward the East Verde River (Figure 6). My mind was exhausted from the intense emotional experience of the night and negative thoughts still hung in the air. I kept thinking, “Is this really even research? I feel like I’m just out here.” The day prior, I had theories and academic concepts floating around in my head as I walked. Today, having *been worked-with* by the land for almost 24 hours, I no longer mused with theories and intellectual thoughts. The feelings of loneliness and anxiety, now becoming frustration and indifference, opened space for a deeper sensuous experience, because my mind had quieted somewhat. I noticed and listened more deeply to the land, and as I approached the river, I noticed a massive, dried epiphytic mushroom sitting on the riverbank. I sat down beside it and imagined mycelial networks, fungal intelligence, and “The Mushroom at the End of the World” (Tsing, 2015). I wondered whether this ancestral decomposer would share their relational wisdom regarding the shame, frustration, and general inner confusion I was sensing.

Wolfe describes the underlying logic of settler colonialism as a “logic of elimination” that is symptomatic of an incessant desire for land: “The primary motive for elimination is not race (or religion, ethnicity, grade of civilization, etc.) but access to territory. Territoriality is settler colonialism’s specific, irreducible element” (Wolfe, 2006, p. 388). The forced removal of the Yavapé and Dilzhé’é

peoples was an executive order, issued by President Ulysses S. Grant⁵ in response to pressure from federal contractors who wanted the fertile land on which the Rio Verde Reservation had been established (Corbusier, 1969; Yavapai-Apache Nation, 2024). The Rio Verde Reservation was established in 1871 and consisted of 900 square miles of land in the fertile Verde Valley ancestral to the Yavapé and Dilzhé'é (Yavapai-Apache Nation, 2024). These wealthy settlers had heard that the Yavapé and Dilzhé'é people held on this reservation were growing sufficient crops to support themselves and sell excess to the Army (Braatz, 2003; Corbusier, 1969). These settler contractors also sold crops to the Army, so they pressured the federal government to remove the Yavapé and Dilzhé'é from this reservation and make the land available to settlers for private ownership (Braatz, 2003; Corbusier, 1969). The ontological orientation toward land as “an object to be owned and controlled” is clear here, and it speaks to the staunch “anti-relational” nature of settler colonialism (Whyte, 2018; Wolfe, 2006).

As I left the mushroom and riverbank to start the long walk back, I was back in my head fixated on thoughts and conceptual thinking. I recalled a quote attributed to Native American Elders describing the problem with settlers: “they act as though they have no relatives” (Morrison, 2013). I wondered whether it was even possible for settlers like me to cultivate “deep reciprocity” and become naturalized to place (Kimmerer, 2013). Feeling ashamed and frustrated at the pain, destruction, and death inflicted by settler societies—still today—such a sentiment seemed hopeless. I walked with these thoughts and emotions as I approached a groundwater seepage of thick, wet mud. A log lay across, and I carelessly hopped onto it. The log immediately collapsed under my weight, and I went crashing wildly into the mud. Furious, I trudged out of the seep and sat with my head in my hands. My shoes and socks were engulfed in mud, and I still had to walk ten miles before dark. All the shame, fear, anxiety, and anger I had felt up to this point seemed to stir together. I experienced a moment of utter defeat. Then, I quickly got up, because it was clear that I could only keep walking, and a strange calm came over me.

⁵ While, as far as I know, I have no direct relation with Ulysses S. Grant, our shared surname speaks to my ancestral connection with colonization.

Disruption 6: Saddle Ridge Tank



Figure 7: Disruption 6: Saddle Ridge tank sits dry with an ominous invasive tamarisk tree.

Before I stepped into the mud, my attention and awareness largely revolved around conceptual thinking. I was stuck in my head for much of the walk, in a general state of anxiety. From Strawberry Creek to the East Verde River, I had been anxious, which minimized the potential for embodied experiences with the land. The place-based disruptions provoked small openings of relational awareness that quickly settled back into this general state of anxiety. Strangely, like the lonely dark night on White Rock Mesa, collapsing into the mud would slowly clear my mind and further activate my embodied relationality.

After walking a few miles, the mud on my shoes peeled away, along with the anxiety. My feet and my head felt light, and I noticed a calmness that I had not felt in a long time. I saw paw prints, smelled the cleansing aroma of pine trees, and embraced the stillness of the land. The sensation of sore, wet feet did not feel good, but it felt okay because I was in a relationship with the land. And as I reached the juniper trees on Saddle Ridge, I sang to the black bears. This time, I sang “Freedom” by Richie Havens. Now I felt fear, but also respect and humility. To my surprise, during a brief pause, a bear “sang” back. I had never heard the growl of a black bear before, but as soon as it hit my ears, there was no mistaking from whom this had come. The message was simple: keep walking. And so I did.

I walked confidently amidst the setting sun. When I thought about checking the topography map to ensure I was on the right trail, I dismissed that thought quickly—I did not need the map. Soon after, I approached a dry cattle tank with a large, ominous tamarisk tree (Figure 7).⁶ Struck by this place, I stopped and

⁶ The tamarisk, or salt cedar, is a highly invasive species due to its voracious thirst. It often takes root near water sources, which it rapidly consumes.

tried to recall whether I had walked by here yesterday. I could not recall it, and I knew I would have remembered this place. Finally checking the map, my anxiety returned as I realized I was not on the right trail and was walking in the wrong direction. Though it was only a half mile to reconnect with the AZT, it would be close to nightfall. I reached for my headlamp in preparation for walking at night, and then my anxiety shot up. Rifling through my pack, the headlamp was not there.⁷ Remembering I could use my phone's flashlight, I calmed down slightly and kept walking.

My phone battery depleted about a mile before I reached the trailhead, and I was again alone in utter darkness. I tried to maintain my composure by assuring myself that the trail would be easy enough to follow and encouraging myself to just keep walking. Yet, I quickly lost my way. The trail seemed to disappear, and I stumbled around, frantically trying to find the trailhead where I had begun walking. Overwhelmed, I sat down in defeat. Tremendous fear and anxiety gripped me. I experienced a brief panic attack. After some focused breathing, I calmed myself enough to remember that the road I had driven in on had to be somewhere nearby. If I could find it, I could find the trailhead. After what felt like hours of wandering aimlessly alone in the dark, I finally came upon the faint shadow of my vehicle. The relief I felt was indescribable. My car symbolized comfort, security, and home—I was grateful for this machine that I normally only associate with the guilt of contributing to climate change.

Just as I began to experience a level of embodied relationality with the land, I was reminded that I was still out there alone. I was still in the dark. And I still had a lot to (un)learn to cultivate relationality and further becoming naturalized to place (Kimmerer, 2013). Though I would not begin processing and integrating this walking experience until later, while sitting safely in my car, I felt grateful for all of the disruptions the land had enacted upon me. They had been tremendously challenging, yet I was okay, and I knew this was the beginning of an ongoing inner process for (un)learning to relate differently with land, knowledge, and research.

Discussion: Unlearning to Relearn Relationality

It has been four years since I walked-with this trail. This experience established a foundational experience in my approach to sustainability research and scholarship. Back in 2020, when I first learned about the Exodus, I had a vague sense that this history would become important for my intended career in sustainability, but I could only imagine how profoundly it would shape my nascent scholarship. Perhaps most significantly, this walking experience has guided my interest in and understanding of relationality and its importance for sustainability transformations and systems change (Goodchild, 2021; Gram-

⁷ Comically, I found it about two years later in a small, seldom seen pocket.

Hanssen et al., 2022; Ives et al., 2023; O'Brien, 2021; West et al., 2024). At the same time, learning about relationality, specifically from Indigenous scholars (Gould et al., 2023; Kovach, 2021; TallBear, 2019; Waters, 2004; Wildcat & Voth, 2023; Wilson, 2008), has deepened my own (un)learning process, which began by walking-with the trail. Taking seriously the ontological dimension of relationality—that “we are relationships”—entails (re)connecting with our ancestry and meaningfully considering how it influences our relationships with land, people, and research (Wilson, 2008).

Learning about the Exodus forced removal catalyzed my own relationality as an ongoing inner process vis-à-vis the world. Walking the trail was a first step toward unpacking my ancestral relationships with Christianity, settler colonialism, and Western science—all important for my relational awareness. As I have continued to integrate and deepen these teachings, I have come to reinterpret relational awareness as interconnected with “becoming naturalized to place” (Kimmer 2013) while engaging with systems change. I have understood that I am not separate from the systemic changes toward sustainability that I aim for. As O'Brien (2021) says regarding social and ecological systems, “*we* are the leverage points” (p. 4), and our personal relationships with the land, people, and knowledge matter significantly. To cultivate relational awareness requires inner work to peel back the layers of our relationships with land (ontological), people (axiological), and knowledge (epistemological).

Personally, this inner work involves acknowledging and accepting the conflicting emotions and thoughts that often arise as a necessary part of our inner-outer healing. Embracing the profound settler shame I feel about ancestral harms, such as the Exodus, as well as ongoing injustices of settler colonialism, is crucial for learning relational accountability (Curnow & Helferty, 2018). While controversial, national initiatives by settler states to reconcile Indigenous-settler relationships offer insight into potential systemic changes related to healing settler shame. For example, Indigenous protected and conserved areas are becoming more formally acknowledged and supported in settler states that have national reconciliation initiatives and have ratified the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Tran et al., 2020). Yet, these reconciliation efforts are criticized because instead of dismantling power structures that perpetuate colonial relationships, they prioritize the need to absolve settlers of their shame (Kizuk, 2020; Tuck & Wayne Yang, 2012). Indigenous-led conservation efforts often prioritize settler outcomes (Campion et al., 2023). My walk can also be critiqued in this way because it prioritized my personal inner work without any connection with the citizens of the Yavapai-Apache Nation. This is a valuable lesson about relational accountability, because if our research and policies ultimately serve our interests and do not build stronger reciprocal relationships with the First Peoples of the land we are working within, then we are not maintaining relational ethics and thus are not really conducting relational research (Gould et al., 2023; Gram-Hanssen et al., 2022; Kovach, 2021; Wilson, 2008).

I now know that I should not have walked alone. The land pushed me to understand that to truly *walk-with the land* requires walking in relationship with the ancestral stewards and knowledge keepers of the land. Historical knowledge and intellectual understandings of relationality are no substitute for real relationships. Cultivating relationships with land in a more-than-human sense calls for cultivating relationships with the ancestral peoples who are inseparable from their land (Basso, 1996; Simpson, 2014; Tuck & McKenzie, 2014; Watts, 2013; Wildcat et al., 2014). Critically reflecting on my walk suggests that it was almost an intellectual bypass to absolve my settler shame and to “hurry toward reprieve...without giving up land or power or privilege,” (Tuck & Wayne Yang, 2012, pp. 9-10). I say “almost” because, though this walking experience was not aligned with relational ethics, I do recognize it as an important (mis)step in my ongoing relational awareness process. Moreover, I share this autoethnographic experience “out loud” (West et al., 2024) as a contribution to awareness-based systems change and the related relational paradigm shift in sustainability science because it provides a practical example of an embodied experience of (un)learning relationality (Datta, 2018; Gram-Hanssen et al., 2022; Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2012).

Turning toward relationality is an invitation for settler scholars to “become naturalized to place” by unlearning settler colonial relationships with land, people, and knowledge (Whyte, 2018) and relearning to relate differently with them from an inner–outer relational awareness. This inner work is difficult and necessitates blurring the lines between personal growth and academic research to advance an entangled inner–outer perspective of scholarship where autoethnographic inquiry is important for researchers working toward collective change (Alexiuk, 2022). Acknowledging and working with difficult emotional responses, such as settler shame, for inner–outer healing requires intense vulnerability, consistent humility, and ancestral acceptance. Ultimately, embracing the need for such inner work means accepting our responsibility as deeply relational beings.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author reports no competing interests to declare.

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Peer Review Article

Listening Across Differences: Facilitators' Perspectives from Austrian Mini-Publics

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Abstract

Deliberative mini-publics, created through sortition and stratified sampling, reflect the broader diversity of the larger whole. While these mini-publics are usually facilitated, the lived experience of facilitators in this role has seldom been explored. Facilitators' accounts of the joys and challenges of facilitating mini-publics in the state of Vorarlberg, Austria illuminate the nuances of embodying active listening and interpersonal empathy in this context, with implications for both deliberative theory and practice.

Keywords

listening, empathy, group facilitation, deliberative democracy, mini-publics

Introduction

How might political systems orient themselves toward collective well-being? Crises in democracy have reached visible tipping points, though these conditions have been long in the making (Koenig et al., 2024). In the margins, democratic innovations continue to grow, including sortition-based mini-publics. These

temporary groups of “everyday people” convened to generate policy recommendations on public issues have shown potential for increasing legitimacy in governance (Mansbridge, 2020), enhancing the epistemic quality of policies (Landmore, 2013), and fostering agency among participants (Ehsassi, 2024; Fung, 2003; Yankelovitch, 1991). While their purpose of mini-publics has not been to make claims about human nature, cumulative findings challenge or highly contextualize earlier assumptions about humans’ disinterest in politics and inability to work through differences. Decades of experiments with various formats show that in facilitated contexts, diverse participants find it highly meaningful to work on collective-action problems (Dryzek et al., 2019). We could see this repeated confirmation of group potential as a “precessionary” outcome, Bucky Fuller’s term for beneficial outcomes arising orthogonally from explicit intentions (Bhalerao, 2022) – in this case, the intention to reconnect people and their governments.

A related indirect finding is the value of group facilitation. Regardless of format, most mini-publics rely on some form of facilitation support (Moore, 2012; Landwehr, 2014). Yet despite being essential for helping diverse groups work well together, facilitation remains largely under-theorized in the deliberative literature. Process design and facilitation have been studied in depth in other contexts, such as multi-stakeholder dialogues to address large-scale conflicts and/or create desired futures (e.g., Forester, 1999, 2009, 2013; Hamann et al., 2024; McKenzie & Seneque, 2024; Molinengo et al., 2021). Here we will be “listening to the listeners”—listening to facilitators speak about the joys and challenges of their work with mini-publics—and exploring the implications for democratic theory and practice. In times of democratic peril, listening may seem too soft a tool to meet the hard edges of political crises. Indeed, many tools are needed. Yet in the practice of democratic innovations, it is often the inner discipline of facilitators—their capacity to withhold, to attune, to reflect—that helps understanding to grow and coherence to emerge. This article explores the often-invisible labor of listening and care at the heart of deliberative design: the work that accompanies reconnection and collective meaning-making.

Toward a “Thicker” Understanding of Facilitators’ Roles in Mini-Publics

In deliberative literature, facilitation has often been described simply as ensuring rule-enforcement and turn-taking (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015). While minimal structuring may still yield positive results, this skeletal description feels insufficient, especially for those of us who, as scholar-practitioners, want to help others learn key mindsets and skills. Even as theorists call for careful attention to the variance in mini-publics’ larger systemic effects, a deeper understanding of facilitation in mini-publics can inform the spread of “meaningful political conversations across difference” (Curato & Böker, 2016) through larger systems.

In the neighboring field of public engagement, facilitators' work has been described as creating "a climate of mutual respect and psychological safety that makes it possible for people to consider creative new solutions and move from preconceived positions" (Creighton, 2005, p. 169). Along similar lines, some political scientists have acknowledged how facilitators' work of "cultivating mutual respect and reciprocity" (Smith, 2009, p. 174) among participants supports the crucial "rights, principles, and dispositions" (Smith, 2009, pp. 197-198) needed for public deliberation. Meanwhile, understandings of deliberation continually evolve. Hawhee describes it as "the art and practice of imagining shared futures together" (2021) while DiSalvo writes of democratic inquiry as "rehearsing futures" (as quoted in Casado da Rocha, 2023, p. 231). Taking a deeper look at the work facilitators do in deliberative contexts, in support of both imagined futures and concrete next steps, helps us understand more deeply the process of collaborative meaning-making and the climates in which it roots and flourishes.

Early efforts by deliberative scholars point to a paradox in facilitation—the expectation to remain invisible while also carrying responsibility for group outcomes (Blong, 2008; Mansbridge et al., 2006). Moore frames this as "following from the front," naming these tensions not as "mute contradictions" but instead as "lively and constitutive tensions that have to be managed by reflexive facilitators" (2012, p.147). While facilitators themselves may hold minimal facilitator activity as a normative ideal (Mansbridge et al., 2006, pp. 30-32), studies suggest that mid-level amounts of facilitator activity can actually enhance deliberative quality (Blong, 2008; Dillard, 2013; Ryfe, 2006). However, the customary "bracketing off" in empirical studies of facilitators' process contributions blinds us to how differences in facilitation influence outcomes, thus not allowing informed choices regarding value tradeoffs between high-quality group exploration and facilitator minimalism (Blong, 2008; Dillard, 2013).

Escobar's work (2011, 2015, 2019) has been particularly generative in framing facilitation as a relational practice that helps equalize power. He also highlights facilitators' work as taking place both 'on-stage' during gatherings, and 'off-stage' during preparation and follow-up. Yet even considering the growing attention to the roles of 'public participation professionals' in democratic innovations (Bherer et al., 2017) and the increasing number of practitioner guides (e.g., Gerwin, 2018; White et al., 2022), we can still benefit from facilitators' reflective practice-based knowledge (Schön, 1983). Thus, it has been a deep honor for me to expand from practicing facilitation, and then also from teaching and writing about facilitation, to listening deeply to the voices of other facilitators in my qualitative research.

Before moving on to the research, I would like to say a word about ethical dilemmas and matters of power relations. Democratic innovations take place amidst both collaboration and tensions between practitioners, government officials, and academics. The growing need for process expertise has sparked concerns that consultants' economic interests might contaminate the idealism of

the public square (Hendriks & Carson, 2008). More recent work explores how consultants face ethical dilemmas when encountering pressure from public administrators to arrive at predetermined outcomes (Parry, 2024). Studies of facilitator malpractice have generally found facilitators to be acting responsibly, yet persistent concerns about facilitation being “possibly undemocratic” point to an uneasy recognition of the power inherent in facilitators’ roles (Morrell, 2018, p. 242). Concerns about potential misuse of power, while necessary, can foster an extreme “hermeneutics of suspicion” (Dzur, 2019, pp. 122-134) which can eclipse what facilitators do to use power well.¹ In this larger context, my research explores the forms of care, presence, and discernment that underpin the holding of democratic spaces.

Learning from Facilitators in the Vorarlberg Citizens’ Councils

This article draws from a broader doctoral study of experienced mini-public facilitators working in a long-standing institutionalized context: the Citizens’ Councils in Vorarlberg, the westernmost province of Austria (Zubizarreta-Ada, 2023). Working with Dynamic Facilitation, an empathy-based method designed to “lead to openness, inclusion, and creative solutions,” the intention of these Councils is to address community issues while strengthening community ties (OECD, 2020 pp. 48-49; Participedia, n.d.a, n.d.b; Zubizarreta et al., 2020).

As a researcher-practitioner, deep listening and empathy practices have been a “red thread” in my personal and professional life. While fluent with other methodologies, I also teach and write about Dynamic Facilitation. However, my own work has been primarily with businesses and non-profits (Zubizarreta, 2013). Thus, as an “insider/outsider” researcher (Herr & Anderson, 2015), I have been deeply curious to learn about these Austrian facilitators’ work in the public sector, and what it looks like in practice.

My larger doctoral project is grounded in the assumption that as reflective practitioners, facilitators bring both past knowledge and openness to experimentation to each new instance of practice (Schön, 1983). Inspired by Forester’s elicitation of “practice narratives” (2009, 2013), I adapted it as a methodology to explore my research questions:

What insights emerge from facilitators’ individual and collective reflections on transformative moments within the group dynamics of these councils, and what are the larger democratic implications of the work that these facilitators are doing?

¹ However, for some positive uses of facilitator power, see Hardy et al., 2013, and Westin & Montgomerie, 2024.

I chose to begin each interview with some warm-up questions, asking “What do you most enjoy?” and “What do you find most challenging about facilitating Bürgerräte?” For the main part of each interview, I asked practitioners to select a particularly meaningful moment from a Council of their choice, and worked with follow-up prompts, like “What happened before that?” and/or, “What happened next?” as invitations to expand upon their initial seed descriptions (Laws, 2020).

My research followed Institutional Review Board procedures, informing participants of their rights and obtaining signed consent forms prior to participation, including permission to record and transcribe our conversations. Subsequently, participants had an opportunity to review and clarify the transcripts. Given my own extremely limited German language skills, I sought bilingual practitioners with experience in facilitating Vorarlberg Bürgerräte through snowball sampling. Research participants included 11 professionals, all of Central European ancestry, with a mix of genders and ages. Six worked as independent consultants, four as public administrators, and one as an independent sustainability researcher. Their prior professional backgrounds included various combinations of social work or education (5); public administration (3); coaching and consulting (2); computer science (2); mediation (1); and videography (1). Four had facilitated less than 10 Councils, five had facilitated between 10 and 20, and two had facilitated more than 20.

All interviews were conducted in English (a few facilitators requested the presence of an interpreter as a back-up). Throughout the interviews, my most frequent response was reflecting back the gist of practitioners’ statements. While my main purpose was to offer facilitators the deep listening they so often provide for others, these reflections also helped fine-tune interpersonal understanding, generate resonance, and naturally elicit corrections and/or further elaboration from practitioners.

The “warm-up” questions about joys and challenges were intended to build rapport and provide a springboard into the deeper narrative interviews. Yet unexpectedly, they also surfaced rich material, offering insight into facilitators’ relational awareness, emotional labor, and internal tensions. Rather than bracketing these responses as peripheral, I chose to examine them more closely. These are the findings I will be exploring here.

Following an iterative, inductive process, I began with open coding of responses to the warm-up questions to identify emergent categories, and then moved into a more focused thematization, seeking resonances across these responses. Rather than applying a fixed analytic framework, my work was informed by my action research experience as an organization development consultant, which often leads me to look for larger patterns among the individual interviews. My findings here are not intended to generalize across all facilitation contexts, nor to present a definitive typology of facilitator experience. Instead, the aim is to illuminate the main patterns that arose: How practitioners in this setting experience the subtle dynamics of listening, empathy, and tension-

holding. Given scant research on facilitators' lived experiences, and the key nature of their work, I start with their responses before turning to implications for current deliberative theory.

Findings from Practice: Joys of Facilitating Bürgerrate

Facilitators spoke of three main joys: witnessing participant development, serving as catalysts, and appreciating the structure.² Many described participants' visible transformations—from skepticism to connection, from guardedness to curiosity – and shared stories of participants becoming more empathetic, reflective, and engaged. Others spoke of witnessing agency emerge, as participants realized they could organize, act, or pursue political learning beyond the Council. Facilitators also took joy in their role as deep listeners, describing their presence as a catalyst for others' clarity and connection. Here are some of their voices.³

Joys of Witnessing Participants' Individual or Group Development

Some of these responses highlight the transformative aspect of the group experience:

There is a joke running within our team, with our facilitators. We have this facilitation suitcase, when we go to the workshops and the councils and so on, and we say this facilitation suitcase is like a beauty case, because it makes people more beautiful. There is a kind of magical development people make through this process, that they build a connection to each other. And there is trust in the room. That's always wonderful to see, in such a short time, [...] 12 to 15 people who are randomly selected and don't know each other, transform into a real group and community. And a kind of caring

² Practitioners were free to offer multiple responses to this warm-up question; reviewing the transcripts afterward yielded a total of 27 responses, which after several rounds of clustering and grouping resulting in the above three categories.

³ For the dissertation research, participants chose to use their real names in association with the longer narratives that formed part of the broader study. For other sections designed as a mosaic of voices (such as the one which seeded this article), I communicated my intention to weave in individual contributions anonymously, following the Dynamic Facilitation principle of centering the larger emergent picture rather than individual contributors. Here I use numbers to differentiate the different voices.

All direct quotes are from English-language interviews, with the occasional use of German words retained. Ellipses in brackets (...) indicate omitted words; words in square brackets indicate clarifications added for readability. Natural pauses or trailing off are shown with em dashes (—). All emphases are as spoken by the original speaker.

community because they care about the issue they're talking about.

So, when they come, they're curious and skeptical. And they're watching out, what's going on here, and why am I here. And you can see, as the process goes along, they get more alive—and *you can really see it*. At the beginning, they are sitting in the circle, and watching the others. And it's a different appearance when we start into the second day, for example. It's always absolutely fascinating to me (Interview 2, Jan. 14, 2021).

It is not surprising that when groups go well, participants build trust and connection, and *come alive*. Yet what stands out here is how closely facilitators are observing participants and rejoicing in the shifts they see.

Other responses spoke to the *development of empathy and connection* in the group:

What I enjoy the most is [...] when they really start to feel that they are working on something together and start letting go of their ideas of how things should be, really go into a deeper understanding of persons and of personal viewpoints, which they didn't have before. [...] In this personal connection, they understand there is not an idea I talk to, but there is a person I talk to—and this person has personal insights and personal feelings, and they begin to be empathic. And if this empathy rises, this is actually one of the things I enjoy the most (Interview 1, Jan. 8, 2021).

Some facilitators described witnessing *a growing sense of agency* among participants:

Something that I generally enjoy a lot when I do facilitation work is to observe how people have this process of reflection. So maybe coming from a problem or coming from a complaint—and when I ask them to go deeper, and when I mirror them, and when I listen to them, and when I repeat what they say, how they get into this reflective state, where they change their role from being passive to being active. Sometimes it feels like they say, “Ah, well, we could actually do this!” (Interview 3, Jan. 30, 2021).

This growing sense of agency can take the form of *greater confidence and interest in political participation*:

We often hear, when we do the check-out, they're totally surprised by the creativity of the group and the different people sitting here. One of the most [frequent] feedback we get is when they come, they say, “I'm not interested in politics.” And when they go, they say, “I couldn't imagine that discussing difficult political issues could be so creative and constructive.” (Interview 2, Jan. 14, 2021).

Agency can also take the form of greater *curiosity regarding how others think*:

Before, people are being careful, guarded, they don't want to say what they really think. And *after*, they are more interested in how people think. As one [participant] told me, when they go shopping now, they not only hear someone's opinion and think, 'Is it right or wrong'? They want to understand *why* someone might have this opinion, and they ask questions to know why. And this is new (Interview 4, Jan. 30, 2021).

This facilitator is recounting how afterwards, during a chance encounter, a participant mentioned their new desire to understand the reasoning behind others' opinions, rather than simply agree or disagree. And this is one of the joys of her work.

Another indicator of increased agency was *continued group interaction afterwards*:

In one *Bürgerrat*, two or three days after the *Bürgerrat*, they organized themselves. They were interested in social change and social policies, so afterwards, they organized themselves to continue to meet. The other day, in Feldkirch, they made an excursion, like a field trip, by themselves—to learn more about the field of energy and city planning. They organized events by themselves to get together and learn more about how local government works, as a learning journey. And this happened after three different *Bürgerräte* (Interview 4, Jan. 20, 2021).

Other facilitators mentioned their *appreciation for participants' dedication and hard work*:

To have so often that experience, where those very different people find a way to open themselves, to say very personal things, and to do this *really* hard work to find a common outcome [...] They don't make decisions in the *Bürgerrat*, we all know that, but they get to influence and help the people who have to make decisions, to make good decisions. It's not a methodology where we ask people for a street survey for one hour, or for sitting together for a three-hour workshop. [Instead], we bring them into a room for one and a half days, where they work on a summary, they present it at the *BürgerCafé*, and they hand it over to the politicians. So that's a lot of work and effort. And I have had some experiences where people got very, very frustrated because their work was not honored. In that situation, you really get the feeling of what it means to give your time and your heart and all your intellect and your patience, to sit together with other people, and work on something [without being] sure how seriously it will be taken in the end (Interview 9, Mar. 29, 2022).

Developing agency is not a linear process and can involve a sense of frustration. Yet here we can see how deeply this facilitator cares about participants' frustrations: even while responding to a question about "what do you most enjoy," they have already begun to mention some of the challenges.

Some facilitators specialize in Youth Councils (*JugendRäte*), an adaptation of *Bürgerräte* for young people only. One said:

With these Youth Councils, we get a lot of feedback that the people really enjoyed it, and they really had a great time, and it was so good that they were allowed to speak their mind. [...] That's what I experienced with young people, who don't have these sorts of spaces in society, and who live in or work in circumstances where they are mostly told what to do, or how to behave. For them, it's a revelation, this kind of space, where their opinion is valued, and their insights are appreciated.

But I'm thinking, "This is so easy, you know? Why do we have to come, and give them this space, where they are allowed to say what they really think?" It's also sad in a way, that there are so few of those spaces, and it's so easy to provide—just taking them seriously and encouraging them and trusting them (Interview 3, Jan. 30, 2021).

Taking them seriously", "encouraging them", and "trusting them" are described here as *key relational elements of facilitators' work*, yet these listening-related factors are not often found in skeletal conceptions of facilitation. We are learning about these stances indirectly, through facilitators' responses to the question of what they most enjoy about their work—and here, with a tinge of sadness that these contexts are not more widely available for youth.

Joys of Being a Catalyst

These responses focus on facilitators' own experiences of being a catalyst, usually through the work of what many called "deep listening." Listening and empathy have already shown up in some of the earlier responses, in connection with witnessing participants' individual and group development. In these responses, facilitators are also describing their *own* experience with the listening process as joyful:

The format [...] makes the room very open, and you have another role as a facilitator, because you have to be like a fascinated child—you are by each person, with the one who speaks, and you

are understanding the things they say, and this *tiefe zuhören*⁴, this listening deeply, creates a very interesting effect on the person. They are really happy if you understand them well, and if you do it very consistently, then they are empty. [...] And then, if they are ready, I go to the others.

This is another way of working with groups. And I like this form, because it opens other possibilities for all the people in the room, because they have to hear the other person, for as long as needed. And this is a new experience for the people that come in because they don't have this experience in other places. [...] And this is a magic moment for me (Interview 10, Apr. 12, 2022).

This facilitator mentions the term “empty”, as did others in the interviews. Rough, the originator of the Dynamic Facilitation approach, uses the term “empty” to describe the outcomes of the “purge” catalyzed by facilitators’ “deep listening” (2002, pp. 89-91). Through the process of being respectfully received, heard, and mirrored back, there is a resulting “emptying out” of participants’ initial ideas along with an opening to being able to hear others.

Other responses in the category of “being a catalyst” described facilitators’ enjoyment of being with the unknown, hearing the unsaid, recognizing shifts in the group’s unfolding process, and contributing via active listening to participants’ creation of meaningful outcomes.

Enjoying the Structure and Dynamics of the Format

Here facilitators mentioned enjoying the significant diversity among participants created by the sortition process; the length of the mini-public and the value of overnights; the joy of working with and learning from a co-facilitator. One response mentioned the appreciative and open climate that welcomes the whole person, including emotions, while another mentioned the climate of authenticity. Yet as we will see in the next section on challenges, *welcoming the whole person* while also ensuring an appreciative climate, is not always so simple.

Findings from Practice: Challenges of Facilitating Bürgerräte

I initially grouped challenges into two domains, following in-the-room and beyond-the-room aspects of facilitators’ work (Escobar, 2015). In the room, the most common theme was “holding back”—refraining from offering solutions or opinions, even when participants struggled. This restraint was described not as

⁴ While all of the interviews were in English, at times practitioners used some German words. I have left them in German in the quotes, in honor of practitioners’ hard work and willingness to communicate in their second language.

passivity but as a form of disciplined presence, which included the difficulty of holding space for extreme views without collapsing into agreement or judgment. As described by facilitators, this requires self-awareness, deep emotional regulation, and the ability to maintain relational coherence in the face of discomfort. Beyond the room challenges include structural design issues (e.g., topic relevance, time constraints, accessibility) and working with decision-makers.

In-the-Room Challenges: Holding Back for Participants' Benefit

We begin with a fairly simple instance:

Sometimes it's a bit painful to hold back all this information that I have. Like people are thinking, "Ah, how could we make transport more sustainable? Ah, I don't know if there's any way—" and I know of ten examples where cities have tried new innovative things, but I'm really trying not to influence them in any way. Because it should be their idea, they should come up with it. And sometimes it's a bit painful to see them running in circles and then end up at a solution where I'm thinking, "Yeah, there are much better ways than that already" (Interview 4, Jan. 30, 2021).

This may parallel Scharmer's concept of "staying with it"; the challenge of "building and evolving the holding space for something new to develop and be born" (2018, p. 51), which requires "holding back" on the part of the facilitator. The next response highlights how "holding back" becomes even more challenging when listening to extreme views:

Recently there was a situation where we were talking about vaccinating [...] We've got the QAnon and also the QuerDenker, people with strange theories about Corona. And all of a sudden someone started with arguments, where I thought it's going that way. And I got really, really nervous. That was challenging, because I realized, "Oh, I'm a bit scared now, [whether] I can still be the facilitator."

As a facilitator, I really try [...] to suspend my own ideas. So, when something comes up that is *really* contrary to what I usually think, it's harder to keep the space and to stay with the person. And it was very interesting, because I was really nervous, and I was sweating. And I could feel in my body, that I was really nervous (Interview 7, Mar. 16, 2022).

When working with extreme views, facilitators are not just managing their own internal reactions, but also the reactions of other participants.⁵

For me, the most challenging [matter] is, when someone says [an] opinion that is different from mine. To hear all, and to [say] “all is okay.” All opinions are okay, and to not judge them. I really need much meditation before, so that I feel really empty [...] Because I feel that the people, they can feel if I can really take their opinion, or they can feel when I think “Oh—” And this is the most challenging, really to be like empty pot, and to take it all in. Sometimes I must sit on my tongue and say, “Ooooh—”

Yes, thank you so much for being open about this challenge. I'm hearing you say a few different things here; one is that, um—you know, it's hard! And sometimes, we have to sit on our tongue—You think there is a level at which people can sense or feel if we are not fully taking them in. And you want to do right by them, by being as empty as possible, so that you can fully take them in. So, it's not just that you are not saying something?

No, it's much deeper. Yes, at the beginning [of doing this work] I thought, “Okay, when I have a poker face, it's okay.” But there are many, many layers under this. Like [the poet] Rumi said, “we meet in the field where [there] is nothing right, nothing wrong.” I think this is a really important way to be a good facilitator, and maybe I can give you a *Beispiel*—an example of that.

It was the *Bürgerrat for Bildung*, education, the future of education. And one man said to me, “It's good to be strong with the children and also to hit them, when they [do] not do what we want.” And when people say something that [does] not conform with the others, I can feel that they think that I have to say something. I don't agree [with the statement] when I feel it, but I want to be with this man or woman, and I want to understand what he or she means. I'm sure there are situations where participants of *Bürgerrate* think I have to say more, or I have to say, “That's not right.”

Yes, so let me see if I'm understanding—you're thinking about a particular example, a Bürgerrat that was focused on the future of education. And when a man said something about needing to be strict, including hitting children when children are misbehaving, you could feel inside yourself that you don't agree. And at the same

⁵ My reflections during the interview to check my own understanding are in italics; the comments by the back-up translator are also in italics and labeled as such. When in the context of their English-language interview, a practitioner includes a word in German, it is in italics.

time, you could also feel the desire to be curious and to want to understand more?

Back-up interpreter: *What I understood is that she senses that the other people, the participants, expect her to react to that man [...] She senses that people want her to say, "being strict and hitting kids is wrong." The people expect her to react to that because it's wrong.*

Facilitator: *Ja, because then others, they say "No, that's not right." And they go to a different opinion. And I say, "Moment, moment", and I ask the man, "Why do you think this?" (Interview 4, Jan. 30, 2021).*

In this response, we see three related aspects of “holding back” in a challenging situation: (a) listening deeply to someone expressing an extreme view; (b) actively keeping other participants from jumping in; and (c) tolerating the frustration of the other participants. Here is another response on the challenge of tolerating participants’ frustration:

*It's very important to be very consistent in this form of moderation, because [as you are engaging in deep listening with one person] the other people have to wait. And there are many *Emotionen*, emotions, when they have to wait. And they have to go through crises, they do not have all good emotions, because they have to wait—and in the brain, there are many things that come together, but they have to wait.*

*And I think this is one of the secrets of the *Methode*, method, because they have to go through these emotions. [...] the emotions are a way to understand. You can *feel* it in the room [...] whether they are connected (Interview 10, Apr. 12, 2022).*

Another response also speaks to the challenge of *holding one's own discomfort*, order to be present to participants’ emotions:

*I would say, to have a good result from a *Bürgerrat*, you have to be able to get out of your comfort zone. Human beings are often irrational. They are also emotional. As a facilitator, you're really asked to handle this mixture of rationality, irrationality, emotionality, fight and harmony. There's so much going on, at the same time. This is possible, but difficult: it depends so much on how you feel that day, how you get into this process.*

Are you anxious? Are you tired? Are you curious? Or not? It's very, very important to be strong at that moment, to be very present at that moment—therefore this is the most difficult facilitation methodology. But you get a lot [out of it] when it works out well (Interview 9, Mar. 29, 2022).

In-the-Room Challenges: Miscellaneous

A scattering of other challenges included helping participants shift from seeing themselves as representatives to speaking more authentically; coordinating the roles of facilitator and scribe; managing participants' deflation when learning about the low response rate to the much larger pool of randomly-chosen invitees; managing one's own frustration at seeing participants "tone down" their recommendations in preparation for the reporting-out phase.

Beyond-the-Room Challenges: Structural Issues and Working with Decision-Makers

Design choices made before a Council begins can affect in-the-room experiences. While some Councils develop into significant human encounters, others stay on a more surface level. Some facilitators attributed this flatness to "shallow issues" without enough complexity or energy:

So, do we really have a *good* one, a "dragon problem"? Or is it a question which is not really a "dragon problem"—and then we have the problem that the people don't really want to come, because it's not so interesting (Interview 11, Apr. 13, 2022).

Other structural challenges included not losing valuable information when distilling abundant input down to a handful of recommendations. Also mentioned were difficulties experienced by some youth and elders with format length, and the challenge of working with language differences in a talk-based method. Although only mentioned in one interview, these last two have implications for accessibility. Finally, some facilitators mentioned they found working with decision-makers more challenging than any in-the-room situation; this theme will be explored in future work, as it also surfaced in some of the longer narratives.

Reprise: Revisiting "Holding Back to Hold Space"

Earlier we heard a facilitator describing the challenge of welcoming different perspectives, with an example of the man who did not believe in "sparing the rod." The story continues:

[...] The next day, this man, he told us a story: how he, when he was young—and his father hit him. And he cried—this was really a healing time of *Bürgerrat*. I think this is, for the participants, a deep learning. Because they experience that, and not only hear that. When I want to explain [...] in words that it's important that we hear all opinions, it's not so deep. In comparison, when I just do it [...] I know that they will understand the next day, not now. And there's no need for me to explain, or make the magic moments go away, because of too many words.

Yes. So, in the moment, you didn't explain why you were doing this—?

It's like, laugh, laugh also work like this. [These were the words I originally heard but did not understand.] Many always speak about it. It's boring.

You just did it. Trusting that participants will come to understand eventually, by experiencing the process, the value of listening to all perspectives. And I didn't quite understand that thing that you said at the end about laugh? Laughter—

Not laugh! Love, love, *Liebe*. Love—

Oh, love! Oh, so you don't want to talk about love, you just want people to experience it?

Yes.

Back-up interpreter: *I think she was saying that you can't explain how important it is, to be heard. People have to experience it—just like love. If people experience it, they know what it is; you can't talk about it* (Interview 4, Jan. 20, 2021).

Later in the interview, this facilitator chose this experience as her “most meaningful moment” in a Bürgerrat, and we proceeded to unpack it further. Yet already we start to see the power of feeling heard, and how some things may need to be experienced to be understood. Also, what a facilitator chooses *not* to do, and why, may be as important as anything we can observe.

Parallels and Contrasts with Deliberative Theory

Listening, as a normative expectation for citizens in broader deliberative encounters, has been acknowledged as arduous work (Scudder, 2020). Yet mini-public facilitators' own work as listeners, and how their listening influences participants, has been largely unexplored. As facilitators, “holding back” our own ideas and interpretations is an essential aspect of listening well, yet one usually taken for granted.⁶

Elbow (2006, 2008) distinguishes between “the doubting game”, which aligns with cultural norms of what good thinking looks like, and “the believing game” involved in the effort to deeply understand another's perspective. He further points out how the implicit cultural bias toward the “doubting game”, limits our ability to recognize intelligence in those proficient at the “believing game”:

⁶ For a moving exception, this article on Deliberative Polling includes some paragraphs describing how a student facilitator's restraint was severely evaluated (Diamond, 2019).

When we see them listening and drawing out others, we call them generous or nice rather than smart. We don't connect good listening with intelligence, and we call creativity merely a mystery. [...] And because our intellectual model is flawed in these ways, we don't teach this ability to enter into alien ideas. (Elbow, 2008, p. 9)

Gemma Corradi Fiumara, philosopher and psychotherapist, explores how the dominant cultural value of speaking or 'holding forth', over and above listening or 'holding back', may be at the root of larger cultural dysfunctions (Fiumara, 1990). I would add that this cultural imbalance contributes to blind spots regarding facilitators' essential work. As Elbow points out, the intelligence, heartfulness, and skill required to meet the challenge of "holding back" is not often acknowledged. Yet it is essential to facilitation, especially when working with extreme views.

We see the powerful impact of deep listening in social psychology findings documenting how Deep Canvassers going door-to-door to "non-judgmentally exchange narratives" with strangers, catalyze "durable reductions in exclusionary attitudes" (i.e., lasting shifts toward greater inclusivity) (Kalla & Broockman, 2020, p. 422). Some facilitators in my research described significant transformations as participants experienced non-judgmental listening in these Councils (Zubizarreta-Ada, 2023), including the one we began to glimpse here of the man who experienced a shift in his beliefs about physical punishment.

Listening in Vorarlberg Mini-Publics as "Witnessing Testimony"

In one of the few academic papers on this particular mini-public format, Asenbaum describes two Councils he observed (2016). Years before, a former Nazi concentration camp had been turned into a memorial; later, a proposed extension stirred up conflict between older people in the region who "want to leave the past behind" and younger people who sought continued engagement with the past. Yet "despite the controversial issue at hand, an open, tolerant, and productive atmosphere was created" (Asenbaum, 2016, pp. 4-5).

Asenbaum framed his observations with Sander's construct of "testimony" to describe how this came about. He describes how, as participants address their testimony to the moderator, "the moderators' concentrated *attention* and *appreciation* [emphasis added] is mirrored by the group" and thus, "respectful and constructive conduct is quickly established within the group" (Asenbaum, 2016, p. 5). As we saw earlier with the facilitator who works with young people, attention and appreciation are recognized here as powerful aspects of what a facilitator does. Asenbaum also clarifies that testimony does *not* imply "that participants simply narrate their stories, oblivious to what has been said by others before;" instead, a dialogical fabric is woven by participants who "pick up

arguments of others, express consent or dissent, and propose alternative views” (Asenbaum, 2016, p. 5), even while directing their comments to the facilitator.⁷

As Otto Scharmer writes, "Dialogue is not people talking to each other. Dialogue is the capacity of a system to see itself" (2015). It is this *capacity of a system to see itself* that develops as participants listen deeply to a broad range of perspectives. While in one sense, this happens in *any* deliberative mini-public, when the design builds in high-quality mirroring, this intensifies the creation of a powerful group field.

What Does “Witnessing Testimony” Make Possible?

Having participants direct their comments to a facilitator is sometimes viewed askance, given conventional wisdom that “best practice” requires participants to directly address one another. Yet the structure of dialogue through an intermediary that Asenbaum (2016) describes as “testimony” is analogous to some dialogue practice where participants offer their comments to the “fire at the center” (Garcea & Linley, 2011, p. 168) rather than to one another. It also parallels formats from family therapy (Freedman, 2014) and conflict resolution (Friedman & Himmelstein, 2008) where participants speak to the mediator, who offers “active listening” to each participant in turn, while others are “overhearing”.

This “reflecting back” can be easy to overlook, as the facilitator is not saying anything new, only repeating back what has already been said. Indeed, Asenbaum is silent on this. Yet as we have heard in the facilitator interviews, “this *tiefe zuhören*, this listening deeply, creates a very interesting effect in the person. They are really happy if you understand them well.” Another facilitator described how upon hearing a reflection, participants often “get into this reflective state, where they change their role from being passive to being active.”

One might be tempted to de-emphasize the power of active listening by seeing it merely as facilitators “modeling good listening” for participants. Yet nowhere in the interviews did facilitators describe reflecting back as setting an example, nor as modeling good listening. Instead, they described their relational role as being genuinely curious; one facilitator described it as being “like a fascinated child”. Facilitators also described their listening work as helping participants “empty themselves” to have room for new thoughts and for listening more deeply to others. Facilitators also described listening as an opportunity to offer empathy and, in so doing, to awaken participants’ own empathy.

⁷ For more on how participants in other contexts use storytelling as a way to express divergent perspectives, see Black, 2008 and 2013.

Contrasting Practice and Theory

Clearly, these facilitators experience listening and empathy as deeply connected. Yet this differs significantly from some deliberative theorists who posit an inherent conflict between listening and empathy (Scudder, 2020), based on a definition of empathy that involves “imagining” or “guessing” how others might feel (Morrell, 2010). While significant differences persist in how scholars define empathy (Hall & Schwartz, 2019), Scudder and Morrell share a similar perspective; empathy as an *intrapersonal* phenomenon taking place *within* an individual—although *about* another—rather than something enacted *between* people.

This similarity underlies their disagreement about the *value* of empathy; Scudder’s concern is that a person could choose to simply *guess* or *imagine* how others might feel and use that to avoid the demanding work of really listening to another (2020). Yet seeing empathy and listening as potentially opposed appears initially quite perplexing to those of us steeped in communicative practices stemming from Carl Rogers’ humanistic psychology. Here empathy is intimately connected with listening, and enacted collaboratively through the practice of “listening-and-reflecting-back” to check our understanding with each other (Rogers, 1980).⁸ This relational, co-constructed approach to empathy actively involves at least two people, in contrast to the *intra*-personal understanding of empathy as primarily an individual experience—though one *about* another). Reminiscent of “Nothing about us, without us!”, a relational, co-creative approach to empathy involves a dyadic communicative dance that is often experienced as deeply satisfying by both listeners and speakers.

I am by no means proposing a single definition of empathy here; different communities of scholars use the term in significantly diverse ways. What I *am* affirming is that the interactive understanding of empathy has a long history, which continues to this day. Barrett-Lennard (1981) uses the terms “facilitative relational empathy” or a “cyclical model of empathy” to describe this interactive understanding of empathy. An empathic approach to listening includes regularly reflecting back to the speaker, in a tentative and respectful manner, what we have just heard, thus checking our limited understanding and explicitly inviting the other person to correct us and/or to expand as needed (Barrett-Lennard, 1998; Irving & Dickson, 2004; Topornycky & Golparian, 2016).

Empathic listening is key in mediation, conflict de-escalation, counseling and psychotherapy, and also taught in medicine (Buffington et al., 2016; Jagosh et al., 2011) and business (Covey, 1989). In mediation, Friedman and Himmelstein (2008) call it “looping”; Susskind calls it “active listening” and describes it as essential (as quoted in Mansbridge & Latura, 2016, p. 45). Yet even in this field

⁸ Although the origins of empathic listening are primarily associated with Carl Rogers, empathy historian Susan Lanzoni (2018) describes how Otto Rank and Jessie Taft influenced Carl Rogers’ listening approach.

where active listening is quite well-known, some theorist-practitioners are concerned that the term “empathy” may be too psychological, proposing instead that reflective listening’s value may be in allowing people to hear their own selves more deeply (Cobb, 2013)—an interesting parallel to Scharmer’s call to “bend the beam of observation back to the observing self” (2015).

Rogers’ legacy lives on in lay communities including Gendlin’s Focusing (Gendlin, 1984), Rosenberg’s Nonviolent Communication (Little, 2020), and the Empathy Circle movement started by Edwin Rutsch (Kakai, 2021; Nowak, 2020). Empathic listening is also a core component of the u-school for Transformation’s methodology (Presencing Institute, n.d.) and has been used in interventions designed to strengthen the social field in school settings by introducing new alternatives for constructive communication around conflicts (Pomeroy & Herman, 2023).

And, as we have seen in these interviews with facilitators of mini-publics in Vorarlberg, Austria, empathic listening is very much alive in their accounts of what they enjoy in their work, as well as what they at times find challenging.

Concerns and Caveats

First, it is worth highlighting that any tool can be misused. In Carl Rogers’ lifetime, he came to lament the commodification of his empathic reflection practice (Irving & Dickson, 2004; Rogers, 1980). Contemporary practitioners and researchers point to *intention* and *integrity* as key to ethical work with active listening; its practice involves the cultivation of values-based dispositions (Jagosh et al., 2011) and includes significant nuance (Robertson, 2005). Yet if we assume that convergence inevitably requires compromise, we may regard active listening as inherently manipulative. As a facilitator in this study pointed out, the potential benefits of deep listening and interpersonal empathy may need to be experienced, in order to be understood.

In the field of democracy studies, Dobson (2014) warns that “helping people feel heard” can be manipulative without good faith efforts to respond with action. This resonates with facilitators in this study who emphasized the need for governments to seriously consider mini-publics’ outcomes, knowing how harmful it can be when powerful small-group experiences are met with subsequent disregard. Thus, ensuring integrity involves much more than what occurs *within* a Council.

Varied designs for mini-publics exist world-wide that rely on diverse formats and facilitation modalities. While most practitioners have heard *about* empathic listening, these findings may be less relevant in contexts where this practice is less central. Still, practitioners often welcome learning novel approaches. All of the facilitators I interviewed had trained in multiple modalities, “Art of Hosting” being the one most frequently mentioned (Quick & Sandfort, 2014; Sandfort & Quick, 2017).

Even with these caveats, these facilitator responses affirm the relational value of empathic listening for creating shared understanding. Though it can be challenging, especially in situations where quite different perspectives are present, this listening practice can also be deeply enjoyable for both participants and facilitators. While these facilitators did not use the language of power, their examples show how deep listening, relational empathy, and “holding back to hold space” are some of the ways they are using their power well.

Implications for Further Research and Practice

As Dillard argues, it would be helpful for future deliberative democracy researchers to realize that “facilitation is not a single stylistic category” (Dillard, 2013, p. 231). Neither are mediation and negotiation (Seul, 2022). Most professional practitioners have a varied repertoire, and their work will look different depending on context. I hope that, as researchers continue to explore which forms may be most useful in different contexts (von Scheidemesser, Oppold, & Stasiak, 2023), this study can serve to expand perspectives on what *good facilitation* can look like.

In 1980, Carl Rogers affirmed that “an empathic way of being can be learned from empathic persons [...] and learned most rapidly in an empathic climate” (p.150). Researchers could re-examine this claim in a present-day context. The *Bürgerräte* could serve as a site for exploring how facilitators’ deep listening stance, embodied in their reflective listening responses, creates a social field that generates open minds, open hearts, and open wills (Scharmer, 2018).

Facilitation approaches that include some form of empathic listening can be especially helpful for mini-publics on high-conflict topics. In-depth practice with empathic listening builds valuable “muscle-memory” that can be drawn on to work constructively with conflicts. In turn, mini-publics on high-conflict issues can become a source of powerful narratives that, when shared more broadly, contribute to systemic cultural shifts (Zubizarreta, 2015).

While mini-publics of many distinct kinds have shown what is possible when we bring together community members with diverse perspectives into supportive contexts, their broader effects vary depending on interactions with the larger political system (Curato & Böker, 2016.) Still, given their significantly positive benefits for participants, we could reasonably ask how these “supportive contexts” might become more widely available. In a polarized world, we could all benefit from having more of us able to take turns stepping into the role of facilitator, actively welcoming others’ enthusiastic contributions.

This is why the embodied knowledge that facilitators are continually developing, matters. This knowledge is born from practice and presence (Scharmer, 2018), from reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983). Whether we see ourselves as simply offering some basic structure and making space for every voice, or as co-creating a field of deep listening and empathic presence—may facilitation continue to nourish spaces where inter-

human curiosity, agency and community can flourish. We all need to develop the power to bring out the best in humans.

Acknowledgments and Gratitude

Much gratefulness to the facilitators who took part in the doctoral research on which this paper is based, under the wise guidance of Drs. Dorothy Agger-Gupta, Keith Melville, and Katrina Rogers at Fielding Graduate University. An earlier draft of this article was written as a Democracy Visiting Fellow at the HKS' Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation (AY 2023–2024). Deep appreciation to Professor Emeritus Dr. Jane Mansbridge for her extensive and generous feedback.

The current version took shape as a Senior Fellow at the Research Institute for Sustainability in Potsdam, Germany. Heartfelt thanks to Oliver Koenig and Eva Pomeroy for their thoughtful editorial suggestions, and to two anonymous reviewers for their constructive insights. I am also grateful to Antonio Moya Latorre for skillful copy-editing and to ACT, a ChatGPT 4.0-based writing companion, for assistance in thoughtfully clarifying and refining several sections during the revision process. Any errors or omissions are of course my own.

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Book Review

On the Gifts and Perils of Choreography:

Social Presencing Theater: The Art of Making a True Move, by
Arawana Hayashi (PI Press, 2021)

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Keywords

social arts, emergence, inner transformation, collective transformation,
awareness based social change, mindfulness, facilitation, dialogue

In the prologue to *Social Presencing Theater: The Art of Making a True Move*, the Japanese-American court dancer turned systems transformation technologist, Arawana Hayashi, writes that the book is primarily about the origins and vision of her work, and although instructions for some Social Presencing Theater practices are included, “this volume is not intended to be a detailed practice manual” (Hayashi, 2021, p. xxix). This is not exactly true. While it goes far beyond a set of workshop notes, for those of us who took Social Presencing Theater trainings, and then immediately lost our notes, the book is a fantastic replacement, complete with reader-friendly, visually distinct pages (black background, white text) of Instructions.

The roughly 200-page volume is the first and definitive introduction to Social Presencing Theater, which is described in Otto Scharmer’s forward as “a new social art form—a set of methods and tools that change-makers worldwide are using to facilitate transformational change in their relationships, in their communities and organizations” (Hayashi, 2021, p. xii). Hayashi calls it “a set of embodiment activities and reflections that support personal transformation, social creativity, and systems change” (Hayashi, 2021, p. xx).

The book is organized, primarily, around seven practices (or methods, or tools, or activities and reflections—Scharmer and Hayashi do not land on a single phrase; they use these terms interchangeably). Hayashi situates and describes them in a gentle, deliberate voice, using many of the same frames, anecdotes, metaphors and endearing phrasing she uses in her trainings—now immortalized between white covers.

The seven practices, which (it is important to note, for the uninitiated) are more dance-like than theater-like, and happen almost entirely in silence, followed by dialogue, are:

- The 20-Minute Dance—a solo mind-body synchronization practice, in which a person makes the feeling of the body the object of their meditation, and spends 20 minutes doing whatever the body feels like doing, going from simple shape to simple shape.
- The Duet—a two-person meditation, where the awareness rests on the bodies of a pair of humans (the smallest social body) who alternatively move and remain still, letting each unplanned gesture rise from the empty, unspoken space between them.
- The Dance of Five—in which the size of the social body grows to five humans, who spend time experiencing the feelings of lying down, sitting and standing next to each other, attempting to choose their next movement, level, direction, and distance from the others based on what the body-of-five feels like doing.
- Stuck—in which one person explores a predicament in their life by physically arranging a body-of-five to represent the systems forces that keep it stuck in place in a Sculpture 1, and then experiences the spontaneous movement of the quintet ending a few minutes later in a Sculpture 2 from which some insight may be drawn.
- The Field Dance—where a solo walk unfolds in front of a seated audience, the walker attempting to take in and move from an awareness of herself *and* the audience, sometimes offering a gesture or verbal phrase that naturally arises in the process.
- The Village—a contemplative large group practice, in which participants move simultaneously according to their own and

the group's felt desires, in the process creating spatial patterns—clusters, centres, edges etc.—that sometimes resembles the patterns of communal life—weddings, funerals, trade etc.—one might find in a village.

- 4D Mapping—a performance-like representation of a social system (say an organization or community), in which a group of participants volunteer to embody the most relevant system roles—mayor, media, moral courage etc.—and arrange themselves in a Sculpture 1, moving with awareness of the social body into a Sculpture 2, with hopes of generating insights about the system under examination.

Sometimes, hilarity ensues. More often it is brokenheartedness (Hayashi, 2021, p. 85) given that the practices make visible the invisible dynamics at play in the social systems we find ourselves representing or mirroring. We see and sense what it is like for a person to be excluded from a team, for example, or for a community to walk around in confusion and purposelessness for a long time, failing to cohere. But just as often, we see and sense the goodness of humans in the tenderness of a person turning to another, in the beauty of a small group propping up a vulnerable act of leadership, protecting someone who is down, or celebrating joy.

Hayashi's prologue rightfully warns us that "learning to engage in a movement practice by reading a book has its limitations." I might go as far as to say that learning to engage in a movement practice by reading a book is impossible. On that note, if you have never experienced Social Presencing Theater, please head over to the Presencing Institute's demonstration videos on YouTube so that you have at least a visual reference for these practices. Readers are cautioned against reading the book—or watching the videos—and thinking they are ready to lead a group in these practices at their next team retreat or international conference.

I have rarely felt more aware of the limitation of a book as a vehicle for conveying knowledge than I have while reading a book on embodiment. In the case of *The Art of Making a True Move*, I couldn't shake a feeling of sadness for readers who were experiencing Arawana Hayashi in the two-dimensionality of a book. We do get glimpses of her humour, her softness and humility—she writes, for example, "I often think that flow is highly overrated. Stuck is so interesting and juicy" (Hayashi, 2021, p. 44). She tells us about her own 20-Minute Dance in which she begins to cry as soon as she lies down on the floor (Hayashi, 2021, p. 104). She meticulously credits fellow practitioners—Ricardo Dutra, Manish Srivastava, and others, who are genuine co-creators, but also a workshop participant in Denmark who happened to contribute a single, perfect phrase—claiming hers is "just one story" of Social Presencing Theater among many

(Hayashi, 2021, p. xxviii). Still, the genius of her presence doesn't quite translate across to the page. Of course, we wouldn't be aware of what we were missing unless we had met her, as I was lucky to do.

I met Arawana around 2005 in Nova Scotia, at the annual Shambhala Institute for Authentic Leadership gathering. This was also the setting for the fortuitous meeting between her and Otto Scharmer, which led to their co-creation of Social Presencing Theater, thus this book, thus this book review. I was in fact among the rag-tag group of mostly young people at the Shambhala Institute who acted as the makeshift crew for Arawana the summer she started experimenting with the forms that eventually became Social Presencing Theater (see Hayashi, 2021, p. 187).

Meeting Arawana in my early 20s (she was about 60 at the time) was significant for me in ways that I have not acknowledged fully until recently. For one thing, though I didn't have enough critical consciousness to name this at the time, I felt somehow represented in Arawana's non-Whiteness given the context of mostly-White spaces we shared. She was the first person leading from the front of a room about whom I remember thinking/feeling *the texture of her power is available to me*, and therefore, *I think I could lead*. At the time I never imagined that some 20 years later I would be leading a Centre for Dialogue at a major Canadian university, facilitating groups grappling with the most complex challenges of society, drawing regularly on Arawana's Social Presencing Theater, among other methods that I came to meet at the Shambhala Institute. What I observed in her was a possibility of absolutely commanding a room from inside a slight frame, absent a big voice and immaculate hair, absent the extroversion and witty verbosity of the other facilitators I had been enchanted by up to that point. Instead, she was endlessly relatable in her down-to-earth-ness, endlessly trustworthy in that she seemed almost incapable of pulling a fast one. She was masterful with relatively simple words, and the crowd hung onto every one of them. It is easy to name, in retrospect, that people responded to her sense of dignity (the secret to which, she shared with us in the book, is an awareness of the back of the body [Hayashi, 2021, p. 101]), grounding (which, she tells us, grows out of a practice of regularly lying down on the ground [Hayashi, 2021, p. 94]) and presence (which, she shares, is the result of a synchronized body and mind [Hayashi, 2021, p. 106]).

Some ten years later she changed my life again with one seemingly random gesture during the Advanced Social Presencing Theater training. She was talking about the physical space of the room we were in, the walls and ceiling, the room as a kind of frame for the art form we were practicing. At one point she gestured to indicate a corner of the room, but instead of using an index finger to point like any regular human being would do, she lifted a knee and pointed out the corner of the room with her pointed toes. My world fell apart and was remade in that moment. Surely it was in part the breaking of a gendered taboo, a slap in the face to all the societal messages I had received about girls keeping their knees together. In the surprise of it I had a sudden realization of our

underutilized—possibly suppressed—physicality as human beings in dominant Western culture. A facilitator, or leader, or teacher is *not* meant to be a talking head complete with hand gestures. We are *not* flat and meant to be relegated to the front of the room. We have volume and length. We have a lower body. We are holding space with our entire physical apparatus, and we can use it in so many more ways than we typically do. That realization forever changed how I enter a room, and particularly how I move in the space of a meeting entrusted to me.

You just don't get that kind of teaching from reading a book!

Though I have not experienced this side of Hayashi, I understand that she was a choreographer for many years, and I think her choreography skills shine through the arrangements in the book. It is structured purposefully to open with a couple of contextual chapters emphasizing the view behind the practices. The view—the fundamental way of looking at the world, the foundational beliefs, if you will—is a critically important starting point, as I learned again and again in my years at the Shambhala Institute where no conference could begin without an extensive framing talk to explicitly name *the view*. The book ends with chapters elaborating on the origins of the methods, situating it in the larger body of social arts and arts-based research. Sandwiched in between, the practices chapters are cleverly arranged, not from individual to couple to small group to large group practice, as I have done above, but in an order that allows for the scaffolding of key concepts. It is almost as if the introduction of each practice is an excuse for further clarifying an aspect of the view that is best illustrated by that practice. For example:

- Chapter 3 on Stuck illustrates the view of basic goodness, that each human body has inherent wellness and knowledge that can be relied on to move us in the direction of sanity in the face of complex challenges (Hayashi, 2021, p. 50).
- Chapter 4 on 4D Mapping introduces the view that systems are not just “out there” but also “in here,” and that any change we’re going to make in systems can only come from changes in the consciousness of its members (Hayashi, 2021, p. 63).
- Chapter 5 on the 20-Minute Dance dwells on the critical role of genuine presence, and the possibilities that become available when we stop planning and controlling, instead learning to “delight in not know what comes next” (Hayashi, 2021, p. 100).
- Chapter 6 on the Duet goes deep into the meaning of *ma*, the gap or the silence or the not-doing from which fresh movement arises (Hayashi, 2021, p. 111), and introduces the idea *aesthetics* as the presence of feeling or perception (as opposed to anesthetic which is the absence of feeling and perception) as basis for decisions (p. 114), and the *true move* as unforced and unconcerned movement (Hayashi, 2021, p. 113).

- Chapter 7/8 on the Dance of Fives describes the link between simplicity and the true move (p.145), and details what it means to see, sense into and act as the social body, each individual exercising “almost a choice” (Hayashi, 2021, p. 146).
- Chapter 9 on the Village introduces the social field (“the sum total of the qualities of relationships we collectively enact” in Scharmer’s words), and instructs on the use of the three-dimensional body (strong back, soft eyes) to fully sense into it (Hayashi, 2021, p. 160).
- Chapter 10 on the Field Dance challenges notions of leadership as authority with the notion of leadership as awareness of—and responsibility to—the whole (Hayashi, 2021, p. 177) and hones in on the value of awkwardness and leaning into nowness as a basis for genuine creativity (Hayashi, 2021, p. 179).

I found myself deepening my grasp of each concept, relying on the scaffolding presented by the book’s structure to carry me forward. But I was also super aware of the book’s architecture as I was reading. There was, somewhat ironically, very little by way of not-knowing-what’s-next. Very little awkwardness. I got quickly familiar with the shape of the book and the boundaries of its form—descriptive and instructional prose, punctuated with first-person anecdotes and occasional images, garnished with the rare poem here and there. I could have skipped around and gone to the chapter on a specific practice if I had wanted to (evidence perhaps that the book *is* a practice manual). There was a relatively predictable plot—enjoyable because clearly planned with the reader in mind (evidence of the author’s care for the reader). It is strange to observe this about a non-fiction book, because they are almost always written this way, but the book felt *staged* to me. This felt like an incongruity given the material. It was almost like the form of the book didn’t match the spirit of the practices presented within. I had the thought that the book was more similar to the early prototyping days of Social Presencing Theater when Hayashi imagined it as a performance form rather than a contemplative unfolding of true moves (Hayashi, 2021, p. 187).

Which got me thinking: What would it have been like to write a book as a 20-Minute Dance? What would have happened if Hayashi had let a synchronized mind-body decide where to take the reader next, through a meandering, unplanned journey? Can a book hold together if it is made of one true move after another? And would such a book be truer to life, if not particularly conducive to a comfortable reading experience?

Which of course got me thinking: What would it be like to write a book review as a 20-Minute Dance (or is it more like a Duet since it is in conversation with the book)? Could I resist the urge to plan ahead and instead let each paragraph, each section, emerge from the empty space left at the end of the last? Could I let the pen go wherever it wanted to go? Would it give readers another,

perhaps more representative experience of what a Social Presencing Theater practice feels like? Or would it clash so strongly with readers' expectation of linear, choreographed writing that they would put it away in disorientation?

Readers, you decide.

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Innovation in Praxis

The Invisible Dimensions of Systems Transformation:

Field Notes from Social Field Cultivation in the Law and Justice Sector in India

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Abstract

In response to the growing complexity of sustainability challenges, field catalyst organizations are emerging across sectors such as health, education, finance, and law. These organizations seek to foster systemic transformation by bringing together diverse institutional actors. While much attention is given to strategy and structural collaboration, many such initiatives fall short by neglecting the invisible, relational, and awareness-based dimensions of collective action—referred to as the social field or social soil in the Presencing and Theory U framework. This article presents an action research inquiry into how Agami India, a field catalyst network, is cultivating the social field to enable systems transformation in the law and justice sector. Grounded in the application of Social Presencing Theater (SPT)—a methodology that offers both a framework and embodied practices for cultivating the social field—the study draws on seven years of fieldwork, practitioner reflection, and fourteen deep-dialogue interviews with participants of the Agami Shala (immersive leadership journeys). It

illustrates how cultivating interiority, presence, and relationship supports a shift from ego-stuckness to ecosystem consciousness. The article culminates in a grounded, practice-based practitioner framework for cultivating the social field, rooted in the principles of natural ecosystems and Indian spiritual wisdom on universal consciousness.

Keywords

social field, field catalyst, 4D mapping, Social Presencing Theater, ecosystem consciousness, Indian spirituality, law and justice, Agami

A seed finds its roots
and becomes the tree
it was born to be.

The tree finds its home
and becomes the forest,
where it belongs fully.

The forest comes to life,
thriving in harmony
with all its siblings.

The field softly smiles,
breathing in its rich soil,
breathing out life with deep generosity.

The Call from a Fragmentation Field

Several years ago, I was invited to design a rural marketing hub for grassroots women entrepreneurs in India. Fourteen leaders from various businesses and social enterprises/NGOs sat across two round tables. Each table was given a flip chart and asked to build two 3-dimensional models of the hub using Lego blocks, clay, pipe cleaners, and pebbles.

The table of business executives quickly collaborated on a single joint model. However, the table of NGO leaders and social entrepreneurs hesitated, then tore the chart paper into eight pieces, each building their own model with limited resources. Concerned they had misunderstood, I offered a fresh sheet and encouraged them to create a joint model. To my surprise, they resisted, insisting their approaches were too different to unify.

As I stood between the two tables, they mirrored a deeper systemic challenge: the stark contrast between monolithic business and government institutions that default to centralized power and a fragmented civil society sector struggling to build collective agency.

When I shared the story in another cross-sectoral forum, a young district collector readily agreed, "It's so difficult to bring NGOs together to make any change happen." My friends from the NGO sector echo this frustration, pointing to deep cracks in the field—*competition driven by limited funding, donor-imposed*

thematic silos, and the relentless pressure on social entrepreneurs to prove their models. One leading entrepreneur admitted he spends 75% of his time fundraising. Another young woman broke down, confessing she's been so caught up in this race that she has not visited the community in three years.

The result? A sector too consumed by survival to see the whole picture—small wins, but a more significant collective loss, with leaders burning out before systemic change can take hold. All this while the Earth heats up and communities suffer.

Significant efforts have been made in the past decade to bring diverse actors together for collective impact, giving rise to a new breed of organizations—Field Catalysts (FCs) (Hussein et al., 2018). These include multi-stakeholder partnerships, social innovator fellowships, funding-driven collaborations, cause-driven compacts, institutional coordination frameworks, and business or policy-led alliances. Over the last 20 years, I have had the opportunity to work with many such organizations and have been inspired by their genuine efforts to convene stakeholders and foster difficult conversations. Some even create deep relational spaces in small groups. Yet, most struggle to build lasting collaborations that sustain long enough to transform entire systems. While there are remarkable examples, the field on the whole remains fragile and fragmented.

An Invisible Dimension: Insights from Social Presencing Theater and Theory U

Learning Social Presencing Theater (SPT) with Arawana Hayashi gave me a language and practice for exploring this phenomenon (Hayashi, n.d.). SPT is a social art form that integrates mindfulness, movement, contemplative theater, and systems thinking to help us embody and sense the “stuckness” and emerging future of any social system.

Through SPT, I experienced two key aspects of a social ecosystem—the Social Body and the Social Field. In any social system, whether a family, a group of teenagers, an organizational team, or a network of stakeholders, the Social Body refers to the visible structure: how we gather, our physical positions, levels, proximity, and directions. The Social Field, on the other hand, is the invisible, felt-experience of relationships—how members of a social body connect with each other and the space as a whole (Hayashi, 2021).

Otto C. Scharmer and Katrin Kaufer explore this theme in their new book, *Presencing: 7 Practices For Transforming Self, Society, And Business*—“A social field has a visible part aboveground (the tangible part of the system) and an invisible part below the surface: the social soil—that is, the qualities of awareness and relationships that people in a system operate from” (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2025, p. 3).

This insight helped me recognize the struggles of many field catalysts, communities of practice (CoPs), and organizations that focus primarily on building visible structures while neglecting the invisible social field. While

“structural” efforts like stakeholder engagement, leverage-point identification, data gathering, and policy-building are essential, their sustainable success depends on cultivating an often-overlooked social field—the invisible relational fabric that shapes the quality and impact of collective work.

Arawana Hayashi further adds that “awareness” is what weaves the social body and social field together. In the Indian spiritual context, this may be referred to as our collective consciousness or how we collectively become aware of the visible and invisible dimensions of the social phenomenon. As our quality of awareness shifts from viewing others as competition or resources for our ego-driven agendas to recognizing each other as integral parts of the whole, the social field also transforms from being fragmented or transactional to becoming caring and transformational.

In the following section, I will share our insights on cultivating a social field with the Agami, a Field catalyst organization which is committed to transforming the law and justice system in India.

Social Presencing Theater (SPT)

Social Presencing Theater (SPT) is a body-based art form and awareness practice that helps individuals and groups sense and actualize their highest future potential through mindful movement and embodied presence. SPT brings together eight foundational practices, grouped into four areas:

- *Embodiment and body awareness*, like the 20-Minute Dance, helping participants connect mind and body through stillness and movement.
- *Field awareness*, through practices like Field Dance and Village Practice, allowing participants to sense the invisible social fields that shape collective creativity.
- *Personal transformation*, using practices like Stuck Exercise and Seed Dance, to embody challenges and crystallize emerging futures.
- *Collective transformation*, with practices like 4D Mapping, where large groups embody stakeholder roles to sense systemic pain and possibilities.

Learn more about Social Presencing Theater at www.u-school.org/spt or see applications in contexts like Agami at my blog www.sacredwell.in.

Journey with Agami

Co-Initiation (What Brought Us Together)

Sometimes, I feel that if we hold our questions long enough, the universe creates opportunities for us to learn.

In 2015, Supriya Sankaran (then Director at Ashoka India) invited Sonali Ojha, a maverick Social Entrepreneur and Ashoka Fellow, and me to design immersive retreats for Ashoka Fellows using Social Presencing Theater (SPT). Over the next four years, the three of us guided around 80 Social Entrepreneurs (or "Changemakers") through the "Reframing Journey" from ego-stuckness to eco-consciousness.

During one of these workshops, we were creating a live stakeholder map (or 4D Map) of the system's current reality (see Presencing Institute, n.d., for more on 4D maps). I asked participants to embody the role of various stakeholders like government, funder, community, family, etc., and explore how they interact with each other. Supriya stepped in to embody the role of a social entrepreneur. As she tried to orchestrate the actors and the whole system to move, it hit her that "no actor was waiting for my direction. Each one was already directing their paths and moving. In that moment, I realised that to truly move the system, one has to be able to weave the visions and intentions of multiple actors together" (Dialogue Interview, January 17, 2025).

In other words, Supriya realized that we need to attend to the social field.

Over the next few years, Supriya discovered others asking similar questions, including Sachin Malhan, and together, they co-founded Agami, a field catalyst organization that connects ideas and people working to transform the experience of justice in India (Agami, n.d.).

Agami had a different start compared to Ashoka. One, Agami's focus on the law and justice sector provided a necessary container for cultivating the social field. Two, Agami created an ecosystem to invite changemakers on an immersive leadership journey, Agamishaala, and to co-create system-transforming innovations.

As Sachin Malhan puts it, "While Agamishaala (the leadership development journey) offers the critical rite of passage for holding the community together, other parts of Agami foster deep care and relationships that help cultivate this social field. The Agami Prize identifies new Agamishaala members, Agami Projects provide space for innovation, and the Agami Summit or Mela creates a platform for the larger community to see and sense the field. Together they help the system shift from scarcity to abundance" (Dialogue Interview, March 20, 2025).

With this foundation, Supriya invited Sonali Ojha and me to cultivate the social field within Agami through Agamishaala and the Agami Summit/ Mela (Agami, n.d.-a; Agami, 2024).

Invitation and Challenges (What Built Our Foundation)

Supriya had curated the essential elements: a sectoral focus, a group of passionate changemakers, and a sense of openness to start the work. But a bigger question loomed: How do we enable field shift in a sector that is proudly stuck at level two listening—factual, analytical, confrontational, and siloed?¹

Sitting together, we reflected on our struggles and the learnings from the Ashoka prototype that could inform our next steps. Sonali Ojha, in her quiet way, synthesized our insights into three guiding principles:

1. Invite those at an inflection point in their professional journey—those longing to break out of their silos and engage with the larger ecosystem;
2. Take a vertical dive—boycott level-two, analytical, and ego-based engagement, instead, collectively sensing into systemic challenges;
3. Create space for integrating our insights with the external ecosystem, ensuring that inner transformations translate into external shifts.

We launched our first immersive journey with 19 passionate changemakers from the field of law and justice. A year later, the pandemic hit. We nearly let go of the effort—until Artika Raj, Co-creator of Agami, stepped in. She inspired Sonali Ojha and me to co-create a hybrid version of the journey, grounded in cultivating mindfulness and resilience amidst the COVID crisis.

But soon after, we lost Sonali Ojha. Perhaps we will never fully recover from that loss. A part of me believes she has not gone but has dissolved into the field, living on through the work we bring into the world. And somewhere, her spirit inspired Artika and me to carry forward this journey over the next seven years.

Inspiration (What Keeps Us Going)

Over the last seven years, we have embarked on immersive year-long journeys with six cohorts, each culminating in collective gatherings (reunions) that nourish the field. Today, we are a closely-knit community of over 100 changemakers—committed to each other's successes, rapidly sharing ideas, and showing up for one another through personal and professional challenges. This deep trust and selfless spirit to serve the sector's transformation are contagious, shaping our gatherings in ways we could never have imagined. We continue to show up as ecosystem stewards at large community learning forums like the Agami Summit and Mela, strengthening our collective impact.

¹ Level two refers to levels of listening and attention articulated by Otto Scharmer. See <https://www.u-school.org/offerings/apply-levels-listening>.

It's heartening to see how participants join Agamishaala as seeds or trees and, over the long journey, transform into thriving forests. Many of them find a newfound assurance in sharing that: I am not just a small player; I can see my role in shaping and serving the whole ecosystem, and I can also appreciate others' contributions. Some participants have also undergone profound shifts in their roles, moving from enterprise leaders to ecosystem conveners. For instance, Akshay Roongta, a startup founder, discovered how he could expand his role to help social impact networks convene better. The journey inspired him to co-initiate the Alliance for Conserving Freshwater Ecosystems to bring focus, collective effort, and action to protect and conserve inland water ecosystems in India.

Numerous bilateral collaborations and partnerships have emerged along the way where members support or join others to expand their ecosystem impact. One such example is Rohit Sharma, who co-founded Awaaz Leadership Labs with support from Anshul Tiwari and fellow Agamishaala members to build an ecosystem where law students can bring fresh ideas to transform the field of law and justice.

Agamishaala has played a pivotal role in catalyzing multi-stakeholder collaborative innovations, unlocking collective agency. One such initiative, PUCAR (Public Collective for Avoidance and Resolution of Disputes), is transforming the dispute resolution experience of every Indian through many innovations, including India's first 24x7 ON Court in Kochi (PUCAR, n.d.). PUCAR initiative emerged from the social field cultivated by Agamishaala to address the unparalleled crisis that India's judicial system faces with over 58.4 million cases pending nationwide, as reported by The Hindu (The Hindu Bureau, 2024). The Times of India highlights that the Supreme Court has a record 83,000 pending cases, and High Court pendency has surged to 6.2 million cases, a 33% increase since 2019 (TNN, 2024). In its early days, Agamishaala offered a space for diverse dispute resolution leaders to set aside roles, connect deeply, and engage openly with differing views. Supriya, who co-facilitated the cohort, noticed a shift in energy and relationships in the months that followed. She reflects, "Agamishaala played a critical role in building the relational foundation and trust needed to sustain and grow this difficult mission (of PUCAR). This retreat was instrumental in enabling participants to collectively own the purpose of the initiative, significantly accelerating its progress" (Dialogue Interview, January 17, 2025).

Field Notes—What is the Social Field Teaching Us?

Seven years hence, I sit with our core team, our field notes spread before us. We reflect—what are we learning about cultivating the social field?

In reflection, I must also acknowledge, along with Sonali Ojha and Social Presencing Theater, two other sources that deeply inspired my work. One is the Indian spiritual wisdom on transforming ego-centered striving into ecosystem

consciousness.² It gives deep grounding to my work as an awareness-based systems change facilitator and has been the undertone of Agamishaala design. The other is nature—a lifelong source of inspiration. This connection comes partly from my father, a farmer and forester, and partly from my own early childhood spent in forests. Nature forms the foundation of much of my creative work. Together these sources shape my approach in conscious and unconscious ways.

When I view the social field through nature's lens, clear parallels emerge—The Fragmented Field, like a barren desert, isolates and depletes, leaving people lost and stagnant. The Transactional Field, like rocky terrain, breeds exhaustion through rigid exchanges. The Relational Field, like a nurtured garden, fosters trust, care, and belonging. The Regenerative Field, like a thriving forest, sustains itself, allowing communities to flourish with flow, reverence, and emergence.

I often wonder: how can we transform the fragmented social field of law and justice into a regenerative ecosystem? Looking back, I see a virtuous cycle—a three-phase journey that gradually cultivates this regenerative social field—curating the seeds, cultivating the field, and co-evolving the ecosystem.

I am sharing three field notes in the hope they will speak to the hearts of practitioners and action researchers who read them. I call them "field notes" because they are the notes I have been writing to myself and sharing with my team. They emerge straight from my heartfelt experiences, and I hope they will speak to the hearts of practitioners and action researchers who read them. You might notice that each field note feels like a direction, containing three parts: What—A principle or insight; How—The practices that bring it to life; Examples—Real-world instances where we have seen it in action, based on 12 dialogue interviews I did with Agamishaala participants and Agami leaders.

Field Note A: Curate the Seeds

I first learned the word curation from the Agami team. Curation is the process of identifying and organizing different elements to reveal a bigger picture. In a social context, it means bringing together leaders from diverse backgrounds to represent a microcosm of our social system. This is a crucial step before we begin cultivating the field. Curation involves two key principles:

Identifying Diverse Pioneers at an Inflection Point

We seek individuals ready to transition from ego-driven leadership to ecosystem stewardship. One guiding question we ask is: If you feel like you're hitting a wall

² A detailed exploration of Indian Spiritual frameworks based on conversations with Dr. Samata Vashisht are published in my article "Alchemy of the Heart" (Srivastava, 2025a).

and can't move forward, would you consider joining us? This invitation resonates with those longing to break free from their current patterns and engage at a deeper level. Throughout the year, Artika continues to scout around the country, connecting with people who can bring diversity to enhance each other's inquiry and experience at Agamishaala.

Over the years, we have expanded our scope to invite leaders like Akshay. When invited, he could not see himself directly working in the domain of law and justice. Although, he felt that “I was at a right transition point, feeling unsettled as a leader. The Agamishaala team saw my diversity as a gift to the cohort. The journey helped me to up my game as a leader and inspired me to engage more deeply with others as a network weaver” (Dialogue Interview, April 15, 2024).

Creating Curiosity and Shared Intention through Dialogue Interviews

The Agami Team conducts in-depth dialogue interviews without revealing details about the workshop design or process. Instead, we simply ask: Are you willing to join us with the shared intention of transforming the law and justice sector? This approach serves as a filter, ensuring that those who step in are truly committed to the purpose and open to stepping into the unknown.

Carefully curating a diverse cohort does the work even before we start the gathering. As one of our participants, a senior government official reflected, “at Agamishaala, I met people from different fields, perspectives, ages, groups, and knowledge bases. I was able to break my own barriers of thinking in a structured fashion and engage beyond hierarchies” (Dialogue Interview, April, 2025).

Field Note B: Cultivate the Field

The cultivation of the field begins the moment all participants come together at the Agamishaala retreat. However, this journey continues throughout the year, or even years. While we may use various practices and rituals, four underlying principles guide us in cultivating the social field (Figure 1.0). These principles have been inspired by Indian spiritual wisdom on being, belonging, and becoming one with the Universe. When I integrated nature's principles of cultivation with Indian spiritual wisdom it offered me a simple 4 steps framework:

	Individual (Inner Work)	Collective (Relational & Systemic Work)
Awareness shift (Grounding)	Being—Preparing the Soil of Trust (Creating a safe and brave space for personal renewal)	Belonging—Rooting in Relationship (Developing deep, authentic connections)
Agency shift (Serving)	Becoming—Flourishing with the Forest (Activating personal agency as ecosystem stewards)	Building Beyond—Regenerating the Whole Ecosystem (Inspiring collective agency in service of the whole)

Table 1: Four Principles of Cultivating the Social Field (Manish Srivastava)

Being—Preparing the Soil of Trust (Creating a Safe and Brave Space for Personal Renewal)

Curating the seeds is not enough if we do not have relational soil fertile enough to nurture conversation, relationships, and innovation.

In the natural world, we begin cultivating the soil by clearing the ground, composting the old, and adding organic matter, air, and moisture to let it breathe life. Likewise, we need to prepare the social soil by clearing past judgments, composting our ego and stuck patterns, and enriching the ground with trust, care, and generosity. In other words, we must create a safe and brave space where participants feel secure enough to engage in courageous conversations, self-reflection, and collaboration—essential for transforming the field.

In the initial gatherings, I was unconsciously preparing the soil. Only when I interviewed some participants for this article did I realize the profound importance of cultivating the soil of trust. Almost all of them acknowledged that the facilitation style, which is non-threatening and non-agenda-driven, creates a space where people trust each other. This implicit trust helps them to show up for one another on short notice. The shared experiences of embodiment activities helped them be vulnerable and develop this trust.

When people arrive, there is often an unspoken doubt and distrust, shaped by past experiences in gatherings where they had to defend their positions and where convenors imposed a dominating agenda. At Agamishaala, we consciously disrupt that pattern through practices designed to cultivate trust—both at the beginning of the retreat and throughout the journey.

- We do not have a fixed agenda or expected outcomes. This creates an open, nonjudgmental space and allows personal agency to engage naturally. There is no pressure to perform or produce an outcome, making it easier for participants to trust the process and each other.

- We avoid formal introductions, dissolving (or composting) ego identities and inviting participants into a shared space of presence and connection. Embodiment work becomes a leveler. By not asking people to talk about their work, we help them relate at a deeper level. Anshul reflected on his first experience, “There were no introductions—we directly went into a 20-minute dance (an embodied activity where we alternate between stillness and movement in silence for 20 minutes on the floor). But when we got up, we felt we were in a safe space” (Dialogue Interview, April 4, 2024).
- We create rituals of mindfulness, embodiment, and intimate reflection that shift awareness from conceptual frameworks to a felt, embodied social experience. This opens both mind and heart to trust and acceptance. Anshul added that “it created a space where I felt safe enough to look at my ‘stuckness’ honestly” (Dialogue Interview, April 4, 2024).
- We engage in nonverbal, movement-based group activities that invite spontaneous play, creating a safe space to compost ego-stuck patterns into fresh insights. As one of our changemakers Lubhyathi Rangarajan noted, “We connected in silence, sharing personal experiences. This created a deep level of trust” (Dialogue Interview, April 18, 2024).

At first, participants are surprised by our unusual approach, but soon, they begin to relax and simply be themselves. As the Agami Team puts it, *our approach disarms participants of their habitual patterns and prepares them for ecosystem consciousness.*

Belonging—Rooting in Relationship (Developing Deep, Authentic Connections)

We have learned that relationships are not built through visible exchanges but through invisible connections and resonance—just like the mycelial root network that cultivates the field for forests to emerge. We have seen this deep network of connections emerge through the following social embodiment practices:

- *Non-verbal social body experiences:* We engage in non-verbal activities like Duets or Village practices. By letting go of verbal exchanges, we expand our awareness to connect with each other. Sensing each other's presence through our hearts and whole bodies, we cultivate a deep appreciation of each other's whole being and the social space in between. This creates an unspoken connection that is not dependent on the stories we bring. As our participant, Sampat Mandaarapur, says, this is

where “deep bonds are created” (Dialogue Interview, April 4, 2024).

- *SPT activities like "stuck"* help us embody our personal challenges collectively within a small group. Without words, we can more deeply sense each other's struggles and longings. We share a collective experience of vulnerability, which creates deep empathy. As Anshul reflected, “We all felt stuck, and we connected deeply in our challenges” (Dialogue Interview, April 4, 2024).
- *Stepping into our field of the future*: We invite participants to embody their field of the future and ask others to become supporting elements. This creates an embodied memory of being part of someone else's vision. This joyful energy and commitment continue beyond the retreat. Aditi Kim Karolil, Agamishaala Curator, often says that after Agamishaala, “We feel a deep sense of joy in supporting each other and manifesting our potential” (Dialogue Interview, April 25, 2025).

These shared embodiment experiences create a deep sense of belonging and commitment to the shared purpose. Anshul acknowledges,

I have never felt as invested in any other community as I do in Agamishaala. It is the best cohort I have ever been part of. We are all connected for a reason beyond work. It is a personal and vulnerable space. We are connected on the level of a living room. It's genuine and authentic. We don't have to put on a facade. There is no competition. (Dialogue Interview, April 4, 2024)

Sampat Mandaarapur, from the Indian Prison Services, adds, “Government awards don't really recognize what I am doing. The people at Agami always do. They give me their full attention. Because of this, I feel very committed” (Dialogue Interview, April 4, 2024). He further adds, “Embodiment activities are at the core of this experience. There are no filters. We are not trying to impress anyone. There's no hidden agenda. It is very different from our daily lives. We don't wear any masks. Even a few minutes of such engagement can be more impactful than 15 years of work” (Dialogue Interview, April 4, 2024).

Becoming—Flourishing with the Forest (Activating Personal Agency as Ecosystem Stewards)

In natural ecosystems, every part inherently senses the whole. As we cultivate the field, a distinct ecological body emerges. The forest's canopy not only shapes but also protects, creating the conditions for the soil and ecosystem to thrive. I have always wondered: What, then, is the social equivalent of this canopy that nurtures and enables a social ecosystem to emerge?

Social Presencing Theater serves a similar role by allowing participants to see, sense, and embody the whole system deeply. Through practices like 4D Mapping³, individuals step into the roles of various stakeholders—not just observing but feeling their struggles, aspirations, and interconnectedness.

For Vikram Hiresavi, the activities expanded his perspective: "My view is generally limited to wildlife conservation. At Agamishaala, I was exposed to other people's viewpoints. I learned a lot about people working on social justice. It developed my relationships with other members, which led to effective partnerships" (Dialogue Interview, April 19, 2024).

Seeing and sensing the whole ecosystem works at multiple levels. One, the participants become aware of their role and responsibility in shaping the whole. This activates their personal agency. They also start appreciating how others are contributing to the journey, and this creates the basis for collaboration. Finally, they can rest in this awareness that they are not alone in transforming the ecosystem and this creates a sense of collective well-being.

As Rangin Pallav Tripathy shares,

Noticing myself as a part of a social body has become a central part of my work. I realize, as a Professor and Registrar in a University, my actions do not happen in isolation. Social body awareness has helped me stay calm and avoid frustration or agitation when things don't go according to plan. I feel much more at ease. (Dialogue Interview, April 18, 2024)

Members not only sense their role in the ecosystem; they become the ecosystem. This shifts identity from isolated actors to a collective social body—a forest of solidarity. As this awareness deepens, leaders naturally emerge as ecosystem stewards, fostering care for each other and the whole.

Akshay reflected on his journey:

The Stuck exercise⁴ had a direct impact on my work as a leader. I started delegating more and letting go. The Stepping into the Future (Seed Dance) helped me clarify my role as a connector between various domains and organizations. I have put the drawing from the activity on my wall. It inspired me to renegotiate my role from being a facilitator of a project to becoming a partner and weaver (networker). Over the years that initiative turned into the Alliance for Conserving Freshwater Ecosystem. Network weaving has become an important part of my practice that I want to build further. (Dialogue Interview, April 15, 2024)

³ For more information on 4D mapping pls see <https://www.u-school.org/4dmapping>

⁴ For more about Stuck exercise please see <https://www.u-school.org/stuck>

For Anshul, founder of Youth Ki Awaz, the embodied activities worked like a reminder: “I could see everything that I was not and wanted to be. I took a drastic decision at work. It transformed the way we were engaging so far” (Dialogue Interview, April 4, 2024). He is now stepping into a global ecosystem development role by being on the Global Safety Advisory Board of Snap Inc.

For others, ecosystem consciousness helps them see their own role differently and inspires new collaborations. Lubhyathi reflects on this:

One of the most powerful takeaways for me was the insight that embodying is different from enacting. I have learned to embody my profession as a lawyer and researcher, to embody the theory. I am able to perceive and go several levels deeper. The exercises helped us to be creative in a non-scary way. (Dialogue Interview, April 18, 2024)

Building Beyond—Regenerating the Whole Ecosystem (Inspiring Collective Agency in Service of the Whole)

A social field becomes truly regenerative when it taps into a deep source of collective renewal and unlocks its collective agency. Over the years with Agami, I feel that the regenerative source of a social field lies in its connection with the collective heart (Srivastava, 2025b).

In Live Stakeholder or 4D mapping sessions during Agamishaala, we sometimes touch a collective wound. An intuitive silence fills the room. In acknowledging our shared helplessness, it feels as if we are part of the same heart, beating together.

One moment that stands out for me is the Agami Mela in Bhopal, held against the backdrop of the 40th anniversary of the Bhopal gas tragedy (Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, 2024).

On the second day, a spontaneous and intense dialogue emerged, confronting unresolved questions about the gross injustice caused by the tragedy—surfacing deep anger, naming unspoken truths, exposing the failures of capitalist institutions, the State, and development organizations, while recognizing the vital yet often overlooked role of movement-based groups in demanding accountability.

The weight of history made it an overwhelming space to hold. Sachin recalls the experience as

a crisis that acted as a rite of passage for us. However, because of our immersive experience with Agamishaala, we were willing to stay with the discomfort, willing not to judge others hastily, willing to heal and let others heal, and willing to stand for our truth. We did not dismiss anything others said. We did not make it about us versus them. We were all collectively committed to

listening to each other in the face of confrontation and creating a new kind of field. (Dialogue Interview, March 20, 2025)

In such moments, we develop a collective capacity to care for each other despite our differences. Sachin adds that such experiences help us to “relate to each other's work and purpose with deep care. When we see others work as part of our system and our work as part of theirs, our collective agency is truly activated.”

This collective agency is based on deep friendship that has a unique quality of presence. Or as Sachin puts it poetically,

In such a friendship, there is the wisdom of the third. Apart from you and me, there is a third being or the field itself. Therefore, it is not just that we care for each other—we care for this whole. We are able to settle in silence with this awareness of the third being. The quality of relationships that we cultivate is the game changer for cultivating the social field. (Dialogue Interview, March 20, 2025)

Sensing the “third being” or the collective heart unlocks a collective agency that serves the whole ecosystem. Unexpected collaborations, where leaders across highly bureaucratic and rigid institutions partner with technology innovators and civil society activists to create radical transformations for the community, can only happen when all of them have been through a shared experience and connected with the collective heart—a deep longing to serve those who suffer the most. It creates an unspoken commitment that brings people back, time and again, as if they long to drink from the same sacred source that inspires us all to serve.

Akshay reflects that “When I go to other gatherings or conferences, I find their soul or lifeblood is missing. At Agamishaala it is the deeper human to human connection and vulnerability that creates trust and shared intent to transform the field” (Dialogue Interview, April 15, 2024). Sampat, who has been attending all our gatherings, put it beautifully that, “Agamishaala reinstalls my youthful idealism” (Dialogue Interview, April 4, 2024). Anish Andheria calls it “a dopamine shot taken collectively. Within half a day, we opened up our hearts to the level that we could not do with a psychologist even after months of sessions” (Dialogue Interview, April 19, 2024).

I suspect many return to our gatherings for this very reason—to reconnect with the collective source of purpose. Or, simply, to connect with the collective heart.

Field Note C: Co-Evolve the Regenerative Ecosystem

The transformative generative spaces are powerful yet delicate. While we may be able to create right conditions in a retreat environment, however, as soon as individuals leave the retreat and re-engage with the outside world, the habitual patterns of society take over. They may feel lonely, lost, and heartbroken. This saddens me, and I have always wondered how we can cocreate an ecosystem that is genuinely regenerative, one that begins to take care of itself. Fortunately, the Agami Team shares this concern, and together we started investing time and resources to make this vision a reality. While there is a lot of work we need to do in this area, here are some of our initial field notes on how, once we have cultivated a generative social field, we can evolve a regenerative ecosystem.

Create Spaces for Cross-Pollination and Innovation

The Agamishaala team, Artika and Aditi, have tirelessly created various formal and informal spaces enabling community members to meet in-person and reconnect with social embodiment practices, nurture relationships, and encourage collaborations. The Agami ecosystem facilitates this process on three levels:

1. *Agamishaala United:* We invite all cohorts to come together in collective embodiment practices, allowing different streams to merge into a larger river. This is a joyful community space where members reconnect with their own cohort, the larger community, and the deeper purpose of our movement. At times, we embark on sensing journeys to explore other aspects of the ecosystem, which in turn helps us gain deeper insights into our own reality.
2. *Informal Support Spaces:* Throughout the journey, we encourage and support the creation of small, rapid, and informal spaces where members can come together to support each other. These spaces may take various forms, including online or in-person gatherings, coaching circles, city meetups, online forums, or innovation retreats.
3. *Community Gatherings:* We invite all participants to co-hold large community gatherings such as the Agami Summit and Mela. These events provide an opportunity to engage with the broader law and justice community—up to 700 people—where members can test and apply their ecosystem learnings. These spaces allow cohort members to practice what they have learned in an open field and then reflect on their experiences within their own circles.

We realize that our approach is very different from the practices followed by the rest of the sector. It is therefore important to create space where participants can find a community to strengthen their practice. Lubhyathi touched this need in sharing that

Agamishaala is counterintuitive to the way we work as lawyers. We have been taught to be suspicious. I realized that it was impeding my own growth. At Agamishaala, I learned the power of deep listening. It gives me space to practice that. (Dialogue Interview, April 18, 2024).

After every such forum, we hold a check-in call with the facilitation team and select community members to sense what the field is teaching us and explore how we can evolve. This approach mirrors nature's principle of adaptation—embracing disruptions and cross-pollinating ideas at the edges.

Allow for Emergence

Creating a regenerative community and guiding a social movement is challenging work with insufficient funding. This raises the question: How can we cultivate a space for self-flourishing communities? However, this inquiry poses a paradox: attempting to create a regenerative community may hinder its natural emergence.

In other words, true regeneration happens when we step back and allow it to unfold organically. This requires us to let go of outcomes, anxieties, and expectations, which is incredibly difficult for two reasons. First, there is external pressure. Funders often seek tangible stories of collaboration or impact. While this is a valid concern, it can create outcome anxiety. Second, there is an internal struggle. Those of us involved in shaping these spaces—people like me—feel a deep need to know that our efforts have made a difference. However, as soon as we begin expecting specific results, we risk interfering with the natural process of emergence.

Consider a forester attempting to make a forest self-sustaining through external interventions. Will the forest ever truly thrive on its own? Likely not. In trying to ensure its independence, the forester may unintentionally create dependence instead. Similarly, natural and social ecosystems regenerate in their own time and space. The wisdom required is to trust in this process.

Our long-term champion, Sampat warns us, "do not try to scale. If you try to scale, we will not succeed." He reminds us that "regenerative work is slow. We need to keep doing this. We are at the beginning." Anshul confirms the same, urging us to "continue the work. A hundred people is not enough" (Dialogue Interview, April 4, 2024).

At this stage, our role as facilitators must evolve—we become stewards of the larger ecosystem. Our direct interventions lessen. Instead, we focus on tending

the social soil, creating rituals and spaces where the community can come together. We allow for self-organization, offering support only when needed.

This is also the moment to identify and invite natural weavers and facilitators from within the community. We can support them—perhaps even funding their travel or time—to help them step into leadership roles. This intentional yet subtle guidance enables a smooth transition.

Letting go does not mean abandoning our efforts. Rather, it means committing to long-term ecosystem stewardship. And for this role to be truly effective, it too must be resourced and funded over time.

Shift Attention to New Fields and Cultivate a Parallel Connected Ecosystem

A key lesson from the Earth's biosphere is that ecosystems thrive through deep interconnection. The same applies to social systems—true regeneration requires weaving multiple, interconnected ecosystems.

We must resist building isolated “islands” and avoid limiting our journey to a few cohorts of Agamishaala. Instead, we need to keep stepping into new fields, inviting fresh cohorts of law and justice pioneers to cultivate thriving social ecosystems. Over time, we must reconnect these groups, strengthening a living network of social fields.

Our expansion has led us to welcome not only legal professionals—lawyers, judges, and scholars—but also those from related ecosystems: media, journalism, technology, innovation, and government. The recent Mela revealed an even greater need to engage leaders from people's movements, organizations, businesses, and public administration.

As some of our members point out, the civil society sector may resist engaging with those within the government and business sectors. That may be the reason that membership from these sectors has been significantly low. We may first need sector-specific journeys before bringing them together across sectors. We must also remain intentional about keeping these ecosystems connected over time.

A regenerative social field is not an isolated island of excellence—it is a network of islands that constantly evolves through connection and renewal.

What Lies Ahead and Where Do We Struggle?

In reflecting on my hopes and messages for fellow stewards, co-creators, and funders of the social field, I would highlight:

1. *The Pace of Transformation:* We often misunderstand the natural rhythm of change, expecting short-term results for long-term challenges. Conditioned by a capitalist system, we see time as linear and assume that impact must be immediate. Yet, just as a forest takes time to regenerate, cultivating a social field requires patience. The early stages may seem slow and demanding, but transformation eventually emerges through unexpected collaborations, identity shifts, and breakthrough innovations. True systems change is not about speed but depth. If we trust in the organic unfolding of change, we allow stronger roots to form.
2. *The Invisibility of Process:* Much like the mycelial networks beneath a thriving forest, most of our work—nearly 80%—remains unseen. The deep cultivation of the social field happens out of sight, yet we live in a world driven by fundable, tangible actions. We must create space for observation, presence, and care. A forester does not rush growth but spends time witnessing the land. Likewise, honoring the silent, nonverbal dimensions of change is essential to sustaining a regenerative field.
3. *Non-Linear Outcomes:* Transformation does not follow a straight line. When members experience deep collaboration and innovation, they rarely point to a single moment of change—it is the entire journey that shapes them. Like a thriving ecosystem, regenerative change does not emerge from isolated interventions but from nurturing the whole field. A farmer practicing permaculture does not cultivate a single tree but tends to the entire landscape, trusting that it will support whatever wishes to grow.
4. *Fragmented Social Fields:* Not all soil is ready for regeneration. Some sectors—like defense, rigid bureaucracies, or some corporate spaces—are too fragmented, too dry for social innovation to take root. Just as deserts and rainforests regenerate differently, social fields require unique approaches based on their context. Understanding these differences allows us to adapt, applying strategies that respect the natural conditions of each space rather than imposing a one-size-fits-all model.
5. *Overprotecting the Ecosystem:* There is a danger in over-curating what we build. As funders, facilitators, and stewards, we may become too attached, shielding our ecosystems from struggle instead of allowing them to co-evolve. We must

remember that we are in service of a wild, self-sustaining forest—not a carefully manicured garden in a private valley. True resilience comes when we allow ecosystems to embrace both challenge and renewal on their own terms.

A Moment of Gratitude: Power of a Layered Container

As I write the final words of this paper, I find myself wanting to honor what holds it all together. And that is the power of a layered container. Looking back at our journey, I feel deeply grateful for the many containers that make transformation possible. By "container," I mean a group of people who share an intention and create the conditions for change. These containers are layered, each supporting the others in holding the collective intention.

The first container is the design and facilitation team—currently Artika, Aditi, and me. We are responsible for curation, design, facilitation, and community building. This requires deep intention—how we hold attention, support each other in surfacing unconscious assumptions, and embody the principles we practice. Before each gathering, we spend one to two days in inner preparation to show up in service.

Another container is the participants, especially those who return to support new cohorts. We set a shared intention with them and engage through pre- and post-event calls. I'm specifically grateful to all those who supported me to write this article.

The larger Agami team—Supriya, Sachin, and other ecosystem leaders—forms another layer, creating platforms for cross-pollination and emergence. Cultivating the social field with them is essential, and we are becoming more intentional about creating shared spaces.

Then there are the enablers—funders, idea-partners, and well-wishers—who trust us as ecosystem stewards without imposing rigid demands. I am deeply grateful for their belief in this work.

Beyond them is an even larger container—stakeholders and partners in the field, some close, others distant, yet all holding the intention for transformation. These "Friends of Agamishaala" provide spaces, offer vital services, and help in unseen but essential ways. Over time, we've identified a network of individuals—like earthworms and birds—who nurture the ecosystem's growth. We've honored them in different ways, but the time has come to create conscious spaces for them as well.

Finally, I'm grateful to Presencing Institute for their generous support—especially Arawana Hayashi and Angela Baldini, who have been my "practitioner container", holding space for my growth and nurturing the courage, compassion, and creativity, I needed to show up and serve wholeheartedly.

Engaging with systems transformation work from the lens of "cultivating a field" brings tremendous humility. It brings deep reverence for the Earth and all the beings who are creating this experience. I realise that I am only a small

player in the larger ecosystem. Yet I'm significant and the choices I make have an impact. And therefore, it is a call for each of us to be, belong, become and serve the field.

The seed opened its heart,
Held me gently in his palms
And said, "We have all we need—
The soft soil and the warm sun—
Will nurture our soul
You and I make each other whole
Let us trust the longing to be free
And serve the world
By being the plant
We were born to be

—Manish Srivastava, *Midnight Journey of a Seed:
Pathways to Resilience in the Face of a Crisis*

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In Dialogue

Knowing in the Bones:

Embodying and Uncovering Systems

Eva Pomeroy, Arawana Hayashi, Sebastian Jung, Beth Mount, Asiya Odugleh-Kolev, Otto Scharmer, Ericka Toledo-Zurita, and Joost van der Crujisen

One of the hallmarks of awareness-based systems change is the integration of inner and outer awareness. Any type of deep systems change is utterly dependent on transformative learning and change of those embodying that system. Scharmer and Kaufer (2025) comment,

to transform a system we must transform the consciousness (the mindsets) of those who co-enact that system moment to moment. And to do that we need to create new forms and qualities of holding spaces that allow the system to *see and sense itself*. (p. 20)

While “seeing the system” is a common frame in systems change work, and one around which a multitude of methods have been developed, *sensing* the system hints at something beyond the cognitive engagement that often forms the basis of these methods. Sensing calls on us to draw on epistemologies less prevalent in systems change discourse—embodied, aesthetic, and intuitive forms of knowing—to inform our inquiry from a more holistic and complete understanding of what it means to be that system.

The 4D Mapping practice from Social Presencing Theater (SPT) offers a methodology to do this. It integrates systems mapping and embodiment to help participants see, sense, and make sense of system dynamics (*see more in Hayashi, 2025, and in Jung & Hayashi, 2025, this issue*). Participants in a

mapping experience embody key roles in the system and move through a process that reflects the current reality of the system and the future possibilities that may be available to it. 4D Mapping has been used across contexts, sectors and geographies, and it has both an in-person and online version. It is a process that can be organized and held by members of the system or led by external facilitators, as in the cases below.

In this dialogue, four leaders who have integrated 4D Mapping in their broader systems change initiatives come together to dialogue with three members of the SPT team. They share and reflect on their experiences of mapping their systems, the role and impact of the experience within their initiatives, and the lasting effect on themselves as leaders.

Throughout the dialogue, both leaders and the SPT team speak to the specifics of the 4D Mapping experience outlined in the box below.

4D Mapping Practice

An inquiry question held by members of the system is clarified.

Between six and eight key roles in the system are identified, for example local government, businesses, or residents, and each map includes representation of what is called the three divides: ecological, social, and spiritual (Scharmer, 2016, 2018). These are represented as Mother Earth, the most marginalized in the system and the highest future potential, respectively.

Each player, in their role, assumes an initial place, level, and direction in an embodied shape, positioned in relation to the other roles. When all players have settled into a position, each player speaks a word or phrase that emerges for them in the moment from that position, e.g. “I can’t see from here” or “unbalanced.”

The overall map of players in their chosen positions is called Sculpture 1.

Players are then invited to sense into their embodied role, letting go of any preconceived ideas about potential movement and instead attending to their embodied-knowing and spatial sense to lead any movement and to follow that movement until it settles into a second position.

The map of players in their second role is called Sculpture 2.

A structured dialogue follows with both the players and observers, called citizens, to surface observations about the shifting dynamics of the reflected in the movement from Sculpture 1 to Sculpture 2.

In sharing their experience, the systems leaders describe with granularity key moments in the process that supported a collective shift in the way in which a system or issue was framed and understood. At times this began before the practice itself, while clarifying the very question to be explored or in selecting the roles to be embodied. In other cases, shared awareness came during the mapping process. Regardless, these reflections, in their specificity and authenticity, provide insight into an experience that could be described as accessing the collective inner dimension of systems change.

Dialogue Participants

Arawana Hayashi is a choreographer, performer, and educator, co-founder of the Presencing Institute and founder of Social Presencing Theater.

Sebastian Jung is an organizational development consultant, Research & Development Lead for Social Presencing Theater at the Presencing Institute.

Beth Mount is an activist, artist, and educator in the global movement toward inclusion in the service of people with intellectual disabilities and their allies and the founder of Graphic Futures, USA.

Asiya Odugleh-Kolev is a community engagement for quality health services lead at the World Health Organization Headquarters, Switzerland.

Otto Scharmer is a Senior Lecturer at MIT's Sloan School of Management and Founding Chair of the Presencing Institute.

Ericka Toledo Zurita is the Head of projects at the Water Center in Tecnológico de Monterrey, Mexico and founder of The Sustainability Atelier.

Joost van der Crujisen is the Manager of Strategy and Innovation at Waterboard De Dommel, Netherlands

Dialogue Facilitator

Eva Pomeroy is the Research Lead at the Presencing Institute and Affiliate Faculty in the Department of Applied Human Sciences, Concordia University, Montreal.



Figure 1: 4D Mapping at the Social Field Research Summer School, Berlin, 2019.

Opening the Space: Origins

Eva: It's so delightful to have this circle gathered. In speaking to Arawana last week, I learned that there never has been a time when people came together from different 4D Mapping experiences to exchange across maps and it's quite a thrill to do so. Perhaps we could start with a few comments to set the stage for our dialogue.

Otto: What comes to my mind now, Arawana, is the early days of SPT. I think for the first prototype with the 4D Mapping we had just a few people gathering together. Then, later in the same week we were to launch the first Global Forum and on the spot, we decided: let's go, let's do it. Let's use this method-in-the-making with hundreds of people in that public event, applying it to real cases in real time.¹ That really was the spirit of origin. We did that not as a random experiment, but because we felt that something important needs to be born and to be explored with a method, and based on that we went all in.

Beth: I was there in that room where we were just making things up and I will never forget. I played the role of a marginalized person. I was a mother, a low-

¹ The Global Forum was an initiative to convene, across three in-person events, a global community emerging around Theory U and other awareness-based systems change methodologies. The event referred to here was held in Berlin, 2011.

income mother. That was before we learned to have people step out of their roles, and it affected me for the entire Global Forum.² It was so profound, my experience of inhabiting that role.

Arawana: I also was thinking about the first time we did this. It was connected to Occupy Wall Street. I think that was 2015. Even though I often think of mapping as a kind of ceremony that brings awareness in as a player, as the major player in the process, I also think it's political. I think that's because of how it started. This map started with Otto getting up on a chair and saying "banking," then Jan Jacob Stam coming in and saying "multinationals," and then Beth coming in and saying, "mothers."³ That opened the unfolding of these different voices of the Planet. There's something about it that is both healing and also somehow political in the biggest sense.

Sebastian: It's interesting, Beth, that you mentioned you were part of the beginning of the 4D Mapping. To a certain degree you are also part of the beginning of the online 4D Mapping endeavors, as the case giver. It's a similar pattern. We had just started the whole inquiry with Arawana and Otto around how to do it online in the pandemic. We had the u-lab 2x program in process, and we said, "Okay, let's try this out" and launched it with your case and 500 viewers.⁴ I remember that moment well and it was beautiful to see the impact it had and what now keeps evolving.

Arawana: The stories that we explored of the four of you really stay with me these years. Oftentimes I don't hear anything past the process and then I wonder, "whatever happened? Did it affect anything?" I'm delighted that we can have this conversation.

Systems from Within

Eva: We're going to start off in a way that's more structured to make sure we get to hear each person's experience, and then we can open up into more open dialogue. For the first part, we invite each of you to share some reflections on the questions we shared last week in preparation for our time together:

² At the end of a 4D Mapping process, players are invited to consciously "step out" of the role they were playing.

³ See Stam (2016); Stam, et al. (2016); Stam, et al. (2017).

⁴ u-lab 2x is a four-month accelerator program offered by the Presencing Institute, designed for teams with projects to grow those projects using an awareness-based systems change approach and process.

- What was the challenge or situation you were Mapping and the context that brought you to the experience?
- What were the key moments and most interesting insights from your Mapping experience?
- How has this experience influenced your actions (intentionally or not) since?

Being in the World, Anchoring in Spaces

Ericka: I guess my work leans more towards the environmental community. We are a very wounded community. We don't want to feel too much, because it's hard sometimes. You see that you've stopped using the body, you've stopped feeling. Sometimes using these practices, especially in the Global South, because I live in northeastern Mexico where, we deal with systemic aggressions, I think we always need to design these transgressive processes. You need to find a way to transcend these aggressions and start healing the body and bringing the whole person in. You realize that it gives you so much information. This is something that I've been working on with government officials and the environmental community around the forest.

So, the challenge that we were trying to work with in our 4D Mapping was the protection of a forest in a place called Arterga in northeastern Mexico. We were figuring out how we could achieve a structure of governance around the forest and, of course, we were very focused on things like the land, the trees, the animals. The u-lab 2x team supported us—Arawana, particularly Sebastian, and eventually Otto. Arawana highlighted some aspects of the situation that were important to us. For instance, as we describe the forest, she said, “Well, this is like a care system, right? This is a system caring for the city and for the rural villagers and the biodiversity.” We said, “Yeah, but everyone is destroying it.” Back then a major company was going to build a plant that may trigger rampant urbanization, but in the end it didn't happen. But she said, “I don't think anyone wakes up thinking I'm going to destroy the forest. Maybe we are destroying it by being unconscious or not fully aware of the care system that it implies and the things that we receive from it.” So how do we attune our awareness, and support others in attuning theirs, to what the forest truly represents, without judgment? How do we fine-tune our attention to understand not just its function, but its meaning, its gift, and its presence? That is the potential we were invited to tap into.

Then, as we were trying to figure out the stakeholders, and who we should be working with at the beginning, she said, “As you think about the trees, the soil—all of which we had called the Forest Parliament—what about the water? Maybe the voice of water should be a stakeholder that we could explore because she sometimes is excluded.” I mean, we understood that water was important, but we didn't consider her a separate stakeholder. We went with that and I think that by giving water a voice it really opened a whole new layer of experience and

meaning. By unveiling water as a nonhuman stakeholder, we were revealing and ensouling her, and this personified essence activated an innate knowing within our collective.

At first, some people said, “how can you give voice to a nonhuman stakeholder?” We thought this would be the weakest element of the stakeholders. Then, when we started working with water, we realized it was the most powerful stakeholder because if you move water physically to any place, it will move the whole constellation. It’s not weak. I think we reframed the whole strategy around this being a water forest and water being the most important element. This is something that's gaining momentum, because now the climate agenda is being defunded and by default also the environmental agenda in some respects. But if you speak of water, there is no doubt about funding or the gravity of the problem. A lot of agencies are reframing their environmental agendas from biodiversity conservation to water preservation and water security. I think this is a very smart move. We have a water crisis globally with many layers of complexity. We were the first movers in that sense and now, after two years, we have learned a lot as a community by doing that. I'm not sure if Arawana is fully aware of the contribution she has made to the conservation of forests in Mexico.

We first did our case online, but then we did it physically, in the real world with these officials and people from industry and the municipalities. Something that happened then was because we don’t play our own roles in the mapping. If you were, for instance, part of the Federal Government in charge of conservation for the forest, we will make you take the role of, say, industry.

People fully understood that those they thought didn’t care, were also going through harsh human experiences. It's not like they're the devil. They also have pressures of their own. The city is dealing with people wanting to build more houses, wanting to use more water. Exchanging the pressures we're feeling and the emotions reminded us that everyone is human like us. I think that gave us a huge blank space that could be used for experimenting.

This group came into existence because we had a training which was funded by the German Government and this group emerged as a community who wanted to protect this forest, and thought “let's keep working together.” Having these intimate experiences was an early investment in a collaborative infrastructure that could be used later. In governance, they say the most expensive thing is trust. We had so much trust between us because we had felt at the human level and felt like that about each other.

We’re still going on with this strategy. We're part of a bigger project, and when we have challenges, this early stage of the process has given us a lot of agility to move forward. We have trust. We have a shared experience. It’s almost like sisterhood. Of course there's also men, but it's a very deep bond and you don't get to see that very often at this level.

Otto: Can I just ask a clarifying question, Ericka? I understand there's Arawana's input. There is the voice of water coming in that has an impact on the

mapping and the people who participate in the mapping. So that was back then. Then I understood you were saying we are almost post-climate, but water works. So, there's a practical strategic usefulness.

That's one thing. What I would be interested in is: how did you communicate? It's one thing if you participate in a 4D Mapping, it's another thing if I'm a mayor or another stakeholder and I did not participate. How are you showing up to me? Are you using the 4D Map? Is it just something that now helps you to frame it in a different way, or are you making explicit reference to the perspective-taking and bringing in the perspective of relevant nonhuman stakeholders? What have you learned about how the original experience can be made productive—to broaden, and deepen the tent, and bring in more stakeholders—in this different shared sense of understanding, more from multiple perspectives rather than mono-perspectives?

Ericka: That's a great question. We have the group who has had the experience and then we have to explain it to other people as we go forward. We use it a lot, to be honest. We took photographs of the process with the permission of people. We show the photographs. We show what it means, having the whole system in a room saying, “Okay, you know the Arteaga Forest. The whole system means this, this and this (as in the actors and their interconnections). We show them the different sculptures because we were lucky that during the u-lab you use the software with graphics of the actors and the map. We make a small explanation of the graphics: here the water was somewhere there and no one paid attention to her. In the second sculpture suddenly we involve her more, and she's part of the process. We delve deeper into how the actors change the quality of their relationship.

We are applying to a funding for doing research in regenerative design in protected areas within Arteaga and Monterrey, and we are exchanging methodologies with fellow researchers. I work now at the Water Center in Tecnológico de Monterrey, and we've shown our process with this natural protector area. I think people were shocked that the Water Center wasn't showing hydrographics and complex modelling. They were showing pictures of people moving and holding the space. I must say people were gladly shocked! “Oh, my God! We thought the water center was going to come with this complex modeling.” But we said the first step for us was to invest, as you say, Otto, in the quality of the soil. Of course, we want to build a governance structure. We want to build bigger projects. But we have to anchor it in the quality of the relationship between a group of people.

From the three projects that were presented there, you could see that there was huge human capital in our project already. Maybe we are still looking for other funding and still figuring out what's going to be the project, but our project had all the relational components to make it happen.

Creating Beloved Community: Artisanal Pathways toward Handmade Peace-Centered Action

Beth: I've been involved in my work with people with disabilities and their allies for 50 years and I'm going to talk about the 4D Mapping that we offered during the u-lab 2x. This was the first virtual 4D Mapping.

Even deciding we would do it was important for our team of 14 people. We were a team of 14 activists from all over America who have been together for many years, and we're committed to creating the best possible lives for people with disabilities. Because we have been around for a while, we know it's possible and we've seen remarkable possibilities emerge over and over again. So we know this kind of rich and coherent life is possible for more and more people, and we understand the conditions that increase the likelihood of deep and generative change.

Yet we also lived with this terrible gap between what most of the services offer instead of what we know is possible. One of the first things we had to decide as a team was: are we willing to show up in this global community and be as depressed as we actually are, because not only has this always been difficult, this closing the gap between what is and what could be—but Covid had hit us like an asteroid. A meteorite. It has just devastated our communities and our work.

People were really hanging by a thread to even be in the u-lab 2x, much less show up to be a case right in front of 500 people.

One thing that happened right away was that the quality of the 4D experience created a profound sense of being held—held in the current reality that you're in, with an eye toward what you know is possible, and with a great compassion for how defeated you all feel.

As I thought back on it, our experience of shifting was more than just the 4D Map itself. The formulation of the question was hugely important. We spent a lot of time between us trying to really clarify. “What is the question we're bringing to this 4D Map? What is the question that we're really living with inside of ourselves?” It was a question about how we know so much more is possible. We feel so profoundly stuck and discouraged at how much the industrial care system hurts people. Ericka, you said that we are a wounded community. The wounds in our community are deep and pervasive—among everybody, within everybody, inside of everybody.

So the first level of being held was just contemplating and clarifying the core question, and then the second level of being held and in awakening surprises and insight, was in clarifying the roles. Sebastian, you and Arawana may remember this, but the roles came because you were so attuned to our feeling state. This is another thing that is profoundly different in the 4D Mapping process. You're going for a feeling state from the very beginning and you're making a space for everybody to go even deeper into how hard it feels, how broken-hearted and how much anguish there is among everyone, and where the biggest alarm sounds are.

There were eight roles, and three of these roles represented the divides. So often in our world we imagine that a person with disability or their family represents the social divide as the marginalized one. However, it became really clear to us that the people providing direct support were, in fact, the ones occupying that marginalized position. These are the people, mostly women and mostly women of color, holding the care and the quality of so many people's lives against enormous odds and strain. That was just a really important “aha” moment before we even got into the map.

The other important insight is that when we thought about the highest potential, the role that usually helps us understand the spiritual divide—it was the beloved community. This was not an abstract idea of a highest potential, it related more to the tangible experience of beloved community, in the spirit of Martin Luther King. Our work has flowed from the civil rights movement in America and continues to be framed dramatically by that. Having the beloved community as the highest potential also somehow changed the whole constellation of who is in this picture.

Finally, the other five roles, in general, are the stakeholders in our landscape, and they typically have nothing to do with each other. We could even more vividly see how disconnected they are.

In Sculpture 2, we moved to more integration and coherence even at a most basic level. Bringing in the three divides as people was powerful. The three divides are often what is crushing us. We can get lost in those three divides. We can get lost in the polycrisis, if you will. But there's something so amazing about the way the process allows the three divides into the space without becoming ogres or crushing everyone.

That felt so important to us, because I believe that when we started this conversation, we were feeling crushed by so much. In the space of the 4D Map we could feel held, all the pieces could be held, and we could still move, we could still find coherence. We could still find some kind of alignment and insight.

There was something profound in that being held by the whole group of 400 people. The complexity of what people are living with is being held, both the sorrow and the possibility, the anguish and the hope for better realities, better lives. There was a knowing that came in for us. It came in for everyone in our team in a very profound way.

I look back in my notes and it's hard to say what that knowing is, but someone said, “we allowed this greater being to speak to us, and it spoke to our bones. It came in and it spoke to our bones.” I think I said as much toward the end, that this had been electrifying in a good way. There was so much energy that was unleashed from holding at such a deep level. Having all of this in this space together was electrifying.

Part of that electrification was feeling and knowing in our whole body. Ericka, back to the point you made. It's so easy to get out of our bodies because there's so

much trauma. There's so much pain. Here we are, in our body and in this social body, being seen and felt and heard in a different light, and we know in our bones what more we are called to do.

There were a number of things that were stunning to me about all the things that have happened since then. We didn't do most of what we imagined we would do. That's important for me to say. However, we've enacted twice as much as we ever thought we might do. Does that make sense? It's interesting to look at our notes and the harvesting of our experience. In the prototyping phase, we had these grand schemes. Here's the thing that shifted in a big way: Somehow, we shifted out of our grand schemes and more toward what Pope Francis called the artisanal pathways toward handmade peace-centered action. That happens in pockets of possibility. It's not the same as islands of coherence, because it's probably smaller than an island. It's your damn pocket. Can we just have a little bit of hope to put in our pocket to get through this day? Can we also make the pockets? Can we nurture the pockets without having them be too large and unwieldy—so that they still feel artisanal, handmade, and, most importantly, maybe, that they are restorative places where people can come together across all these roles, across all these divides, across all this anguish, and still find new ways.

Creating Pockets of Potentiality: The Courage to Access Non-Physical Data

Asiya: So much of what Ericka and Beth have already mentioned resonates deeply with me. For me, the context was slightly different, because the 4D Mapping wasn't around getting large numbers of people together to experience 4D Mapping.

My first experience of 4D Mapping was at the Berlin research meeting in 2019.⁵ What's interesting is that when I participated in that gathering, I brought with me experiences from a staff-led action research project and had the opportunity to explore WHO's transformation agenda, from a very different perspective. At the time, our incoming Director General, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, brought an ambitious agenda for transforming WHO. A small group of us had already been operating as change agents engaged in action research. We'd gathered data about how we were experiencing our system from the inside, and I was looking for help in using this data. So, in Berlin I got the opportunity to understand WHO's stakeholders and the relationships between them. I agree with Beth, that the question, “What is the question that you bring to the 4D Map?” was really important.

⁵ In 2019, the Presencing Institute held the Social Field Research Summer School in Berlin, gathering academics, research-practitioners, and students to explore and expand the emerging field of awareness-based systems change.

That's the starting point, and that question has to come from people deeply embedded within a particular situation or system. It can't come from the outside and it's almost as though that kind of intelligence or data that is unlocked by the 4D Map resides within the spaces that these people occupy. Being very intentional and focused about the inquiry is critical.

It helped me begin to see the alliances between the different stakeholders. The methodology is clearly laid out. I was uncertain about where we should focus the attention of our research efforts. What was interesting was when the question was asked, where did the move start from? Exploring that first movement brought clarity.

Within our 4D Map, that movement wasn't from a place where I thought it would come from. It came from the face of the person representing the Director General turning towards the countries.⁶ There was something around the relationship between global leadership and country leadership that was really important. That signaled to me that this was a space I needed to focus attention on. It wasn't with some of the more obvious stakeholders—the researchers, the practitioners, service users, or specific population groups. There was something important based on the origins of that movement. There were also other insights I took away that left an indelible mark.

Moving forward, the pandemic happened, and I got an invitation to support one of our regional offices in primary community engagement research. So, I got the opportunity to more fully understand the role of research in advancing practice and policy. We looked at relationship-building within health programming in multiple countries, working with researchers to understand how relationality could be embedded within typically vertical programs. We explored mental health in Malaysia, HIV/AIDS in Cambodia, and primary health care in Laos.

Alongside this external facing work, the internal transformation work also was continuing. I was awarded small project funds for staff development and so what we were learning from the countries was then being fed into learning how we, as an organization, could address relationality within our own ways of working and mindsets.

We used 4D Mapping to understand the dynamics within our department. We looked at our internal stakeholders and spent time crafting the right question to start the process. Again, what was insightful for us was the shift between the first sculpture and the second sculpture. We were working with people that had no idea what was happening within our organization, yet they were able to sense our lived experiences and be accurate in terms of the feeling state of those different stakeholders. 4D Mapping supported other pieces of work around the

⁶ This is a description of the person in the role of the Director General, in the movement from Sculpture 1 to Sculpture 2, turning toward the person embodying the role of Member Countries.

project which we were calling “Me2We.” So we didn't look at 4D Mapping in isolation. It was in combination with many other different inputs and activities.

I think that's important, we need different kinds of data but the biggest challenge is accessing data that is non-physical. That's the value of 4D Mapping because it gave us insights and validated other types of data. Spaces and people hold information, and it is ever-present. The question is whether we are aware and able to tap into what already exists—the pockets of potentiality, as you said, Beth.

I think for our organization and in the health sector specifically, I found that people who work in health delivery services are not often seen as people who also need to be cared for. They're conduits for interventions, to get people to change behaviors, deliver vaccines, or take up health interventions. Too little attention is given to who they are and how they do what they do. These aspects impact both the quality of their work and the end results.

When we incorporated aspects of sculpture within a relational learning experience crafted for our own staff, we had responses that we weren't expecting.

We're a diverse organization. We have cultures and subcultures just like many national health systems. In fact, our department has a team working on traditional, complementary and integrative medicine. A relational approach was very much aligned with their understanding and practice of health and medicine. We also had colleagues with a background in emergency care, who had a very different response to relationality. It brought home to me the need to be mindful of different worldviews and how culture and professional training shapes comfort levels with embodied practices such as 4D Mapping.

I think this practice has a healing element because it gives an experience of what it means to literally step into someone else's shoes from a sort of non-mental viewpoint. It gives you access to multiple kinds of data, but you have to be ready to step into that space. We used 4D Mapping to help those of us that were operating within a system be able to understand and navigate our system. I would love to see this kind of experience become part and parcel of the way that we do our work. But I think until we have shifts in mindsets and people are able to access themselves in a deeper way, I don't think it'll be used in the mainstream.

4D Mapping has influenced how I navigate my own system in ways that validate who I am and how I approach my work. I think that's been a strength of 4D Mapping. As I've evolved and grown, I suppose I've also stopped cowering in the face of the very confident attitudes and postures of those trained to value objective physical reality. I have proof too—but of another kind. One that is felt. And no, it's not a number. It's a direct subjective experience about who you are, what you notice about yourself, your environment, and others, and what you do with that information to make intentional and conscious choices. Having processes like this becomes really important in helping people like me navigate my own environment.

I think the other thing I would say is that the instruments of change in a system are people. It's about human beings. If we don't access the cumulative intelligence that resides within us—and the collective intelligence that lives between us and among us—then we will not arrive at holistic solutions to address the systemic problems that we're facing. I completely agree that trauma, intergenerational trauma, and intergenerational suffering are active on many levels, particularly in places of work and institutions. I think this kind of practice has the potential to surface this aspect, making it visible and I think that's why some people don't engage. They're not quite there yet. There's a kind of courage that's needed to come face-to-face with yourself. You also need facilitators highly skilled in engagement—people able to notice, hold space, and have competencies to work with what is.

Accessing Human and Nature-Intelligence

Joost: I'm Joost, based here in the Netherlands at a local water board and working on water for more than 30 years. Last year we started a new water lab in a very small catchment area, and we started to work with something called nature intelligence.

Then came the opportunity to have an online 4D Mapping experience. It was—and still is—about, a polluted stream, a very small one. It is fed by a sewage plant which is used by 250,000 people in a small city and by a lot of different industries. We try to clean it the best we could, but it remains not clean enough and we had some problems with it. Two people got sick, so we decided to investigate more deeply. The people that are living next to the stream are not happy with the smell and it's not healthy. So, the focus of our map was on how to create a healthy and clean stream.

What I remember as key moments during this mapping experience was that we had all these stakeholders, and one of the things that struck me were the farmers. The farmers in the first sculpture were saying, “I know what to do, but this is so difficult, this is extremely difficult.” Then, in the second sculpture—I still get goosebumps when I think about it—was, “I will fight you if you hold my hand.” That was very profound. The other thing was that nature intelligence said in the first sculpture, “there is light,” and that was very promising, then in the second sculpture it said, “listen, really, listen.”

That was October 2023. In that year we had our first brainstorm within our water board. All my colleagues were there and there was tension all over the place. People were angry with each other, saying “no, we have to go that way,” “no, we have to go this way.” Finally, we came to about a hundred solutions in these brainstorms, but it was extremely tense.

Then in January 2024 we went to the stakeholders, to the citizens and to the farmers in that area and they were mad. The farmers were so angry with us and so were the citizens. The citizens said to us, “Why didn't we know this? Why didn't you tell us this stream was so bad?”

I think what happened next was synchronicity. We have an extensive pilot now on the sewage plant. We were granted the opportunity to monitor the incoming sewage water in detail. Where does the water exactly come from? What industries are responsible for the pollution and the smell? So we dove deep into finding what is actually happening and where the pollution comes from.

Last December, 2024, we had a stakeholder meeting and invited all these people that were so mad at us. And we had a beautiful day. We started with music because music helps to open the heart, and we showed what we had found. We conducted 16 studies on where the pollution comes from and shared what we know—what we do not know, and what we need. We really wanted to honestly say what we have found and what we didn't.

Then we went to the stream, and we listened to the stream. This was very challenging to do because for rational people this is a bit weird. But they came back with beautiful thoughts and emotions. This was a group of people from the government, citizens, scientists, and farmers. The feel of this meeting was completely different than the year before.

It has to do with the mapping experience, and, my deep interest in how to involve nature intelligence. It created a kind of personal leadership. This was my most important project and when my water board challenged me on this, I really got to be the dragon: You're not going to take this project away from me! It also attracted a lot of beautiful, energetic people. It became a magnet for people seeking change, with the energy to create it. Now we have a meeting every two weeks with the core team. It takes place on Friday mornings, and everyone is completely energized. It's unbelievable. People want to come to the office on Friday morning just to acknowledge and enjoy the energy.

Otto: I have one clarifying question about your story that we just heard. How much of the impact that you shared is due to the 4D Map? And what are other interventions? Maybe a more general version of the same question to everyone is this: we know in social reality it's many variables that lead to things. You never know without that what might have happened. But here's the question for you: if that mapping that you were referring to had not happened, what would be different today, if anything?

Joost: That's a very good question. I go back to the key moments—if you look at the difference between the farmer's reaction, it was very distinct, and I have this in the back of my mind. We should be more focused on how to get this community to work—and be honest about what we know and what we don't. Not, “we are the government, and we know everything.” No. We're part of one community, and we will try to help each other. I think that's one of the key differences.

Varied Paths and Essential Essence of Systems Change

Eva: Asiya, Beth, and Ericka, I'm interested in that question that Otto asked. Without this mapping what would be different?

Ericka: This is something that I thought about a lot, because if you want to use these kinds of tools, you have to prepare this space and say, can we really do it? Will it make sense? Will people get scared and run away, thinking this is not professional? But I think it's very highly linked to something: You know that the hardest part of the U process is coming up the U.⁷ A lot of people say, "oh I know what to do," and it becomes messy. As I explained before, we have another community of U-practitioners, and we had a very good facilitator, César Jure, an exceptional practitioner who worked between Germany and Latin America, and a dear friend—who recently passed away.

When he explained Theory U, he would say, when you arrive at the bottom of the U, in *presencing*, it's almost like being in the *MA*—the Japanese element of this emptiness full of potential. It's not a negative space, but it's like a fertile void. There's something happening. It's not a bad place. It's not like you're in the abyss.

I think the quality of how you arrive there, and the quality of attunement to what may emerge is highly dependent on these practices of Social Presencing Theater. If you arrive there in a rush, or without really exploring the deeper dimensions of this iceberg and what's happening there, you may rush out of this *presencing* moment. This is also because it entails feeling uncomfortable, suddenly it's a void and who wants to experience a void? Groups of people sometimes rush and come up with a prototype that is not attuned to the emerging future. But if you have done all this prep work, it's like priming yourself with somatic practices. Then you experience this differently. Cesar used to quote a phrase, that said, "This moment is the silence between the notes which make music, the quality of the music which will become your prototype. This song." It's highly linked to what you did before the presencing moment and I think if you could name it as a skill, it would be about the liminal space, that space where you are neither here nor there. Learning how to sit with it, with the people around you, and holding the space of not knowing but also aspiring to know when to move—it's only possible if you have invested in this prep work.

⁷ The reference to "coming up the right-hand side of the U" refers to the phase in the Theory U process that following the phase of presencing. Presencing can be understood as a period of pause and stillness, sometimes referred to as a *MA*, borrowing the Japanese term, that allows individuals and groups, "to connect from the Source of the highest future possibility that depends on us to come into reality" (Scharmer, 2016, p. 161). In the visual representation of Theory U, it lies at the bottom of the "U." Coming up the right-hand side, then, involves crystallizing the ideas and impulses emerging from the presencing phase and stepping into action through iterative prototyping.

Beth: What Ericka just said reminds me so much of what Asiya said about how we forget that the people are instruments of change, as in a musical instrument instead of tools, instead of mechanical parts. What is killing people is a mechanical view of who humans are. I love this added notion that the liminal space is between the notes, that it's how each of us are supported as instruments of change. And is the space safe enough? That's another point you made about safety so that you can be present to the liminal space. This safety issue is a big issue. I think it's what everybody here said all the way to the farmers, right?

Asiya: That really echoes with me as well. Beth, the issue of safety is on multiple levels. It's psychological; physical; physiological; and relational. What I've found helpful in my work is to connect safety to how our central nervous systems operate, because our central nervous systems are continuously feeling into the spaces in our environment and telling us whether we feel safe or not. Reflecting on "what did 4D Mapping bring?" the difference that it made is that there is something about connectedness and that connectedness is alive. It's living and it's felt by everyone that is in that experience. And it still is living. I feel it in my body right now. It's always present, it's moving and has an energetic signature.

I think the experience of 4D Mapping heightened that sense, it lifted it up. It brought it more to my awareness and established a way of understanding a situation with the others that were involved in the process as well. We took photographs of the sculptures before and after, and the statements from stakeholders that emerged from the process. I hadn't looked at it before until a couple of days ago when I was reflecting on coming into this space, and it just resonates. It's still very much alive.

Attending to the Full Spectrum of Experience

Eva: We started with you, Otto, evoking the very first 4D Map, as an experiment. Now, many years and maps later, we've just heard four beautiful map stories. I want to loop back around to see if there's something that's very alive for any of you to close that circle.

Otto: Something that really struck me was, Beth, when you were talking about "it spoke to me in my bones." Asiya, you spoke about the "validation of who I am" and then your last statement about the connectedness—I feel it in my body right now. It's alive, it's always there. It's moving. I feel it now. I think that somehow belongs to the essence of the method. It's the presence of Sculpture 2 that's always in Sculpture 1, inherent, but not always visible, not always brought to our attention.

To me, the key takeaway is really that—and a question related to the "validation" that's always present, the validation of who I really am. What is the collective dimension of that? Is there a collective dimension? Because essentially what the method does is make a shared body visible to our attention that was there before, but not attended to, and that uncovering or revealing is part of the alchemy. That's really what started surfacing everything you shared.

Sebastian: I want to make one note on a pattern that stood out to me as I listened to your cases around the role of the marginalized. The role of the marginalized came through strongly in what I heard from Ericka, Beth, and Joost. In each case, it was a game changer.

Beth, you noted the way the three divides are being held compassionately so that they don't crush us.

Ericka, in your map, the voice of the marginalized was the voice of water—which wasn't what you had in mind in your initial inquiry—and also the forest protection. That shifted the whole game, and even unleashed the synchronicity that led you to your current work at the Water Center. It shifted the whole scenario.

Beth, in your case as well, you initially positioned disability in the role of the marginalized. But then you shifted that focus to the direct support workforce, which created a small paradigm shift in how we look at the system and who is actually marginalized.

Joost, I remember when we were framing the case. We had the water as one actor and nature intelligence as the marginalized. These were the subtle forces of nature itself—forces that are not being heard and listened to. Then came the instruction: “listen.” It was the nature force that said “listen” in the mapping and activated the idea and the agency to go to the river—to listen to the force of nature through the force of the stream. That's what struck me in your stories: the importance and power of bringing in who is marginalized in your system.

Arawana: There are many things that popped out to me, but what's curious is your ability to turn toward the degree of suffering present in the system. It's been spoken about as safety. You could say, “oh, people are uncomfortable using their bodies,” or “we don't want to feel.” But in the end, it's about how profound suffering is, and how to turn toward that as a motive force for agency, rather than to be crushed by it.

So it's about building a collective heart capacity for grief, and for this level of confusion. However, we name that—whether we use words like trauma; suffering; painfulness; broken-heartedness (all these words have been coming up), or anger, as with the farmers. How do we turn toward that, and both personally and collectively build the capacity to hold it?

It's the moisture of the soil, and without it, we go into an airy-fairy version of Sculpture 2 that doesn't reach to the depth of experience.

How do we frame that as an invitation—particularly in relation to professionalism? For example: “it's not professional to feel,” or “I have to keep this to myself.” The idea that “it's not professional to share that with the team” is still present somehow.

An interesting and provocative area in all your stories is the courage you each showed—to go toward the angry farmers, to face the despair of the team. All four

of you have that kind of courage and perspective without feeling like you'd be eaten alive or lose control. You're willing to take that risk, and step into the role of someone who says, "this is a tool that we can use." To be a champion of the method requires that kind of maturity or sophistication. It's not to be moved into with naivete.

On the other hand, we create safe spaces—whether that's through research, our basic humanness, or art. This is art. I don't know the frames exactly, but what stands out for me is the respect and courage I feel for the four of you. I also feel inspired to think more about this particular invitation we're making: for people to be really uncomfortable, "to not know, to not do, and to be uncomfortable," as Otto says. It's not everybody's cup of tea, and yet it seems like being able to hold and transform our heartbrokenness is the key to being beneficial on the planet, given what we've got to work with here.

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Journal of Awareness-Based Systems Change

Volume 5, Issue 1

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This issue of JASC was published with the generous support of **PI Europe gGmbH**.



J A S C
JOURNAL of
AWARENESS-BASED
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