

Editorial

Relational Praxis and Regenerative Possibility:

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

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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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