

Editorial

Awareness-Based Systems Change:

Prototyping the Third Option

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Approaching the task of writing each issue's editorial always brings with it a dual sense of privilege and profound responsibility as we aim to give expression to our evolving understanding of Awareness-Based Systems Change, whilst also doing justice to the collection of contributions, capturing the essence that both informs this broad understanding and makes up the unique character of each issue. At first, and when done alone, this task can often feel overwhelming. But when we ask what it looks like to 'walk the talk' of our own cause, and we move toward an answer by co-developing our own practices and rituals, the task moves into the realm of what is not just possible, but uplifting and inspiring. Creating intentional moments to pause and reflect—both on the events in the external world and environments that surround and make us, as well as on the internal resonances within and between us—has opened a space of liberation, a place of hope amidst the otherwise overwhelming acceleration and collective creative paralysis we have frequently discussed in previous editorials. It is from this place that we write, and the process of conceiving each editorial itself has become emblematic of both the outer form and inner essence of what we firmly believe an awareness-based approach to collective action for social change embodies. This approach offers an alternative pathway, a route that transcends the deadlock of dualistic thinking and acting making possible the creation and enactment of

more effective methods to address our pressing crises. Our own process is a microcosm of what we attempt to prototype with JASC as a whole: a space of exploration beyond the constraints of our existing ontological and epistemic paradigms that supports generative and life-sustaining ways of knowing, being and doing, both ancient and emergent.

The articles that make up this issue traverse many of the domains that shape our societies and our lives: learning, leadership, climate, governance, research and art, among others. Each of these domains, as well as their intersections, face challenges which our old paradigms for understanding and acting on the world are ill-equipped to face. In academic institutions worldwide, entrenched conflicts have led to deviation from the foundational role of these anchor institutions as arenas for public debate, capable of moderating dissent. Democracies throughout the world are caught in a polarizing grip—echoed in rhetoric that swings between moving backward ("Again") and maintaining the status quo ("Still"). When choice is presented as "either-or," as it is throughout much of mainstream discourse, hardly any room is left for the "both-and" approaches necessary to embrace the complexities of our interconnected realities. Characterized by binaries—subject and object, body and mind, thinking and feeling, human and nature, us and them—our existing foundations are neither able to adequately inform action in a world marked by inter- and intra-connected realities any longer, nor do they provide explanatory capacity for the complexity of our current situation and the dialectic struggle between old epistemologies and emergent realities we are caught in. We sense that if we continue to operate from the existing foundations, we will fail.

Jamais Cascio (2020), describing our current global context, introduces the acronym BANI as an update to the VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous). He argues that current reality represents a "phase change" in need of a new paradigm and, with it, new language, and offers instead BANI: *Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear, and Incomprehensible* (Cascio, 2020, paras 6-7). Cascio does not regard this current state as reason for despair, but rather as a call to invoke alternatives ways of knowing and being:

The BANI framework offers a lens through which to see and structure what's happening in the world. At least at a surface level, the components of the acronym might even hint at opportunities for response: *brittleness* could be met by *resilience* and *slack*; *anxiety* can be eased by *empathy* and *mindfulness*; *nonlinearity* would need *context* and *flexibility*; *incomprehensibility* asks for *transparency* and *intuition*. These may well be more reactions than solutions, but they suggest the possibility that responses can be found. (Cascio, 2020, para 45, *italics in original*)

Approaches reflecting Cascio's vision of possibility do exist, and are increasingly coming to the fore. More than just methods, these approaches and bodies of work are born from an emerging transformation in the way we conceive knowledge (epistemology) and existence (ontology). We think of this

transformation as the *third option*—a novel way of connecting that holds the potential to regenerate societies, ecosystems, and communities.

In asking what constitutes such a third option, we find inspiration in a multitude of seminal writings across a variety of intersecting “lines of flight” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). All disruptive and regenerative in their own right, collectively these works point toward the relational inseparability of our ways of knowing and being. We draw inspiration from Martin Buber’s notion of the “third alternative” (Buber, 1966) in which he underscores the primacy of relationships over individual entities, presenting a foundational shift in understanding sociality. This perspective fosters a relational ontology, challenging us to move beyond seeing ourselves as isolated agents and instead as participants in a web of interdependent relationships. Countering critical re-interpretations of Buber’s distinction between the “I-It” and “I-Thou” relationships, Metcalf & Game (2011) see Buber’s relational logic not replicating but rather transcending binary by allowing for a connection that acknowledges and retains difference without reducing it to sameness or otherness. They posit Buber’s main contribution lies in his assertion that genuine relationality involves meeting the *other* in their full, undefinable difference, which is a direct challenge to the deconstructionist perspective that sees difference only as the result of oppositional breakdown. They emphasize that for Buber, the relational meeting is an ontologically primary experience where relation itself is the ground of being, enabling both the existence and interaction of “I-It” and “I-Thou” within the same existential framework. This inclusive approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of inter-human connections, where difference and sameness coexist without the necessity of conflict or the compulsion to resolve tension into neat categorical divisions (Metcalf & Game, 2011, p. 354). The work of anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose reminds us that the call of the *other*, to which we respond, applies to more-than-human connections. Further, the relational space she describes is deeply ethical, a critical dimension as we navigate this third option. As Rose (2011) describes,

That thin, scary zone where life and death brush close together is an opening wherein we are vividly called to ethics... We respond. We turn our faces toward the innumerable selfhoods of the living world, and we do what we can (p. 145).

Her primary questions help define the core inquiry of the third option: “Are self and others flourishing? Are the possibilities for life enhanced?” (Rose, 2011, p.12).

In heeding and highlighting Melanie Goodchild’s guidance in this issue’s commentary on entering into dialogue and relationship with Indigenous research and standpoint theory without appropriating, we recognize Indigenous knowledge systems, in existence for millennia, as another guiding post for the third option. As Cox et al. (2021) note, Indigenous epistemologies unsettle and at times invert “the concepts of objectivity, subjectivity, the Other, and universalism,” (p. 461) offering a profound critique of the Enlightenment’s legacy on modern positivist science and thought. Chilisa (2011) adds that people are “embedded in a web of

relations and interconnectedness that extends to nonliving things," which requires a dynamic understanding that continuously engages with this web of relations (p. 186). Martin (2017) further underscores this by pointing out that Indigenous onto-epistemology is premised on real conditions of existence. Here we see resonance with the main axioms of post-humanist thinking that challenge the alienating tendencies of conventional frameworks grounded in representationalism. Barad (2003), for example, makes an ontological distinction between representations and their subjects, founded on an understanding that the inherent nature of experience precedes any representation of it (p. 802). Indigenous research methods exemplify how *doing* can serve as a form of performative agency and immersive experience (Martin, 2017). Rather than abstractly theorizing about objects or subjects, these scholars describe methodologies that engage directly with the world, embodying knowledge through and in practice, whilst maintaining a constant dialogue with the web of interconnected relations with the human and more-than-human worlds that define and provide the conditions for our existence. Entering into direct relationship with the world, and surfacing knowing through that movement and relationship, are hallmarks of the third option, and one of the commonalities that run across all of the contributions to this issue.

Also common to the contributions is experimentation with the new, feeling our collective way toward possible futures. Somewhat counterintuitively, it may be the current context of crisis and rupture that creates the impulse for such experimentation. Periods of acute disruption can act as an amplifier as they accelerate acknowledgment that old scripts haven't worked and aren't likely to do so in the future. These liminal feelings of vulnerability often lay bare ruptures that then allow for and bring forth creative responses. New social, political, and ontological contours emerge in the context of crisis, which allow us to act into these contexts in ways that embody and embed new relational networks. Rosi Braidotti's (2006, 2013, 2019) philosophy provides a powerful lens to further conceptualize this transformative journey. Braidotti rejects the despair often associated with critiques of humanism, instead advocating for an "affirmative positionality" that seeks "critique with creativity" (Braidotti, 2013, p. 51) in the pursuit of finding alternative ways of living with one another. Braidotti's call for a posthuman turn involves embracing a theory of the human subject that acknowledges the decline of a narrowly defined anthropocentric humanism, celebrating this decline as it heralds the emergence of the self as an extended, distributed, interconnected, and relational entity. This new conceptualization of self is not confined to the boundaries of traditional humanist thought but is instead "embodied and embedded" (Braidotti, 2013, p. 51) within a network of relationships. Braidotti's posthumanist theory thus points to the significant re-emergence of "the structural others" (Braidotti, 2013, p. 37)—those once marginalized by mainstream narratives. This re-emergence fosters novel and hopeful visions of selfhood and community, where individuals, recognizing their interdependencies, can experiment with new models of self that champion community, belonging, and kinship over individualism.

Articles in this Issue

Each article in this issue—akin to fractals—where the essence of the third option is vividly manifest—speaks from a deep place of connection, affirming our belief that collective actions inspired by people, place, and purpose, can lead to more just, effective, and sustainable outcomes. The contributions in this issue do not shy away from the complexities of the current global situation; instead, they confront these realities while simultaneously reaching for what we most deeply aspire to achieve. Through their exploration of new ontologies, epistemologies, methodologies, and ethics, the papers demonstrate how we can move forward. Acting from a knowledge grounded in the field, influenced by diverse human and non-human agencies, they offer glimpses of what it means to live and act within the framework of the third option.

In this issue, Dr. Melanie Goodchild, Anishinaabe scholar and member of our Editorial Board, provides a profound *Commentary from the Field* exploring the complexities of integrating Indigenous wisdom within academic frameworks. She offers considerations for non-Indigenous persons when they, through their practice and writing, come into relationship with Indigenous knowledge systems, underscoring the importance of “right relations,” humility, relational accountability, and the role of cultural and academic self-location in research. Goodchild advocates for a deep, respectful engagement with Indigenous scholarship. When non-Indigenous authors frame their works as *decolonizing* or *Indigenizing*, they owe an “implicit indebtedness” to not only connect their lived experiences to the lineages of others in the field but also to acknowledge and be explicit about what their engagement has taught them. Such open and dialogic engagement, particularly with concepts like time, space, place, and identity, she asserts, holds emancipatory potential. By advocating for the mutual recognition and “deep relationship” of and between diverse epistemologies, Goodchild's work speaks directly to the core tenets of the third option. She emphasizes that true relationality and humility in scholarship can lead to more meaningful and authentic knowledge production.

This issue features another *Invited Article* by Editorial Team members Otto Scharmer and Eva Pomeroy. Strategically placed as an opening piece of this Volume, it reflects our collective recognition of being at an inflection point in the journal's history, and aiming towards further articulating and deepening the foundation for the journal's evolution. In this context, the invited article, *Fourth Person: The Knowing of the Field*, introduces fourth-person knowing as a sui generis epistemic category, distinct from existing epistemologies, first-person (subjective), second-person (intersubjective), and third-person (objective). Scharmer and Pomeroy frame fourth-person knowing as an extension of self-transcending knowledge, exploring the blurred boundaries where the knower and the known intersect, to provide a foundation for new research and inquiry methodologies based on sensing and presencing. Central to their concept is the idea that mind and world are intertwined in a co-shaping relationship. This interconnected nature allows for the development of deep sensing and presencing

capacities among individual change-makers and leaders, and among collectives. These capacities enable tuning into latent developmental possibilities that are not immediately evident through empirical means but can be recognized through new cognitive practices. By articulating and centering fourth-person knowing, Scharmer and Pomeroy provide an epistemic basis for individuals and collectives to recognize, connect with, and manifest their "unique imprint" within the broader pattern and movement of our current moment. This article lays the groundwork for a deeper understanding and application of Awareness-Based Systems Change, aligning with the journal's evolving mission and vision.

This issue features five *Peer-Reviewed Articles*. The first, *Te Ruru: Co-creating an Indigenous Systems Change Framework* by Tanya Allport, Tom Johnson, and Amohia Boulton, connects to the idea of the third option by navigating the space where Indigenous knowledge systems and Western systems thinking intersect. Systems thinking recognizes the interconnectedness of natural and human-made systems, providing a lens for identifying the systemic structures that produce contemporary problems. The authors argue for the compatibility between systems change thinking and Indigenous worldviews, suggesting that new Mātauranga (knowledge) can emerge in this intersection, when the two are in right relationship with one another. As Indigenous researchers who are pan-tribal, the authors operate from *responsive Indigenous standpoints*, positioning their Whakapapa (genealogy), Whenua (land), Tikanga (values), and Mātauranga (knowledge) in relation to others, with a core belief in connection (Whanaungatanga). The article outlines a systems change framework developed within a tribally-owned health research center in Aotearoa New Zealand, designed to enable a whole-of-systems approach to Māori health research. The article introduces "Te Ruru," an Indigenous framework of systems change, designed by a Māori health research center to address systemic inequities in Māori health outcomes. Te Ruru is depicted in three parts: the micro lens prioritizing Indigenous identities and values; the macro lens translating research findings and providing strategic oversight; and the meso lens focusing on new Mātauranga, addressing internal barriers and traumas and emphasizing healing and restoration. Its transformational power lies in its ability to surface both seen and unseen aspects of systems, supporting Māori leadership in systemic change via Indigenous health research. By fostering systems change from an Indigenous paradigm, Te Ruru represents an act of decolonization against systems that hinder Indigenous flourishing. This framework, adaptable and iterative, serves as a living model that evolves with each application, refining research within diverse cultural systems.

The second Peer-Reviewed Article, *When Beauty Leads* by Laura Blakeman, explores the relationship between experiences of beauty and leadership in times of rupture. Blakeman draws from trans-disciplinary literature to position beauty as an aesthetic experience that provides leaders with pathways to greater awareness and capability amidst uncertainty. Through research using art-based methodology she describes how a guided experience of beauty offered to a group of systems leaders revealed that beauty can stimulate novel insights, emotions,

and perspectives beyond their customary experiences. This aesthetic sensitivity fostered connections with others, authentic self-expression, and a willingness to experience discomfort. Through her work, Blakeman identifies four core themes: beauty as a guide, beauty and liminality, beauty and authentic connection, and beauty and discomfort. These themes highlight beauty's role in catalyzing a shift in consciousness, making visible a broader set of possibilities and perspectives. By bridging the logical and analogical mind, working with beauty offers a holistic, soulful approach to leadership development that is rare in contemporary leadership education. Blakeman introduces the concept of a *leadership of devotion*, suggesting that a commitment to beauty can restore our capacity to feel, imagine, and sense deeply in uncertain contexts and enable creative participation aligned with life-enhancing coherence.

The third Peer-Reviewed Article, *Hedgerows for Hedgehogs and Campus Biodiversity - A Prickly Challenge for Universities* by Glen Cousquer, Peter Lurz, Emily Norris, Liz Van der Meer, and John Gurnell, takes the specific case of hedgehog and hedgerow regeneration on university campuses and examines how it can be used as an entry point and vehicle for building much-needed ecological and vertical literacy in higher education. The paper addresses the responsibilities of universities in responding to biodiversity loss, pollution, and climate change. Using the Hedgehog Friendly Campus (HFC) initiative at the University of Edinburgh as a case study, the authors demonstrate how universities, by creating a healthy environment for hedgehogs, can also support broader ecosystem health. The article highlights the metaphorical and literal significance of hedgerows in education, suggesting that addressing ecological fragmentation requires overcoming institutional fragmentation. By mapping and managing hedgerows, universities can create wildlife corridors and enhance ecological health, integrating student-led research and community engagement into conservation efforts. The HFC initiative serves as a focusing tool, fostering a sense of connection to nature among staff and students and promoting collaborative, transdisciplinary work. Cousquer et al. emphasize that engaging with biodiversity crises involves shifting from management to stewardship, fostering a relational literacy that supports ecological and planetary health.

The fourth Peer-Reviewed Article, *Drawing New Relationalities with Migrants and Immobile Exiles* by Camille Courier and Laura Winn, investigates the impact of climate change on migration and the concept of relationality as a means for systemic change. The authors describe the phenomenon of "immobile exiles," individuals who, despite not physically moving, experience a sense of exile due to rapid environmental changes. This collective experience invites exploration of new relationalities for systems change, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all life. The article argues that climate change results from a disrupted relationship with nature, rooted in the Cartesian mindset that separates humans from the natural world. Courier and Winn use the term *relationality* to highlight the processual nature of being in relationship and suggest that fostering new relationalities can enhance life's capacity to regenerate. Their hypothesis is tested through arts-based research, including

Courier's work with migrant children and adults in France and Canada, and Winn's facilitation of learning about systems change and regenerative development. The article illustrates how visual practices, particularly drawing, can facilitate such new relationalities. Drawing is presented as a transformative educational practice that helps individuals and groups develop awareness of their relationships with humans, other living beings, and the environment.

The final Peer-Reviewed Article, *Harnessing Dialogue as a Social Technology for Systems Change in Development Institutions* by Sophia Robele, investigates the role of dialogue in fostering relational infrastructure and capabilities essential for systems transformation. The paper draws on in-depth case studies of several interlinked initiatives of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The agency has increasingly explored what counts as development impact and the critical forms of innovation and learning necessary for progress. Framed by her positionality as both participant and co-designer in several initiatives, Robele argues for the need to mainstream more dialogic and process-based approaches in multilateral and governmental work. This paper illustrates how dialogue processes can serve as bridges between personal transformation and the transformation of policies and structures, aiming for social, economic, and ecological regeneration. Robele highlights that the deepest leverage points for change lie in the mindsets and paradigms that shape systems. She proposes four paradigm shifts: from linear delivery to relationship orientation, from immediate action to understanding underlying assumptions, from reliance on neutral data to recognizing power dynamics in knowledge, and from technical solutions to co-creating wisdom and capabilities. Despite the challenges of steering large bureaucratic institutions towards more dialogical processes, Robele emphasizes the importance of expanding spaces within these institutions to collectively address barriers related to organizational culture and accountability frameworks. By focusing on the 'how' of development, beyond the 'what,' this approach encourages the co-design and practice of tools that integrate the heart, mind, and hand in development work.

Adjacent to the Peer-Reviewed articles this issue also features a *Book Review* by Elizabeth Walsh titled *Beyond the Limits of Modernity toward Enlivening Futures of Blessed Unrest and Complex Joy: A Review of Routledge Handbook for Creative Futures, Edited by Gabrielle Donnelly and Alfonso Montuori*. In her review, Walsh emphasizes the Handbook's focus on integrating diverse perspectives, grounding theories in personal stories, case studies, and pragmatic practices, offering principles and processes for co-creative future-shaping alongside an assembly of over 50 diverse voices across 37 chapters. Walsh appreciates the Handbook's ability to inspire co-emergence and synergy while also addressing the tensions between contributors. Walsh concludes that the Handbook equips readers with tools to navigate the polycrises of our times with grace, courage, and compassion, making it a vital resource for those committed to co-creating enlivening and regenerative futures.

Following the inaugural and prototype article of *Innovations in Praxis* (Casado da Rocha, 2023), this issue features a foundational text by Editorial curators Fiona McKenzie and Megan Seneque, titled *Art and Science of 'Escape': World Building and Other Leaps towards Transformation*. McKenzie and Seneque write about the relational, messy, and evolving dimensions of praxis, aiming to give others permission to be honest, reflective, and unique. They share their understanding of praxis and what it means to work intentionally with concepts-in-practice through illustration. Their focus is on weaving the threads of methodological pluralism for transformation, and they emphasize the need for systemic intervention and ongoing boundary critique to build resistance to totalizing ideologies. Drawing on their work with the David Suzuki Foundation in Canada, McKenzie and Seneque present six elements of *escape* for transformation: strengthening relationships, structuring for emergence, integration of content and process, deconstructing realities and dismantling constraints, recognition and reconstruction of worldviews, and enlivening possibilities. Their methodology emphasizes responsiveness to context rather than strict adherence to a single method. They describe their role as creating spaces for mutual connections and deep listening, actively scanning for signals of readiness, and challenging worldviews to find new patterns of meaning. McKenzie and Seneque reflect on the importance of “creating hope for the systems aware,” aiming to liberate individuals from limiting worldviews and fostering self-empowered *escapees* capable of reimagining and transforming our economic systems for the wellbeing of people and the planet.

Continuing our tradition, this first issue of our fourth volume also closes with an *In-Dialogue* article. This time, the theme of embodying knowledge through practice is taken up in a piece entitled *Transgressive Knowing: Lying Down with the Trouble*. This dialogue explores the contours of transformative and transgressive research and its role in shaping new worlds, drawing from the participants' diverse practices and perspectives. The dialogue, facilitated by Oliver Koenig and Megan Seneque, brings together Bayo Akomolafe, Iacon Fazez, Injairu Kulundu-Bolus, Dylan McGarry, Fiona McKenzie, and Michelle Proyer. Together, they reflect on the meaning and practice of transformative research, which seeks to respond to the intersecting crises of our time with ethical, critical, and creative approaches. Throughout this lively dialogue participants share personal stories and insights that highlight the idea that transformative research is relational and co-creative, fostering deep connections and mutual learning. In many ways, this dialogue itself is a lived experience of the kind of world-making practices that are at the heart of transformative research, illustrating how new paradigms can emerge from collaborative inquiry and shared understanding.

As an editorial team, we think of the future as a potential always in the process of being re-created and realized in the present moment (Sharpe et. al., 2016) and we see our role as part of a broader movement and network of connections that we aim to help nurture. In doing so, we take a hopeful stance: the future is not a distant dream but a present reality, unfolding in diverse

communities and initiatives around the globe. In the context of shaping the third option, this hope is enacted in the rebuilding of a sense of community, of belonging, and of purpose as humanity. It requires purpose, agency, and organization to activate its underlying values; it is not passive. In that sense hope is an ethical stance, stimulated by addressing inequities and injustice, creating alternative futures in the context of our current realities.

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