

## Editorial: Creative Writing by and for Systemic Practitioners

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As systemic practitioners, thinkers, and researchers we have always written, often in the form of note taking, or maybe reflections for our own sense-making. But when we write for and with others, *how* do we do it in an ethical and reflexive manner, in ways that feel “true”, respectful and fair? How do we honour our voice(s) as well as the voices of the people with whom we write, literally, as co-authors or with people who we hold in mind as we write? Questions like these were in our minds in the editorial team when we invited people to contribute to this special issue on Creative Writing by and for Systemic Practitioners.

In the process, we have realised that this is the territory we are always in. We are continuously thinking about whose stories belong to who, whose voice and language is being privileged, and whose is subsumed. This is part of our ethical way of being in the world. This has particular resonance for us, as editors, as we immerse ourselves in the themes of this edition and the real-time process of reading, reviewing and editing people’s writing, making comments on what has been shared and how. We recognise, and continue to live with the tension embedded within this.

In this issue, the writers create ethical permissions for themselves. They are visible and embodied in their texts, interested in sharing in ethical and literary ways, stories they are moved to write. They are innovative and keep discovering ways to share complex relational stories ethically, without being discouraged by the complexity of the task. The writing pulses with life, showcases and safeguards the warmth of our living interactions, the relational moments, the lenticularity of our practice, the urgent concerns we hold about the times and places we live in.

We live within the context of the stories we write. Understanding and being transparent about our position is not about separating or othering but about making connections and commitments, about being able to respond ethically as relational, situated participant-players. No writing can ever be objective or neutral. We realise that although it is *our* hands writing the stories, *our* eyes looking at them, *our* questions inquiring about them, *our* emotional worlds reflected in them, we are still co-writing them together with many others, human and more-than-human, those who may appear in the texts and those who do not.

We are entangled in numerous contexts, actual and imagined, emerging from within the stories. Stories (written, oral or performed) have always been a part of human history, and our more-than-human world. Through stories we convey information, we share emotions, we describe things to each other, and we make sense of the world. We create, develop, entertain and learn with each other through telling stories. Stories are not necessarily language based and not necessarily written down. Stories are shaped by, and are always in the process of shaping, our environments, our communities, our relationships. Stories are never one-dimensional; they never belong to any one person or community. It takes a teller and at least a listener for a story to come to life. Storywriting, as a form of storytelling is therefore a relational activity; it is for the teller or writer(s) and the listener(s) to shape the story, evolving meaning and significance together.

Writing in a lively and creative way, writing as we talk, is an extension of how we want to practice. Such writing is daring, generous and trustful. It is acknowledging as a community, that we are not the authority - we are only another participant in never-ending “intra-action” with everything else. It shows that we are in “not-knowing positions” also outside our practice room, in paper, in our conferences, in front of our colleagues; that we travel blind paths and that we realise we can’t subside and hide behind monotonic voices. Writing as we talk embraces the mess of polyvocality, dares to show our vulnerabilities and clumsiness, and finds ways to make sense of the cacophonies which we experience in our inner dialogues. With creative writing we celebrate spontaneous relational responsiveness; we learn for ourselves and from each other and strive to move our discipline further through sharing practice knowledge.

We cannot *not* write - because our stories matter. They help us to evolve as a profession and relate with each other as a professional community. But we need to write in ways that honour both the necessity of speaking out, to be part of a process of justice-doing with communities and reflect the necessity to ensure we are speaking with, not for or about others. The papers in this issue involve daring and generosity and help us as people-practitioners to learn from each other’s, personal and professional experiences, each tussling with relational ethics.

In the opening paper, Joanna Michopoulou’s writing sets an invitational tone, drawing on Baradian theory and writing from within intimate living moments of relational activity, sharing a compelling, complex, yet everyday example of living systemically, dialogically, relationally, in community with others. This theme of relational responsiveness continues to unfold throughout the collection. In her paper, Clare Wenham writes movingly about a personal experience and how to find an ethical way to share stories that involve others’ experience as well. “Is this my story to tell?” she asks, finding her way through poetic writing. Poetry has been a common theme through the writings, which some have spoken to in terms of finding permission and voice to express themselves, as shown in the following paper by Karen Partridge. Drawing on many years of experience, Karen Partridge shares her process of writing poetry as a sense-making, reflective activity that includes a poignant in-depth account of a relationship in therapy, inviting us all to reflect on ethics, consent, coloniality and health inequality. Helen Bohme also dares to speak deep from within years of practice experience, blending beautifully systemic conversations and storytelling with relational and conversational ethics. Storytelling is also a key concept in the paper by Julia Evans and Kevin Hall who reflect on language and combine their reflective autobiographical/ethnographic pieces on their childhood experiences of social class. The systemic duoethnographic methodology they use creates a “ripple effect”, similar to a pebble being dropped into a pond. Reflecting on systemic practice “outside of

the therapy room”, Ioulia Balaska describes her Improvisational Experiential Theatre practice and, in particular, the role of spontaneous writing as a way of paying attention to living, relational moments. Her paper captures a sense of place and time, co-creating theatre in Greece, during a period of quarantine. Staying with the theatrical, Amber Kelley and Jerry Gale created a play in six acts to talk about the experience of working with trauma disclosure. They bring alive the new materialist perspective on systemic therapy as entangled and embodied performativity, inviting the readers to embrace our many embodiments as a murmur of being. In the final paper of this issue, Marilena Karamatsouki also writing from Greece, writes spaciously and invitationally from within practice, reflecting on a scenario that will have resonance for many of us, drawing the collection of prose to a kind of conclusion, before we move onto contributions written in stanza form.

There are several poetic contributions in this issue by Lorna Edwards, Frosso Moureli, Judy Rathbone, Chiara Santin and Leah Salter. They speak about collaboration in therapy, loss, polyphony and language. The authors navigate through the sense of urgency we feel to tell the stories which need to be told and the worries about how to best “speak” these stories and “do justice”.

We would like to thank all contributors and reviewers of this issue for their courage, integrity, dedication and hard work.

Finally, the current journal editors extend a welcome to two new Deputy Editors, Dr Leah Salter and Dr Joanna Michopoulou. Their contribution to the making of this issue has been immense and we are looking forward to our ongoing collaborations!

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