

# Aesthetics of Co-ordination: On Behalf of a Kinder Reply

Dominic Abraham and Danna Abraham

Volume 10

Issue 1

Summer 2026

**Keywords:**

*relationality,*  
*intra-species*  
*collaboration,*  
*aesthetics of*  
*coordination,*  
*reflexive re-*  
*positioning,*  
*transmaterial*  
*worlding*

**Abstract**

In this writing, we recount the story of our journey as a pet-assisted therapy team from a poetic and creative perspective. Attending to the notion of practice-in-action, the authors develop an aesthetics of co-ordination as an analytic and ethical orientation to embrace how relational life is made and unmade in real time. We discuss breed-specific legislation and these constraints framed as a reflexive loop in which typological accounts of danger circulate in the social production of stories, connecting them to the conditions that intensify animal surrender and euthanasia vulnerability. We explore co-authorship with a canine participant as a method: a commitment to co-composed signification and transmaterial worlding, where meaning is created in collaboration with-in and across environments, not extracted from them. As a result, we present a poetic practice narrative offered as a performance-based rendering of our relational knowing.

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**Citation Link**

**Let me tell you a tale**

When we began our work as a pet-assisted therapy team in 2012. We did not start this journey from a place of knowing; we started from a place of noticing how young people were drawn to Dominic – an undeniable softening that could dismiss any preconceived assumptions or learned habits and how to be in the world. When we stepped outside of the boundaries of our home, children were often the first to meet us with generous loving eyes. With no hesitation and no pre-conceived judgment, no distance was created by stories shaped by reputations of being. Instead, a smile, a natural movement to reach for connection, to be with us as we were. In those moments, before anything else could be said, an invitation into a relationship in motion that asked nothing of us, except our willingness to receive what was already being offered. In the later section of this work, a living example of what we

have attempted to describe here through words makes an appearance as a window into the realm of our experience – a bid for connection.

These early encounters stayed with us. It is this attention to the subtle and the unfolding of the relational world that we carry forward in spirit in this writing. By doing this, we hope to reveal a relational practice-in-action: small gestures through which a relational encounter becomes possible and kinder, as well as a consideration of intra-species collaboration that is grounded in mutual influence and shared responsiveness: transmaterial worlding.

Simon and Salter (2019) bring attention to how dominant ways of knowing have trained people into selective processing of how they relate to the world. They propose a practice of transmaterial worlding to counter decontextualized knowing and being. Reviving stories that include the voices of those that normally circulate through privileged channels, alongside those of human and non-human others, while attending to how the stories we tell are continuously constructed, deconstructed, and reconfigured across contexts, time, and the ever changing material conditions from which they emerge (Simon & Salter, 2019). In this sense, transmaterial worlding can be understood as a practice of re-thinking the relationships with our environments, remaining faithful to “philosophically based ways of systemic being-seeing-doing-becoming in and of the world.” (p. 8)

We approach transmaterial worlding and aesthetics of co-ordination as deeply connected to our commitments to engage complex problems as co-created through creative invitations. In this way, we developed a practice of attending to how relationships evolve in real time, through the patterned details that usually go unnamed: timing, pacing, distance, gesture, turn-taking, who gets to speak, who gets approached, to name a few, and what kinds of responses become possible in a given environment. Throughout the unfolding of these inter-actions, we draw from the notion of systemic mattering as a practice that opens dialogical spaces to question matter and what comes to matter, including whose voices are heard, and which human and non-human relationships remain overlooked (Simon & Salter, 2019). Additionally, we explore the concept of aesthetics as the perceptual organization of daily encounters, including what becomes visible, sayable, hearable, and credible as we move through the social world. This way of being aligns with transmaterial worlding that requires from us to re-think the dimensions of our environments – to notice the effects of co-ordination, such as timing, proximity, and unfolding patterns that emerge between us in any given moment.

Rancière (2004) offers a helpful philosophical language for this way of relating to the world, describing social order as a distribution of the sensible, meaning the taken-for-granted arrangement of perception that determines who and what can have a place. In this way, co-ordination in our writing points to the fact that practices for being are living, responsive, and jointly produced activity. We find it useful to borrow the translator’s framing of *modi operandi* as the entire network through which signification is produced, including what relationships are preserved and what are being created (Rancière, 2004). In that sense, the act of writing and authorship is rarely a choice about words and authors. As the work was created in collaboration with a canine author – which is the heart of transmaterial worlding, our method moves toward a co-composed, relational form of signification: writing that treats action and meaning as something made between us. Relationships between human and non-human actors are at the heart of transmaterial worlding (Simon & Salter, 2019) as the opportunity to understand and disrupt power relations and centring who-what matters as well as who-what counts (p. 8). What we explore as poetic practice is the engagement and invitation to become active in meaning-making and world-shaping as it is connected to our lived experience.

Gergen (2009) helps us understand this notion by suggesting the act of writing, through shared language, is itself a site of co-ordination, where realities are negotiated rather than merely represented. In this sense, practice is understood as a relational activity where we participate in shaping the worlds we seek to describe instead of passively observing them as if they existed independently of our participation.

Indeed, it could be argued, from a social constructionist perspective, that meaning does not reside within the individual, nor within the object of attention – meaning emerges through the process of continuous interaction and ongoing exchange of language (Gergen, 1994). In this way, what becomes sayable is dependent on the relational processes in which we are already. As Gergen's broader social constructionist work suggests, our ways of knowing are inseparable from cultural, linguistic, and relational contexts that sustain them as life is continuously shaped through dialogue and shared practice. As he writes, "... cognitive accounts of individual knowledge are largely isolated and vulnerable; because they lack any compelling justification – either in terms of a foundational theory of knowledge or a theory of methodology – they live on borrowed time" (Gergen, 1994, p.8)

"We" is therefore not a stylistic choice, but a deliberate movement away from the logic that grants inviolable status to a single authoritative voice, and toward a practice of mattering that is held as constitutive of the method itself. Gergen (2007) reminds us that writing, much like speaking, does not stand apart from relationship building. Instead, writing gains its meaning and mattering through the ways we simultaneously invite difference. Keeping this in mind, writing can either sustain distance, positioning the authors as contained and knowing – a singular human account – or it can invite something other than – a human and dog collective account. Of particular relevance here is a form of writing that departs from a bounded superior knower and moves towards a more shared, recognizable relational presence, where there is an intentional effort to soften the space where knowledge is developed between all of us.

What pulled us toward doing pet-assisted therapy as a volunteer endeavour was the heartfelt sense that words are not enough to relate to the social world. In the beginning, our decision to start training to become a pet-assisted therapy team through Love on a Leash, a local non-profit organization (Love on a Leash, n.d.). This initiative felt obvious because of how people were responding to us as a unit mattered, and these interactions could matter even more, beyond our private lives.

Pet-assisted therapy is usually discussed under the broader umbrella of animal-assisted interventions (AAI): structured, goal-oriented practices that intentionally include animals in health, education, or human services to support human well-being, with attention to the welfare of both humans and animals (International Association of Human–Animal Interaction Organizations [IAHAIO], 2018). This definition works because pet-therapy can otherwise become a vague label that hides big differences in training, handler requirements, animal consent, stress signals, setting risk, and clinical purpose.

It can be said that people have gravitated toward therapy-dog programs partly because of their relational quality. Across settings, there is published evidence suggesting promise, alongside important cautions about heterogeneity and study quality. Many people and institutions are adopting these programs because they feel relationally potent, and the evidence base is steadily developing, with the strongest work emphasizing careful program structure, appropriate outcomes, and animal welfare as non-negotiable (Brelsford et al., 2020).

## The social production of stories and the reflexive loop

We had graduated from all the required training to provide pet-assisted therapy in a volunteer capacity, but we ran into stories that were already written about what he was able to do and the spaces that could accept him. The first author has been categorized as a pit bull-type breed. In the majority of settings, this reputation preceded the formation of relationships. Some institutions and community members have learned to think about this type of breed as risky by default, even when evidence was missing. This is the power of stereotype: an old script that travels fast and persuades people in its objective, settled knowledge, rather than a story that has been taught, repeated, and enforced through habit and policy. Simon (2018) highlights that dominant ideologies tend to stick to bodies. We consider breed stigma here as a reflexive loop – a culturally reinforced pattern that stabilizes dominant accounts of danger and who or what counts as worthy. These patterns can reproduce inequality camouflaged in discourse.

Breed-specific legislation (BSL) is where these stories translate into policy and real implications. In the United States (U.S.) and in other countries, pit bull-type dogs have been singled out through bans and restrictions intended to reduce bite-related harm as a breed-based strategy for public safety, one that frames risk as a matter of appearance rather than context, relationship, and human responsibility. However, professional bodies have repeatedly challenged this approach. The American Veterinary Medical Association argues that BSL is not an effective solution to dog bites and that it misdirects attention away from evidence-informed prevention and responsible ownership (American Veterinary Medical Association, n.d.). The American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior similarly states that BSL is ineffective, can create a false sense of safety, and raises welfare concerns for dogs identified, often incorrectly, as belonging to targeted breeds (American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior [AVSAB], 2014).

Internationally, the British Veterinary Association and British Small Animal Veterinary Association take a comparable stance in their analysis of the UK Dangerous Dogs Act (1991), arguing for a deed-not-breed approach and describing breed-based controls as ineffective in meeting their stated aims (BVA & BSAVA, 2023). Studies that have received the label of empirically-informed from multiple contexts complicate the claim that banning specific breeds reliably reduces harm. For example, a time-series intervention study in Odense, Denmark, found limited to no effect of breed-specific legislation on hospital-treated dog bite injuries, suggesting that other interventions are likely more effective (Nilson et al., 2018). Similarly, researchers from Ireland have likewise questioned whether legislated breeds differ meaningfully from non-legislated breeds on key bite characteristics, raising concerns about how risk is being socially and legally imagined (Creedon and Ó Súilleabháin, 2017).

These policies are not clearly designed to address at the level what public safety means. Their effects on people and animals' ordinary lives are very unique, especially when it comes to housing. Even when rental properties in the US advertise housing as pet-friendly, dogs are often filtered through breed and size rules that function like quiet bans – an experience that we know too well. In one study of rental listings, the majority of landlords who allowed dogs still used breed restrictions and weight limits to narrow who counts as an acceptable companion animal, and only a small share of dog-allowing properties had no breed or size restrictions (Rose et al., 2023). For pit bull-type dogs, this becomes a disproportionate reality: across 21 U.S. shelters (2019–2023), pit bull-type dogs were 16% of all relinquished dogs, yet they represented 27% of landlord-related relinquishments, suggesting that housing barriers are at the heart of this problem (Applebaum et al., 2024).

Usually, when housing options are not available, shelters become the final stop in a chain of systematic events started with policy and perceived notions of what counts as evidence. In 2024, the ASPCA estimates 607,000 animals were euthanized in U.S. shelters, including 334,000 dogs. At the same time, the Shelter Animals Count describes a system under pressure: dogs of all sizes stayed longer in shelters in 2024, tightening capacity and increasing the risk of euthanasia when space and resources run out (ASPCA, 2024; Shelter Animals Count, 2025). What is disheartening is that breed-targeted fear not only influences who gets welcomed into a pet-assisted training or community event – a reflexive loop – extending even to which dogs are granted the right to live, as these dogs have higher odds of being surrendered for reasons that are influenced by systematic barriers dressed up as neutrality.

One way we hold this connection to policy, housing restriction, and euthanasia practices without letting it become purely statistical is to integrate the unit of analysis from identified problem to relational encounters in which risk is reproduced, circulated, and enforced. Dwan (2025) offers a useful frame through her description of an intra-species collaboration, where practice is understood as knowledge made in the relationship itself, and where considerations about staying close to the lived, moment-by-moment negotiations that are central to imagining and creating what is possible. In addition, human and non-human relationships can also function as a political tool that both extends and disrupts the connections between language and material conditions, opening possibilities for more generative ways of knowing (Simon & Salter, 2019). Drawing on this refusal of typological thinking, we approach breed stigma as a social story that contributes to how people and dogs interact in the world. We are writing in a shared knowledge and as active agents in our capacity to create and to improvise new invitations – to create the environments that we want to be part of.

What follows in the next written section is the collective response from the pet-assisted therapy team – a poetic practice narrative, adapted from a conference presentation (Abraham, 2025). The East Side Institute's annual *Performing the World 2025* conference issued a call for Zeal, Intimacy, and Passion (ZIP) Talks – a short piece that asked a simple question: how do we keep creating when the messy conditions we experience in the world? Newman and Holzman's work has been instrumental in reminding us that development and improvisation are ways of meeting messy conditions without making knowing the primary route to change (Newman & Holzman, 1997). They highlight the importance of a developmental approach that privileges activity, performance, and collective invention over certainty and classification. In this way, these ideas position our rendering of the ZIP Talks as a form of developmental proposition: a brief public activity that invites new ways of seeing, transmaterial worlding, and co-ordinating life with others, including intra-species collaborations.

In the spirit of collaboration and devotion to volunteer work, we had the opportunity to share our story as a brief video. We offered our journey as relational work in motion: introducing how a small gesture helped us keep hope alive when we kept trying to meet the world with a kinder reply.

**Note:** Before you read the poetic practice narrative below, please take a moment to watch the short video version of this piece by clicking the link [www.therislab.com/video](http://www.therislab.com/video) or by scanning the QR code. The link will take you to a window where you can wait for a few seconds before it starts. The video offers the original pacing, voice, and rhythm through which this story was first shared, and it can serve as a companion way of entering the narrative that follows.



## **A kinder reply: Re-framing the story**

This is a story about love finding its way into people's hearts through a little bit of play and persistence.

You see, sometimes it takes heart to see through stereotypes.

And if you know anything about stereotypes, you know there are old stories that travel fast until we can possibly rewrite these old scripts into better ones.

How can people be so quick to judge a dog by the way they look?

It took time for him to trust people.

It took time... but Dominic from the very beginning was just pure love.

The Inspiration was obvious.

Could I share His love with the world? Yes, I really could.

We practice, practice, practice.

So Dominic could become a therapy dog. We're ready, ready to start.

But remember those stereotypes that I talked about?

It seemed that they traveled with people everywhere.

So we got creative.

Why don't I give Dominic glasses so people can see him more clearly?

And we did just that.

There is always time to become a superhero.

Will you promise to finish your story and tell me what you have learned?

Yes, we have lots of work to do.

We have people learning how to trust without fear.

We have people who practice a kinder reply.

We have people who stitch it with laughter.

And a steady why.

We have people who show up and stay.

We have people who share what they know.

We have people who choose a different way.

We have people who plant so others grow.

From the challenges and learnings, it doesn't take much to live in a different world.

You just have to be able to see it that way.

You learned how to be patient, and we learned how to stretch our imagination,

a whole new performance,

a whole new way of connecting.

In the middle of learning

Was the gentleness that we saw  
It was all we needed to keep returning.

Now we wish we had Dominic forever near.  
He earned his angel wings, and yet he feels here.

We continue to see gentleness,  
We'll keep returning still to meet the world with courage.  
My greatest teacher  
to love that learned our names  
and loves us still.

### **Lesson of Meaning**

We have come to understand the value of intra-species collaboration and devotion. For this reason, in becoming “we”, both authors – Dominic and Danna – became part of something larger than ourselves. Our efforts to locate injustices, disadvantages, and the conditions influencing pit-bull type of dogs and pet-assisted therapy work in this writing became a bid for trust, helping us speak into what had not yet been told, while making visible the often unseen threads through which the social world is co-created.

For systemic practitioners, our invitation is to approach practice as a creative interaction – one that opens possibilities for new ways to respond to challenges. To work with what is emerging can be radical in contexts where limited and pre-determined ways of knowing tend to narrow what becomes available to people and other earthly beings – building the environment we wish to develop. While systemic traditions have long engaged with language, narrative, and meaning-making, to name a few, we hope our story invited you, reader, into the work of improvisation and into moments of departure where we loosen the hold of what is already known to favour the ongoing effort of constructing something other than what we had.

Before we say goodbye, we find it important to turn toward you, reader, in another bid to develop something other than we are used to. We offer a few provocations in hopes they can serve as invitations to stay with the unfolding of your own practice:

- Where might you be invited, perhaps gently or quietly, to respond differently, not in relation to others, but in attunement to human and non-human conditions that are shaping the moment?
- What would it mean, in your own way, to offer a reply that is less guided by what is already known, and more responsive to what is emerging across bodies, environments, and material relations we are a part of? What would it mean for you to be influenced by what is emerging between you and others?
- Where have you experienced moments of connection that seemed to arrive before you could even notice – perhaps something that was already in motion across you, others, and the more-than-human world, waiting for you?

- How might you begin to recognize practice not as something you do, but as something you enter into with others – human and non-human like – where collaboration unfolds across and with-in relationships and environments that shape what becomes possible?

Perhaps, in staying with these questions and the emerging pauses available throughout this moment, you might linger a little longer to notice what is already in motion. At this time, it has become important to us to broaden the ways in which we construct a problem before we get to understand it or respond to it. Oftentimes, when we think rigidly about how to approach relational encounters, we fall into this trap of responding in ways that we may be accustomed to. Attending to these moments as part of a transmaterial process invites us to acknowledge how our responses are always entangled with the material conditions and environments we inhabit (Simon and Salter, 2019).

From this perspective, the forms of how we come to ‘be’ and what we ‘do’ can become the entry point into how worlds are continuously made and unmade (Simon and Salter, 2019). This includes challenging familiar positions on who and what is granted significance or mattering and how we might re-think our participation with-in these processes. We end, then, with our lesson of meaning, hoping that we have offered a starting point for a method of ongoing consideration with-in the relational and transmaterial processes of worlding. We hope that attending to how everyday encounters take form across and with-in human and non-human relationships may inspire curiosities and possibilities to the ongoing making and unmaking of the worlds we share. However small a gesture, such as writing in partnership, can be a reminder of what has been living between us is never lost, and continues in how we meet the world, again and again, in the quiet insistence and on behalf of a kinder reply.

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## About the authors

**Dominic Abraham** is a certified therapy dog and an AKC Canine Good Citizen (CGC), a credential awarded through the American Kennel Club (AKC) program for dogs who show steady social ease with people, thoughtful leash manners, and a grounded presence in everyday public settings. He worked alongside Danna for more than twelve years, offering a gentle presence in volunteer pet-assisted therapy visits across libraries, hospitals, universities, etc. Dominic became known for wearing his glasses and for the quiet ways he invited collaboration, especially with children and those who felt uncertain at first sight. Though he is no longer physically present, his work continues to live in the relational and ethical commitments of his guardian and the hearts of the ones he remains close to.

**Danna Abraham** works as an educator at Alliant University in San Diego, CA. She is the founder of the Research Initiative for Storytelling Engagement (RISE) lab, a collaborative space dedicated to creative inquiry and

community development. Through her engagement with community-based initiatives, she mentors systemic practitioners in training as she remains actively working alongside others to develop spaces where new ways of being, knowing, and responding can emerge. She is the author of *Therapy Tales from Dominic the Pit*, a children's book that offers a glimpse into our journey of meaning.

URL: [www.theriselab.com](http://www.theriselab.com)

### **Citation**

Abraham, Dominic & Abraham, Danna (2026). Aesthetics of Co-ordination: On Behalf of a Kinder Reply. *Murmurations: Journal of Transformative Systemic Practice*, 10(1), 42-51. <https://doi.org/10.28963/10.1.4>