

Transmaterial Worlding. A brief illustration of the theory in practice

Finn Finlayson

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Abstract

Transmaterial Worlding is an intriguing concept which is valuable for philosophical discussions around systemic practice, but might be considered complex. This writing encourages practitioners to play with Transmaterial Worlding language, and to be creative in developing a Transmaterial Worlding practice which enriches families by expanding their network to beyond-human community.

This paper is short. Relations between me and time, my life activities, my doctoral research and new professional demands as a systemic lead in children's services are shaping this writing, keeping it brief and to-the-point. And a couple of points to mention:

- I refer to "land" in an all-encompassing description of what lives in, on, and above the land, human and what is often described as *beyond-human or more-than-human*.
- In addition to referencing people with their full names, I also name their land of origin.

In referring to boundaries and labelling of land, I acknowledge that I may appear to endorse inherited and often coloniser principles of defining territories and land ownership. This problem raises questions that lead me to consider and develop new values regarding land/property ownership for individuals and communities.

Transmaterial Worlding

When I first read about the concept of Transmaterial Worlding, developed by systemic therapists Gail Simon (in England) and Leah Salter (from Wales), I was struck by their use of imagination to create new knowledge. This was novel to me and the skilled crafting of questions felt an important development of systemic practice (2019). Yet the language could trip me up and I would find myself pausing mid-sentence to remember if it was

Transworld Materialling or Transmaterial Worlding, and to work out if the material created the world or the worlding created the material or something else.

As I settle into long-term relations with Transmaterial Worlding I find that I'm less troubled, and more energised, as my practice benefits from:

- perspectives arising from Transmaterial Worlding which are very different from those considered in therapeutic spaces focused only upon human relations
- a demand for creativity to provoke less easily digested questions
- a depth of reflexivity to which those creative questions can lead before, during and after conversations with clients.

I hope that the brevity of this paper can allow us, meaning you as the reader, and me, the storyteller, to quickly revisit the concept of Transmaterial Worlding, before exploring it through a tale of everyday practice.

I don't see Transmaterial Worlding as complicated. Rather in a Western society that has internalised capitalist values for as long as it has normalised colonialism, complicates the process of understanding. A century ago, English mathematician and philosopher Alfred Whitehead, developed the concept of Process Philosophy (1978). In considering the world as always being in process I am learning to consider what is becoming, rather than considering what is being. This approach allows me to remain in the present moment but to be moving with it rather than hold it back.

Social Construction has been largely developed over the past 50 years by American professors, Sheila McNamee, communication scholar and Ken Gergen, social psychologist. In keeping with Process Philosophy, Social Construction challenges the notion of objectivity and fixity, foregrounding instead the means by which humans create their realities together through communication (Gergen, 1985; McNamee and Romaioli, 2020). I understand Transmaterial Worlding to expand the concepts within both Process Philosophy and Social Constructionism through the acknowledgement of worlding processes beyond human activities, to our relations with beyond-human entities. "We propose transmaterial worlding can be understood as embracing all forms of communication between and beyond human forms," (Simon and Salter, 2020, p. 90).

Can we deconstruct centuries of Western knowing and being, to embrace relations with beyond-humans, through our contemplation of Transmaterial Worlding? I hope so.

A story of hope

My hope is founded on work I did with inspirational and hard-working people. We knew each other through our voluntary activities for a charity committed to social and environmental justice through issues surrounding the global clothing industry.

We had worked together for several years to plan events that challenged behaviours promoted through a dominant fast-fashion culture and we had raised public awareness of a means of developing alternative relations with our clothes. During the Coronavirus pandemic we became friends through the preparation of online activities in which we met with members of the Scottish parliament to discuss the development of policy around these issues. Our conversations with policy makers were later strengthened when we were invited to host events in the Scottish parliament. These included

communities of practice discussions in 2023 (Wenger, 2000) and a sewing task in 2024, which used a fabric map of Scotland for policymakers to sew buttons upon their constituencies, allowing conversations around the environmental damage and modern-day slavery practices, occurring through clothes worn in Scotland, to be explored. The fabric, the stitching and conversations all played a part in worlding processes.

During the pandemic online experiences, we introduced a co-founder of the Ecocide movement, an organisation committed to the adoption of legislation which protects the environment, Jojo Mehta, to a Scottish policymaker, Monica Lennon (Ecocide, 2026). Monica has since introduced a proposal to the Scottish parliament for Ecocide legislation that will criminalise practices that are harmful to the environment. The bill has recently been advanced to stage two for scrutiny and amendments before a final vote, which could make Scotland the first country in the UK to introduce Ecocide law. We were pleased to be small cogs in a policy-making machine, we know that everything is connected (Bateson, 1979).

I share this story to illustrate that as parts of systems we can all affect positive change. I suspect that most readers of the Murmurations journal affect positive change in systems of which they are part. These are worlding processes, but often I don't notice them happen until after the event. As a theory, Transmaterial Worlding helps me to gently probe into issues of human and beyond-human relations and to plan for creating positive change. It offers a concept that enables me to plan and to explore what happens in such processes, rather than a framework to replicate a formulated experience. By taking a systemic action research approach to my work with Transmaterial Worlding, I take a small step, for instance asking questions in a different way or committing myself to learning more about the land on which we practice and I am reflexive within each step. I recognise that in my exploration of Transmaterial Worlding practices I will leave my imprint upon whatever I nudge, and that likewise, 'the nudged,' irrespective of what form it takes, will leave its impression upon me.

Transmaterial Worlding in Practice

The learning I am going to share, has occurred through my role as a systemic practitioner for a local authority. When I began this work, in February 2025, non-statutory Family Services were in the middle of a process which required practitioners who had previously worked for charities to be employed by the local authority. This experience was unnerving for most employees, whether they were already employed by local government services and watched their workforce double in size, or were part of the commissioned services who knew that job losses were inevitable through this transition. As spring bloomed, a workforce-wide event was organised to promote positive working relations. Part of the morning activities involved my introduction of systemic practices within Family Help. I turned to the reflexive style of questions by Karl Tomm (1987) to consider our work from wider perspectives and developed them further using a Transmaterial Worlding approach for some questions. It is the latter that are still commented upon a year later.

As practitioners sat around circular tables, I asked them to consider questions which referred to towns in which they worked. To allow a sense of anonymity the names of these towns have been replaced with the word 'local'. The questions included,

“What is the *local* shoreline of 2026 glad that Family Help workers are doing now?”

“How do the seats of *local* buses used for travel to school know that Family Help initiatives are having a positive effect on bullying?”

On the managers WhatsApp thread, a few days after the event, one of the Family Hub managers shared a picture of her dog looking out to the sea with a caption asking, “Finn what would the shoreline say?” I was excited that the question had remained alongside her as she walked, but it’s the second question that continues to get referenced by people almost a year later. Yes, eyes roll when it’s mentioned, but my colleagues smile and seem intrigued by what the answer to the question might be. By considering a situation through beyond-human material it might be possible to world something new.

Italian Professor of Humanities at Utrecht University in the Netherlands, Rosi Braidotti, has emphasised the importance of imagination in a worlding process. She referred to the “nomadic subject” when she wrote in 2014,

Implicit in my choice of this figuration is the belief in the potency and relevance of the imagination, of myth-making, as an element of fuelling our creativity. Political fictions may be more effective, here and now than theoretical systems

(Braidotti, 2014, p. 181).

Braidotti’s endorsement of imagination as a powerful tool to create change has been reflected in my experience of Transmaterial Worlding within my work practice. The “political fictions” that resulted from such experiences may appear negligible but British social worker and family therapist, Barry Mason’s theory of change reminds us of the value of repeating small steps over time to create sustainable change (1993). My use of Transmaterial Worlding has required informed-imagination, one that knows/suspects what has happened, or is happening, on the land, before imagining what the land might be asking now. For instance, before working with colleagues to understand the specific needs of a community living in a peninsular location, I listened to the stories of people who had lived there for years, visited the archives of the local library and visited a space committed to outdoor therapy with a friend who had invited me, as well as a multi-cultural centre used by asylum-seeking families. Through these activities I moved around this particular land and began to get a sense of its history, the natural resources that had once been plentiful, and patterns of human migration according to industrial demand.

I used my training in systemic constellations to work with colleagues who lived in the area and were studying the first year of a four-year training in systemic therapy. Our plan was to enquire into the needs of the land in the present day. One colleague brought the experiences of asylum-seeking families who had been allocated housing in the area, some of whom were suffering from racially motivated discrimination. My systemic constellation training occurred over 6 months and was based on the work of German psychotherapist, Bert Hellenger (1998). Hellenger’s development of the method had been informed by the practices of Zulu people with whom he worked while a priest in South Africa. The matter through which we worked were our senses and physicality.

The experience taught us that asylum-seeking families might require trusted members of their community to reach out to them with information about local authority services, rather than attend services within buildings and localities that felt distanced from the families. There was an increased sense of commitment within this group to reach out to the families and one member of staff decided to volunteer at the multi-cultural centre.

My own current research into relations with land is considering how a sense of belonging, to a place that is familiar and meaningful, might be of value to children and families who have known violence, abuse or neglect through human relations. American social critic and educator, bell hooks, has written of the importance of belonging; the shaping that a place will offer to creatures, human and beyond-human, living on the land and the relations that develop (2009). I wonder if encouraging relations between humans and beyond-humans could be part of the role of systemic practice when working with humans who have suffered, and I am interested in how Transmaterial Worlding can contribute to this development.

When proposing Transmaterial Worlding practices Gail Simon and Leah Salter warn of the danger of decontextualising and labelling what we see, hear and eat, to prevent us from listening to matter other than human matter. They advise readers to,

develop new comprehension abilities, to become translinguistic to hear our transmaterial family and see how we are making and unmaking this world together

(Simon and Salter, 2019, p. 3).

Simon and Salter encourage us to consider intra-action, describing the continuity of matter proposed by American physicist Karen Barad, whereby the end of one entity and the beginning of another is never complete (2007). Barad uses the act of an ultrasound machine that uses the illustration of sound waves transmitting an image of internal organs to photographic paper, asking at what point might the different components of this process be separated from each other, other than in theory.

Acknowledging beyond-human matter can happen through different activities and rituals. Canadian film-maker Sarah Abbot wrote about the gifts that she laid at the edge of forests, during her research, as she asked trees for permission to enter the forest (2021). This form of listening to beyond-human matter has been practised by Indigenous communities for millennia and the authors of Transmaterial Worlding acknowledge the impact of Indigenous scholarship upon the concept. The metaphysical principles of Transmaterial Worlding questioning have challenged humans to see the effects of eco-tourism from the perspective of the snow at Everest base camp, or the challenges of intimidating behaviours within housing estate stairwells. These questions gently disrupted my thinking, requiring me to go back and read the questions again while simultaneously asking what my response might be.

The playfulness of Transmaterial Worlding provides a welcome alternative thought-space to the severity of the issues that it can tackle. Italian psychiatrist Gianfranco Cecchin wrote with colleagues, Gerry Lane and Wendel Ray, about the value of irreverence within systemic therapy (1992). Their writing did not suggest a frivolous approach but rather to question what was already in place, to be open to new ideas. I believe that Transmaterial Worlding offers systemic practitioners an opportunity to do that within their work, to stretch ourselves to inhabit new spaces and to work in ways that we have not yet imagined.

In considering Transmaterial Worlding practices within my work, I hope that you, my collaborative reader, are inspired to consider what your own practice is becoming. The Transmaterial Worlding framework does not dictate how our practice should be but allows us to imagine what it is becoming, through our relations with all matter, human and beyond-human.

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About the author

Finn Finlayson works as a Systemic Lead and Family Group Conference manager in a rural local authority in England. Research for her Professional Doctorate in Systemic Practice asked how a relational approach to the land beneath our feet might enrich systemic practices.

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