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## **Pandemic, therapy, and a meditation on *how*: A creative-relational inquiry**

### **Abstract**

*“A creative-relational inquiry,” writes Dan Harris, “might be so small as to be imperceptible to the human eye ... [b]ut it might also simultaneously be so big that whole universes exist within, between, and through it.” In this brief article, I take up Harris’ claim, writing into questions of scope and pace at this pandemic time, like how the small and the slow of an Edinburgh lockdown flutters into writing, poetic and therapeutic life, while around, within and beyond there is the multiplicity of the small, vast and fast of a virus. The text mutates with one small word, ‘how’.*

**Key words: creative-relational inquiry; therapy; writing; poetic; how**

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### **Bio**

Jonathan Wyatt is Professor of Qualitative Inquiry at The University of Edinburgh, UK, and director of the Centre for Creative-Relational Inquiry. His current book project, in which this article will find its place, is *Writing, the Everyday, and Creative-Relational Inquiry*. The book will be published by Routledge.

## Pandemic, therapy, and a meditation on *how*: A creative-relational inquiry

I claim this brief article as ‘creative-relational inquiry’: an inquiry open to fluid, dynamic, force-ful, hyphenated, human and more-than-human encounters (Wyatt, 2019); open to how we are always in the midst, in process, engaged, affected and affecting; and, for better and worse, always infecting and being infected, contaminating and being contaminated; always already given over to the other (Butler, 2004), always becoming-other. Contamination is a condition of being alive. We are irrepressibly, irresistibly relational, “porous and leaky . . . , conditioned by the encounters with multiple human and nonhuman bodies” (Wolodźko, 2020). We are given life by, depend upon, our mutual contagion: *con(together)-tagion* (*tangere*, touch). How we touch each other, how we affect each other (Woo, 2016); how bodies are affected and affect others (Spinoza, 2002). Contagion is endemic, not epidemic (Servitje & Nixon, 2016).

“A creative-relational inquiry,” writes Dan Harris, “might be so small as to be imperceptible to the human eye . . . [b]ut it might also simultaneously be so big that whole universes exist within, between, and through it.” (Harris, 2020, p. 17) So, here, I follow Harris as I write into the everyday all-but-imperceptible of living in this pandemic time, the small and the slow of an Edinburgh lockdown fluttering into writing and poetic life while around, within and beyond there is the multiplicity of the small, vast and fast of a virus. I keep faith in how the act of writing might make it possible to fathom human and more-than-human connections and disconnections, to create the intimate within a universe, to create the intimate with, and, a universe, to find creative-relational connections with and between the everyday of this shrunken time. I search the stories of a therapeutic mo(ve)ment (Davies & Gannon, 2006) during an Edinburgh lockdown, the struggles and losses it speaks of, its moments of contact. I inquire into the everyday of how the pandemic is laying its mark, changing the way we think, reorienting us to what is and isn't possible, affecting – and infecting, contaminating – how we imagine, how we hope, how we dream, how we are intimate; how we grieve. I inquire into ‘how’; just, how.

\*\*\*

I’m writing at my keyboard and screen, eyes closed, a practice I have learned from writing alongside Dan Harris and watching them write; at blue metal tables on the Illini Union terrace in Urbana, Illinois, sitting on the grass in Melbourne parks and on sofas in Edinburgh apartments, fingers on keys, keys pressing up against fingers, words arriving as they, fingers and keys, keys and fingers, move together in an “interplay of human and nonhuman agency, *a dance of agency*” (Pickering, 2008, p. vii, emphasis in the original). On my right wrist, two bracelets, one leather with a silver clasp, one a silver bangle, both gifts, both reminders, both gestures of love, still and moving, still and moving in rhythm, on the memory foam rest as my wrists shift position. The bracelets are always together. They meet each other, on occasion, in the sound of silver on silver, engaging with each other in the formation of these words. The (*hear the hyphens*) text-fingers-typing-bracelet-wrist-wrist-rest-writing-eyes-closed machine (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004) finds the word, ‘how’. The machine pauses there. We stop there, affected by the possibilities of ‘how’, by its three letters, by its singular placing. My eyes remain closed. They must, to feel it, to pay attention, to this one word, how.

‘How’ offers openings not closures, invites possibilities not fixities: ‘how’ draws us to happening, calls attention to process, slows the world down. Not how *to*, not the instrumental

‘how to do something’, but the how of the event, the moment of inquiry. How is this taking place? How is this possible? How is this? The moment. Haecceity (ibid.). This-ness. ‘How’ as a creative-relational intervention in the present, a noticing of the “power of the vital movement of creation” (Larsen et al., 2007, p. 28).

How the world seems so quiet beyond the sash window of my office on the University campus. How the leaf buds of the whitebeam tree are moving in a wind I can't feel or hear. How the sounds of activity on the Meadows, sharp and vivid just a few moments ago when I was walking, are now muffled, only the callings and laughter of the children audible from here. How outside the children in their green high-viz vests were impossible to ignore. Two boys kicked a ball between them, one always sending the ball away from his friend who, without complaint, chased after it, brought it back, and they did it all over again; and again.

How solitary I am. How solitary in this building I have been these past lockdown weeks, the only person here in the company of the tight spiralling stairs that echo as I climb, the sloping floors, the leaking ceiling. How my being here has been sailing close to the wind of defying university guidance. How I have had to be here, to get out, to get away from the sense of confinement of home; had to. How it has been about survival. How solitary I have been walking here each morning. How hushed the city has been, the speed and bustle of early weekday city mornings long gone.

How, later, I am not writing and Catherine is here. It's therapy day, therapy time. I have been waiting for her, eyes closed again, breathing deeply. I hear the microphone click of her arrival and look up to the screen; she greets me. “Hi Jonathan.” There's a pause. “How are you today?” I hear the ‘how’ of her question pulling me into a different shape. I see her long dark hair, her glasses, her calm, steady look at me. I hear the softness of her Scottish accent. We haven't spoken for two weeks. Hearing and seeing her has an impact upon me, affects me. I feel present, connected.

How, in the days when we could meet face-to-face before this current lockdown, I would take the bus from near home to the beach suburb where she lives. I would go early so I could walk by the sea, get a coffee overlooking the beach, and watch the dogs being thrown sticks and balls, the walkers leaving marks in the damp sand where the waves break, and the swimmers, like selkies, heading without fear and without clothes into the bracing water.

How walking to her rooms from the beach café would take me 10 minutes. I would always arrive early and would hover in the park across the road under the cover of a tree if it were raining, which it often was. She would open the door to me, welcome me and I would enter, turn left into the therapy room, place my bag and my coat on the floor and sink into the sofa, breathing in the sense of possibility. How is it you are here, she might ask. How is it to be here. How is here.

How it's been 20 years since I was last in therapy. I finished when I finished my training. I realised early in working with Catherine that this is the first time I've been in therapy because I know I need it and only because I know I need it. For those few years when I was training I could offer the rationale – make the excuse – that I was in therapy because I was in training. Now there is no pretence. Now there is only raw need, need over these few months I cannot avoid or ignore.

How, at the screen today, I begin with the small, slow things. I look out at the darkening sky, as if what I'm looking for might be there, as if out there, over the Pentland Hills, I'll notice what's here, rising, moving through me that I can find words or movement for. A gesture with my hands in front of the screen or, maybe, headphones permitting, I could find it by standing and letting the body's movement take me. How she will see it, though, whatever I do, whatever happens. How she will notice, even from there, from her chair in her front room on this rectangular screen frame. How she will see. How she sees me. I speak about what it feels like to stand, to walk, to reach to pick up a cup from the side. How it's there all the time.

How she invites me to speak more about, to feel further into, the 'it'. How the screen image, the amplified speaker sound, conveys how she wants to know, wants to hear, as the laptop rests on my table by the window, as the rain begins to tap against the glass. How alive this slow-fast moment feels, this "posthuman subject as creativity", this *zoe* (Braidotti, 2017, p. 23).

How I say, well, I could call it pain. How it's pain but it's more than that, or not only that, or not quite that. How I tell her that some mornings, like today, this Friday morning, I feel it more. More intensely. How I feel it as grief today. I feel it as absence. It's not pain, exactly. It's space where once the other was; still is. How I don't feel it as regret, nor only loss. Or even loss. There is relief, there is the memory present of joy shared. But there is this absence. Grief.

How, I say, I'm writing. How I write as I move, as I walk, talking into my phone, and writing/talking/walking (Springgay & Truman, 2018) is taking me somewhere, releasing something, finding something, creating something. How, I say, I have written a poem. About a walk in the rain, just walking, an everyday lockdown walk. It's what I can do. How my umbrella and me, the small and the slow, find a poem in the rain, seeking creative-relational connections amongst the spread of unruly, incommensurate forces. Forces like a virus. Forces like grief.

*An umbrella and I go for a walk*

It was raining as I opened the front door  
so I took the only umbrella I  
could find. I opened it on  
the street and realised it was  
the one with red transparent hearts

the umbrella, its hearts and I took a wet Saturday  
afternoon walk along the rushing waters  
stopping in Dean Village at the lookout  
to watch the river tumble over the weir  
I held the umbrella tight because  
it wanted to leap in and surf  
the flow, or maybe that was just the wind

we turned left to climb

the steep cobbled lane to the  
bridge, crossed the busy road and  
followed quiet Georgian houses and their  
big windows, glimpsing the young woman at her two screens  
and the father and son in a kitchen playing  
a board game. An anxious man retreated

three steps in front of his house to avoid us,  
my umbrella, its hearts and me; another, eyes down, skirted  
onto the road, the virus making  
us all wary. Then we were home but  
the umbrella got stuck and wouldn't close so  
I left it outside, open, broken  
hearts running red with rain

How the poem moves between us, between (*hear the hyphens*) us-on-screen-and-through-  
speakers-on-a-table-here-by-the-Meadows-and-there-on-a-stand-in-her-room-I-am-not-in-  
but-am. How the poem flows, lands, moves on elsewhere, the umbrella opening above us,  
between us, a refrain, an “improvisational creative expression” (Jackson, 2016, 183), before it  
fades, its work done for now.

How it becomes time to finish. How it becomes time to click ‘Leave’ on the red button. How  
I wait for her to go. How the screen tells me she has gone. How she remains present, the  
traces of our encounter making it possible to wonder how. How it happened. How it was  
possible. How it makes more possible.

How the rain continues, staccato against the window. How I stand, stretch my arms to the  
ceiling, take my coat and scarf. How I pick up my umbrella. How this one is blue and has no  
heart/s.

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