ARTICLE

NODE "ECOLOGY OF THE IMAGINATION"

Communities of practice for an ecology of the imagination: Thoreau's *Walden* and the GAIA journey

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Abstract

This article analyzes the "GAIA journey", an initiative hosted by the Presencing Institute (PI) between March and June 2020, by discussing its precedents in terms of social art, and its potential for facilitating social change as a container in which a multitude of communities of practice can re-imagine the future.

GAIA (Global Activation of Intention and Action) emerged during and in response to the COVID-19 global pandemic and associated lockdown. It aimed to virtually bring together communities to bear witness to the current moment as a way of mobilizing social change. It included online and offline interaction, both local and global, but this article focuses only on the online-global aspect of the journey.

Our hypothesis is that GAIA is a contemporary instance of “social art” as initially conceptualized, among others, by Henry David Thoreau in the 19th century and Joseph Beuys in the 20th. Their seminal ideas have been put into use, developed in several cycles of iteration, and upscaled by Otto Scharmer and his colleagues at the MIT and the PI.

Methods include a review of the literature, textual analysis, participant observation (Antonio Casado da Rocha took part in the whole journey), and qualitative analysis of recordings from seven live sessions over the fourteen-week duration of GAIA, in which 13,000 people from 77 countries participated.

Keywords

community; online; practice; transformation; social innovation

Comunidades de práctica para una ecología de la imaginación: Walden de Thoreau y el viaje de GAIA

Resumen

Este artículo analiza el «viaje GAIA», una iniciativa organizada por el Presencing Institute (PI) entre marzo y junio de 2020 discutiendo sus precedentes en términos de arte social y su potencial para facilitar el cambio social como un espacio en el que una multitud de comunidades de práctica pueden reimaginar el futuro.

GAIA (Global Activation of Intention and Action) surgió durante y en respuesta a la pandemia mundial de la COVID-19 y el confinamiento asociado a esta. Su objetivo era reunir virtualmente a las comunidades para dar testimonio del momento actual como una forma de movilizar la acción de cambio social. Incluía la interacción en línea y fuera de línea, tanto local como global, pero este artículo se centra solo en el lado global online del viaje.

Nuestra hipótesis es que GAIA es una instancia contemporánea de «arte social» como el que fue conceptualizado inicialmente, entre otros, por Henry David Thoreau en el siglo XIX y por Joseph Beuys en el XX. Sus ideas seminales se han puesto en uso, se han desarrollado en varios ciclos de iteración y han sido ampliadas por Otto Scharmer y sus colegas en el MIT y el PI.

Los métodos incluyen una revisión de la literatura, un análisis textual, una observación participante (Antonio Casado da Rocha participó en todo el viaje) y el análisis cualitativo de las grabaciones de siete sesiones en vivo durante las catorce semanas de duración de GAIA, en las que participaron trece mil personas de 77 países.

Palabras clave

comunidad; en línea; práctica; transformación; innovación social

It matters what ideas we use to think other ideas.
Marilyn Strathern, in Haraway 2016, 34

Introduction: a day in GAIA

March 27, 2020. The Italian government confirms 919 deaths in the last 24 hours from COVID-19, and half the world is in lockdown, from Ireland to India; in the UK, Boris Johnson tests positive for coronavirus.

That day, in a series of Zoom meetings, MIT senior lecturer Otto Scharmer and his team at the PI launched the “GAIA journey” (<https://www.presencing.org/gaia>), a “response and holding space” for the

global coronavirus crisis. Due to the high and immediate demand, they increased the capacity to accommodate all time zones, and eventually 10,401 people signed in for the meetings that day in 4 languages (including Spanish).

In the first week of the proposed 14-week programme, combining hosted (“inhale”) and self-organized (“exhale”) sessions, Scharmer described the challenge as “reimagining civilization”. The seven “inhale” sessions were designed to help participants make sense of their situation, with the explicit intention of supporting transformative learning and action (Pomeroy *et al.* 2021, 108).

Most “inhale” sessions included an introduction with live music, a conceptual framing in which the current session was situated within

the whole journey, guided meditation, journaling, embodiment exercises, guest speakers, short video clips made by other participants, explanations by Scharmer and other PI members, breakouts where the audience interacted in groups of four to five people, and harvesting moments in which feedback was shared with the whole audience. Meanwhile a “scribe” – an artist visually representing ideas while people talked – listened and drawn simultaneously, creating a large picture that integrated content from the whole session and closed the feedback loop.

The seven online sessions took place every two weeks, with a duration of one to two hours each. In between, in the respective “exhale” sessions, participants created or joined “social solidarity circles” and helped each other to practise with PI tools and methods. These include contemplative practices, deep listening, case clinics, “social presencing theater” (Hayashi 2020), and others. All of them could be practised online, even during lockdown.

1. Background: Theory U

The GAIA experience is informed by a framework (an aggregation of process, narrative, principles, and practices) for implementing awareness-based change known as “Theory U”. It was developed in a series of publications by Otto Scharmer (2016, 2018) and embodied in a number of multiplatform educational programmes year-round, with a thriving community of around 100,000 practitioners from all over the world.

It was to be expected that Scharmer's work would be met with some criticism. In his examination of “The Philosophy of Theory U”, Peter W. Heller (2019) argues that Theory U might become “a rather useful approach to new ways of leadership and the challenges of change management”, but first it needs to let go of its “incoherent doctrines of historic and social evolution” and some “philosophical inconsistencies”. To that end, Heller recommends Scharmer and his followers to continue “in the tradition of Kant and Husserl” instead of Nietzsche or Steiner. Heller concludes that Theory U has potential but no real grounding in Western philosophy.

In this article, we argue that there is such a grounding, but it is to be found away from Europe, in the first original school of philosophy in North America: New England transcendentalism, particularly the version enacted by Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862). Scharmer mentions Thoreau amongst other authors who influenced his thinking, but the relationship between Theory U and transcendentalism has not been yet explained in any detail.

We will provide an interpretation of Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) according to the 5 basic movements in Theory U, showing the affinities between Thoreau's and Scharmer's practices. Our hypothesis connects *Walden* and Theory U through contemporary phenomenology by means of the concept of “transformative experience” (Carel & Kidd 2020).

Indeed, both Thoreau and Scharmer invite the reader or participant on a journey in which the subject undergoes a transformation of viewpoints, from “ego” to “eco”. Critical thinking and imaginative leadership could be thus understood as the capacity to facilitate such transformative practices.

The hypothesis is not completely new; Scharmer himself has often visited Walden Pond and acknowledged that the sources that influenced his thinking include “the work of the avant-garde artist Joseph Beuys, and the writings of Henry David Thoreau” (2016, 30). However, this connection has not yet been developed in detail or explained in scientific literature.

2. Hypothesis: *Walden* by U

According to Scharmer (2018), the 5 movements in the U process are:

- 1) Co-initiating: uncovering shared intention.
- 2) Co-sensing: seeing reality from the edges of the system.
- 3) Presencing: connecting to the highest future potential.
- 4) Co-creating: crystallizing and prototyping the new.
- 5) Co-shaping: growing innovation ecosystems.

Our hypothesis is that those movements also informed Thoreau's transcendentalism, specifically in his masterpiece *Walden* (1854). To prove it, let us look at them one by one.

2.1. Co-initiating

The U process starts with “the primacy of perception and attention” (Scharmer 2016, 379). How? By listening to others, to oneself, and to the social field. “Listen to what life calls you to do”, urges Scharmer. So, the first movement is not really a movement: it is an invitation to stop. That is the starting point in *Walden*, too: “Here is life, an experiment to a great extent untried by me”, writes Thoreau (9). How to live it?

Thoreau found sanctuary in Walden Woods and decided to stop and stay there for a while. He was not satisfied with the old system, the traditional answers: “I hear an irresistible voice which invites me away from all that”, he wrote (10). In this sense, he was a full transcendentalist: a member of the most innovative social movement of antebellum New England, which crystallized in Concord (Massachusetts) around Ralph Waldo Emerson in the 1840s.

A few months before *Walden* was published in 1854, the Association for the Advancement of Science sent Thoreau a letter inquiring about his activities. It was not an easy question for him to answer, and eventually, he wrote in his Journal entry for March 5, 1853, “I am a mystic – a transcendentalist – & a natural philosopher to boot” (Thoreau 1997, 469).

Transcendentalism was a sort of contracultural movement; even Emerson tried not to be directly associated with it. It was not the kind

of life “which men praise and regard as successful”, as Thoreau wrote. But, he asked, “Why should we exaggerate any one kind at the expense of the others?” (19) “Why should we live with such hurry and waste of life?” Such a hurry is intellectual as well as physical since we “cannot possibly keep our heads still” (93).

The invitation to stop is both a rejection of conformity and a commitment to diversity. Because there should be “as many different persons in the world as possible”, Thoreau “would have each one be very careful to find out and pursue his own way, and not his father's or his mother's or his neighbor's instead” (71). He is representative of what philosopher Marina Garcés (2017) describes as “radical Enlightenment”: a combination of critical thinking and a lack of reverence for the past and, at the same time, openness and confidence in what Thoreau called “the unquestionable ability of man [*sic*] to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor” (90).

New England transcendentalism was not a technical inquiry into the presuppositions of human experience, as it was for Kant, but “a new confidence in and appreciation of the mind's powers, and a modern, non-doctrinal spirituality” (Goodman 2019). This spirituality included following one's own source, conscience or “genius”: “Follow your genius closely enough, and it will not fail to show you a fresh prospect every hour” (112). Thoreau believed that, in some circumstances, listening to the genius is the true source of action, but that is not to say that anything goes; only if it is the “faintest” objection, if it is “assured”, “resolute and faithful”, what “one healthy man feels will at length prevail over the arguments and customs of mankind” (216). The suggestions of conscience must be continually and experientially tested in order for them to be true.

It takes work to access to the source and uncover one's deep intentions. There is too much noise. Thoreau describes the move to *Walden* as a way to meet with people “under more favorable circumstances than [he] could anywhere else”, since “fewer came to see [him] on trivial business”. Company was winnowed by mere distance from town (144). Therefore, the motivation for going to *Walden* was not so much being alone as it was “building a container”: a place for meaningful conversations with others.

Thoreau was not self-sufficient, and he knew it. The *Walden* house could not be built without help. However, the need for others is not a simple necessity; it could also become a virtue, “an occasion for neighborliness” (45). “I am naturally no hermit,” he wrote (140). There is more than irony in his acknowledgement that “it is difficult to begin without borrowing” – partaking in a common intention is an intelligent way “to permit your fellow-men to have an interest in your enterprise” and even “the most generous course” (41). This said, the intention, the enterprise, must be worthwhile: “In the long run men hit only what they aim at. Therefore, though they should fail immediately, they had better aim at something high” (27).

“Failing better” is also part of the U process, as it is “beginning from nothing and uncovering some common ground” (Scharmer 2016,

378). In Theory U, in addition to listening, “the other key practice that matters at this early stage has to do with perseverance” (383): with never giving up. The same principle is suggested by Thoreau: “I would not stand between any man and his genius; and to him who does this work, which I decline, with his whole heart and soul and life, I would say, Persevere” (73).

2.2 Co-sensing

The time in *Walden* was a transformative experience because it sieved “only the finest sediment” (144) so that Thoreau could “front only the essential facts of life” (90). This learning is about ethics – how to live well – but it is also epistemological since it involves criticism of usual patterns of thought and “knowing by downloading”, to state it in Theory U language.

Men know many things, or pretend to (180), repeating “those sayings which men love to repeat whether they are true or not” (241). *Walden* is ironical or critical of many “self-evident truths” of its time, but its goal is not scepticism. Critical thinking comes, in Thoreau's case, from a deep longing for truth, because “be it life or death, we crave only reality”. “If we are alive,” he adds, “let us go about our business” (98). There is a lot of questioning of certainties in *Walden*, and to satisfy that “craving for reality” Thoreau went to the edges of his system, establishing a horizontal connection with others.

Thoreau made two journeys while in *Walden*: one to jail, where he had “a closer view of [his] native town,” and the other to Maine, the edge of the “civilized” white world, to climb Mount Katahdin. He was jailed for civil disobedience and thus became “an involuntary spectator and auditor of whatever was done and said in the kitchen of the adjacent village inn – a wholly new and rare experience”. In the woods in Maine, his journey was “exhilarating and sublime” (96), terrifying and life-changing.

On both journeys, the important thing was not the distance travelled, but the connection achieved: “One hastens to southern Africa to chase the giraffe; but surely that is not the game he would be after” (320). Going to the edge is not a merely spatial notion. It could also mean observing things in the intervals of “normal life”, without prejudice or expectations, as ordinary workers do: people “spending their lives in the fields and woods, in a peculiar sense a part of Nature themselves, are often in a more favorable mood for observing her, in the intervals of their pursuits, than philosophers or poets even, who approach her with expectation” (210).

Theory U is about leading from the emerging future, and accordingly in *Walden* the future can only be seen by relating to and looking at the present with fresh eyes. The biggest challenge is to “see what is before you, and walk on into futurity” by “being forever on the alert” with “the discipline of looking always at what is to be seen”. Nothing can substitute this: being a “seer” is superior to being “a reader, a student merely” (111), but the greatest thing for Thoreau is “to look through

each other's eyes for an instant" (10). This is not done solely with the eyes or by oneself: when "our vision does not penetrate the surface of things" (96), the whole of nature can represent "the embodiment of my own thoughts" (159), then "the whole body is one sense" (129) – that is the kind of sensing sought by both Thoreau and Theory U.

2.3. Presencing

One of the most suggestive sentences in *Walden* is near the end: "Things do not change; we change" (328). Thoreau imagines the human as an animal able to transform itself and, therefore, the world. Thoreau invites the reader or participant on a journey on which the subject undergoes a transformation of viewpoints from "ego" to "eco" – from the current self to the future Self, in U terms. The initial self is the "little self" to which Thoreau feels confined by the "narrowness of [his] experience" (3), but the final self in *Walden* is a "big Self", one that identifies with the universe, which is always "wider than our views of it" (320).

The premise is that the journey is worth it – that it is a sort of improvement over whatever went before. It involves to "explore thyself" (322), simplifying and letting go of the old life, and to "put some things behind" so that "an invisible boundary" is crossed and we can "live with the license of a higher order of beings" (323). It is a process of "Self-emancipation" in the "provinces of the fancy and imagination" (7).

Now, this journey or movement is a vertical one, metaphorically surveying the bottom of Walden Pond in search of "a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call reality" (98). But it is also a sort of collective "reset". In *Walden*, Thoreau describes several anthropological records of millennial rites in which a community starts anew driven by "the belief that it was time for the world to come to an end" (68). Thoreau's favourite metaphors for this reset are waking up, morning work, and getting lost: "not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations" (171).

The reset (that is, the dot at the bottom of the iconic representation of the U) is a break with both the future and the past, toeing the line between them: "to stand on the meeting of two eternities, the past and future, which is precisely the present moment" (17). This connection with "the perennial source of our life" (133) is vertical and upwards since the call is to "feel the influence of the spring of springs arousing them", so that one "would of necessity rise to a higher and more ethereal life" (41). But the vertical connection is also downwards, with a "chthonic" (Haraway 2016) element to it (175). Nowhere is this tension between up and down more visible than in the "Higher Laws" chapter (which could be interpreted in Harawayan terms, in what concerns the killing of other animals). Thoreau recognizes the hunter and fisherman in him, but "he has the seeds of a better life in him, he distinguishes his proper objects, as a poet or naturalist it may be, and leaves the gun and fish-pole behind" (213).

That poet and naturalist was Thoreau himself, of course. So, ultimately, this vertical journey is an expression of love: loving his own life, no matter how poor (328), and loving the community (both human and non-human) that makes it possible. He loves his beans because "they attached [him] to the earth" (155), and he loves "to weigh, to settle, to gravitate toward that which most strongly and rightfully attracts [...], to travel the only path [he] can, and that on which no power can resist" (330).

2.4. Co-creating

At Walden, Thoreau built a neat little house with the help of four or five friends, using old materials and fresh wood from a squatted piece of land; that house has become an iconic element in popular culture and replicas of his experiment can be found all over the world. In U terms, Thoreau prototyped the new and explored the future by doing. Too often this has been understood as individualistic self-creation. It is not. It is co-creation: *sympoiesis* (Haraway), not *autopoiesis*.

Having made the diagnosis of our condition and determined to "endeavor to be what he was made" (326), Thoreau attempts to improve it by means of experimentation. There are at least five lessons on this in *Walden*, and all five correlate to Theory U.

- 1) The first step is in "Economy" – change the metrics by connecting with your love, with that which is most dear to you. Life, not money, is the right measure: "the cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run" (31).
- 2) The second is to connect the head with the heart and the hand: "to practise some new austerity, to let [one's] mind descend into his body and redeem it, and treat himself with ever increasing respect" (222). The "head is hands and feet," writes Thoreau (98), adding that "labor of the hands, ... has a constant and imperishable moral" (157).
- 3) The third is to co-operate, that is: "to get our living together" (72). There is solitude in *Walden*, but also moments where the little house is full of people, and they "combined the advantages of conviviality with the clear-headedness which philosophy requires" (268, describing Channing's visit). "There we worked, revising mythology, rounding a fable here and there, and building castles in the air" (269, with Alcott). As Laura Walls (2017) aptly explains, Thoreau cannot be understood without R. W. Emerson, Bronson Alcott, Ellery Channing, and Elizabeth Peabody, among others.
- 4) The fourth is learning by doing: "try our lives by a thousand simple tests" (10). Students should not study life, "while the community supports them at this expensive game, but earnestly live it from beginning to end" (51).
- 5) The fifth is to iterate and accordingly improve the initial design: "go into business at once, and not wait to acquire the usual

capital, using such slender means as [one] had already got" (19). Do not reject technology if put to good use: "accept the advantages, though so dearly bought, which the invention and industry of mankind offer" (40). And repeat the process as long as necessary to achieve "the intimate and curious acquaintance one makes with various kinds of weed – it will bear some iteration in the account, for there was no little iteration in the labor" (161).

2.5. Co-evolving

The final lesson is that nothing lasts forever. Thoreau left *Walden* two years after settling in: "I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one" (323).

Every end is a new beginning, and so *Walden* ends like it began: in springtime, with new plans and new life around. Similarly, the final stage of the U journey has to do with revising, adapting, and co-shaping whatever has been learnt in the process, grounding it, and somehow institutionalizing it in new practices. This is done with others, even in *Walden*; when Thoreau writes that "we belong to the community" (46) he is being sarcastic, but not without acknowledging that we shape our fate collectively.

That might be the reason why schools and educational reforms were the principal result of the transcendentalist movement. Thoreau was involved in the creation of several innovation infrastructures by shaping safe places and rhythms for the community to learn, and by bringing the university to the street through social art (108, 110).

When Thoreau wrote that "we are all sculptors and painters, and our material is our own flesh and blood and bones" (221), he anticipated for more than a century Joseph Beuys' concept of "social sculpture", according to which every aspect of life could be approached creatively and, as a result, everyone has the potential to be an artist.

Social art for Thoreau is both emancipatory and uncomfortable: "The best works of art are the expression of man's struggle to free himself from this condition, but the effect of our art is merely to make this low state comfortable and that higher state to be forgotten" (37). Indeed, the effect of social arts should be to transform the quality of the present time:

"It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful; but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look, which morally we can do. To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts. Every man is tasked to make his life, even in its details, worthy of the contemplation of his most elevated and critical hour" (90).

Back in the 21st century, let's contemplate one of such "critical hours" again.

3. Method

Taking into consideration the previous background and hypothesis, our research is aimed at understanding GAIA as a form of social art, both historically and experientially, showing its genealogy and potential as a community of practice for cultural transformation.

The historical side is focused on the influence of Thoreau and Beuys in Otto Scharmer's work, but this article only addresses the part dealing with Thoreau. The experiential side is focused on the online part of the GAIA journey, as experienced by Antonio Casado da Rocha and reconstructed through the recordings of the seven live or "inhale" sessions.

Therefore, the research questions are three: To what extent Thoreau's *Walden* could be an inspiration for GAIA? (Q1), Is GAIA a global community of practice? (Q2), How does it serve its goal of re-imagining civilization? (Q3). Q1 has been tentatively answered in the previous section of this article. As for Q2 and Q3, we proceeded as follows:

We compiled and watched recordings of seven online GAIA sessions (R1-R7, see links below), covering the whole first cycle or "journey". The information consisted of approximately twelve hours of audio and video that were subject to thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2008), a type of analysis that allows for the identification of the main thematic axes and the content on which the representation of a social object such as "disruption", "transformation", or "renewal" is based.

To conduct the thematic analysis, we watched the recordings again. Fifty-eight passages of the recording that were significant for the research questions were selected and classified into twelve main categories or themes. Those parts were assigned a label (or sub-theme) that captured a more general meaning. The procedure was inductive, and as we discussed the nature of the codes, the information began to be articulated in a theoretical way, considering recent studies on the same topic (Pomeroy *et al.* 2021; Pomeroy & Oliver 2021). Eventually, we selected the passages (and themes) that were repeated and consistent with each other so that they could be articulated in a coherent narrative that could answer the main research questions.

4. Results

The thematic analysis identified twelve recurrent categories or overarching themes around research questions Q2 and Q3. They address the question posed by Scharmer in Recording 1: "How to activate our imagination for civilization renewal?" (R1, 13:37).

CATEGORY	RECURRENCE
Imagination	14
The other	9
Future	8
Ecology	5
Learning not to know	5
Making time for ourselves	4
Social field	4
Emergence	3
Making space for the other	3
Shadow	2
Social art	2
Time	1

Table 1. Thematic analysis

Source: Own creation

Several other themes appeared, but here we present only the results of the qualitative analysis in relation to the role of imagination in times of disruption.

The selected passages speak of imagination as the opening of a relationship between the self and the other, and between the time of disruption and the emerging future. This relationship takes place within an ecology of overlapping social fields, or social systems “seen from within”, in which the learning edge is about how to live with uncertainty, how to accept the other, and how to face what several participants called “the shadow”. Forms of social art are proposed and practised to facilitate such learning.

This synthesis is too general in contrast with the passages, which are specific and grounded on personal experiences of “presencing” (experiencing connection with our source or true intention) and “absencing” (experiencing violence, be it direct, structural, or attentional, as explained in R6). Therefore, a few examples might help unpack the findings.

Imagination

- Imagination is an opening of the mind and the sensibility. Mariann from Chile shares in R7 (23:01) that the GAIA community helps her learning “to see through a different lens all those infinite possibilities that appear from the experience of sharing this journey with all of you”.

The other

- Imagination is relational. In R2 (1:42:05) Vandana Shiva declares “isolation” to be the main problem in the pandemic, and advocates for “joining efforts ... what we say is so how you are therefore I am”.

Future

- The future is imagined as uncertain. In R3 (10:45) Antoinette recognizes that “we are in a world with many of us in lockdown, many of us are still in quarantine, in different ways, and many of us have come to terms in facing a new reality, and maybe quite uncomfortable, and so we have tools, we have practices, but they’re still uncomfortable; and I just want to acknowledge that there is where we are, and that we may not know what is going to happen next, and that’s okay even when it doesn’t feel good”.
- However, uncertainty is also a chance for transformation. In R3 (49:00), Susan declares that “people are using the uncertainty of the situation to make big changes in their lives”.

Ecology

- There is a general feeling of civilizational overshoot and ecological limits being transgressed. Otto (R2, 32:16) claims that “our system is not sustainable, we are hitting the wall... it’s not only broken, it’s hitting the wall”.
- The deep causes of individual suffering, ecological breakdown and extreme social inequality, and their consequences for the self and others, are being cynically ignored and neglected. Jon Kabat-Zinn (R4, 1:00:27): “There’s a kind of cynicism, a toxic cynicism, that is institutionalized, then legalized in very many ways that people don’t even realize, that there’s some larger context that is being created by the human mind”.
- Ecology is not separated from economics. In R5 (1:05:42), Fritjof Capra says “there’s a direct relation between economic justice and ecological balance”.

Learning not to know

- Laura, from Uruguay: “GAIA is a journey of deep immersion into not knowing” (R7, 23:22).

Making time for ourselves

- Crystal, from Taiwan: “GAIA is a journey that re-activates our deep connection with self” (R7 22:57).

Social field

- Otto, from Boston: “There are three bodies each of us is participating, we have a small body which is our physical body that is just what we’re walking in, then there is the big body which is the planet earth, and then there’s the third body, and the third body is this social body which we collectively enact, and that’s what we really mean with the social field” (R3, 1:32:18).

Making space for the other

- Antoinette, from New York: “inter-cultural cross pollination ... each day, each week there's something new emerging in our communities” (R5, 18:08; 19:35).

Shadow

- “Seeing our own shadow is the source of transformation that allows us to step into a different world. It's our piece of the path to the future, that we need to hold, that we need to own, that we need to polish and transform”, says Otto (R7, 45:05) quoting another participant (Noel Nannup, from Australia).
- “We need to integrate the tools in an extended concept of science ... to help communities and systems to sense and see themselves, to look into the mirror and see our own collective shadows ... structural violence is the most powerful example of looking into that collective mirror” (Otto, R3, 20:10).

Social art

- “To effect profound change is not enough to react to the symptoms, and it's also not sufficient just to redesign the frame of these patterns of behaviour, we also need to attend to deeper source conditions which we operate (...) and one of the most powerful tools we have found in our experience, has to do with social arts, with social arts practices” (Otto, R3, 18:15, abridged).

Along with others, those pieces of data tell a story about GAIA as a space of connection in which diverse communities navigated the “in-between” or “strange” times of the pandemic's disruption. According to the participants, the connection helped them move from the initial shock and “freeze” reaction (even apocalyptical in tone: R1, 10:03) towards a relational activation of possibilities by means of a “whole person, whole system” array of tools and methods for mutual empowerment. The story is about a “critical hour” in which the movement from “being stuck” to “being open” begins to happen when we connect with our own shadow or limits, accepting discomfort, fighting isolation, and facing what we do not know.

Conclusions

Through this study, carried out from an interdisciplinary perspective between philosophy and sociology, and within the framework of an impromptu intervention aimed at facing the disruption caused by the

pandemic, we propose that *Walden* enacts a kind of transformation that works “from the whole” or “the emerging future”, and therefore that Theory U can rightfully claim it as a philosophical precedent. This might also explain why so many world leaders and change-makers (Gandhi, M. L. King, Nelson Mandela, Daisaku Akeda, amongst others) have found inspiration in Thoreau's life and works, but it will take further work to show it.

As for GAIA, the data gathered suggest that this ongoing initiative embodies a global community of social arts participants – an “ecology of imagination”, in the sense proposed by Marina Garcés (2021) in this issue: critical thinking emerges from an ecosystem of imagination, which in turn emerges from practices in which we embrace otherness, relate the future to the present time, and act with confidence in the face of uncertainty. We conclude that Q1 is validated not only by Scharmer's own acknowledgment of Thoreau's influence, but also by the interpretation of *Walden* (the original two-year experience) as an awareness-based social arts performance, and of *Walden* (the book) as a re-enactment of the transformative experience brought by the performance. Thematic analysis was not exhaustive and therefore research (as GAIA itself) is a work in progress, but we consider Q2 and Q3 to be also validated, since participant testimony confirms that GAIA provided support and inspiration to a number of practitioners, offering an online holding space and a weekly rhythm for their own communities of practice to interact and develop, both locally and globally. Those practices include several forms of social art meant to build capacities for confident action in disruptive times, so we see GAIA and other related experiences as a useful ecology of the imagination for the 21st century.

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Author contributions

Original idea and conceptualization: ACdR. Participant observation: ACdR. Data curation and coding: NVM. Data analysis: ACdR and NVM. Writing – original draft: ACdR. Writing – reviewing and editing: ACdR and NVM.

Links

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