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Letter to the Alpine Glaciers and Ecosystemic Therapy

Chiara Fortina Santin[1,2,3]

[1]Tavistock and Portman, London, UK | [2]Institute of Family Therapy, London, UK | [3]Kings College, London, UK

Correspondence: Chiara Fortina Santin (chiara.santin@btinternet.com)

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ABSTRACT

Through a love letter to the glaciers that have shaped the author's inner landscape as a child, this article shares reflections on the ecological context of climate change, our relationship with the more-than-human world and the implications for ecosystemic therapy. At a time of multilayered ecological crisis, if we engage in dialogue with the more-than-human world, even whispers from the glaciers as perspectives from the wild can help us feel in tune with the loss of habitats and the state of the natural environment, leading us to recognise our sense of loss and eco-grief as a response to climate change and ongoing natural disasters. A shift of positioning away from dualistic thinking and anthropocentrism is necessary and urgent. This paper will argue that embracing ecological thinking will lead to redefining therapy as *dual hospitality* where nature becomes the host and co-therapist, whereas clients and therapists become co-explorers of inner and outer landscapes. Nature, as a *diffractive mirror*, will reflect the tight link between our sense of well-being, mental health and our sense of belonging to Mother Earth. This process of rewilding our personal and professional lives will contribute to restoring our shared identity as earth dwellers and activate our commitment to care for the planet. This, in turn, will lead to becoming actively engaged in *imagin-action*, that is, as systemic therapists/activists imagine and create new landscapes of mental health services rooted in social justice and ecological change.

1 | The Ecological Context

We cannot ignore that climate change has become a climate emergency as it is now an everyday reality affecting us all, the whole planet and its natural habitats. Natural disasters can be seen as manifestations of how humanity, particularly non-indigenous cultures, has put itself and its needs before everything else, using and abusing the environment and the more-than-human world. Western cultures, oppressive political and economic systems, embedded in anthropocentrism and driven by power and greed, have destroyed many habitats and species and have permeated the social fabric and all areas of our lives. This has created a lifestyle that is unsustainable and has an impact on our mental health, individually, as families and communities (Totton 2011; Rust and Totton 2012; Rust 2020). As systemic thinkers, we consider how interconnected these systems are by widening our perspective to include multiple layers of context in which we are embodied and embedded (Hardham 1996), the more-than-human world, including the Cosmos and the imaginal world as shown the figure below.

When a climate disaster happens, we could all feel emotionally shocked and overwhelmed; however, we can quickly fall back into a default position of denial about the severity of the ecological crisis that, in turn, reinforces our cultural disconnection from nature and ourselves as biological beings. Unfortunately, this kind of news has become more frequent.

In 2024, news of a new tipping point for the loss of ice sheet in Antarctica, and some headlines about disappearing glaciers in Venezuela and in Europe, brought back memories of the Italian Alps where I am originally from. It is shocking that this process of melting so-called 'permanent ice' is leading to even changing political and natural borders between Switzerland and Italy. I was filled with great sadness. This is what Joanna

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Key Points

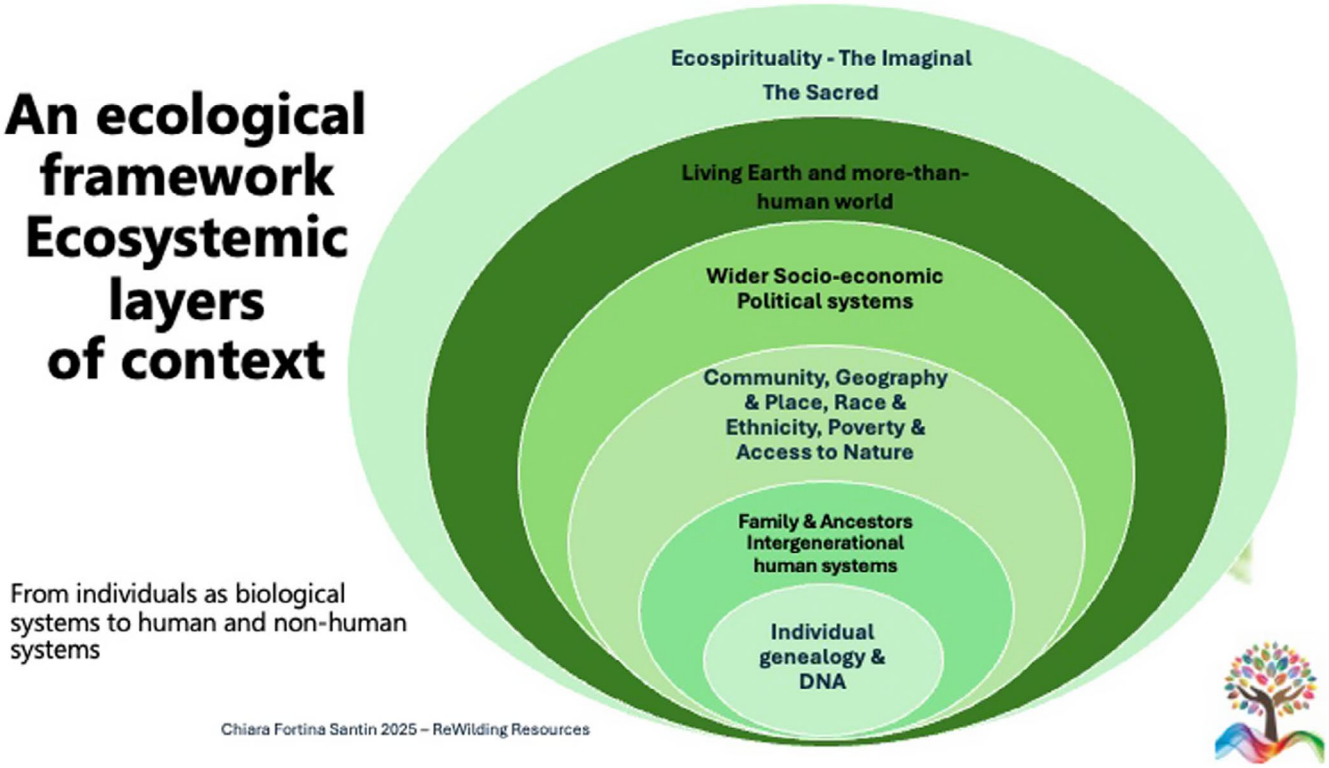
- The article invites us to use an ecological framework to include multiple layers of context, including the spiritual and the imaginal, the Cosmos.
- The article is an invitation to engage in dialogue with the more-than-human world to embrace an ecological and wild perspective.
- The article includes a letter to the disappearing glaciers that have shaped the author's inner landscapes as a child to show the importance of acknowledging loss of habitats and eco-emotions as appropriate responses to climate change.
- The article challenges us to redefine ecosystemic therapy as dual hospitality; hence, nature as a co-therapist and host where clients and therapists become guests and co-explorers of inner and outer landscapes.
- The entanglement with the other, including matter and the more-than-human world, encourages a process of rewilding away from anthropocentrism through nature as a diffractive mirror to highlight the reciprocal relationship between humanity and the environment.
- The article encourages engagement in imagin-action, that is, imagining of new landscapes of mental health services and to embrace a way of being in the world that actively seeks social justice and ecological change.

Macy (1983) started describing as eco-grief. Later, many others discussed eco-grief and eco-anxiety in the wider context of climate emotions (e.g., Cunsolo et al. 2020; Hickman et al. 2021; Landmann 2021; Pihkala 2021).

In this self-destroying and down-spiralling climate, Bill Plotkin (2013) and his ecological map to understand the human mind strongly advocate that reconnecting to nature is an essential part of our survival as a species. The life-enhancing qualities of the natural and more-than-human world are the blueprint for us to learn to become nurturing and generative adults, for example, trees producing oxygen for all and one species of animals creating a habitat for the survival of another and its ecosystem. Plotkin proposes that we all have the capacity to nurture others, be generative of life to promote healing and wholeness, for the earth community, including the more-than-human world. In this way, we can act from the depth of our soul as a manifestation of the self. One of the practices that Plotkin suggests is to write a love letter to a mountain or river in order to develop these nurturing qualities, and more specifically the ecological and cosmic aspects of the self and wild mind.

As I was reading about the multiple news stories regarding the loss of glaciers in various parts of the world, I felt compelled to write a love letter to the ancient glaciers that I have seen and visited several times throughout my life.

> *Dear Ancient Glaciers*,
>
> Since I was a child, I admired your fascinating and reassuring presence in my regular trips and summer camps in the Italian Alps. Looking up to you and the highest peaks filled me with a sense of awe and wonder. Time spent near you had a flavour of eternity. You were able to combine stability and change, stillness and movement as the melting snow was





shaping and reshaping your appearance, your very being, through the seasons, every year.

You were not only at the mercy of snow falls to replenish your ice caps, but you were increasingly at the mercy of much bigger forces, increasingly erratic weather systems, the irreversible increase in temperature whilst you were trying to keep cool, and to resist the changes to preserve your essence. I wonder if it was almost like losing your sense of identity and fearing to disappear for good from the Earth, now breathing with difficulty, feeling warmer and warmer each summer, each season, each day.

Returning to say hello each summer as an adult had a bittersweet taste. I started noticing your majesty shrinking, breathing in the sadness of an irreparable loss all around you. I was noticing the level of the water in the lakes reducing, some of the alpine lakes disappearing altogether, leaving many streams dry and thirsty. The permanent aura of eternity was now a distant dream.

Filled with sadness and despair, I have been trying to make sense of how this has happened in a twinkle of an eye. I felt like shouting from the top of your naked peaks and tell the world to stop hurting you, damaging your ecosystem and threatening your very existence.

I can only imagine the anger, perhaps the rage at what humanity is doing to you and to the whole planet Earth. One night I heard you crying, in a desperate attempt to fight. The following morning, I realised that you were adapting and resigning to a changed landscape, made of wet rubble rather than thick solid ice. You were helpless in your attempt to stand strong and to cover rocks that were there at the beginning of time, now feeling bare and exposed to the elements like no other times. In this changed landscape you not only felt robbed of the present moment but also denied the future. Sadly, this is not only happening to you; it is happening to many other glaciers all over the world.

Oh my glaciers, how short sighted we are in failing to listen to your warnings, pretending that you have no voice, relying on the fact that you have no power to change or reverse this trend. This is not just a prediction. This is a reality now: you are slowly disappearing, affecting all the ecosystems connected to you in a destructive cycle of death and misery for every being on Earth.

Oh my glaciers! Why are we so foolish to think that we will survive without changing our ways of looking, listening, whilst living our disconnected and disembodied lives?

In the darkest nights and most chilling silence humanity has ever experienced, if you could speak, what would you say? If we could just listen to your call for systemic change, for a radical departure from this self-destructive trend we are oblivious to!

I will just rest at your feet for now to reflect.



2 | Ecosystemic Therapy and Rewilding

Why does it matter that we are losing the glaciers on our planet? How does it connect to systemic therapy? We all know that these are just examples of the multiple threats to our very existence as a species and as a planet. Hugh Palmer (2021) reminds us, by revisiting and reclaiming Bateson's legacy for our systemic minds, that long ago Bateson had predicted this ecological predicament and that the only solution is to change the way we think.

People may seek therapy at a time of personal distress or concern for others, which often relates to relationships becoming difficult, conflictual, abusive rather than supportive and loving. Whether we work with individuals or couples, families or groups, we see each single individual as part of an often complex web of relationships in which they are embedded, yet we do not tend to consider that any psychological distress or relational issues are also connected to the broader ecological context. However, in recent years it has become apparent that our disconnection from nature is tightly linked to deteriorating mental health on a global scale.

Working therapeutically in nature makes it more obvious that we are part of a web of relationships that are interconnected and interacting with each other. We are actually part of a global ecosystem where everybody and everything is interconnected.

The more I practise in nature, the more I engage in a process of redefining therapy. Nick Totton started using the term *wild therapy* (2011, 2021) to acknowledge that we live in a domesticated world causing an imbalance of the ecosystems including the psyche; therefore, as therapists, we need to cultivate a wild mind. Through rewilding my systemic practice (Fortina Santin 2024), I am striving to welcome more wildness into my personal and professional life, reconsidering my place within the material and the natural world, including the more-than-human and the spiritual world, and the blurring of boundaries between the personal and the professional self.

Taking the perspective of a glacier is no different from inviting multiple perspectives from which to see the world, using different lenses, honouring different points of view as part of the same ecosystem. The *Wild Reflecting Team* (Santin 2021; Fortina Santin 2024) is a strong invitation to joining conversations with the more-than-human world, allowing wild voices to be listened to and becoming part of the therapeutic process, whether we work indoors or outdoors.

3 | Ecosystemic Therapy as Transmaterial Worldling

Writing a letter to the glaciers from my childhood reminds me of the importance of these places, memories and stories for me, my ecology of selves (N. Bateson 2016) and my sense of belonging to Mother Earth. This is what Simon and Salter (2019, 10) call the *transmaterial ecology*, the coming together of the material and the narrative world, and the web of relationships and meanings created between and within! They write: *'Co-inhabitation emphasises not simply collaboration and intra-action* (Barad 2007) *but a humility to re-position humans as living*

in a vital-emergent-disappearing world, alongside and as vital-emergent-disappearing matter. We are all equal earth dwellers'.

It follows that ecosystemic therapy strives to provide a space in nature that honours this shared identity as earth dwellers, engaged in *transmaterial worldling* (Simon and Salter 2019), that is to acknowledge our co-inhabiting the human and non-human world in a constant process of making and remaking the world we live in from within, including matter; animals; plants; all living organisms; as well as rocks, minerals and glaciers! If we give ourselves permission to be playful with words, a worldling might be like a child's world or offspring, a new growth like a sapling that needs nurturing like any child born into the world. The term worldling might also be a social justice perspective or action perspective that we might take to embrace a new order of things in the wider Cosmos.

Ecosystemic therapy can help us experience the blurring of boundaries between the human and non-human worlds, what is animate and inanimate; it can restore our lost connection with nature and a deep understanding of this transmateriality, so familiar to our own ancestors and Indigenous cultures.

4 | Ecosystemic Therapy as Dual Hospitality

The idea of hospitality (Derrida 2000) has been used in systemic and family therapy to emphasise the importance of the therapeutic relationship as an ethical position of openness and awareness of the risk of cultural appropriation, the potential for the power held by the therapist to become a form of violence even when trying to be a good host (Rober and De Haene 2017). Hospitality has also been used to encourage an integrative approach by welcoming different therapy modalities, for example, cognitive, narrative and psychiatry, to enhance mental health services (Newman et al. 2003). Jodi Aman (2006) used the metaphor of 'the therapist as host' to consider the aesthetics of the therapeutic space to make clients, particularly children, feel welcomed in therapy.

If we transfer the idea of hospitality into working in nature, a paradigm shift is needed. Nature always welcomes us, but if we position ourselves as guests, we can reflect the ethics of *dual hospitality*. This means that our implicit goal is to recognise nature as the host and co-therapist, as well as nature as the calming physical environment and context in which therapy takes place. At the same time, we acknowledge our role and ethical responsibility as therapists in holding and creating a therapeutic space in nature. This helps us consider our therapeutic positioning as guests and co-explorers, letting go of many plans and systemic techniques, being decentred facilitators and sharing some of the professional power we hold with nature. This can encourage clients to become co-explorers and recognise nature as a therapist and the expert of their lives too (Fortina Santin 2024).

I am an ecosystemic therapist because I have experienced nature as my rock, my secure base and my consistent therapist throughout my life. I always felt welcomed by nature, a constant presence, there for me, anytime I needed it. This is, however, a consumerist view of the world reflected in our capitalist culture as if nature is only there to meet our needs or, worse, to be exploited.

Embracing an ecological framework leads to seeing the reciprocity and the circularity of this relationship. If we were to experience ourselves as earth dwellers, we could contribute to reversing the illusion of human dominance over everything and consider ourselves not only as guests but also as custodians and stewards of the land we inhabit with a duty of care for our planet.

I feel committed to sharing the privilege of my bond with nature so that many can experience and learn to connect meaningfully with the non-human world and develop a sense of belonging to Mother Earth as biological beings and part of the mysterious matrix of all life. This experience of *nature connectedness* can help restore our broken relationship with the natural world (Richarson 2023), and it is about enhancing both personal and planetary well-being (Passmore et al. 2025).

5 | Ecosystemic Therapy as Entanglement With the Other

Karen Barad (2007, 392–393) states: 'Differentiating is not about othering or separating but on the contrary about making connections and commitments. The very nature of materiality is an entanglement. Matter itself is always already open to, or rather entangled with, the "Other"'.

I cannot be more different from a glacier, yet I am invited to think that we are made of the same matter in this fascinating web of relationships. This is what Barad (2007) calls entanglement. Thinking about the glaciers, I wonder: Where does the glacier start and where do the underlying rocks and soil and water end? What about the seasons and the weather system intermingling so that the snow is becoming ice, and the temperature interacting with this in a mysterious way to change it again into water as the summer arrives? And in turn, how does it relate to myself as part of that ecosystem, my relationship and story about this inner and outer landscape? Differentiating is held within this tight entanglement of matter.

Taking the perspective of the glaciers, I am invited to consider ecosystemic therapy as entanglement with the Other, a flowing of relationships which allows new connections, that is, differentiating to be made within the therapeutic ecosystem. This is when clients and therapists become co-explorers; they recognise and experience becoming entangled in a mysterious web of new ideas, meanings, feelings and material elements as deeply interconnected.

6 | Ecosystemic Therapy Through the Mirror of Nature

If we consider our biological blueprint that we are nature and nature is us, when we engage with the natural and the more-than-human world, we can see glimpses of our shared identity

through a mirroring process, a window into new emerging inner landscapes (Santin 2021; Fortina Santin 2024). However, if we start seeing ourselves through the mirror of nature, we do not see an exact copy of who we are or who we think we are.

When we, as therapists, become facilitators of a change of perspective beyond what is seen, described and understood, for example, the familiar representation of a problem and ourselves within an ecological context, we may see ourselves as part of an ever-changing and emerging process of diffraction rather than just a reflection of the same.

Barad (2007, 381) explains: 'The phenomenon of diffraction does not merely signify the disruption of representationalism and its metaphors of reflection in the endless play of images and its anxieties about copy and original and displacements of the Same elsewhere'.

We may describe ecosystemic therapy as diffraction when we, therapists/clients as co-explorers, appreciate a moment of connection, an insight that changes everything we see. Change becomes necessarily a process of diffraction; a new representation of reality; and new ways of seeing, feeling, describing and understanding, which barely resemble what we knew before.

This involves the art of noticing the difference that can make a difference (G. Bateson 1972), differentiating as the carefully calculated risk of undoing what is known to allow one to see a new reality made possible by seeing beyond the mirror of sameness, old solutions to old and new problems. In fact, Barad (2007, 382) writes: 'The crucial point is not mirroring but its creative undoing, not sameness reproduced without end but attentiveness to differences that matter'.

7 | The Universe in Becoming—Open Questions

Writing to the glaciers has reminded me of the panmorphic crisis Simon (2021), meaning a crisis we are experiencing in all areas of our lives, at all levels: ecological, economic and sociopolitical, including mental health.

I agree with Hugh Palmer (2022, 2025) and Roger Duncan (2021) that the current ecological breakdown and narrative collapse brought forth by Western dualistic thinking are replicating the same epistemological error of modernity that Bateson highlighted, that is, the separation between the human mind, body and nature.

Systemic wisdom cannot ignore that we are biologically attracted to nature and life-like processes (Wilson 1984), our blueprint and shared identity with the more-than-human world. This ecological breath of fresh air can give us hope to restore our sense of belonging and connection to everything and each other. When I practise in nature, I am mindful of an implicit therapeutic aim, that is, helping clients to see themselves as part of a much wider context, the ecological context, the Universe where everything is interconnected and entangled (Barad 2007).

As some advocate (Falco et al. 2025), a cultural shift is necessary to move away from anthropocentrism and colonising thinking. Through embracing anti-racist, feminist and indigenous worldviews, we can promote planetary relationships rooted in social justice. Similarly, Laszloffy and Twist (2019) have highlighted that the field of family therapy needs to be ecologically informed and see therapy as a vehicle for social and cultural change.

This may mean walking invisible paths that will be unravelling in unexpected and unpredictable ways. This reminds me of Imelda McCarthy's Fifth Province thinking that invites us to navigate the space between the liminal and the imaginal, utopia and dystopia, a time between stories, remembering past wisdom and naturing the present (McCarthy 2021).

Changes are inevitable, in a world that is emerging and becoming as Barad states: 'We are of the universe – there is no inside, no outside. There is only intra-acting from within and as part of the world in its becoming' (Barad 2007, 396).

As systemic therapists, who are we becoming? By embracing an ecosystemic framework, we may challenge the status quo of our practices and mental health services, fixed ways of seeing the world, the problems, relationships and create space for *imaginaction* (Fortina Santin 2024). This is an ethical call to deepen our relationship with nature by becoming custodians of the land and therapists/activists to imagine and create new landscapes of services through reconnecting with our systemic roots of being engaged in social justice (Falco et al. 2025).

As an ecosystemic therapist, I wonder: If we were to acknowledge that glaciers are disappearing whilst accepting that we are already living these dystopian realities ... a step back from first-order certainties may be necessary to allow the emerging of a new differentiating logic, a diffractive new order of things, finding meanings in the dirty ice left.

If we were to start from rewilding ourselves, body, mind, heart and spirit, and our practices (Fortina Santin 2024), whatever that means in our personal and professional lives, what difference will it make to us, our way of thinking, being and living? What difference would it make to families, communities, locally and globally, and the private and public landscapes of mental health services?

If we were to listen to the voice of the glaciers or any other wild beings we are entangled with, what words of systemic wisdom can we hear?

> *Dear Ancient Glaciers*,
>
> It's time for me to go now and say my good-bye. I can only try to listen to your whispers, hold on to my memories of your majestic presence in my short earthly life, being grateful for giving me a sense of belonging to Mother Earth and everything else interconnected to the web of life that goes beyond time and space. This is still the essence of who I am as an earth dweller and an ecosystemic therapist. I bow to you! Thank you!



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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The author has nothing to report.

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