Conference Reflection

Nsamu Moonga
University of Pretoria
mwendandende@gmail.com

Bio

Nsamu Moonga is a music therapist and doctoral research candidate at the University of Pretoria. His research employs Indigenous research methodologies that centre the participants' experiences of the subject under investigation. He focuses his research on acts of appreciative inquiry, expressions of desire, and the liberation of people.

Abstract

This paper presents a reflective critique of the University of Johannesburg Art Therapy Conference held in July 2023, focusing on the intersection of race, coloniality, and professionalisation within arts therapies. It critically examines the systemic barriers faced by minoritised practitioners and communities whose valuable contributions and needs remain marginalised in professional discourse. Personal observations from the conference reveal a troubling pattern of limited representation of Black professionals, often framed as "grateful amateur users" of the arts rather than as equal contributors. This framing highlights how professionalisation within the field can perpetuate hierarchies, prioritising Western practices and qualifications at the expense of inclusivity and Indigenous knowledge. The exploitation and undervaluation of Black labour are examined, illustrating the complex tension between altruism and economic survival within arts therapies. Informed by Kim Berman's editorial insights, these reflections advocate for urgent structural reform and cultural sensitivity, promoting Indigenisation practices to dismantle exclusionary frameworks in the profession. The reflections intensify the call for required dialogue and collective action toward more inclusive, equitable, and socially just practices within arts therapies in Africa and beyond.

Keywords: Arts therapies, Indigenisation, intersectionality, professionalisation, social justice

Introduction

These reflections are situated from my personal standpoint as an African practitioner engaging with the intersection of race, coloniality, and professionalisation in the arts therapies. This article aims to interrogate the structural barriers and power dynamics that became apparent to me at the University of Johannesburg Arts Therapy Conference in 2023. The reflections and insights are integral to illuminating the blindspots as we expand the discourse on arts therapies' role in addressing social justice in the Global South. In her editorial, Berman (2024) situates the arts as inherently collaborative, fostering interconnectedness and empathy while addressing historical wounds. This intentional focus on unpacking historical legacies resonates strongly with the themes of these reflections. The reflections were written prior to the Berman Editorial. Berman (2024) calls on art therapists to deconstruct power and privilege, foregrounding intersectionality and the responsibility to disrupt established hierarchies in the practice and training of art therapists. The reflections build on Berman's editorial's thematic pillars by confronting the observed triad of challenges that reflect the complexities of professionalisation within the arts therapy sector, particularly in the African context.

Framework for the reflections

I will use the describe, interpret, evaluate, plan (DIEP) format to discuss the observed issues of limited representation of Black professionals, the portrayal of Black attendees as appreciative recipients rather than active contributors, and the absence of under-resourced communities, examining how these reflect broader systemic issues in professionalisation and economic exploitation within arts therapies. The DIEP model is a structured approach to reflective writing. The DIEP framework encourages individuals to describe an experience, interpret their thoughts and feelings about it, evaluate the positive and negative aspects, and plan for future actions or improvements based on their reflection (Boud et al., 2013).

I will discuss how the observations reflect the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion and the persistence of colonial structures in how arts therapies are practised and who has access to them. I challenge the notion of arts professionalisation as a neutral process, revealing its capacity to reinforce inequalities while simultaneously alienating historically excluded groups.

These reflections resonate with Berman's call for intentionality in addressing the legacies of exclusion and the unresolved tensions they generate. To further contextualise these reflections, I now turn to my positionality statement, which elucidates my situatedness in relation to how I experience myself in spaces I occupy and how such occupations impact me.

Positionality statement

As a Black African cultural observer, I have both experienced and witnessed how Africans, particularly in African Christian and NGO spheres, are frequently depicted in ways that reinforce stereotypes of dependency and impoverishment, as Kiguwa (2024) and Phiri et al. (2023) note. This awareness has sharpened my understanding of systemic issues in representation, where NGOs often serve as vehicles for neoliberal agendas, sanitising exploitative practices under the guise of benevolence (Walsh, 2020), Christian missionaries perpetuate the image of Africans as powerless victims who cannot help themselves (Kuja, 2019), and academic institutions offer lip service to the work of Indigenisation (Horsthemke, 2017). In this context, NGOs can act as the underbelly of capitalism, operating to absorb and placate the guilt of those engaged in profit-driven systems and academic institutions as perennial pacifiers of the rage of epistemic injury while perpetuating colonial narratives of the dependent, discovered, and rescued Africans (Cole, 2012; Flaherty, 2021).

As I approached writing these conference reflections, I encountered many false starts. My initial excitement at the gathering of arts therapists and practitioners from across the African continent—and some from around the world—was rooted in the value and cultural significance of gathering, a practice deeply consistent with African social structures. However, this excitement soon gave way to complex and conflicting emotions of discontent and discomfort. The focus on justice at the conference brought to the surface feelings of cognitive and emotional dissonance, a phenomenon well-documented by creative and expressive arts therapists and practitioners worldwide (Hunnewell, 2019; Swamy & Webb, 2022). As a minoritised individual within a small, often insular profession like arts therapies, I have become familiar with these tensions, which are intensified by the frequent exclusion and professional ostracisation experienced by those of us who

lack access to established networks of opportunity as Mains et al., (2024) have described.

The scarcity of opportunities in arts therapies, often concentrated within a close-knit circle of professionals, compounds the challenges of minoritised practitioners and underscores the need to renegotiate one's position within the field continually. The dynamics of social justice influence my reflections on this experience as they intersect with Blackness, gender, socioeconomic status, and a history of exclusion, which are dimensions often requiring a critical re-evaluation of self and humanity, as Walcott (2018) noted. This positionality shapes my critique of the professionalisation and systemic hierarchies within arts therapies, which often alienate minoritised voices and inhibit meaningful participation.

Observations on representation in arts therapies

During the University of Johannesburg Art Therapy Conference held in July 2023, I observed several problematic patterns regarding the representation of Black professionals and communities in the arts therapies field. Specifically, three observations stood out viz skewed representation of Black professionals, Black presentation as "grateful and congratulatory amateur users" of the arts, and underrepresentation of agentive communities.

Skewed representation of Black professionals

The limited representation of Black arts therapists and practitioners among speakers and participants at the conference highlighted broader issues of access and inclusion within the field of arts therapies. This underrepresentation reflects systemic inequities and limitations that many Black professionals encounter when navigating spaces traditionally shaped by Western norms and standards. The lack of diverse perspectives restricts the depth and breadth of dialogue, ultimately reinforcing a predominantly Eurocentric framework that does not fully engage the experiences or contributions of African practitioners.

Black presentation as "grateful and congratulatory amateur users" of the arts

Presentations often depicted Black professionals in ways that subtly framed them as appreciative recipients or amateurs rather than as pioneering

contributors. This portrayal, seen in discussions and presentations, relegates Black artists to roles that acknowledge their participation but not their expertise or leadership. Such framing reinforces a hierarchical dynamic within arts therapies, which positions Black professionals as beneficiaries of the field rather than as co-creators with a stake in its advancement. This dynamic marginalises Black voices and sustains a perception that Black practitioners are students of arts therapies rather than innovators.

Absence of agentive communities

Under-resourced Black communities were notably absent from meaningful engagement in the conference's discourse, except in cases where they were framed as beneficiaries of Western individuals-led organisations' benevolence. This selective representation presents these communities and individuals as recipients rather than as sources of rich, culturally informed practices in the arts and therapy. Such a perspective not only alienates under-resourced communities from being active participants but also perpetuates a narrative that disregards the depth and value of Indigenous African artistic and therapeutic practices. This absence of agency marginalises local voices and restricts the development of arts therapies practices that are genuinely inclusive and representative of diverse African cultural landscapes.

Systemic barriers and power dynamics in arts therapies

These observations had personal and professional resonance for me as a practitioner deeply invested in the Indigenisation and inclusion of African perspectives within arts therapies. The limited representation of Black professionals highlighted the systemic barriers faced by minoritised groups within this field, echoing longstanding struggles against coloniality and exclusion. Seeing Black professionals primarily presented as grateful beneficiaries rather than drivers of innovation within arts therapies was a poignant reminder of how pervasive colonial narratives can remain, even in spaces ostensibly dedicated to social justice.

Moreover, the absence of under-resourced Black communities from meaningful representation reminded me of the persistent challenges these communities face in accessing culturally relevant health resources. This exclusion perpetuates a dynamic where these communities are seen as recipients of charity rather than as possessing valuable contributions to the

arts and arts therapies field. This experience emphasised the urgent need to challenge and reframe these representations if arts therapies are to serve as authentically inclusive, socially just spaces.

These observations highlight systemic issues within the arts therapies field, particularly power dynamics and the enduring impact of colonial legacies. Often acting as a gatekeeping mechanism, professionalisation prioritises Western therapeutic norms, disproportionately impacting historically marginalised groups (Estrella, 2023; Kalocsai et al., 2023). In the ensuing sections, I will detail the underlying issues contributing to the three named observations from the conference: the implications of professionalisation within the arts therapies field, particularly how it fosters exclusion and hierarchies that marginalise Black practitioners and communities, the exploitation of Black labour and the systemic devaluation of amateur artists. Each section will examine these issues, considering their impact on arts therapists and emphasising the urgent need for structural reforms to foster a more inclusive and equitable field.

Professionalisation of the arts in therapy

In general, there are no qualms about professionalisation, especially considering the enduring shortage of competent and appropriately skilled workers in the public arena (Abrahams et al., 2022). Professionalisation is a process by which occupations gain public recognition as professions based on how well they match the purported qualifications with two components (Estrella, 2023). One strand is concerned with increasing status, while the other is concerned with members' ability to improve the quality of service they give (Hoyle, 2001). It is commonly assumed that these two elements proceed in parallel; however, this is not always the case. The terminology used to describe this divide is ambiguous. Nevertheless, distinguishing between professionalisation as the desire for status and professionalism as the development of skills and, thus, service helps understand the complexities of professionalisation.

Professionalism is a dynamic commitment to continuous improvement, development, mastery, devotion, and excellence (Cho et al., 2022; Parsa et al., 2021). Professionalism is not just about technical skills but also effective communication, situational awareness, initiative, time management, and leadership (Egetenmeyer et al., 2019). These crucial aspects of professionalism are not static but evolve with the individual's growth and learning (Wang &

Ho, 2020). Beyond these skills, professionalism also encompasses behaviours, ethics, and integrity that enhance contributions in any professional context (Rees et al., 2014).

This understanding of professionalism can align with professionalisation (Egetenmeyer et al., 2019; Jarbandhan, 2022). However, when viewed as a lover, connoisseur, or participant in a specific art or activity, the amateur often demonstrates even greater devotion to their craft and artistic expression (Ingold, 2021). Scholars in the arts in health have grappled with the question of professionalising and professionalism in arts and health (Dewey et al., 2019; Jones, 2020; Malis, n.d.). Much discussion has been on the semantic distinction between terminologies such as therapeutic arts (Dalton, n.d.), arts in therapy (Atkins et al., 2011), and arts therapies (SANATA, 2023.; Jones, 2020), relegating the amateur practitioner to the status of community artist status (Fouché et al., 2007).

The responsibility criterion is operationalised in professionalised occupations by implementing a code of ethics and licensure to regulate professional practice (Ukim & Adora, 2019). Ukim and Adora (2019) present extensive considerations of the criteria of professionalisation by various scholars, particularly in the social sciences. This article does not have sufficient space for me to delve into the specific criteria. Suffice it to present the particular ways the arts in therapy have proceeded with professionalisation in South Africa. The arts in therapy in South Africa have been professionalised as arts therapies (SANATA, n.d.; Berman, 2011; Dalton, n.d.).

The professionalisation of arts therapies in South Africa means that professionals are only those registered with the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) according to the Health Professions Act and Regulations that defines the scope of arts therapy professions. These regulations play a crucial role in shaping the professionalisation process (Government of South Africa, n.d.), contributing to the establishment of a recognised and respected field. Further, the HPCSA regulates training and registration whereby aspiring arts therapists complete master's degree-level programmes. Afterwards, they undergo formal registration exams with the HPCSA. According to the HPCSA, obtaining an HPCSA registration number officially allows individuals to practise as registered art therapists in South Africa. Added to the statutory requirement of registration and regulation is the professional invitation to be

part of the South African National Arts Therapies Association (SANATA). This body represents the interests of arts therapists across South Africa.

An inquiry into the shadow of professionalising liberally occurring arts populated by amateur artists makes an interesting proposition. The interest lies in the contradictory desires, the need for professionalisation and understanding how such professionalisation magnifies the divide in society between the formally trained artist, usually associated with people with means and the informally trained, often people with inherited skills in less sophisticated forms of tuition. Less formal training follows communitarian associations of learning. Amateur artists are often considered community practitioners to signify their relative distance from formal instruction in the specific arts. As an example, the entry requirements for registration with the HPCSA underscore the exclusion from professional practice of the arts in therapy for amateurs. This distinction was dramatised through the presentations at the conference. There were players in the arts therapy field who presented as amateurs. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary (2024), an amateur engages in a pursuit, study, science, or sport as a pastime rather than as a profession and lacks experience and competence in an art or science. The amateur is presumed incompetent (Muhs et al., 2012). This disavowed positioning of the artist strata relegates non-professional artists to playing supportive roles in the game of the therapeutic use of the therapies.

The professionalisation of the arts in therapy, at the best of times, can enhance the packaging of the arts in therapy as a public good and service that requires protection, providing for the practice of evidence-based care safe for the public. At the worst of times, it can entrench the colonial incentivisation of academy-based learning that is yet to establish a viable relationship with communities and potential arts users. Such unquestioned professionalisation emboldens patronage, control, and state censorship of the arts (Crehan, 1990). To this end, professionalisation is a form of colonisation. In this case, professionalisation of the arts colonises the arts, partitioning the arts with strict boundaries of ethical requirements. Like all forms of colonisation, professionalisation engenders the alienation of people from their means of meaning-making arts, leading to exclusion. Such exclusion leads to growing inequalities and inequity. Professionalisation ensures that colonialism continues in more benign and systemic ways.

As a process of conquest resulting in African states being governed by a settler government of Europeans (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020), one sees ongoing colonialism in the arts through usurpation, financing, and inclusive exclusion. Inclusive exclusion borrows from the logic of colonialism, established through a network of relations of exploitation, domination, and control of the means of production in ways that dehumanise, engender disparities, and prejudice some members of the society (Mamdani, 2001; Quijano, 2007). At the core of coloniality is an imbalance of power that affects all aspects of the social existence of beings, including gender, sexuality, interpersonal relations, spirituality, language, and race (Quijano, 2000).

In her keynote speech, drama therapist and researcher Lireko Qhobela challenges us to continually question coloniality and employ decolonial frameworks in reflective practices concerning training, research, and social justice. She challenges arts therapists to welcome criticality, reflexivity, and extension of the practice, including histories of places and cultures. Qhobela (2024, p.1) further asks us to be intentional about attending to the historical wounds: *How can we, as creative arts therapists on the African continent, begin to unpack historical wounds together?* The wounds of historical inequality and exclusion through such mechanisms as colonialism and apartheid continue to fester, much to the discomfort and desire to move on with the more effortless and fun things of being an art therapist.

Exploitation of the labour of the arts therapist

In the context of professionalisation, the widening gap between Black service users and professionals becomes more pronounced (Schierenbeck et al., 2013; Wilson et al., 2014). Research highlights significant barriers to accessing services, particularly in mental health. A key factor is the historical legacy of colonisation, knowledge appropriation, and repackaging that does not align with the service user's epistemic lifeworld. Professionalisation perpetuates this gap while advocating for the inclusion of historically marginalised individuals into the often-unseen profession. Notably, Black individuals remain conspicuously invisible within the field of arts therapies. Calls for diversity and personal involvement may inadvertently reinforce acquiescence and recognition politics (Grande, 2018). Amid this intricate landscape, Black artists may engage but ultimately be ensnared by systemic challenges exacerbated by scarcity, insecurity, and exploitation (Kalocsai et al., 2023).

The conference featured presentations by various groups, institutes, and institutions focused on social justice. It became evident that efforts were underway to address justice issues in Africa. However, a lingering question persisted: *Who was engaged in this social justice work, and for whom?* This inquiry, framed within the context of reflexive practice, led me to consider the fate of Black therapists. Qhobela (2024) observes that these therapists often become subtly invisible after training, fading into structures that attempt to uphold the professions. This invisibility seems rooted in a profound historical wound.

Navigating the landscape of social justice work in Africa involves multifaceted complexities. These complexities span financial economics, epistemic and ontological justice, evolutionary justice, and identity justice. To truly understand the systems shaping society, arts therapists must broaden their perspective and examine how these systems originated, evolved, and entrenched themselves within the governing institutions. Critically evaluating the socioeconomic organising principles that dictate societal structures and individual participation becomes essential.

The Black therapist grapples with the dual imperatives of altruism and economic necessity. Within a field marked by limited opportunities, this tension is often exploited by the select few who wield the power to provide employment—not-for-profit organisations. These entities strive to extend their services to marginalised populations, particularly where access remains elusive for resource-constrained individuals. My professional experience in not-for-profit contexts has revealed a disconcerting reality: arts therapists are frequently under-compensated, and their work is devalued. Arts therapists encounter challenges related to the devaluation of their expertise and labour. Unfortunately, as practitioners, we have perpetuated the notion that our work merely fills gaps, emphasising our lack of interest in financial gain. We often operate in suboptimal settings—boardrooms, dimly lit corners, and even garages—while simultaneously glorifying these compromises as beneficial for arts therapies. However, using such spaces raises fundamental questions about the valuation of our work and the dignity afforded to service users. The devaluation of arts therapists remains a central concern for some academics and practitioners (Mains et al., 2024). Research has explored workforce characteristics of arts therapists (Meadows et al., 2024) and burnout among music therapists leading to attrition (Silverman et al., 2022). These issues require critical attention according to discussions on global perspectives

among music therapist educators and students (Clements-Cortés et al., 2024). Left unaddressed, these challenges can lead to moral distress (Guan et al., 2021), especially for therapists navigating the dual moral demands of community service and livelihood. I assert my stance: I shall decline any work offer lacking dignified surroundings, grounded in the conviction that our noble endeavours serve those most economically disadvantaged (Lateef et al., 2022).

Optics of social justice

During the two-day conference, I grappled with a complex blend of emotions, much of which manifested as visceral discomfort. This discomfort, paradoxically, felt like the inception of something novel. I experienced profound gratitude for the opportunity to convene and engage in candid discourse on social justice, particularly within the context of the arts in Africa. The poster presentations by the Master of Art Therapy students provided a valuable window into their thinking and pointed to a promising future in arts therapies research in South Africa. Their research projects were proudly included in the inaugural publication of the *South African Journal of Arts Therapies*, which was launched at the conference (SAJAT, 2023).

In stark contrast to this celebratory atmosphere, I could not unsee how the African practitioner-contributors in the symposia were often framed as celebratory affirmations of a civilising mission, especially in economically disadvantaged communities. The apparent presentation of such contributors in such a manner as singing, dancing, and expressing gratitude for acts of benevolence from external benefactors would extinguish my flickering optimism from meaningful presentations such as the poster to which I already referred. This portrayal perpetuates a damaging narrative that frames economically vulnerable individuals as inherently deficient and destitute, only escaping this characterisation when 'rescued' by outsiders armed with more significant resources and altruistic intentions.

Strategies for advancing social justice and inclusivity in arts therapies

Several key steps are essential for addressing these challenges and fostering a more socially just arts therapies field. First, arts therapies organisations and educational institutions must actively integrate Indigenous frameworks into

their curricula and professional standards. This curricular inclusion means recognising and valuing Indigenous knowledge systems as equally valid within arts therapies practices, thus promoting an inclusive understanding of professionalism that goes beyond Western norms.

Second, Black practitioners should be positioned and celebrated as beneficiaries and as knowledge producers, contributors, and innovators within the field. We require a transformed outlook on communities from depravity and incompetence to agency, resourcefulness, and collaborative participation to achieve this shift. By so doing, we would see the value in redistributing resources in a way that honours such truth-seeking, ensuring equitable access to professional development opportunities that support their leadership and advancement in the field.

Third, rather than viewing under-resourced communities as passive recipients of artistic and therapeutic interventions, the arts therapies field must engage these communities as active partners. These partnerships require acknowledging and incorporating under-resourced communities' cultural practices into mainstream arts and arts therapies and supporting initiatives for community-led research and responsive innovation development, thereby affirming the communities' roles as contributors to the field.

Finally, arts therapies institutions and organisations that employ practitioners must embrace structural reforms that address the systemic biases embedded within their frameworks. The structural reforms would include reassessing qualifications, hiring practices, professional recognition criteria, and remuneration structures to foster inclusivity, ensure fair work for just remuneration, and encourage an authentically diverse range of voices and perspectives.

Conclusion

In reflecting on the University of Johannesburg conference, it is clear that while strides have been made toward justice in arts therapies, the professionalisation of the field continues to alienate those from marginalised groups. Moving forward, it is essential to dismantle these hierarchies and create spaces where both professional and non-professional artists and therapists can contribute equitably. These reflections serve as a call to action for art therapists to engage with community artists equitably in tackling these

systemic barriers and actively work toward an Indigenisation and socially just practice.

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