

# Harmonising empathy: A critical exploration of *Empathy Pathways: A View from Music Therapy* by Andeline dos Santos

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Sinethemba Makanya   
University of Johannesburg  
sinethembam@uj.ac.za

## Bio

Sinethemba Makanya is a senior lecturer in the Art Therapy programme at the University of Johannesburg. She coordinated and lectured on Health Systems Science and Medical and Health Humanities at the Department of Family Medicine and Primary Care at the University of Witwatersrand. Makanya completed her doctoral degree in Psychology and Medical Health Humanities at the Wits Institute of Social and Economic Research. She completed her Master of Drama Therapy at New York University. Makanya is also an *inyanga* (Indigenous healer). Her research interests include embodied approaches to health and healing Indigenous forms of knowledge, and she is engaged in thinking about how these can inform university curricula.

## Abstract

Empathy is a pivotal element in therapeutic practices, particularly within expressive arts therapies, where emotional connections facilitate healing. This paper reviews the book *Empathy Pathways: A View from Music Therapy* by Andeline dos Santos (2022), which is a comprehensive examination of empathy through the lens of music therapy that challenges conventional notions by emphasising relational empathy, cultural humility, and pluriversality. This review critically assesses dos Santos's interdisciplinary approach, which situates empathy within broader cultural contexts and highlights its multifaceted nature. The book introduces four distinct pathways of empathy, each grounded in various philosophical traditions, thereby expanding the understanding of empathy beyond traditional frameworks. Notably, dos Santos critiques the dominant Euro-American models of empathy, advocating for a more pluralistic view that respects diverse cultural perspectives. However,

the review identifies gaps in the engagement with decolonial perspectives and local contexts, suggesting that a deeper exploration of African concepts like Ubuntu could enhance the work's applicability. Despite its theoretical depth, the complexity of dos Santos's arguments may pose accessibility challenges for practitioners seeking practical applications. Nonetheless, the text offers valuable insights into cultivating empathy in therapeutic settings, emphasising self-reflection and community-oriented approaches. By bridging theory and practice, dos Santos provides music therapists with structured frameworks for understanding and applying empathy effectively within diverse therapeutic contexts.

**Keywords:** Book review, empathy, expressive art therapy, decoloniality

## Introduction

Empathy is a foundational concept in therapeutic practice, particularly within expressive arts therapies, where emotional connection and understanding play a critical role in healing and transformation. In *Empathy Pathways: A View from Music Therapy*, Andeline dos Santos (2022) offers a nuanced and multifaceted exploration of empathy through the lens of music therapy. Dos Santos (2022) engages with empathy as a complex process through her interdisciplinary approach. She moves beyond traditional notions to address the nuances of relational empathy, cultural humility, and pluriversality. The work deepens our understanding of empathy as an emotional and cognitive process. It also situates these processes within broader cultural and social contexts. Dos Santos (2022) invites more profound reflection on the complexities of empathy and its diverse applications in therapy, pushing the field toward greater critical engagement with this foundational concept.

The book is a theoretically rich and ambitious text that expands the boundaries of empathy research within therapeutic practice. Its complexity may pose challenges for some readers. However, its interdisciplinary scope and engagement with diverse cultural perspectives offer a valuable contribution to music therapy. Despite its intellectual richness, its philosophical density presents several dilemmas and theoretical caveats that prompt deeper reflection. This review critically engages with *Empathy Pathways*, reflecting on its contributions and its missed opportunities for deeper engagement with decolonial perspectives, South African scholars, and the local therapeutic context.

## An overview of *Empathy Pathways*

In *Empathy Pathways*, dos Santos (2022, p. 1) argues that mainstream notions of empathy “revolve around sharing in and understanding another person’s emotions. One separate person gains access to the emotional world of another”. She critiques this individualistic view of empathy, which “affirms the possibility of access to other people’s inner world” (Dos Santos, 2022, p. 1). Dos Santos (2022, p. 2) critiques the one-size-fits-all models of music therapy, arguing that pluralism and contextuality are essential. She maintains that “empathy may look, sound, and behave differently in diverse contexts” (Dos Santos, 2022, p. 2). The book, thus, elucidates empathy’s contextual, relational, pluralistic, and often non-verbal manifestations. She notes, “If we notice that we play in a pluriverse, new possibilities open up for all of us” (Dos Santos, 2022, p. 2).

Dos Santos (2022) invokes the concept of pluriversality and demonstrates an openness to decolonial thinking. She cites postcolonial scholar Mbembe (2015), who draws upon the anti-colonial scholars Dussel (1988a) and Santos (1999) to think through this idea. Mbembe (2015, p. 14) suggests that “knowledge can only be thought of as universal if it is by definition pluriversal” and is “open to epistemic diversity”. Dos Santos (2022) draws on various interdisciplinary frameworks, including philosophy, psychology, neuroscience, and various Indigenous knowledge systems.

Dos Santos (2022) introduces four pathways of empathy, each grounded in distinct philosophical traditions. The book is, thus, divided into four major parts, each exploring various pathways of empathy. These empathy pathways are intended to act as an empathy map within which therapists may “try out different positions, and notice what each allows [therapists] to see, hear, feel, think, and do and how each one blocks or limits [therapists]” (Dos Santos, 2022, p. 2).

The book’s first part is *Insightful Empathy*, which dos Santos (2022, p. 26) describes as “purposefully sharing and understanding another’s emotions”. This concept examines the traditional notion of empathy, emphasising the sharing and understanding of emotions between therapist and client. The idea of insightful empathy also describes how therapists attune to their clients’ emotional worlds through music. It is particularly compelling as it underscores the non-verbal dimensions of empathy in music therapy. In this section, dos Santos (2022) discusses concepts like receptivity and awareness, stressing

the importance of therapists positioning themselves to fully perceive, share, and respond to their clients' emotional worlds. Dos Santos (2022, p. 29) emphasises that "empathy necessitates turning towards the person I'm encountering, shifting away from focusing on myself, my plans, theories, and expectations, and making this person the centre of my experience". This call to centre another person invites therapists to become deeply aware of their internal states. The aim is to ensure that personal biases do not cloud their perceptions. Dos Santos (2022) urges therapists to remain vigilant of the therapeutic relationship. She emphasises the need for continuous self-awareness, reflexivity, and mindfulness of power dynamics within the therapeutic relationship.

The book's second part is *Translational Empathy*, which Dos Santos (2022, p. 143) defines as a "quality of presence in which a sense of witness is generated through a situated and productive process of emotion translation moves of expression and response". Dos Santos (2022, p. 143) acknowledges the limits of empathy as traditionally conceived and moves beyond the idea of emotional sharing. She argues that "humans engage in many other errors and biases when attempting to understand others" (Dos Santos, 2022, p. 146). She introduces the concept of 'honouring opacity' as an alternative approach to insightful empathy. She offers this concept that reminds therapists to accept what they cannot know while offering an empathetic presence. In this framework, knowing another's inner world is not always possible, and respecting 'opacity' or the unknowability of the other is crucial (Dos Santos, 2022).

While carefully acknowledging that "specific processes of Othering have been and still are dangerous and devastating" (Dos Santos, 2022, p. 150), she calls for "respect for radical otherness" (Dos Santos, 2022, p. 152). Drawing from Levinas (1948, p. 152), she states, "the Other who stands before me is radically 'Other', and I must let them remain in their infinite otherness". This idea of opacity invites a level of humility from the therapist and emphasises the need to honour the client's autonomy and mystery. She offers essential critiques of cultural competence, arguing that "culture is often reduced to race and ethnicity" (Levinas, 1948, p. 157). This reduction, she warns, may lead to dangerous forms of othering, "while dominant cultures are left unproblematized" (Levinas, 1948, p. 157). This othering, she asserts, perpetuates the status quo, making minority professionals invisible (Levinas, 1948, p. 157). Additionally, dos Santos (2022) elucidates the subjectivity

of competence: while practitioners may feel confident in their cultural competence, this may not “correlate with their actual ability to work inter-culturally” (Levinas, 1948, p. 158). She contends that cultural competence may reinforce power dynamics, positioning the practitioner as the “expert knower” (Levinas, 1948, p. 158) who claims mastery over knowledge about other cultures. She illuminates the static nature of cultural competence, which suggests a “kind of arrival” (Levinas, 1948, p. 158). In contrast, dos Santos (2022, p. 158) advocates for cultural humility, emphasising the “ongoing and critical self-reflection required” of therapists. She proposes that cultural humility “permits therapists to consider and negotiate the value of alternative points of view” (dos Santos, 2022, p. 158).

The book’s third part is *Empathizing Assemblage*, where dos Santos (2022, p. 223) shifts from radical otherness “towards the radically relational”. She implores the reader to “perform an ontological flip and begin with relationships that generate certain expressions of selves”. Drawing on O’Hara (1997, p. 223), dos Santos (2022, p.223) positions empathy not as “getting ‘inside the skin’ of a client but being inside the skin of the relationship”. Drawing on relational ontologies and posthumanist ideas, she presents empathy as a relational process that involves multiple interconnected elements. In this section, dos Santos (2022) discusses entanglement, attunement, and the mapping of complex relationships and dynamics that influence emotional expression and empathy within therapeutic contexts. She looks at how therapists can enhance their ‘response-ability’ to clients. She maintains that a “more mutually affectively response-able assemblage is open, flexible, accessible, and invites in people ideas, events. It’s connected and open to expanding. It’s also collaborative and acknowledges multiplicities and becoming” (Dos Santos, 2022, p. 228). Dos Santos (2022) invites therapists to focus on attuning to the moment and the relational dynamics at play.

The book’s fourth and final part is *Relational Empathy*. Dos Santos (2022, p. 321) carefully sidesteps a counterargument that, in building up to this section, she may have set up a potentially “problematic binary: individuals versus relationships”. She acknowledges this critique and claims that it is “only when entities and relationships come into relation with each other that we’ve reached a fully relational ontology” (Dos Santos, 2022, p. 321). Dos Santos (2022, p. 345) draws upon dynamic systems approaches to illuminate the development of emotion as “interactional sequences of attuning, sharing, offering, and responding”. She uses this approach to emotional development

to argue that emotions as stories are “constructed within relational themes” (Dos Santos, 2022, p. 345). Dos Santos (2022, p. 355) argues that music is an excellent co-storying medium because it “can coherently hold together diverse musical–emotional co-action in a way that retains a sense of overall connected relationality”. This section thus explores empathy as a co-created process, where emotions are storied and re-storied within relationships.

In this fourth section, Dos Santos (2022, p. 321) attempts to draw “from diverse perspectives”. She acknowledges that the perspectives do not “neatly align with one another” (Dos Santos, 2022, p. 321). She maintains that she lays perspectives “down as stepping stones to create a path we can walk down” (Dos Santos, 2022, p. 321). Dos Santos (2022) argues that selfhood is relational and is thus a relational process of self and other co-creation. She explores how emotional stories are crafted within the therapeutic relationship.

*Empathy Pathways* (2022) delves into the layers of meaning created as therapists and clients work together to understand and narrate emotional experiences. The book examines how therapists can help clients change their emotional stories, offering new perspectives through the therapeutic process.

## Innovative theoretical contributions

A key strength of *Empathy Pathways* (2022) lies in its innovative theoretical contributions. Dos Santos (2022) does not limit empathy to a singular, universal definition. Instead, she gestures toward an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural approach that respects the diversity of human experience. Thus, she explores empathy from various philosophical and cultural angles. By integrating such perspectives, Dos Santos (2022) situates empathy as a psychological phenomenon deeply embedded in social and cultural contexts. Her critique of Euro-American models of empathy and her incorporation of various Indigenous perspectives, such as the African concept of Ubuntu, is commendable. She invokes the idea of pluriversality, emphasising that multiple worldviews, knowledge systems, and forms of empathy can coexist. This engagement, however, feels superficial. Dos Santos (2022) could more fully develop her decolonial perspectives beyond using Mbembe. Among my major disappointments with *Empathy Pathways* is dos Santos’ (2022) citational practices.

Citational practice is “far from neutral or objective [...] it is reproductive of norms, language and life” (Priyadharshini, 2023, p. 200). Citations in

academia become “ways of making certain bodies and thematics core to the discipline and others not even part” (Ahmed, 2013). Dos Santos (2022) heavily cites Euro-American philosophical, psychological, and therapeutic thinkers. Her exploration of empathy as a cognitive, emotional, and philosophical concept is framed largely through these thinkers. While this provides a robust intellectual backdrop, the heavy reliance on Euro-American perspectives may unintentionally centre these knowledge systems. As a result, the work’s applicability to more global and culturally diverse contexts may be limited.

An example is dos Santos’ (2022) discussion of relational empathy and Ubuntu. She acknowledges the impossibility for her “to speak from within Indigenous knowledge systems with deeply relational understandings of empathy and empathy-like constructs” (Dos Santos, 2022, p. 6). A solution for this, however, lies in decolonising her citational practice. Gobodo-Madikizela’s (2017) work examines empathy within post-apartheid South Africa, focusing on how it helps understand the experiences of both apartheid victims and perpetrators. Over the years, she has evolved her scholarship on empathy in ways that resonate with the ideas presented in *Empathy Pathways* (2022). Like dos Santos (2022), Gobodo-Madikizela (2017, p. 177) takes a nuanced approach, arguing that empathy should not be seen simply as “resonance”, as suggested by neuroscientific insights. Instead, she proposes “empathic repair” to capture the transformative and healing potential that emerges from dialogic encounters (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2017).

Gobodo-Madikizela (2017) introduces Ubuntu as a lens for understanding this empathic repair. She describes Ubuntu as a “deep sense of caring for the other, rooted in traditional African societies and reflects an ethic based on the understanding that one’s subjectivity is intertwined with the community” (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2017, p. 120). Drawing on a similar maxim as dos Santos (2022) – who references Edwards (2010) – Gobodo-Madikizela (2017, p. 120) suggests that the essence of Ubuntu is best encapsulated by the isiXhosa expression *umntu ngumntu ngabanye abantu*. As cited by dos Santos (2022), Edwards (2010 p. 5) translates this simply as “a person is a person through others”. Alternatively, Gobodo-Madikizela (2017, p. 121) offers a more nuanced interpretation rooted in the context of empathy and relationality:

‘A person is a person through being witnessed by, and engaging in reciprocal witnessing of other persons’, or ‘A person becomes a human being through the multiplicity of relationships with others’. The meaning conveyed by the expression is

twofold. First, subjectivity depends on being witnessed; the richness of subjectivity flows from interconnectedness with the wider community, and from the reciprocal caring and complementarity of human relationships. Second, the phrase conveys the kind of reciprocity that calls on people to be ethical subjects. Mutual recognition is fundamental to being a fellow human being, a relational subject in the context of community.

In *Empathy Pathways*, Dos Santos (2022) echoes many of Gobodo-Madikizela's (2017) ideas, especially in exploring relational empathy and empathic repair. Gobodo-Madikizela (2017) and other voices could have aided a deeper exploration of Ubuntu and its implications for empathy. Dos Santos (2022) has overlooked key contributions from scholars like Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, Nhlanhla Mkhize, who has also written extensively on Ubuntu and decolonising psychology, and Kopano Ratele, a key figure in the development of African psychology.

## Practical relevance

Dos Santos (2022) attempts to bridge theory and practice by addressing how empathy can be intentionally cultivated and applied in therapeutic settings. She emphasises the need to critically examine empathy's forms and functions, making the concept more practical and actionable for therapists. Her four empathy pathways give music therapists structured frameworks to approach and understand empathy. They allow therapists to choose the most appropriate path to connect with clients based on their perceptions of context, needs, and therapeutic goals.

The book provides practical strategies for building empathy through music-making, such as musical mirroring and improvisation sessions. Dos Santos (2022) highlights the importance of musical interaction as a medium for empathy, where the shared experience of music can deepen emotional connection. By integrating these music-based tools, dos Santos (2022) bridges the gap between the theoretical concepts of empathy and their practical implementation in therapy sessions.

Another critical practical aspect of the book is its emphasis on self-reflection and reflexivity. Dos Santos (2022) encourages music therapists to critically examine their positionality, biases, and assumptions about empathy. Throughout the book, she encourages therapists to explore their empathetic



processes and reflect on how empathy manifests in their therapeutic work. In the section on *Translational Empathy*, for instance, she offers an approach for therapists to engage with clients when complete emotional understanding is impossible. This ability to hold space for the “unknown” (Dos Santos, 2022, p. 208) is valuable, especially in music therapy, where non-verbal communication is crucial. This holding of space is particularly relevant in cross-cultural or diverse therapeutic settings, where therapists may unintentionally impose their interpretations of empathy on clients. The book’s invitation to engage in self-reflection helps therapists become more aware of how they engage empathetically. This awareness can make their practice more ethically sound and attuned to the needs of diverse populations.

Finally, dos Santos (2022) emphasises the relational and community-oriented nature of empathy. This perspective is practical for music therapists working in community settings or with groups, where empathy is not just an individual experience but a collective and shared process. Therapists can use dos Santos’ (2022) insights to facilitate group music therapy sessions. Doing so may foster empathy between therapist and client and among group members, enhancing collective healing and connection.

## Complexity, accessibility, and applicability

While *Empathy Pathways* (2022) is theoretically rich, it may feel overwhelming for readers without a strong background in philosophy or interdisciplinary studies. Dos Santos (2022) delves deeply into philosophical debates about empathy, relationality, and ontology. Although these discussions are valuable, they may alienate readers who are more focused on practical applications for therapeutic work. The book’s theoretical emphasis may obscure how these ideas translate into practice. While insightful, her dense philosophical language occasionally detracts from the book’s accessibility. Dos Santos (2022, p. 2) maintains that the book offers readers “immersion into rich theoretical worlds”. An anticipated outcome is for readers to be “motivated towards more empathic practice, with critical, accessible, and actionable ideas for doing so” (Dos Santos, 2022, p. 3).

There are gestures toward the practical implementation of the ideas in *Empathy Pathways* (2022). However, the book’s practical application could be further developed and grounded within a context to help readers with concrete examples. Although dos Santos (2022) includes case studies, offering

more real-world applications would enhance the book's usability for students, novice therapists, or practitioners seeking concrete guidance. Readers looking for hands-on strategies may find some sections too abstract, which could limit the book's accessibility to a broader audience.

An example of this is her discussion of honouring opacity. While this section is intellectually stimulating, it could have been grounded in clinical examples, showing how this concept manifests in everyday therapeutic practice. Similarly, her chapter on sharing emotions explores how emotional exchanges unfold through music. In this section, she primarily focuses on the therapist's stance. However, she does not sufficiently address how clients from different cultural backgrounds may engage with these empathetic pathways. This lack of clearly visible cultural pathways could lead to challenges in applying the book's frameworks in multicultural settings where different norms exist for expressing emotions. Dos Santos' (2022, p. 75) focus on insightful and relational empathy might unintentionally limit alternative ways clients engage emotionally in therapy. In cultures where direct emotional expression is less normative, the expectation of emotion-sharing may not align with clients' comfort levels or experiences.

### ***Empathy Pathways'* (2022) pedagogical promise**

In *Empathy Pathways*, Andeline dos Santos (2022, p. 6) asserts that she offers "this book as part of a much broader conversation that is rich, polyphonic, sonorous, and offers varied healing pathways". Indeed, in the classroom, this book would need to be in conversation with various other key texts. In the context of South Africa:

[We] cannot neglect seminal thinkers within the wider humanities and social sciences who might inform us of alternative ways of interpreting the world. They have already helped us understand how sociological, anthropological, historical, and indeed, economic injustices unfold and impact communities (Qhobela, 2024, p. 30)

South African students would need to read the text alongside South Africa's unique history of colonialism, apartheid, attempted reconciliation, and ongoing struggles with race, identity, and inequality. In so doing, *Empathy Pathways* (2022) may offer fertile ground for developing new frameworks of

empathy and relationality and provide a critical lens through which to explore empathy's role in societal healing.

Finally, students would need to read the book through an intersectional lens to understand how their positionality affects their capacity for empathy. In this instance, students must remember that acknowledging one's positionality should not be the conclusion but the starting point for continued self-examination, systemic action, and deeper intercultural dialogue (Msimang, 2017). Positionality should lead to mutual learning and a sustained commitment to de-centring oneself in the conversation. Instead of stopping at positionality, students must actively engage with and incorporate their clients' perspectives and knowledge systems. Furthermore, this engagement and incorporation should occur alongside a commitment to dismantling the structures that sustain their privileged position.

Dos Santos (2022) offers a profound and complex exploration of empathy within the context of music therapy, challenging readers to expand their understanding of empathy as a multifaceted, relational, and culturally nuanced concept. Her integration of diverse philosophical traditions and cultural perspectives highlights the importance of humility and ongoing self-reflection in therapeutic practice. The book presents an interdisciplinary approach and introduces novel ideas like pluriversality and cultural humility.

However, Dos Santos (2022) does not fully engage with decolonial perspectives and South African scholars. The heavy reliance on Euro-American frameworks may inadvertently limit the book's broader applicability in global and multicultural contexts, especially in regions with distinct cultural histories and therapeutic practices. Additionally, Dos Santos' (2022) use of dense philosophical language and limited practical examples may challenge readers looking for more concrete applications for everyday therapeutic settings.

Despite these limitations, the book offers valuable theoretical contributions to music therapy and empathy research. Dos Santos (2022) provides a structured framework for practitioners to enhance their empathetic engagement in music therapy. Ultimately, *Empathy Pathways* (2022) encourages music therapists and other creative arts therapists to approach empathy as an evolving, dynamic process. The suggested process is deeply embedded in relational, cultural, and social contexts, calling for a continued commitment to self-reflection, inclusivity, and intercultural sensitivity.

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