Beautiful Justice: The Role of Beauty in Restoring Psycho-Spiritual Well-Being in a Post-Colonial, Post-Apartheid South Africa

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Bio

Vasintha Pather is a drama therapist, organisational development practitioner, and systemic leadership coach with over 25 years of experience in organisational development consulting and more than a decade in coaching and psychotherapy. Specialising in developmental trauma and systemic trauma related to race, gender, and organisations, Pather helps individuals and groups navigate, integrate, and heal from these experiences. Her therapeutic approach encourages clients to embody their emotions, reconnect with their innate wisdom and creativity, and cultivate deeper meaning in both personal and professional spheres. Pather is an adjunct faculty member at Wits University, the University of Johannesburg, and Henley Business School. She serves as the South African National Arts Therapies Association (SANATA) representative on the World Alliance of Drama Therapy and is the founder of the Centre for Gestalt Leadership.

Abstract

This article explores how colonialism and apartheid systematically dispossessed people of colour in South Africa of the natural and cultural beauty embedded in their spiritual, socio-cultural, and environmental landscapes. It underscores how these systems forced people into survival conditions that hindered their capacity to cultivate beauty in their surroundings, cultural practices, and inner lives. Beauty, which often plays

a central role in fostering psycho-spiritual development and connection, was systematically disrupted, distorted, and undermined. Within the arts therapies, aesthetic engagement holds unique potential to address these intergenerational disruptions by facilitating experiences of beauty as a pathway to restorative healing and justice.

Acknowledgements

the generations of people who have survived a systemic context that has wrought indescribable suffering to millions over centuries.

Introduction

The concept of beauty has been central to human life and thought throughout history. Scholars, philosophers, and aestheticians have consistently emphasised the profound role of beauty in enriching life and in being a bridge connecting us to that which is numinous; including Jung (1964), Hillman (1992), Fanon (2004), May (1985), Mbiti (1990), Nehamas (2007), and Shani (2020). This association of beauty with meaning and sacredness is reflected across cultures, underscoring the universal recognition of beauty as a vital dimension of human existence, connecting the tangible with the transcendent.

This article aims to foreground the perspective that beauty and aesthetic appreciation are crucial to human life and, more clearly, to meaningful human life; and that this understanding has existed for millennia. This article also seeks to contribute to locating beauty and aesthetic appreciation within the arts therapies, illuminating a potentially important opportunity for practitioners to deepen our impact by making an even bigger difference to the healing of clients and addressing the wounds of racial and gender injustices embedded in our collective history. However, this article is not intended to define beauty or explore the merit of any specific philosophical, psychological, or spiritual worldview relating to beauty.

The African spiritual perspective underscores the profound interconnection between beauty, spirituality, and everyday life. In African Indigenous traditions, beauty is collective rather than individualistic and is celebrated in communal activities, including art, dance, and music, which foster cultural identity, unity, and spiritual connection (Mbiti, 1990; Nwoye, 2017). Beauty manifests as spiritual vitality and is often linked to personal attributes like character, wisdom, and alignment with spiritual principles (Mbiti, 1990).

Asante (2007) emphasises the centrality of African culture and aesthetics in shaping identity and spirituality, linking beauty to collective cultural expressions that foster psycho-spiritual growth. African art and beauty have socio-culturally been considered inherently spiritual, serving as a medium for transcendence and cultural expression (Asante, 2007; Senghor, 1988). Land in

African traditions is often honoured as a divine or ancestral gift, embodying a spiritual connection between the living, the ancestors, future generations, and the Divine (Mbiti, 1990).

Beauty has thus been tied to expressions of cultural authenticity and spiritual empowerment in African knowledge systems, highlighting an integration of aesthetics with the sacred and the functional.

Similarly, aesthetic experience and appreciation have long been considered integral aspects of the experience of self-realisation and spiritual connection in Eastern traditions. Myth, architecture, art forms, rituals, and spiritual practices of the East evoke a sense of awe in connecting beauty with the sacred, through resplendent design, imagery, and adornment. Indian poet, philosopher, and Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore was deeply engaged in the pursuit of beauty. While he appreciated the tangible aspects of beauty, he was deeply moved by the subtler, more abstract, and spiritual level of perception (Islam & Mahmud, 2014). For Tagore, beauty extended beyond external perception to an introspective and intra-psychic dimension, appearing as a "living, dynamic force" (Islam & Mahmud, 2014, p. 63). His quest for beauty was profoundly spiritual, encompassing both the tangible and intangible, the finite and the infinite.

Indian spiritual and political leader and poet Sri Aurobindo asserted that revealing and embodying the highest beauty allows individuals to bring forth the sacred through their souls (Islam & Mahmud, 2014, p. 72).

Western philosophical traditions have similarly advocated for beauty as central to human flourishing and transcendence. Kant (1790; 2000) argued that the appreciation of beauty cultivates moral sensibilities, fostering harmony and universality (Nehamas, 2007). For Kant, beauty played a key role in transcending self-interest and engaging with the world.

Plato posited that beauty exists as an eternal, unchanging form, alongside other qualities such as justice and goodness (Nehamas, 2007). Plato conceptualised *eros* as a driving force that seeks beauty and fulfilment, perceiving ultimate beauty as existing beyond time and space (Shani, 2020). Like Tagore, Plato theorised that the appreciation of physical beauty can lead to an ascent toward the metaphysical ideal of beauty, which he considered eternal and the source of all that is beautiful (Nehamas, 2007).

Howell et al. (2020), in summarising several studies, substantiate the many philosophical concepts, spiritual teachings, and empirical findings that

underscore the need for humans to engage with beauty and aesthetics as part of experiencing a meaningful life. These experiences are central to the pursuit of self-actualisation and transcendence. Howell et al. (2020, p. 230) highlight the connection between culture, beauty and spirituality:

> "[Notions of spiritual and moral beauty in religious and cultural traditions] have inspired great art in music, paintings, and the gloriously beautiful architecture of many churches, temples, houses of worship, synagogues, and mosques. […] They are a great heritage of beauty to all humankind. These considerations suggest that the experience of engagement with beauty involves an expansion of consciousness".

Expressions of beauty—including the environment, art, music, poetry, dance, rituals, and story—have thus historically been deeply interwoven with spirituality. These expressions aim to evoke the sacred, bridge connections with ancestors and the Divine, and affirm the interconnectedness of all life.

Despite the profound importance of beauty in human flourishing, its role remains under-explored in Western approaches to psychotherapy (Howell et al., 2020), which, by and large, are mainstream in South Africa as a result of our socio-political history. From a professional standpoint within the arts therapies—and specifically in relation to this article—the transformative power of beauty merits further research. Beauty may possess a unique capacity to facilitate experiences of transcendence, connecting individuals and groups to meaning and that which we consider as greater than ourselves.

A client and context

The idea for this article was initially inspired by Sis E (not the client's real name), a woman then 55 years of age who participated in weekly group therapy sessions at Lawyers Against Abuse (LvA) during the latter half of 2016. Lawyers Against Abuse, a not-for-profit organisation, operated a centre in Diepsloot, Johannesburg, providing legal and psychosocial support to survivors of gender-based violence and intimate partner violence.

In her mid-50s, Sis E was not formally educated as a result of education restrictions during apartheid and had been unemployed for approximately two years following her retrenchment from her role as a caregiver. She was a survivor of gender-based violence within her intimate partner relationship,

a mother of two teenage children, and grieving the recent loss of her own mother, with whom she had shared a loving and supportive relationship. Upon commencing group therapy, Sis E presented with significant emotional distress, anxiety, and a sense of hopelessness. She expressed concern about her emotional state and about her anger and impatience toward her children, demonstrating awareness of her emotions and their potential impact. Despite her distress, this self-awareness offered a foundation for therapeutic engagement.

Victims of gender-based violence are often shamed into believing they are responsible for the perpetrator's behaviour. Socio-cultural norms surrounding gender discrimination and the ever-present threat of violence contribute to silence and self-blame (Pendzick, 1997). Pendzick (1997, p. 227) highlights how the "socialisation of guilt and shame often prevents women from defending their rights". She adds that the psychological consequences of intimate partner violence could include chronic powerlessness and learned helplessness, where victims feel they lack control over their lives.

Through the concept of *intersectionality*, Crenshaw (1992) proposes that gender-based violence is only one form of oppression. People are located in dynamic contexts created by intersections of systems of power, including race, gender, sexual orientation, oppression, discrimination, class, gender inequality, and heterosexist bias (Crenshaw, 1992). These social dimensions are saturated with values and assumptions that have social consequences, each potentially exacerbating the consequences of another.

Older women face a compounded level of marginalisation as discriminatory perceptions of ageing further limit their societal value. Older women are often perceived as asexual, unproductive, invisible, and passive, leading to socio-cultural and economic exclusion (Hightower & Smith, 2005).

This intersectional discrimination, therefore, profoundly impacts women's identity and self-concept, shaping aspirations and emotional well-being.

Sis E's case, against this broader understanding, was not only that of a woman having survived intimate partner violence; it was of a woman having survived intimate partner violence while being located at the intersection of several forms of discrimination and oppressive structures.

The oppression of ugliness

Based on engagement with partner organisations and community stakeholders, Lawyers Against Abuse identified a high prevalence and normalisation of sexual violence and intimate partner violence in Diepsloot. This prevalence was substantiated in a 2016 study in Diepsloot, which revealed some of the highest levels of violence against women by men ever recorded in South Africa (Sonke Gender Justice, n.d.). The community faced serious additional challenges, including overcrowding, limited access to basic services, environmental hazards, and widespread poverty and unemployment (Diepsloot CPF Safety Strategy, 2024). Diepsloot, with an estimated population of 350,000, had limited recreational infrastructure, with just one community park and a single community centre. There were no swimming pools, playgrounds, stadiums, or other recreational facilities (Diepsloot CPF Safety Strategy, 2024).

Diepsloot was the environment that Sis E was located in.

One of the most devastating cornerstones of apartheid and colonisation was the dispossession of land from Indigenous Black South Africans and people of colour. Colonisation and apartheid effectively rendered 87% of the land to White ownership (RSA, 2013; South Africa History Online, 2015). During apartheid, Black, Coloured and Indian people were forcibly relocated to mostly rural, underdeveloped, and under-resourced areas, enforcing poverty, inequality, and landlessness (South Africa History Online, 2015). The impact radically shaped the lives of Black people and people of colour in general, relegating them to environments that were effectively reservoirs of cheap labour with no access to, or ownership of, any productive—or beautiful—land.

In creating reservoirs of cheap labour, apartheid coerced African men to migrate to urban centres and mines to work for White employers under dehumanising conditions while confining their families to overcrowded and resource-poor reserves. The system relied heavily on the labour of African women to maintain their families in increasingly bleak environments (Healy-Clancy, 2017). Similarly, Coloured and Indian women were tasked with managing social reproduction within segregated rural and urban areas, under equivalently oppressive conditions. African women, relegated to low-earning domestic labour, were depended on to maintain the beautiful, White-

dominated spaces from which they were both excluded and dispossessed (Healy-Clancy, 2017).

The physical environments in which people of colour lived were thus deliberately designed to be degrading, overcrowded, and devoid of aesthetic or functional qualities conducive to a life of dignity.

African cosmologies regard the environment as sacred, and this connection fosters a sense of identity, continuity, and responsibility across generations (Fanon, 1961; 2004). Relationships with ancestors are honoured through religious and cultural practices tied closely to the land; thus, land was not simply a material resource but served as a foundation for identity connection, as well as the cultural, generational, and spiritual development of African people (Fanon, 1961; 2004; Mbiti, 1990). The severance from ancestral lands disrupted the spiritual and cultural practices intrinsically tied to African cosmologies, where land is considered sacred and central to communal and spiritual life (Mbiti, 1990). Consequently, losing access to ancestral land disrupted traditional ways of life, thereby severing connections to heritage, community, identity, and spirituality. Displacement disrupted spiritual harmony, leading to psychological and cultural crises (Fanon, 1961; 2004).

The oppressive socio-political and physical environments imposed by colonisation and apartheid not only dehumanised individuals but also fractured the aesthetic and spiritual worlds that sustained communal and individual well-being.

Present-day Diepsloot exemplifies the enduring legacies of apartheid. Initially established in the mid-1990s as a temporary settlement for people from other areas of Johannesburg, Diepsloot remains a densely populated area marked by poverty, inadequate housing, unemployment, and environmental degradation (Diepsloot CPF Safety Strategy, 2024). In stark contrast, the neighbouring Dainfern estate epitomises predominantly White wealth and privilege, with manicured lawns, secure gates, and exclusive amenities. Sis E worked as a caregiver in Dainfern while living in Diepsloot, embodying the ongoing spatial and economic inequalities rooted in apartheid's policies.

In addition to dismantling cultural and sacred connections with the land and environmental beauty, colonisation and apartheid also disrupted cultural knowledge systems by forcing Africans to conceal their Indigenous

knowledge systems, beliefs, and practices. Indigenous knowledge systems were systematically undermined and excluded over centuries. White, Eurocentric ideas of knowledge and aesthetics were instituted instead. Fanon (1961; 2004) critiqued the imposition of White aesthetics through colonisation as a form of cultural violence, eroding Indigenous artistic, cultural, and spiritual practices while establishing Eurocentric norms as universal ideals of beauty, intelligence, and morality. This dehumanising process often compelled colonised peoples to reject their heritage in a quest for safety and dignity within a system that denigrated their identities (Fanon, 1961; 2004). Not only was there a profound violence of physical dislocation enforced on African people and people of colour, but individuals were also faced with deep psychological and cultural dislocation. Jung (1959) warned that severance from cultural and spiritual symbols and rituals necessary to structure our inner worlds could lead to psychological disorientation, alienation, and neurosis.

Psycho-spiritual impact of enforced ugliness

Eastern philosophies such as Zen Buddhism emphasise the integration of external and internal worlds. Suzuki (1994) highlights how harmonious environments promote psychological clarity and spiritual growth, while chaotic surroundings exacerbate mental agitation.

Hillman (2006, p. 18) stated that "the illnesses in the soul of the [physical] world" are intimately linked to the well-being of the human psyche. Environments filled with decay or disorder can lead to feelings of alienation, disconnection, and psychological distress, and could reinforce a fragmentation of the soul (Hillman, 2006; Jung, 1959; Suzuki, 1994).

Hillman (2006) contended that the soul of the individual could not be separated from the soul of the world, asserting that psychological health must consider the aesthetic and environmental dimensions of human existence, and called for psychotherapy to develop a stronger awareness of the external world, recognising that changes in the psyche resonate with changes in the environment. Freire (1972, as cited in Pather, 2017) similarly argued that oppressive systems induce passivity, conformity, and self-subjugation, reinforcing fractured realities of subordination.

Dispossession, cultural violation and violence, and psychological disruption for centuries will thus have had devastating consequences for the

psycho-cultural and psycho-spiritual well-being of African people and people of colour in South Africa.

Aesthetic engagement and beauty in the arts therapies: A healing balm?

Arts therapy professionals interested in promoting well-being and restoration in the context of post-colonial and post-apartheid South Africa must cultivate a deeper awareness of the socio-cultural, political, economic, and historical contexts that have profoundly shaped the lives of millions of South Africans. The context includes the ways in which systemic oppression deprived—or, at the very least, severely constrained—the majority of South Africans of opportunities to experience, create, and access beauty within their environments, thereby disrupting the well-being that beautiful environments can foster. Also included in context must be an awareness that beauty can be assigned to, and experienced through, cultural traditions, knowledge systems, and practices; and that the disruption of these not only impacted the experience of beauty for millions of South Africans but also alienated them from what connects humans to a sense of belonging and meaning.

In the arts therapies, self-ownership and self-agency are promoted through facilitating aesthetic experiences such as externalisation, embodiment, and symbolisation. Aesthetic experiences emerge through interaction between the qualities of the object (artwork, music, poetry, writing, and/or embodied forms), the individual's response, and the broader context or environment in which the experience takes place (Jacobsen, 2006, as cited in Vaisvaser et al., 2024). Externalised, affective experiences in the arts therapies engage processes that contribute to shaping emotions, thoughts, and perceptions of both inner states and the surrounding environment (Vaisvaser et al., 2024). These processes facilitate internal experiences by expressing them through visible, audible, tangible, and/or embodied forms, including music, movement, dramatisation, artmaking, and bibliotherapy (Jennings, 1997; Jones, 1996; Malchiodi, 2023; Vaisvaser et al., 2024).

The distancing-embracing model is closely aligned with the concept of externalisation in the arts therapies and emphasises the role of psychological distancing, where individuals experience a sense of separation

from emotions, memories, or stimuli, temporarily suspending their usual reactions (Menninghaus et al., 2017; Jones, 1996). In the context of aesthetic engagement, distancing occurs through the cognitive framing of an experience as representation, creating a sense of safety and control over how long or intensely one engages with it (Malchiodi, 2023; Menninghaus et al., 2017). Distancing-embracing facilitates the potential for a heightened emotional experience, enabling individuals to fully immerse themselves in and embrace the present moment (Menninghaus et al., 2017). The externalisation of internal experiences and explorations allows individuals the opportunity to reflect, develop empathy, resolve conflicts, and enrich narratives through the arts medium (Malchiodi, 2023; Jennings, 1997; Jones, 1996). By facilitating memory recall and allowing individuals to process memories at their own pace, the arts therapies provide a sense of control—an essential factor for those who have endured violence (Woollett et al., 2023).

New awarenesses about self, others, and the environment can be externalised, engaged with, and internalised.

Thus, aesthetic experiences unfold within the therapeutic space, where meaning-making and potential transformation are connected with the client's engagement in the creative or expressive processes and their outcomes. Jung (1964) viewed the creative process as inherently healing, offering an avenue to encounter beauty and reconcile unconscious material.

African psycho-spirituality and aesthetic engagement in the arts therapies

This discussion offers a glimpse into African psycho-spiritual practices and explores why arts therapies may be well-positioned to integrate these perspectives.

The African-centred model of personhood underscores that:

> "[…] preterrational spiritual processes are a necessary building block in the construction of any model of consciousness. These spiritual aspects of self are central to the essence and expression of all forms and stages of consciousness and human psychological functioning" (Grills & Ajei, 2002, p. 95).

Approaching the concept of self through the South African Zulu philosophy of Ubuntu, Washington (2010) affirms the self as an expression of the Divine. From this perspective, and within the broader context of African cosmology, all humans originate from and remain connected to the Divine, emphasising a shared universal consciousness (Washington, 2010).

Within arts therapies, Ubuntu can manifest through externalisation, symbolisation, and embodiment—activating deeper connections to beauty, self, and the sacred.

Deterville (2016) examines *àṣẹ* (a West African term that represents the life force or spiritual power that connects individuals with nature and the Divine). The West African concept of *àṣẹ* is central to African spirituality and is integral to African-rooted healing and well-being. *Àṣẹ* is often channelled through music, song, dance, and storytelling—artistic and ritualistic expressions that attract, convey, dispel, honour, and celebrate sacred energies (Vega, 1999). These cultural forms serve as vessels through which the Divine essence is both embodied and experienced (Vega, 1999).

Landy (1993) posits that theatrical roles have long functioned as expressions of the human spirit. Many roles repeated across centuries in dramatic literature and performance are archetypal, representing universal aspects of the human condition. Often depicting gods and ritual activities, these roles symbolically express transformation and transcendence (Landy, 1993).

Jung (1922) underscores this transformative possibility of the creative process:

> "The unconscious activation of an archetypal image, and in elaborating and shaping this image into the finished work. By giving it shape, the artist translates it into the language of the present, and so makes it possible for us to find our way back to the deepest springs of life" (Jungian Centre for the Spiritual Sciences, n.d.).

African artistic and aesthetic traditions have long been recognised as inherently spiritual, serving not only as vehicles for cultural expression but also as pathways to transcendence (Asante, 2007; Deterville, 2016; Mbiti, 1990; Senghor, 1988). Indigenous knowledge is preserved in cultural expressions such as proverbs, folklore, rituals, legends, and customs (Busika, 2015; Ratele et al., 2013). Within African knowledge systems, meaning-

making, psycho-spiritual well-being, and arts-based practices are deeply interwoven.

Forms and symbols experienced as beautiful can activate the Self archetype, facilitating a connection to a deeper sense of meaning and wholeness (Jung, 1964). For Jung, the Self represents the archetype of wholeness, symbolising the integration of the psyche: the ego, the personal unconscious, and the collective unconscious; and as the ultimate unifying force within the psyche, the Self seeks balance and harmony among these forces (Jung, 1964).

Thus, arts therapies may be uniquely positioned to facilitate psycho-spiritual restoration by harnessing the healing potential of aesthetic experience. This includes the therapeutic environment itself, which fosters a conducive space for the creative processes to unfold. Arts therapies contribute to both mental and physical well-being by fostering self-expression, enhancing communication, and creating a sense of safety, making them valuable tools in prioritising equitable and safe therapeutic practices. Sensory exploration, interoceptive self-awareness, emotional embodiment, and cognitive insight are activated through aesthetic engagement (Samaritter, 2018; Vaisvaser, 2021). These therapies have been particularly effective in addressing trauma and complex PTSD, often resulting from experiences of violence (Woollett et al., 2023), as in the case of Sis E.

Beauty as a healing force

Despite the adversity she faced, in addition to her Christian faith, it appeared that one of the ways Sis E connected with her self-worth was through a refined and elegant dress style, which may have reflected an intrinsic and healing relationship with beauty and self-care. Sis E*'s* delicate but deliberate acts of self-care—reflected in subtle beautification and adornment— inspired the then-intern therapist to consider the role of self-care in self-worth when confronted with racial and gender discrimination. Over time, this initial curiosity evolved into an inquiry into the potential for beauty and aesthetic appreciation to contribute to transformative justice in mental, emotional, and psycho-spiritual healing.

Did Sis E unconsciously engage beauty and aesthetic appreciation as a means of facilitating her own healing? To what extent did this contribute to the restorative experiences she encountered during the group therapy

processes? Within a few months of participating in group drama therapy, Sis E initiated a social project aimed at providing care for youth in Diepsloot. In addition to the efficacy of the drama therapeutic processes, this development highlights consideration of the potential roles of self-care and beauty in her healing process, as well as in strengthening her innate resilience and resourcefulness.

Several contemporary studies demonstrate that appreciating the beauty of natural environments can yield numerous positive outcomes, including fostering respect, wonder, awe, social connection, vitality, enhanced cognitive processing, and increased generosity (Howell et al., 2020). African cosmologies emphasise the sacredness of the natural environment, recognising its aesthetic and spiritual significance as central to psycho-spiritual well-being. By fostering experiences of beauty, the arts therapies may help restore this vital connection, offering a healing balm for the intergenerational wounds inflicted by systemic oppression.

The values in action (VIA) character strengths classification, developed by Peterson and Seligman (1988) in the positive psychology field, identifies positive traits that contribute to human flourishing (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The values in action character strengths framework comprises 24 character strengths organised under six broad virtues, one of which is *transcendence*. Appreciation of beauty is defined in the framework as a core character strength within the virtue of *transcendence*, and encompasses the capacity to notice and value beauty, fostering feelings of awe, wonder, and connection to the world (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Cultivating *transcendence* strengths has been shown to improve mental health, social relationships, and overall life satisfaction (Diessner et al., 2018). Beauty has the power to promote well-being by fostering positive emotions, resilience, and a sense of belonging to something greater than oneself; and can contribute to countering negative emotions and a sense of isolation (Diessner et al., 2018).

Existential psychologist Rollo May (1985) regarded beauty as a pathway to authenticity and a deeper understanding of life. Encounters with beauty, he argued, evoke awe, wonder, and transcendence, enabling individuals to connect with their inner selves and the broader world (May, 1985).

Hillman (1992) emphasises that beauty has the power to inspire transformative change by touching the deepest layers of the psyche.

For Hillman (1992) beauty was not merely an aesthetic concern but a foundational element of psychological and cultural well-being, and he contended that it offers a pathway to meaning and connection, grounding individuals in a sense of purpose and harmony.

Beauty as an experience of creative harmony

Building on Plato's concept of *eros*, Shani (2020, p. 9) suggests that beauty is "an essential feature of harmony; and where there is love of harmony, there is, therefore, love of beauty. Thus, the potential for self-transcendence, enshrined in the lure of beauty, is an integral aspect of harmony".

In the context of Sis E's experience, intimate partner violence constituted a persistent violation of personal boundaries, further exacerbated by the environmental instability and lack of refuge in Diepsloot. These compounded violations undermined her ability to express herself, articulate her needs, and connect with a sense of personal agency. Yet, throughout the therapeutic relationship, Sis E exhibited remarkable composure, even in moments of deep emotional pain triggered by memories of violence and loss. Her ability to remain present and responsive to her emotions suggests that her relationship with beauty—and the harmony it evokes—alongside her experiences in drama therapy, may have played a role in restoring order within her psyche.

One of the key processes explored in the drama therapy group was body mapping. Participants traced each other's body outlines and then used images, colour, words, and illustrations to express their life stories and strengths. Through this process, Sis E was able to externalise, symbolise, and ground her reflections and inner experiences. Following activities centred on emotional expression and self-care, she illustrated her anger becoming lighter and flowing like a river away from her body. Outside her body outline, she drew an image of the social project she envisioned, and where she had drawn her heart, she later added the words 'recovering' and 'strength'. These moments illustrate her growing recognition and reclamation of self-worth—perhaps even an inner experience of harmony. Notably, on the face of her body map, she coloured the lips red, paying homage to her own beautification.

Lu and Yuen (2012) describe a similar application of body mapping within a decolonising art therapy framework for Aboriginal women survivors

of gender-based violence and intimate partner violence. They adapted the process to align with Aboriginal medicine wheel teachings, inviting participants to represent their healing journeys as circular rather than linear. By integrating physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions, the body mapping process not only grounded participants' experiences in the body but also facilitated deeper access to trauma-related memories (Lu & Yuen, 2012).

As with Sis E*'s* experience, Lu and Yuen's (2012) work highlights the psycho-spiritual value of creative processes in holding and containing participants' emotions. Arts therapies serve as containers for emotional regulation and meaning-making, enabling individuals to externalise their inner worlds, assign words and narratives to their experiences, and integrate and validate their past (Woollett et al., 2023). Furthermore, the act of sharing personal histories through expressive processes can mitigate feelings of isolation, counteract stigma, and enhance self-worth—ultimately supporting mental health and personal agency (Woollett et al., 2023).

Shani (2020) expands on this idea, proposing that creativity acts as the glue that binds the formation of harmonious structures to the human drive for self-transcendence. She argues that the creative process, when yielding harmony, aligns with an innate impulse to move beyond present conditions, serving as a counterforce to stagnation and decline.

Shani's (2020) assertion that the creative process and harmony are linked aligns with Erikson's psychosocial stage of middle adulthood, which centres on the tension between generativity vs stagnation. During this stage, individuals seek to contribute to the world through meaningful work, goal achievement, and investment in future generations. Generativity manifests as confidence, creativity, and a willingness to explore, while stagnation is marked by withdrawal, resentment, and dissatisfaction (Boeree, 2006).

At the beginning of group therapy, Sis E exhibited signs of stagnation, including anger and resentment. However, she also displayed an intrinsic drive toward generativity, evident in her engagement with the therapeutic process and personal reflection. The safe therapeutic container may have enabled a progressive stimulation of generativity through harmony, self-connection, and self-transcendence. Ultimately, it is also possible that the creative nature of the therapeutic process, coupled with Sis E's inherent connection to beauty, contributed to her experience of harmony. Together,

these experiences may have enabled her to transcend her circumstances and pursue a life of greater purpose.

Conclusion

Confronted by the reality of intergenerational trauma resulting from systemic oppression and dispossession, the arts therapies must expand beyond Western, Eurocentric frameworks to embrace approaches that honour the cultural, spiritual, and aesthetic dimensions of healing. The dominant emphasis on individual psychology often fails to encompass the full scope of human experience, particularly in societies where well-being is deeply interwoven with collective identity, ancestral connection, and the sacred connection to nature (Deterville, 2016; Fanon, 2004; Mbiti, 1990).

Fanon's (2004) call for the reclamation of Indigenous aesthetics and traditions as a pathway to psycho-spiritual liberation remains as urgent today as ever. By actively engaging with more holistic artistic and healing traditions, practitioners can resist cultural hegemony while fostering a therapeutic space that validates and affirms the lived experiences of those historically marginalised. This requires a willingness to confront internalised biases, critically examine dominant narratives of beauty, and decolonise therapeutic spaces in ways that are ethical, respectful, and culturally responsive (Freire, 1972; Talwar, 2015).

A psycho-spiritual approach to therapy—one that values transcendent experiences, communal wisdom, and the holistic realities of clients' lives— presents an opportunity for deeper, more contextually relevant arts therapies. If beauty serves as a bridge to transcendence, as both a personal and collective resource for transformation, then Sis E's own relationship with beauty may have functioned as an innate mechanism for self-reclamation. The therapist's role, then, was not merely to support healing but to recognise and elevate the healing processes already at work within Sis E. This approach affirms the potential of beauty not only as a therapeutic tool but as a means of justice—recognising the profound psychological and spiritual wounds inflicted by historical and systemic inequities.

Ultimately, the reclamation of beauty is not simply about aesthetics; it is a radical, ethical, and socio-political act. By embracing a more expansive understanding of beauty—one rooted in cultural dignity, ancestral wisdom, and collective empowerment—the arts therapies can serve as a powerful

force for social justice and healing. In a post-colonial, post-apartheid South Africa, this reimagining of beauty offers a transformative pathway for the arts therapies to contribute to a richer, more inclusive framework for healing, justice, and transformation.

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