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The wild beyond: Creativity, play, and the future of expressive arts therapy

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Abstract

Aligning with Harney and Moten's (2013) concept of the *Undercommons*, this article challenges conventional psychological practice frameworks that have, arguably, marginalized arts-based healing practices, sometimes reducing them to mere tools for analysis rather than full recognition of their capacities. Such reductionist approaches have constrained the arts' potential to contribute more holistically and transformatively to therapeutic practices. We therefore argue that these historical models often overlook the interconnectedness of humans and nonhuman entities as well as the embodied nature of identity and subjectivity, which are central themes to both the arts and therapeutic practices.

Harney and Moten's *Undercommons* envisions a space of subversion and resistance, where traditional knowledge and marginalized practices are nurtured, at a length from the institutional gaze that seems to co-opt them. Drawing on Harney and Moten's work, along with a revisiting of phenomenology through the lens of posthumanism and new materialism and other interdisciplinary perspectives, this paper argues for a radical reorientation in the Expressive Arts. We propose working in the Undercommons, a space that is continuously in motion, engages the 'wild beyond' of established norms and pushes for a more expansive and interconnected artistic practice.

Keywords

Expressive arts therapy, posthumanism, new materialism, creativity, therapeutic practice

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In motion: a constant state of arrival

In "*Principles and Practice of Expressive Arts Therapy,*" Stephen K. Levine (2005) articulates what is a significant shift from the reductionism of the arts to existing psychological frameworks and a call for us to value the arts for "their own intrinsic capacities… [and] not merely as adjuncts to psychological or social functions. This perspective honors the arts for their unique ability to transform, to create new possibilities, and to engage the imagination in ways that purely psychological approaches cannot" (p. 9).

For many of us working in the field of creative arts therapies[1], the spirit of Levine's statement has profound resonance; the arts are our way of knowing, of sense-making, and as a field, psychology has tended to create the feeling that the arts are marginalized, flattened, and compartmentalized. While the field of expressive arts therapy (EXA) certainly does not reject psychological frameworks, some run counter to the ethos of the field—frameworks that march on without us (Mandlis, 2009) and that, more often than not, are fracture points in the regimes of truth and praxis (Foucault, 1995). Ellen Levine (2003) suggests that "[a]s artists and therapists, our ethos is to stay in the imaginal and effective realm and to maximize expression coming from these realms" (p. 181), particularly through the lens of phenomenology.

Further, it is in the ethos of expressive arts therapy that we view the arts as being in constant states of arrival, always in motion, never quite fully settling into conventional academic and therapeutic frameworks. Rather, expressive and creative therapies are in a state of becoming—full of imaginative possibilities, refusing the diagnostic impulse and preconceived ideas of the present 'therapeutic' moment. Here, we call for shifts in how we value the arts, not as static or secondary, but as ever-evolving and resisting reductionism. It is radical, transformative, and risky; like research that happens in an unsafe neighborhood, "to enter this space is to inhabit the ruptural and enraptured disclosure of commons that fugitive enlightenment enacts" (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 26).

Breaking the frame: dismantle, and disrupt

What exactly are we dismantling and attempting to disrupt? There are Western philosophical movements that have informed the work of expressive arts theorists, the most significant being phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty's (1945, 1968) work is relevant here in giving an account of human embodiment, what the living body senses, and the arts themselves appearing as formed expressions are actively shaped. "Here the subject stands as the reflecting, imagining, shaping and speaking member of a world of coherence and rupture, alternately making sense and no sense of [their] life; the human field of the poietic, erotic tension of value and sense making" (Jacoby, 2017, p. 86). The materiality of the arts, the process, and art-making as poiesis is central to expressive arts theory, the "thingly act or object" (Knill, 2003, p. 85) that we make sense of through its becoming, along with the co-mingling of people, materials, artwork and environment.

From Structuralism's introspective analysis of consciousness to Behaviourism's focus on observable behaviour, these frameworks among others flatten the complexity of our individual and collective experiences. As Harney and Moten suggest (2013), these frameworks function in a narrow spectrum, neglecting the 'wild-beyond' where the arts thrive, continuously pushing the limits of conventional thought (p. 2). EXA, it seems, ought to embrace broader philosophical perspectives, including, we argue, posthumanism[2], new materialism[3] and some of the other emerging philosophical approaches to research methodology. The radical rethinking of established norms aligns with the need to, in the current times of radical ecological and technological change, begin working with agentiality of all matter and the interconnectedness of human and non-human entities. If we envision EXA as having rejected the reductionist trends of the past, we now consider the need to yet again be more spacious in the theoretical curiosities we entertain.

This spatiality requires both place and condition, which Harney and Moten (2013) describe as the *Undercommons*. It exists just beneath or below the formal structures and institutions of society, including the university, the state, and other forms of governance. These authors suggest that "the Undercommons is a place where those who would have been described as displaced persons, or marginalized persons, or unfree persons, who resist being hailed by those names, gather to study, to plan, to refuse, and to resist" (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 28). There is a potentiality within these often temporary, shared, inchoate spaces of incompletion and collectivity. In academic settings, these can be usurped spaces to create, study, and care for each other outside the dominant institutions.

The movement of things: agency, materiality, and the arts

While earlier we mentioned the centrality of being in motion, we consider that as the nature of all earthly matter—a motion that relates to other things, central to Harney and Moten's overall work on social relations and fugitive practice—a world of continuous transformation and potential. Here, we title the section *The Movement of Things* to distinguish motion from movement, with movement implying intentionality, which is a politicized activity.

Haraway's (2016) concept of *sympoiesis*, defined as 'making with,' is central to understanding how movement functions,

[1] Creative arts therapy is an umbrella term for the various arts-based therapies (i.e., art therapy, dance therapy, music therapy, play therapy and expressive arts therapy). Expressive arts therapy is an intermodal approach that engages visual arts, movement (dance), sound (music), poetry and narrative.

[2] Posthumanism challenges the anthropocentric focus of traditional humanism by decentering the human subject and exploring more-than-human relationships and ontologies.

[3] New materialism emphasizes the dynamic agentiality of matter and interconnectedness between human and non-human entities.

with a focus on collective agentiality, materiality, and the arts. Unlike autopoiesis, which focuses on closed systems, *sympoiesis* examines the collective and interconnected nature of all living and non-living things. In EXA, this translates into acknowledging the collaborative relationships between the human therapist, client, and non-human entities such as materials, artwork, and even the environment, where agentiality is distributed across all participants in a state of continual co-creation. Haraway (2016) explains, "Sympoiesis is a word proper to complex, dynamic, responsive, situated, historical systems. It means 'making-with.' Nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing. [...] Sympoiesis enfolds autopoiesis and generatively unfurls and extends it" (p. 58).

Extending this posthumanist framework, Rosi Braidotti's (2019) philosophy of becoming helps us further move beyond the anthropocentric view of the human subject. While she doesn't use the term *sympoiesis*, she does emphasize the relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity. Braidotti explains that posthumanism is grounded in the "relational capacity" of entities to affect and be affected rather than in a centralized individual human subject. For Braidotti, subjects are always in flux, embedded, and interrelated with their environment, emphasizing the importance of non-human agents in identity formation—concepts that resonate with Haraway. Building on the posthumanism of Haraway and Braidotti, where they highlight the relational nature of subjectivity and the entanglement between human and non-human entities, we can further explore how these ideas resonate with earlier phenomenological perspectives. Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) whose work on the body as a site of perception, informs us about how subjectivity is formed not only through individual consciousness but also through embodied relational experiences.

For Merleau-Ponty, human subjectivity is connected to the experience we have of our own bodies—situated body-subjects, *thick* subjects that are meaningfully individual—and the unity of bodily existence. For the purposes of the therapeutic encounter, this might involve exploring how some of our stories or histories get sedimented in us and what the relationship is between our bodies and the body of the world, "a thing among things" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 137). Continuing, he explains:

> The body interposed is not itself a thing... but a sensible for itself... a set of colors and surfaces inhabited by a touch, a vision... caught up in the tissue of the things, it draws it entirely to itself, incorporates it, and, with the same movement, communicates to the things... that identity without superposition, that difference without contradiction, that divergence between the within and the without. (p. 135)

Merleau-Ponty's insights into the body's role in perception and subjectivity can assist us in further exploring how post-structuralism extends this decentering of the subject. While Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the body's embeddedness in the world, post-structuralism destabilizes the very notion of a unified subject. Thinkers like Foucault (1995), Derrida (2005), and Deleuze and Guattari (1987), challenge the stability of meaning, seeing it as constructed through language, power, and discourse.

Post-structuralism's decentering of the human subject, its recognition of meaning's instability, and considerations of power and discourse have opened up the helping therapies to new possibilities based on feminist, Indigenous, and many collaborative and dialogical practices. Here and elsewhere, we join scholars of posthumanism and new materialism who are forging change-oriented theories for addressing the challenges of our times. No longer is the individual subject the sole focus of our work.

These shifts, in turn, have influenced psychology and are woven through EXA theory. The authors inquire what EXA would look like along posthumanist and new materialist lines—a mutual constitution of entangled human and "more-than-human" (Abram, 1996, p. 15) agents "intra-acting" (Barad, as cited in Kleinmann, 2012, p. 77) with one another, where subjectivity and identity are no longer primarily encircled by human concerns or centered on human identities. While some have pulled at threads and worked along the edges of these theoretical lines in EXA, what of a more articulated, active movement toward an assemblage of multiplicities—a theoretical and practice-based composition or cartography—that amplifies the already-begun deterritorialization of "traditional structures of therapeutic practice" (Whitaker, 2008, p. 16) within an EXA frame? To further expand on these ideas, posthumanism and new materialism provide critical frameworks for understanding the mutual constitution of human and non-human agentiality.

Theoretical saunterings: reading, writing, departures

Harney and Moten (2013) may very well have considered saunterings in the same way that Benjamin considered his *Arcades Project* (1999) or Deligny his *Wandering Lines* (2015), as movements and motions that capture both the spontaneity of creative activity and the disciplined action of the activist. Sauntering through theory—reading, writing, and taking departures—rejects the linear and goal-oriented approaches typically demanded by academia and psychology. As Haraway (2016) suggests:

> It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what description describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories. (p. 12)

Our own arts-based inquiry, or sense-making, occurs in part through experimentation, play, and the struggle of revealing, concealing, (re)visiting, and (re)learning—by aesthetically responding to and inhabiting different theoretical worlds and realms of experience. What is the relevance of play, creativity,

and the transitional space for expressive arts therapy theorists? Ellen Levine (2003) writes:

> Because play and creativity are interconnected, [Winnicott] locates the origins of creativity in physical experience that is played out initially in the earliest relationship of life… If the environment can "hold" this primary creativity, then the child's capacity for creative expression in the world will have been established… for Winnicott, creativity is not a defense against anxiety but the very expression of existence itself. To be alive is to be creative. (p. 65)

The wild beyond: creativity, play, and space

For those of us working daily in EXA, Winnicott provides the conceptual foundation for understanding play, extending to the wild-beyond that begins with the parent (traditionally the mother). Winnicott describes a space between the mother (or primary caregiver) and baby; it is a holding space that allows for *unintegration* and formlessness, a catching (and holding) for when we fall: "relaxation for an infant means not feeling a need to integrate, the mother's ego-supportive function being taken for granted" (Winnicott, 1971a, p. 48).

Care in this context is contingent on a number of issues. The unintegrative state, as described by Winnicott, can be made problematic by external factors such as racism, poverty, and the violence of war, along with specific familial issues that—sometimes idiosyncratic, may also be intensified by factors exogenous to the efforts of the primary caregiver. In turn, these issues interfere with care and the growing child's ability to suspend their emerging identity "in creative play, in the exploration of potential... [and this] potential space involves a different being in a different world" (Game & Metcalfe, 2008, p. 18).

Harney and Moten draw an important parallel, one that insists that there is a general state of tension—a collection of stimuli—creating this dynamic. As Moten (2018) articulates, "What this knowledge of freedom requires is an improvisation through the sensible and the intelligible, a working through the idiomatic differences between the modes of analysis which would valorize either over the other" (p. 93). This understanding of freedom through improvisation aligns with Winnicott's concept of creative play, which allows for a kind of unintegration without falling into chaos, a state of suspension that nurtures potential rather than collapse.

While they never specifically address Winnicott, Harney and Moten describe parallel states where, perhaps, *unintegration* could refer to more flexible, dynamic conditions in which elements remain connected, yet not integrated. This is important in understanding both Winnicott's play spaces as well as the Undercommons. It is a state where potential and possibility are preserved, held by a caregiving environment rather than by whatever sense of identity that may exist. Holding space is held space, again bringing together the concepts from both Winnicott and Harney and Moten.

The unintegration that happens in play has something of the wild and even dangerous, nomadically challenging fixed boundaries and territories; disintegration, on the other hand, can be frightening, relentlessly chaotic, and involves an accompanying sense of loss of control (Winnicott, 1971b), as we strain to peer through the darkness, no familiar landmarks in sight. In *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing,* Eimear McBride (2014) has written a fictional account of disintegration, a trauma monologue of broken words and phrases that trace a number of traumatic events, including the blind force of a recurring cancer—it spreads, the cancer itself akin to perverse and treacherous roots that eventually kill the narrator's brother (and along with it, the narrator's sense of self, the echoes of which cannot be found anywhere amongst the pages of the self that was). It is a slow vanishing, an erosion of memory and deletion of presence in the face of a terrible absence:

> But I dream. Roots come growing. Slowly and tangle in. And roots come more. And fat and thick. And roots come fast. Roots fast in. Roots seek us. Catch us. Roots that want our head. Our eyes. We move about. The trees will have us… Hurt me. Until I am outside pain…You finish that breath. Song breath… Stop the. What's that? My heart. Comes broken now. Broken off in me… My name is. My name for me. My I… My name is gone. (pp. 203–228)

In the context of the Undercommons, Harney and Moten make clear the purpose of this dynamic relationship between form and transformation, from integration to unintegration, and their description of wild places not only of political and organizational rebellion, but also as spaces that necessitate the arts.

> The call is always a call to dis-order and this disorder or wildness shows up in many places: in jazz, in improvisation, in noise. The disordered sounds that we refer to as cacophony will always be cast as 'extra-musical,' as Moten puts it, precisely because we hear something in them that reminds us that our desire for harmony is arbitrary and in another world, harmony would sound incomprehensible (Halberstam, 2013, p. 8)

Following Halberstam, in EXA we speak of expanding the range of play with our clients, as it is in play that they/we can bring something new into the world; our subjectivities are suspended in creative play. I am no-body, I am every-body, I am not-I, I am a thing among "a Parliament of Things" (Latour), an "actant," to borrow the terminology of Michel Serres (1982), with my own agency, putting in motion another's action—decentred in EXA terms, in this nonlinear time-out-of-time. It is as if my "I" were temporarily hovering elsewhere, the dissolving self perhaps a necessary condition to access creativity.

Paolo Knill (2011), one of the key theorists of intermodal expressive arts therapy, narrates his own experience as a child growing up in Switzerland during World War II and the "Magic Underworld" —this worlding a result of the constant threat

of the Nazis and their onslaught from above that necessitated retreat into air raid shelters below, these shelters becoming a space where the children could vagrantly follow their creative impulses and imagined responses to "play out" their stories. What is also significant here is the fact that the children (between the ages of 7 and 13) were from families "under the Swastika" as well as families (Swiss nationals) who were part of the guerrilla underground (another kind of underworld), actively resisting the Nazis:

> We had long-running stories…featuring ourselves in well-defined roles… By 1944 our "Magic Underworld" was so fascinating that we spent more time playing together there than outside; most of our toys, pastels and papers joined us there. The kids of the two sides never enacted the political rift, even though we knew about the fate of the Reich and awaited the GIs with eagerness. Our great personal experience was our play in the magic underworld, and our sadness when it was over. My brother and I ended up having a good friendship with the German kids, and we went on using the password we invented to begin the play[4] for many years more. (pp. 53–54)

This passage in relation to the expressive arts therapies is impactful in multiple ways, capturing the relevance of play to conjure the worlds below out of the fragments of war with all of its uncertainties, and insulating the children from the ongoing trauma and destruction occurring in the world above. The *Magic Underworld* of Knill's description is an art-full play space that deranges the traditional map's surface and the ordinary thresholds of perception, moving between margins and across multiple sites. The so-called objects of play are animated and re-animated by the children, as all is vibrant matter, differences significantly minimized, a shared and elevated materiality between subjects and objects, in which "all bodies are kin" (Bennett, 2010, p. 13). The shape of the world is magically altered in play, potentialities blooming forth, rituals trembling—the implications for this in the therapeutic context are broad, our understandings of self and other(s) enlivened in a full-bodied knowing.

[4] Social psychologists such as John Haidt (2024) have researched the importance of play, with play even being described as the opposite of depression and trauma. Through play, children gain a variety of skills, including dealing with conflict, managing independence, and coping with stronger emotions such as anxiety and fear in low-stakes situations. Neuroscientist Davis and Jaak Panksepp (2018) stated that trauma impacts emotional play circuitry. This circuitry is first engaged with our caregivers, and a lack of engagement with them and others can cause emotional shutdown combined with an inability to express emotions to others. Stephen Porges (2011), psychologist and neuroscientist, developed polyvagal theory, positing that the ventral vagal system helps us to feel safe and connected. When activated, it is said to stimulate physical and psychological responses, and when we play with others, we feel an accompanying sense of safety and bonding. Play may indeed, in extreme situations, prevent the freeze, a manifestation of the trauma response(s)—that hibernal state of being in the world or what Maurice Blanchot (1995) described as a falling out of being, "already fallen outside of memory" (p. 28).

Collapsible spaces

Illicit capacities across numerous terrains, the play space can be a collapsible space of fugitivity—hidden, a rupture, one "that ends with love, exchange, fellowship. It ends as it begins, in motion, in between various modes of being and belonging" (Halberstam, 2013, p. 5). This is the fugitive path of the Undercommons, Harney and Moten's term (2013) for what lies beneath and beyond various institutions of control—ungovernable, the spaces in between spaces that those with marginalized, outsider status (i.e., Black, queer, colonized, disenfranchised) inhabit and come together. Communities are always involved in the Undercommons, and in their displacement and entanglements, produce knowledge, all of which is productive and creative; "[t]he Undercommons is an attachment, a sharedness, a diffunity, a partedness" (Harney & Moten, 2021, p. 123). In EXA, community arts (Knill, 2011) is a crucial component of the work we do:

> The term "community art" is a strange construct, considering that art cannot be thought of without communities. The word, coined by therapists and educators connected to the arts and creativity, stresses the "community" setting as something special and different from the usual one with individuals and groups. (p. 55)

For Harney and Moten (2021), the university as an institution—"[i]f we mentioned the university at all it was because it was the factory we were working in when we made our analysis" (p. 123)—is fundamentally flawed in its current role of upholding a society that serves the ends of capitalist/State machine, and where the dispossessed are in the hold. What is meant by the hold? The hold of their formulations is the hold of a ship to transport the enslaved—the ship is the common, with the Undercommons being what emerges "from the enclosure of the common, within and against enclosure" (p. 110). Thus, the Undercommons itself is a fugitive practice, a place of paradoxical holding and being held:

> Her labor is as necessary as it is unwelcome. The university needs what she bears but cannot bear what she brings. And on top of all that, she disappears. She disappears into the underground, the downlow lowdown maroon community of the university, into the *Undercommons of enlightenment*, where the work gets done, where the work gets subverted, where the revolution is still black, still strong. (p. 26)

How are the Undercommons, creative and improvisational in nature—serving as resistance against various systems and moving in fugitive ways underneath the activities of state and capital—relevant to the creative arts therapies?

Much like Knill's Magic Underworld, the Undercommons is a potential space—a world within a world, and we play in this world that is neither inner or outer, following Winnicott's (1971a) notions of psychotherapy as two people playing

together. In community arts, this goes beyond the idea of two or more (humans), to include "other-than-human" (Fredriksen & Haukeland, 2023, p. 10)—the voice of matter and materials themselves, those we co-craft with and enliven—a refusal of subject/object dualisms, a relational poiesis and a folding together of entangled subjects, space, and time. By enlivening, this is not to suggest that things do not have their own animacy or that materials are dead before we work with them. Indigenous scholar Kim Tallbear (2015), citizen of Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate, discusses the materiality of pipestone, red stone that is used to make ceremonial pipes. In 1937, the Pipestone National Monument was created by white settlers, who "saw the place where the red stone lies as an artifact of a waning culture and time" (p. 233):

> But like producing indigenous biological samples that come to stand for living peoples, making monuments and doing science risk deanimating the red stone… From a Dakota standpoint, the pipestone narrative is one of renewed peoplehood. A flood story tells of the death of a people and the pooling of their blood at this site, thus resulting in the stone's red color and its description as sacred. The stone is sometimes spoken of as a relative… without it, prayers would be grounded, human social relations impaired, and everyday lives of quarriers and carvers depleted of the meaning they derive from working with stone… In addition, for many indigenous peoples, their nonhuman others may not be understood in even critical Western frameworks as living. "Objects" and "forces" such as stones, thunder, or stars are known within our ontologies to be sentient and knowing persons (this is where new materialisms intersects with animal studies). (pp. 233–234)

German-Norwegian artist Martin Kuhn uses a rock called larvikite for his sculptures; he describes how he walks by the rocks and has multiple conversations with them. Recognizing himself as a geological force within the landscape, he listens to what the rocks have to say. However, this becomes more complicated when no such *crafting-with* larvikite occurs, and Kuhn is "troubled that he sometimes [is] paid to turn a blind eye to the rock and to ignore its voice" (Fredriksen & Kuhn, 2023, p. 116). This is a working against the material's agentiality and lacks the formality of ritual if the larvikite has not asked to be transformed for something that was "already…inside its rock body" (p. 114)

Towards an ethic of care: Relationality and implications for therapy

An ethic of care across species, human and nonhuman materialities moves us out of the hubris of human exceptionalism, calling attention to what might be deemed worth-*less*; to care for who and what has been diminished and rendered invisible or valued only when oriented to "the politics and economy of extraction" (Simpson, 2021, p. 11). In an online interview, *Moten, The Undercommons and 21st Century Resistance* [Video], Fred Moten states that care is the key, introducing *curacy* as a form of care; he differentiates this from the curator, who is in control of what is exhibited and shown, what has relevance according to their judgment. The curate is a historical and lowly figure in the church who "engages in day-to-day pastoral care of a parish" (Moten, 2023, 15:00). He suggests that such forms of care have always existed but how "... to advance those forms of care within the new structures that we are constrained to live within…the surest and most reliable forms of self defense [being that] ... the practices that we seek to defend we can only defend by engaging… in them."

And what of the imaginal realm as the ethos of EXA? The most authoritative theory taught in psychology programs is Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT) with its truth claims of political neutrality, quantitative good science, and the measures and baselines of existence—in mental health and within agency settings, expressive arts therapy, play therapy, art therapy, etc., are often considered adjunct therapies but not necessarily seen as legitimate fields in their own right, and certainly not good enough for the heavy lifting of real, serious psychotherapy. The ethos of CBT is literal reality and the literal realm: "[o]ne helps the patient modify behaviour in the real world by actually experiencing new behaviour patterns and observing their effect on others' behaviour" (Levine, 2003, p. 181). The common therapeutic tableau carries a "we will fix/help you" message from therapist to client, where clients are guided through working with their problems and issues by the therapist, many asserting their expertise in a myriad of techniques (the dominant technique for funding being CBT). This obfuscates the reality that interactions are never neutral, and that we cannot step into objectivity, knowing things from a distance, simply by proclaiming it so. Objectivity and subjectivity, object and subject, are entangled in all of what we are a part of. It seems rather disingenuous to speak of neutrality in the field of humanities, psychology as a science, or elsewhere in academia, particularly in light of the most recent predatory exploits and war on Gaza (against a background of the decades-long subjugation of Palestinians), where universities in the United States acquiesce to billionaire funders flagrantly demonstrating the power they wield; university and regulatory or governance bodies have sanctioned, legitimated or at times situated themselves within the frame of settler colonial violence. They have, in short, succumbed to "the wit of the colonial official" (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 52), with nation states serving as artifacts of racist displacement, anti-Semitism, Xenophobia, etc. And in the field of psychology, what economic and institutional forces are at work that have reinforced the DSM's understanding of "psychopathology" and that aligns with the pharmaceutical and healthcare industries? As it relates to CBT, its medicalization, and the neo-liberal mental health economy, "it is the only psychological therapy that receives high levels of both public funding and private funding from pharmaceutical companies… [In this context, it seems relevant and fair to inquire] ... whose interests are being served by the ongoing 'success' of this research?" (Rowland, 2024, p. 9).

In EXA, there is a vagabondage at *play*, as we vandalize aspects of the narratives of psychology that suit us, reading promiscuously across disciplines, metaphoric networks through which

we construct concepts. Emerging through the gaps, ourselves "unhoused" (Scanlon & Adlam, 2022), we find unseen accomplices in the house of (un)belonging:

> By 'unhoused' then we mean to denote *individual and group experiences of having been displaced, in ways that are profoundly unsettling, from membership of communities large and small with which one either identifies or finds oneself problematically identified by others.* (pp. 5–6)

We are extending Scanlon and Adam's metaphor regarding unhoused minds and bodies to an unhoused, dis-membered body of practice, hovering in the doorway of institutional psychotherapy as it becomes more and more regulated across provinces in Canada. These are the systems that dictate, policing with burgeoning policies of what counts as knowledge and legitimate practice. How do we navigate these systems and oppressive environments while holding an ethical frame in EXA predicated on entanglements, with core practices that return us to community and play? This fugitivity is not isolated to the creative arts therapies, as therapists who are not solely of the CBT persuasion—seeing it as another modality among modalities—turn to their clients for how they make sense of the world, rather than a top-down approach dictated through various public funders, mental health and insurance providers. We know that people are more than their cognitions, passive objects of consumption waiting to be fixed or fixed back into resilient workers, military personnel, students, etc. If we are not mentally well and happy, then we are mentally ill and disordered, with social and structural factors bracketed. And for those who want to turn psychology into a science, we find ourselves aligned more with Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway in their contentions that science is political and that scientists construct facts, or with Karen Barad (2007) in what she describes as "agential realism":

> Practices of knowing and being are not isolable; they are mutually implicated. We don't obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are of the world. We are part of the world in its differential becoming. The separation of epistemology from ontology is a reverberation of a metaphysics that assumes an inherent difference between human and nonhuman, subject and object, mind and body, matter and discourse. (p. 185)

As to other psychotherapy practices, the authors note the relevance of postmodern therapy discourse in exploring hierarchy, power, and knowledge as a between-persons phenomenon, and the category of therapist as an institutionalized position that can operate as a productive force of power. This is not to say that therapists and clients are passive bodies, as both may be able to refuse and resist the prescriptions of power and knowledge; however, Marxist-feminists such as Sara Ahmed (2010) suggest that oppressed people are often blamed for the oppression they face, antidepressants and therapy notwithstanding. At the very least, they should display a happy diversity for others, even with "histories that may linger as mood" (Ahmed, 2014, p. 20). Such is the psychological impact and the nature of these "minor feelings when American optimism is enforced upon you, which contradicts your own racialized identity, thereby creating a static of dissonance" (Hong, 2020, p. 36). The kids are not alright, with Marxist philosopher Franco (Bifo) Berardi (2008) noting that depression is most likely a bi-product of the helplessness that so many young people feel in a world where they are disempowered at every turn, with "the global crisis that is darkening the historical horizons of our time. We are not dealing in a linguistic trick; we are not dealing only with metaphor, but with the interweaving and interacting of psychic flows and economic processes" (p. 1).

The locution of psychotherapy and frameworks that seek to manualize and standardize interventions[5] do not flow easily through our fingertips when we bring in the arts. Consider these interventions (or interferences) in terms of what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1977) refers to as symbolic violence, a form of misrecognition where those from the dominant group "let the system they dominate take its own course in order to exercise their domination" (p. 190). What are the implications of graduate programs offering little space for self-reflexivity in the face of emerging regulatory regimes vying for power and control? How might this obscure alternative narratives within the context of psychotherapy and other mental health fields? What are the regimes patrolling the borders of the dominant social, political and economic order? And how do we "intervene" in a way that attends to the inequalities and structural barriers that clients may face, where the assessment and interventions do not conceal the host of power-differentials inherent to therapeutic phenomena? Combined with this, how could the arts be misrecognized/abused when therapists lack aesthetic attentiveness and responsibility outside of and within the frame of the imaginal realm—for example, following their own agenda or the mandate of agencies in which they practice?

The posthumanist and new materialist non-hierarchical, pluralistic and inclusive ontologies evade some of these interfering tensions. The arts, the artworks, and the materials have their own agency; playing in EXA terms is a valid form of knowing, doing, and becoming. Robyn Maynard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2022) in *Rehearsals for Living* write of a larger connection where "[w]e are remaking the whole world - at once in our most intimate and local places, and through our matrix of relationality with all living things and anticolonial movements on the planet. A never-ending project, a practice, a way of living" (p. 186). EXA as a practice benefits from this political, decolonizing shift, and to focus on the vitality of matter and the "thing-side of affect" (Bennett, 2010) has implications for how, who, and what we listen to, and our

[5] From Latin *intervenire* "to come between, intervene; interrupt; stand in the way, oppose, hinder," from *inter* "between"... Sense of "come between, fall or happen between" (of events) is from c. 1600; that of "interfere, interpose oneself between, act mediatorially" is from 1640s. (https://www.etymonline.com/word/intervention).

sense of care towards things, living and non-living. The things in EXA may be transitory and ephemeral in nature. Sometimes "the phenomenon of creativity" (Knill *et al.*, 2005, p. 27) shows up as an expressive response, gesture, movement, dance, spoken word, a song that is materialized through embodied transmission. Perhaps a movement becomes repetitive—a choreography, a musical score to be returned to—or there is a *no-thingness*, as the poem always fades from our grasp, "a turning of breath [Atemwende] that is barely perceptible" (Derrida on Paul Celan's *The Meridian*, 2005, p. 109).

This is process and becoming, a fugitive momentum with EXA practice involving the "diffracting"[6]/subversive/fugitive therapist. Their work is to upend the more harmful presuppositions of psychology, "mark[ing] the dissonance of any attempt to harmonize them" (Moten, 2017, p. 75), particularly in relation to the arts. As Harney & Moten (2013) inquire,

> Can this being together in homelessness, this interplay of the refusal of what has been refused, this undercommon appositionality, be a place from which emerges neither self-consciousness nor knowledge of the other but an improvisation that proceeds from somewhere on the other side of an unasked question? (p. 96)

In this assemblage of relationships, the ethos of the work in EXA is deepened when we add non-human agentiality to the imaginal realm, and play space. Consider, for example, the traditional dyad of therapist and client; in an EXA session, we add a third, the artworks/workings-of-art(s). The third is part of an ensemble of heterogeneous elements in the room, where the relationship(s) are non-hierarchical and rotational; each part represents different ontological entities that are known or experienced through a multi-sensory approach. According to Tronto (2013), a researcher who studies models and ethic of care, it is relationality that will transform the world. There are revolutionary issues that care raises, when care is "viewed as a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world'... That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web" (Tronto & Fisher, 1990, p. 40). In more recent iterations of Tronto's care ethics discourse (Tronto, 2024, 35:30), this involves consideration of care in the Anthropocene as well as an aesthetic of care (for example, that care itself can be beautiful rather than a mundane task, and that we approach care as artists might in relation to their works); Amin (2012) is a social theorist and geographer who suggests that we need to move from carelessness to attentiveness in terms of how we perform and embody care, "such that empathy—for objects, projects, nature, the commons—can spread as a public sentiment that also serves to regulate feelings among strangers" (p. 12). Attentiveness to the needs of care is something that Tronto (Parra Jounou & Tronto, 2024) also highlights in her work, suggesting that care itself is a practice; we only get better if we practice care, even in the so-called caring professions.

What might such a practice look like? Certainly, the idea of an ethical practice as it relates to images (and their agency, a decentring of subjects to include 'objects') is not new to the field of art therapy or EXA. Shaun McNiff (1991) coined the phrase, "dialoguing with the image," the image itself having autonomy, agency, and rights, alive with its own suchness. Bruce Moon (2020) in discussing ethics in relation to images stated that, "[i]magicide is the intentional killing of the image through labelling it as one thing, and thus restricting it" (p. 60). The dangers of not meeting images with a degree of reverence, care[7], and a philosophy of not-knowing (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992) moves us to scripted interactions, repressed senses, marginalized elements, with meanings predetermined and matched to image: the ingredients for such a structured recipe might include a box of crayons (less clean-up), with a therapist offering "art therapy" by employing a directive to the client that the therapist has pulled off the internet.

For Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012), the world is inseparable from subjectivity and intersubjectivity, with the intersection of our experiences involving "a sort of gearing into each other" (p. 85); we gear into the arts, phenomenologically speaking. Through a posthumanist lens, however, agency—or Latour's distributed agency (2004)—extends to countless objects, themselves actors, an assemblage of activated relations, always in the process of becoming (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). It is about shared practice versus individual roles (Harney & Moten, 2013), and in the expressive arts therapy encounter, it is an "'otherness' that enters into us and makes us other" (Steiner, 1989, p. 188).

The arts have their own dynamic life, "seek[ing] interaction and dialogue with other things" (Pallasmaa, 2011, p. 88), and in EXA, we are co-inhabitants, units of matter and experience in a landscape of activity, "a phenomenology of intra-play" (Richards & Haukeland, 2020). The term intra-play references Karen Barad's intra-action, and how *we become together* - the client, the EXA therapist, the artworks(s) are involved in a dance of human/nonhuman agency, where instruments and apparatuses generate sound, image, and dynamic reconfigurings. Objects have their own specificity or properties, and are entangled with other things. Entwinings and reconfigurings also include the digital world, generating even more matrices of intra-action with other networks or rhizomes; agency is enwebbed within various bodies, dispersed and unlocatable in any "subject." Rather than heterogeneous elements of an interaction where bodies and things maintain a level of independence, everything is communicating and agency

[6] See Barad (2007) on diffractive methodology, the diffraction referring to the subjective position of the researcher - it serves as an acknowledgment of the structure of the research assemblage and the entangled relationships between research and researcher. Ethics is predicated on this entanglement.

[7] And if self-care is part of this conversation, it is the self-care of community activism and those who use care to sustain themselves, as they fight for care and equality for what/who has been othered, de-valued. (https://www.refinery29.com/en-gb/2021/05/10499036/reclaiming-self-care-audre-lorde-black-women-community-care)

emerges from the relationships in intra-actions (Barad, 2020). Barad (2020) writes,

> Virtual particles are not in the void but of the void. They are on the razor edge of non/being. The void is a lively tension, a desiring orientation toward being/becoming. The vacuum is flush with yearning, bursting with innumerable imaginings of what could be. The quiet cacophony of different frequencies, pitches, tempos, melodies, noises… are threaded through the silence, ready to erupt, but simultaneously crosscut by a disruption, dissipating, dispersing the would-be sound into non/being, an indeterminate symphony of voices. The blank page teeming with the desires of would be traces of every symbol, equation, word, book, library, punctuation mark, vowel, diagram, scribble, inscription, graphic, letter, inkblot, as they yearn toward expression. A jubilation of emptiness. (para. 14)

The poetics of the *would be* and *no-thingness* is striking in this passage, entanglement preceding thingness. And in the arts or arts' agencialities mingled with those of other participants, there are endless counter-narratives and possibilities in being and spaces for changing/becoming.

As expressive arts therapists, an ethic of care requires listening across species, across matter, across harm, with arts-based psychotherapeutic pedagogies that make space for creativity and a wider frame of care. The arts have their own addressive and magnetic power, and in the phenomenological theories that inform EXA, one does not analyze and explain. Rather, one describes, thus returning to the things themselves. We see this enacted in what is referred to as the architecture of a session[8], where clients are invited to extend the dialogue towards things, as they are sensitized to the material(s) and turned to engagement through their senses. Tronto states that humans are both caregivers and care receivers (with therapists, psychologists, etc., generally considered elevated, paid caregivers, without completion/recognition of a circle of care in which they are also active participants in care receiving). As to care in the Anthropocene, humans are care receivers from the material world but generally speaking, bad caregivers and stewards of the land (Stevens & Wainwright, 2020); consider the multitude of accelerated ecological disasters, the dark heart of the apocalypse revealing itself repeatedly through the hollowed out, mined and stripped landscapes, the bombs and shrapnel, sharp as razor blades. Where/what is the *heart* of the matter when we consider how mental health issues seem in part tied to the Cartesian logic of subject/object dualisms, a world made sick by late-stage capitalism's refusal to address our entangled concerns?

[8] The architecture of a session was developed by Paolo Knill and refers to the phases that EXA practitioners might use when working with clients. For more information, see *Principles and Practice of Expressive Arts Therapy* (2005), and *Solution Art: A Textbook of Art and Resource-Orientated Work* (2023).

Planning and resistance: the future of expressive arts therapy

Karen Barad's concept of *intra-action* is crucial to understanding how the material and the discursive relate. Like artistic processes, Barad challenges us to view our therapeutic encounters as intra-connected phenomena rather than isolated actions. As the Anthropocene unfolds, this material-discursive entanglement becomes an ethical imperative, compelling EXA practitioners to consider broader ecological and material contexts in their work. How can EXA therapists in their itinerant and improvisational way be intra-actively involved in shaping the present and future with a multiplicity of others in spaces of liberation and creativity? What is the role of the EXA therapist in supporting responsive relations, co-compositions of ethical responsibility between and within us, from being to action—intra-activities bound up in a community ethos of care and interconnectedness?

Building on this, theorists such as Rosi Braidotti and Donna Haraway push us beyond human-centered perspectives, inviting us to consider EXA as a practice deeply embedded in the material and non-human world. Haraway's concept of *sympoiesis*—making-with—forces us to reconsider our interdependence with other beings, technologies, and environments. Likewise, Braidotti's *posthumanism* suggests that EXA can be a site for exploring new relationships between human and non-human entities, transcending the boundaries between self and world.

To respond to shifting ontological, ethical, and ecological concerns, EXA must integrate multiple theoretical frameworks. Drawing inspiration from Paolo Knill's *Magic Underworld*, we recognize that the arts provide a space where rationality dissolves, allowing deeper, often unnoticed, transformations to occur. In Knill's vision of the Underworld, embracing the unknown, the unnameable, and the chaotic can be therapeutic—a theme that resonates with contemporary calls for embracing uncertainty and complexity in EXA practice. Through Harney and Moten's envisaging of the Undercommons, we can rethink how we approach community and resistance within therapeutic settings. They challenge us to reconsider therapeutic frameworks that prioritize individualism in favor of ungovernable spaces of collective action. Within the Undercommons, arts become a mode of resistance, a way to sustain communities that defy conventional structures. In this way, EXA can offer spaces where marginal voices and unacknowledged narratives can be shared, transforming both personal and collective experiences.

Post-humanism and new materialism by way of Winnicott (1971a) allow us to image a path forward, towards the not-yet-known, to do something generative and creative in these shared transitional, play spaces, where "…if we wish, we may collect together and form a group on the basis of the similarity of our illusory experiences. This is a natural root of grouping among human beings" (p. 4). By illusory, Winnicott meant "the substance of illusion" (p. 3), with adults having the ability to form groups, some of which naturally find unexpected location and composition for play. Like the Undercommons,

these play spaces can act as sanctuaries on the fault lines, shaped by resistance, where the imaginal is unleashed, as we ask the question, "What do we not have that we need[?]" (p. 121). How might these liberated space-territories (of the underneath) act as spatial inversions, a refusal of the logic of hierarchies and territories of destruction and control versus shared places of world-holding/building beyond current 'architectural' representations?

Data availability

The data for this article consists of bibliographic references, which are included in the References section.

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✔ **Graça Duarte Santos**
University of Évora, Évora, Portugal
Joana Machorrinho
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This article is an essay, with an interesting read, exploring and questioning the relationships between philosophy, psychology and the arts, from a specific point of view. The title refers to a fundamental question, which is to think about the future of therapies through the expressive arts.

I would like to see deepening the following aspects addressed:

1) Why the greater focus on cognitive-behavioral psychology and the lack of reference, for example, to humanistic or phenomenological psychology approaches?

2) A theoretical framework that differentiated the concepts of EXA and EXAT, delimiting the concept and meaning (for this approach) of the concept of 'therapy'. Will it make sense?

3) The terms ‘EXA practitioners’ and ‘EXA therapist’ are used throughout the article (up to the last section) in a way that is not sufficiently differentiated. I would like to see the roles of each more differentiated.

Is the topic of the essay discussed accurately in the context of the current literature?
Partly

Is the work clearly and cogently presented?
Partly

Is the argument persuasive and supported by appropriate evidence?
Partly

Does the essay contribute to the cultural, historical, social understanding of the field?

Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: expressive arts therapy; body psychotherapies; mental health

We confirm that we have read this submission and believe that we have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Reviewer Report 13 February 2025

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University of Northern British Columbia, Prince George, British Columbia, Canada

The author-artist-expressive arts therapists set the stage with relational conceptuality such as Haraway's notion of sympoeisis—making-with—which calls for contemplation on our intertwined-Ness and dependence with other beings, technologies, and environments. Braidotti's posthumanism is also highlighted, where they posit that relationships between humans and other forms of life can be explored through Expressive Arts Therapy to reach transcendent understanding that blurs the boundaries between self and the world. Paulo Knill's Magical Underworld is narrated to highlight the power of play and how it emotionally and imaginatively saved Knill and the other children (including German children) imprisoned by Nazi concentration camps. Merleau Ponty's body as site is additionally explored. The authors may be interested in my bodyself work:

Margolin, I. (2014). Bodyself: Linking dance and spirituality. *Dance, Movement & Spiritualities, 1(1)*, 143-162. https://doi.org/10.1386/dmas.1.1.143_1

The author-artist-expressive arts therapists ask crucial and critical yet ultimately caring questions about the role of Expressive Arts Therapy (EXA), and how it can disrupt the imposing, marginalizing, silencing of mainstream ethos and ideologies within academic, and more specifically, therapeutic realms that are funded by large public and private bodies including the pharmaceutical industry. CBT, while helping many gain awareness and relationship with their thoughts, is not the only supportive therapeutic modality and to face the atrocities of today, we need, the authors argue, an antidote that can enable us to relate in real relationality, to come to the comforting core of care, and enter an ethics, an ethos that everything is interconnected. Not in a subjugated relationship, but a reciprocal one, where we enter the cocoon of creativity we come to recognize our true power from within, and with other, whatever sacred being that is encountered. The authors carry the reader through lines of inquiry that foster wonder and connection, a decentering of superiority and an interweaving tapestry of life emerging, erupting and dancing not only through the people at play in the therapeutic session, but the artistic

materials that guide makers to make anew. They transpose the reader to conceive that creators in creative process seek to make forms merge and evolve to transform their own forms from the outside in and dissolve the limits of those forms; and further, to suspend judgement and disbelief and enter the possibility of innovation and invention simply by surrendering to the imagination where there are no holding bars but holding hands in the holding space of EXA that therapists excavate to support and guide creators into their creator-ship.

To make more accessible and clear for a wider audience, I suggest in some places replace "nonhuman" with the specific noun you are referring to such as, *art materials, animals, stones, foliage-or mountains, forest, trees, plants, flowers.*

These evocative writers end their passionate rendering of repose by imploring the reader to consider that, "play spaces can act as sanctuaries..., shaped by resistance, where the imaginal is unleashed..." and close with a question that demands a quest into, "How might these liberated space-territories (of the underneath)...refuse logic of hierarchies and territories of destruction and control...?" They leave the reader with a recognition that remembering to create, to play is remembering who we are interrelated beneath barrier-free to imagine, free to move, free to be.

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1. Margolin, I. (2014). Bodyself: Linking dance and spirituality. Dance, Movement & Spiritualities, 1(1), 143-162. https://doi.org/10.1386/dmas.1.1.143_1.

Is the topic of the essay discussed accurately in the context of the current literature?

Yes

Is the work clearly and cogently presented?

Yes

Is the argument persuasive and supported by appropriate evidence?

Yes

Does the essay contribute to the cultural, historical, social understanding of the field?

Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Spirituality; Posttraumatic Growth; Wellbeing; Advaita Vedanta Philosophy; Ancient Meditations & Visualizations; Person-Centred Expressive Arts Therapy; Clinical Group Work; Girls & Women; Arts-Based Research.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.