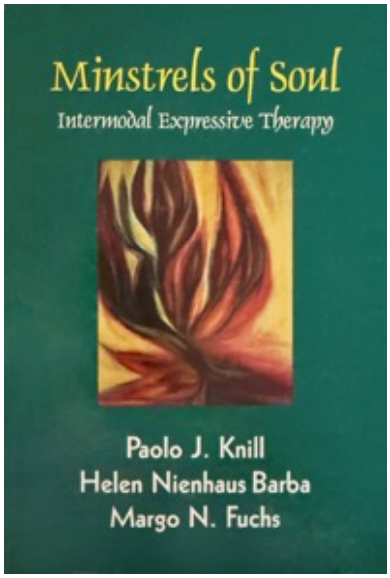


Thirty years later: Reflecting on Minstrels of Soul and the roots of intermodal expressive arts therapy

Richard Wainwright and Bobbie Rasmussen-Merz

Few texts in the expressive arts therapy field have cast as enduring a shadow as *Minstrels of Soul: Intermodal Expressive Therapy* (Knill, Barba, & Fuchs, 1995). Thirty years on, its central tenets continue to serve not merely as historical touchstones but as living, breathing principles that animate much of today's creative arts therapies. Published in 1995, *Minstrels of Soul* emerged from the visionary work of Paolo J. Knill – whose interdisciplinary background in musicology, psychology, and systems theory informed the book's expansive framework – alongside co-authors Helen Nienhaus Barba and Margo Fuchs. In the decades since its composition, the book's weaving of "intermodal decentering" and "aesthetic responsibility" has influenced countless practitioners seeking to integrate music, visual arts, dance, drama, and poetry into therapeutic contexts. As we commemorate its thirtieth anniversary, *Minstrels of Soul* invites both praise for its foresight and a balanced critique of the gaps we can address as the field continues to evolve.

A groundbreaking vision

Written in an era when many therapeutic modalities still privileged talk-based techniques, *Minstrels of Soul* boldly advocated for a more holistic, multi-sensory approach. Expressive arts therapy was hardly new in 1995, but Knill and colleagues shaped its theoretical contours in a way that was both rigorous and inventive. The core idea of intermodal expressive therapy posits that shifting among art forms allows clients to move beyond the confines of verbal-only dialogue and into deeper realms of insight. By "decentering", clients free themselves

from entrenched thought loops and access new perspectives on personal or collective challenges (Knill et al., 1995).

Knill's personal and academic history is woven throughout the text. Born in Switzerland in 1932, he studied musicology at the University of Zurich, followed by periods at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). From music to aerodynamics to systems theory, Knill's intellectual wanderlust resonates on every page of Minstrels of Soul. This breadth, augmented by Barba's clinical expertise and Fuchs's grounding in counselling, informs a method that values aesthetic pluralism, which is what Knill sometimes termed "polyaesthetics". Each art form offers a distinct lens for exploration, and the synergy among them can yield transformative experiences that a single modality might miss.

In laying out this schema, the authors draw heavily on phenomenology, systems theory, and existential psychology. The result is both philosophical and practical, inviting consideration of how creative expression is shaped by interpersonal, cultural, and even cosmic contexts. Art, in *Minstrels of Soul*, is not an "extra" or an afterthought to therapy; it is the very heartbeat of an engaged, relational practice.

Structure and key concepts

Knill, Barba, and Fuchs organise the book into sections that move from theoretical foundations to hands-on applications. Early chapters dig into the philosophical scaffolding of intermodal expressive therapy, citing anthropological evidence of ancient rituals and Indigenous practices to locate art-making in a universal cultural lineage. Rather than an eccentric or new-age add-on, the authors argue, the arts have historically functioned as communal lifelines.

From here, Minstrels of Soul deepens into the principles of "polyaesthetics" and "intermodal decentering". These ideas suggest that a client's story is never fully captured by a single language, be it spoken words or watercolour on a canvas. By shifting modalities, expressive arts therapists nudge individuals into a creative liminal space, where multiple senses and modes of expression work together to uncover hidden layers of emotion and memory. For example, someone wrestling with political anxiety might begin by drawing an abstract representation of their tension, then move to a brief improvisational dance, and finally compose a short rhythmic piece on a drum. This fluidity fosters insight that mere conversation might not elicit.

The later sections turn to the ethical implications of this work. The authors introduce the notion of "aesthetic responsibility", emphasising the vulnerability inherent in artistic creation. Therapist and client enter a shared creative process, where respect, empathy, and the safe holding of emergent space becomes paramount. Notably, the text suggests that art can open profound emotional channels, particularly among individuals and communities scarred by war, displacement, or systemic injustices. While the book predates much of our current

global turbulence, it nonetheless offers a template for how creativity can foster resilience amid upheaval.

Continued relevance after thirty years

Our present moment, marked by political polarisation, social media echo chambers, endless global conflicts, and large-scale humanitarian crises, points to the need for approaches that can address both individual and collective wounds. It might be surprising how well Minstrels of Soul speaks to these challenges, given its original publication date. Yet the authors' emphasis on systems thinking and phenomenology endures precisely because these frameworks refuse to isolate personal distress from its wider context.

Knill's concept of community art, for instance, presciently hints at the communal interventions we see today in large-scale murals, street theatre, and pop-up exhibitions responding to political turmoil. The authors maintain that such collective endeavours can bridge social fault lines and catalyse empathy on a broader scale. Thirty years later, in an era when distance – both emotional and physical – often dominates our interactions, the call for shared creative engagements feels more urgent than ever.

On an individual level, shifting from verbal analysis to intermodal expression is just as valuable for younger generations shaped by the pandemic, digital technologies, and the looming threat of climate catastrophe. As the authors remind us, words alone may be insufficient to articulate the existential dread often permeating these experiences. By incorporating painting, poetry, and movement into therapy, *Minstrels of Soul* provides a map for re-discovering hope, re-establishing a sense of agency, and forging connections that transcend divisive ideologies.

Balancing praise with critique

Despite its many strengths, *Minstrels of Soul* is not without limitations. Perhaps the most significant is its predominantly Western orientation. While Knill and colleagues do discuss cross-cultural rituals and references, the text largely assumes a Eurocentric perspective on art, therapy, and even institutional contexts (e.g., universities and hospital settings in North America and Europe). Practitioners working with Indigenous and refugee or migrant populations might need additional resources to adapt intermodal expressive therapy to cultural traditions deeply rooted in non-Western cosmologies and healing practices.

Another area that feels conspicuously underdeveloped through our modern lens is the role of technology. In 1995, few could anticipate how digital platforms, teletherapy, and online social networks would redefine the ways people connect – or disconnect. For those seeking to bring an intermodal approach into virtual settings, *Minstrels of Soul* offers no direct roadmap. That said, the authors' insistence on flexibility, spontaneity, and embodied engagement can be translated into online formats if therapists are willing to experiment. Virtual "whiteboard" painting, collaborative poetry writing in chat windows, or a group rhythm session through shared digital audio tools can all adapt, for example, the book's core principles.

Critiques from an evidence-based practice standpoint often highlight the need for robust empirical studies. Qualitative research rooted in phenomenology or arts-based inquiry is well-aligned with *Minstrels of Soul*'s philosophical underpinnings, yet a more extensive portfolio of quantitative or mixed-methods studies could help secure the case for intermodal expressive therapy in mainstream healthcare systems. The authors do articulate methodological considerations for future research, but the volume itself remains more conceptual than data-driven.

In reviewing Minstrels of Soul soon after its release, Frances Kaplan (1996) offered a critique that both recognised the breadth of the text's intermodal aspirations and worried about the "fuzziness" (p.276) that might emerge if expressive therapies were framed, per McNiff's foreword, as "outside the scope of explaining" (as cited in Kaplan, 1996, p.276). Notably, Kaplan questioned whether a method drawing so many art modalities into one framework could be adequately taught or maintained in clinical practice, especially when practitioners themselves may lack comprehensive training in each separate art form. This concern, while reflective of an Anglo-American context in the mid-1990s (when expressive and multimodal approaches were still coalescing), resonates to this day in ongoing discussions about professional rigour across diverse artistic disciplines. Kaplan's ambivalence underscores the importance of articulating theoretical and pedagogical foundations to forestall any conflation of integrative creativity with ungrounded mysticism – a tension that the field has persistently grappled with in the ensuing decades, even as broader European traditions have sometimes taken a more expansive view of "the arts".

A lasting legacy and a call to action

As we mark the book's thirtieth anniversary, *Minstrels of Soul* stands as both a historical artifact and a living guide. Its enduring resonance can be attributed to a central belief that creativity is not a luxury but an elemental human need, one that can kindle both personal transformation and social healing. In the face of today's global challenges, the intermodal framework reminds us that people cannot be reduced to their positions in political debates or their diagnoses in medical charts. Instead, through painting, drumming, dancing, and poetry, individuals and communities can encounter one another at the level of shared vulnerability and imaginative potential.

Minstrels of Soul remains a foundational text for educators, practitioners, and community organisers who strive to engage in holistic, inclusive work. While updated companion texts might offer more explicit discussions of digital modalities or culturally adaptive methods, the heart of the book remains compelling. Its call for an "aesthetic responsibility" should prompt renewed dialogue about the ethics of creative work in an era when images, sounds, and performances move at lightning speed through social media. How can we remain mindful stewards of the collective imagination, ensuring that the expressive arts continue to unify rather than divide?

For anyone seeking to ground themselves in the original articulation of intermodal expressive therapy, *Minstrels of Soul* is indispensable reading. Its lessons, challenges, and invitations reverberate well beyond the practice of therapy and into any context where creative process and human connection take centre stage. Thirty years on, one might say the book's soul has only grown in relevance, illuminating paths forward in a world hungering for more nuanced, relational, and artful ways of being.

References

Kaplan, F. (1996). [Review of the book Minstrels of soul: Intermodal expressive therapy, by P.J. Knill, H.N. Barba, & M.N. Fuchs]. The Arts in Psychotherapy, 23(3), 275–276.

Knill, P.J., Barba, H.N., & Fuchs, M. (1995). *Minstrels of soul: Intermodal expressive therapy* (1st ed.). Palmerston Press.

Published: March

Issue: Vol.20, No.1

Word count: 1,666

About the reviewers:

Richard Wainwright
PhD
Richard serves as an Adjunct Professor at the European Graduate School in Switzerland and is Research Director at the Vancouver Art Therapy Institute in Canada. Inspired by the work of Félix Guattari, Richard champions play as a mode of theoretical experimentation. His research extends beyond conventional academic frameworks, positioning the deliberate skill of paying attention – whether during walking, cooking, or cycling – as an essential method for conceptual exploration.

Bobbie Rasmussen-Merz
MSW, DVATI
Bobbie is a committed social worker and art therapist whose practice bridges multiple contexts, particularly through her work with Indigenous youth and her clinical work with Canadian veterans. Her research is often in the overlooked spaces of the margins, where unconventional knowledge often emerges. Bobbie's interest in clowning aligns naturally with this space, using humour and performance as approaches to healing.

This work is published in *JoCAT* and is licensed under a CC BY-NC-4.0 license.

Cite this review
Wainwright, R. & Rasmussen-Merz, B. (2025). Thirty years later: Reflecting on Minstrels of Soul and the roots of intermodal expressive arts therapy. *JoCAT, 20*(1). https://www.jocat-online.org/r-25-wainwright

www.jocat-online.org