



Becoming an Art Therapist:

Tarot as a Therapeutic Orientation While Practicing Art as Safe and Effective Use of Self

© Maria-Hélène Pacelli

Winnipeg Holistic Expressive Arts Therapy (WHEAT) Institute

A capstone reflection paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Dual Diploma in Art and Expressive Arts Therapy

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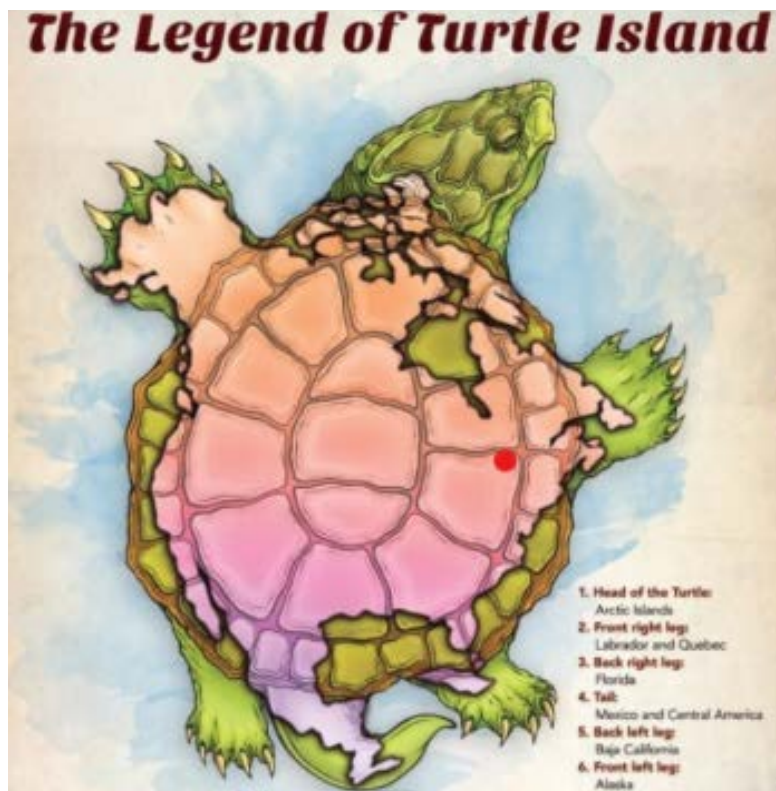
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All Our Relations - Land, Water & Peoples Acknowledgement

Before I add my voice to any discussion, it is essential to situate it within the truth and spirit of reconciliation through my land acknowledgment, which I've expanded to recognize the land, water, and peoples, as well as all the creatures, beings, and elements within them, and all our ancestors, teachers and guides - all our relations. This is part of centering a two-eyed seeing approach (Bartlett, Marshall, & Marshall, 2012), which involves centering the land and situating this work within its colonial context, acknowledging the ongoing harms of colonization, and recognizing traditional land protectors on Mìkinàk, or in English, Turtle Island, and appreciating the value of combining Indigenous and Western knowledge.

As I write this, I live along the banks of the KichiSibi or Great River (Ottawa River), held between a long chain of mountains that form the shell of Turtle Island.



As part of acknowledging all my relations, I wish to also acknowledge my positionality as a guest, settler, and diaspora on this Turtle Island, shown on this map.

These lands were stolen, through centuries of genocide, from the people of the Kanyen'kehà:ka (Mohawk), Wendake-Nionswtsïo (Huron-Wendat), Omàmìwininiwag (Algonquin), and Anishinabewaki ᐱᓂᓴᓇᑲᓄᐩ.

These territories converge around the KichiSibi, a source of life-giving water, travel, and communion since time immemorial.

Image [Source](#): Artwork from the poster, "[The \[Ojibwe\] Legend of Turtle Island](#)" (credit: [KDesign@nativereflexions.com](#)), modified with a red dot showing my approximate location on the map of Turtle Island.

Note: this page is intentionally placed before other content in recognition of the land, waters, First Peoples and all relations that came before me. This land acknowledgement was developed thanks to Native Land Digital (2024) and documentation from the Canadian Museum of History.

Acknowledgements

Beyond all my ancestors, time and space, this paper would be incomplete without some acknowledgements of the people who supported me in becoming an art therapist and expressive arts therapist. First and foremost, my beloved husband Rob and devoted father to our child Xavier. Throughout my studies, you worked around the clock as a Paramedic, helping people when there's no one else to call. Being this close to emergency services impacted me and my work in ways that stretch my sense of compassion, love and understanding of humanity. You have shown up in every way to make it possible for me to complete my education, and I look forward to a life of service to the wellbeing of others alongside you.

Thank you to my mother Louise who visited frequently and provided child care and grandmothering for Xavier while I attended weekend classes, and teaching me that "la nuit porte conseil." Thank you to my father Leonard for always supporting my education, and encouraging me to be "brave, courageous and tough, tough, tough." It was especially healing and meaningful for me to spend time with both of you together during the years of my study; a rare opportunity to share space with both my parents had not happened in many years and healed my inner child's heart. Thank you to my mother-in-law Valerie who helped us out and supported with child care and grandmothering for Xavier, offering moral support and encouragement, and supporting Rob when he needed it to keep supporting me. We wouldn't be where we are without all of you as loving grandparents.

Thank you to all my friends, too many to name you all on this page, but if you are reading this, know that I hold space in my heart for you. Completing this program would never be possible without your friendship, support, love, inspiration, strategizing, academic venting sessions, brainstorming, body-doubling and celebrations of milestones.

To Darci Adam, Founder and Director of WHEAT and Stephanie Scott, Registrar and Operations Manager; you have been incredibly supportive all along the way, working closely with me to accommodate my parenting responsibilities and providing sound academic guidance at every turn. The work you do is so much more than administering a school that provides a high level of education. You are creating a community of practitioners dedicated to social justice and improving mental health individually and collectively. I've learned as much from the way you do things as I have from the robust curriculum, and I will forever be grateful for the experience of being part of the community of WHEAT alumni.

To all the Faculty at WHEAT, your teachings in ethics, theory, research, practice and presence have laid the foundation for a strong career, and I'm grateful not only to the learning in class, but for each and every one of you who responded with kindness, flexibility and support so that I wouldn't struggle being caught between parenting responsibilities and academic expectations. Learning to be a parent while learning to be an art therapist and expressive arts therapist has been the greatest challenge I've ever taken on, and I'm grateful to you all for welcoming me in my full personhood.

Many thanks to Mary Norton, my Capstone Project Advisor, who walked alongside me during some inspirational and challenging times. You struck a balance between gently pushing me to expand the depth of my research, and guiding the path forward for me to find my own way experientially. Our many conversations were essential to the direction of this research. Thank you so much for all your kind, supportive and directive presence. You believed in me and in the potential of this work, and my contributions in this field will all rest on the laurels of this piece thanks to you. Thank you also Jennifer Seniuk, my second reader who has provided valuable insights and brought more depth and reflection to this work.

I would also like to thank my practicum supervisors from WHEAT, Tayler Mawji (Schenkeveld), Lindsay Ashmore, Dr. Tzafi Weinberg, Conly Basham, Kathy Gotshall and Terri Robertson. Each one of you has given me insights, guidance, mentorship and confidence in my skills and clinical judgement. Thank you for teaching me what I needed to know to build my future practice and thrive in this field. I look forward to crossing paths again in professional circles.

Nikki Manzie, I also owe you the biggest debt of gratitude. Since we first crossed paths when I began my Yanumojá Yoga Teacher Training, our connection has lit the way for me with each step forward for more than a decade. Your wholehearted compassion, non-judgement and love are exemplars of the unconditional positive regard that I need to embody as a therapist. You have modeled clean, ethical, just and joyful relationships with me throughout our spiritual apprenticeship. You have supported me as I formed and co-created family, shed parts of my life that no longer served me and embarked on the life-changing journey to become an art therapist and expressive arts therapist.

Finally, this work would have been impossible without the beautiful artwork and vision of [Kim Krans](#), creator of the Tarot of the Wild Unknown (2016). I was honoured to have received a message from her team that she was thrilled to hear about my research, and that she wished me well in its completion. This deck of cards and its unique perspective and artwork were an inspiration that resonated deep within me, facilitating personal inquiry and renewing my understanding of the cosmology of the Tarot.

Lastly, but most importantly, this work is dedicated to my precious rainbow child, Xavier. Becoming a parent to you made me the person I am today, and everything I accomplished in my life is in service to supporting your best life. You give me hope and inspiration every day.

Abstract

Using phenomenological aesthetic analysis and arts-based research, this capstone project is an autoethnographic self-study over six years of personal art practice using yearly Tarot readings to complete one art piece each year. Stemming from a personal journey through decolonizing spirituality, and grounded in an intention of reconnecting with ancestral lineage and reclaiming lost heritage, I engaged in a personal spiritual practice as a Neopagan Italian Queer Feminist Witch. Moving through stages of healing and posttraumatic growth and encompassing my years of study in art and expressive arts therapy, I explored my artwork retrospectively through the lens of an art therapist while training to become one. This personal transformation and healing journey brought me to confront my own mortality and the human condition, face existential trauma, and self-actualize a long-held aspiration and legacy goal of serving as an art therapist. Framing the Tarot as a theory of change and a cosmology of self and community care, I argue that engaging in a personal artistic practice is an application of safe and effective use of self as a mental health practitioner.

The elements of my capstone project include this paper, biographical information, a gallery of my artwork, the podcast trilogy, all of which can be found on [my capstone Padlet](https://padlet.com/mariahelena_arttherapy/safe-and-effective-use-of-the-self-in-the-creative-arts-ther-xx9cfp2b76jsy90n), a web-based platform that gathers the content in the form of an interactive digital book found at the following link:

https://padlet.com/mariahelena_arttherapy/safe-and-effective-use-of-the-self-in-the-creative-arts-ther-xx9cfp2b76jsy90n

The following QR code can also be used to access the Padlet:



Keywords: art therapy, arts-based research, autoethnography, art practice, community care, expressive arts therapy, decolonizing, mental health, reclaiming, safe and effective use of self, self-care, spirituality, tarot, theory of change, witchcraft.

Biography

Maria-Hélène (they, she) is a compassionate student art and expressive arts therapist, completing her Dual Diploma in Art and Expressive Arts Therapy. Their work rests on humanistic, feminist, anti-oppressive, mindfulness, and body-based approaches. She holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Concordia University), a Master's in Feminist and Gender Studies (formerly Women's Studies) (University of Ottawa), and a Yoga Teacher Training, as well as decades of practice in meditation, mindfulness, and bioenergetics. Maria-Hélène is a ritualist and practices Earth-based spirituality that follows contemporary Neopagan traditions traced through her ancestral lineage, including Dianic traditions and Stegheria, a modern revival of Italian Witchcraft. She has led and supported public and private ritual and Pagan observances learned through Reclaiming tradition and is a graduate of Witch School Ottawa, a feminist witchcraft school.

As an artist, Maria-Hélène's work has been intertwined with a deep commitment to bridging art and social justice, demonstrated by her decades of activism in diverse forms and social movements, participation in street-based and intervention theatre, working with feminist artist-run centre Galerie La Centrale-Powerhouse, and founding an artist collective devoted to art for social justice. Maria-Hélène further examined the relationship between art and activism through artistic practice and research at the graduate level, which focused on feminist political theatre.

Maria-Hélène's other projects include art exhibitions, releasing independent music, producing, directing, and acting in a variety of theatre productions. Her most recent accomplishment is completing an Artist Residency with the School of Photographic Arts Ottawa (SPAO) in 2021, which continued to explore socio-political issues through autoethnographic artistic practice in photography. Her work culminated in a group exhibition at SPAO Gallery and digital exhibit.

Maria-Hélène's portfolio of artistic practice can be found at mariahelenapacelli.com.

Becoming an Art Therapist:

Tarot as a Therapeutic Orientation While Practicing Art as Safe and Effective Use of Self

Let yourself be silently drawn,
by the strong pull
of what you really love. - Rumi

This capstone project is the culminating work in art therapy research as part of my studies at the Winnipeg Holistic Expressive Arts Therapy (WHEAT) Institute, based in a Métis community in Saint-Laurent, Manitoba, on the shores of Lake Manitoba. I attended the program virtually from my home studio and office in Eastern Ontario from August 2023 until February 2026.

As part of my commitment to allyship and anti-oppression, I begin with situating myself and my identities in relation to the work. I am a white person of Italian and French-Canadian descent, living as a settler, uninvited guest, and diaspora. Since childhood, I have had ongoing chronic health issues, and in young adulthood, I faced a serious and life-changing health diagnosis. Therefore, I live simultaneously as a survivor and as someone living with an ongoing chronic illness. I identify as non-binary, queer, pansexual, bisexual, and polyamorous, and use she/her and they/them pronouns. I am a parent and caregiver, as well as the spouse of a first responder. These identities and lived experiences underpin my perspective as an artist and as an art therapist and expressive arts therapist in training. They ground and inform my position from the perspective of standpoint theory, which frames my truth and knowledge within the context of these identities (Collins, 2004). Through these identities I access power and privilege, as well as experience marginalization and oppression. They will also continue to inform my future practice as an art therapist and expressive arts therapist.

In 2019, before enrolling in the Dual Diploma in Art and Expressive Arts Therapy at WHEAT, I began a personal art practice of self-care, existential inquiry, and post-traumatic healing to work through the trauma, grief, and fear that arose from a personal health crisis. Grounded in spiritual

practice, I drew Tarot¹ cards to guide me on the year ahead. As part of reflecting on, making meaning with, and integrating personal growth from the reading, I took photographs of the card layout and processed their meaning and my experiences of them by drawing my interpretation of the images on the cards. I continued the practice until the year of this writing, 2025, and through the course of my studies.

The elements of my capstone project include this paper, biographical information, a gallery of my artwork, the podcast trilogy, all of which can be found on [my capstone Padlet](#)², a web-based platform that gathers the content in the form of an interactive digital book. At the time of this writing, the Padlet includes only the capstone elements, however it will be treated as an evolving and iterative space for gathering additional materials related to this work. The paper includes a literature review and insights from aesthetic analysis of the artwork and retrospective journaling. Together with my learning about the origins of the Tarot and contemporary applications in therapeutic settings, I shed light on how the embodied ritual of the Tarot and art-making can support life transitions, personal growth and healing as a theory of change.

My art-making practice with the Tarot provided a focus for my capstone project. My intention in beginning the capstone project was to better understand the relationship between my experience of esoteric³ healing practices, the occult, witchcraft, paganism, and spirituality, and my post-traumatic growth, trauma, healing, and survivorship. Exploring a supportive art process that emerged from a personal and political commitment to decolonizing spiritual practice, I asked a

¹ The spelling of the word *Tarot* is capitalized as a proper noun when referring to the deck of cards as a system of cards used for divination, cartomancy or meaning-making, whereas the spelling *tarot* with a lower case refers to the practice of reading cards.

² The Padlet is a digital bulletin board containing content related to this project, and additional ongoing content that may be created after its completion. Readers may access the Padlet using this URL: https://padlet.com/mariahelena_arttherapy/safe-and-effective-use-of-the-self-in-the-creative-arts-ther-xx9cfp2b76jsy90n

³ The use of the word *esoteric* here refers to the integration of less common practices, such as use of the Tarot, into art therapy.

question: How does applying esoteric approaches in art therapy support post-traumatic growth?

In response to this question, my capstone project involved reviewing and reflecting upon the personal art-making practice and body of work I completed, through the lenses of arts-based research and autoethnography. The aesthetic analysis⁴ of my body of artwork was informed by a phenomenological approach to art therapy, the Expressive Therapies Continuum, and narrative autoethnographic inquiry. My analysis of the artwork, alongside reflective retrospective journaling and conversations with a spiritual mentor, was further explored through a recorded podcast trilogy. As I completed the aesthetic analysis of the artwork and my reflection on my personal growth and self-care as an art therapist in training, the question evolved: the application of esoteric approaches became defined as a practice using the Tarot and a personal art practice, and I understood that the post-traumatic growth I experienced was linked to my transition into becoming an art therapist.

In the podcast trilogy, I discussed aesthetic response,⁵ art as artefact and the concept of synchronicity as it relates to art therapy practice. As exploratory findings, these demonstrate the ways in which my personal art practice served as a practice of Safe and Effective Use of Self (SEUS) as defined by the College of Registered Psychotherapists of Ontario (CRPO, 2015) as follows:

One of the defining competencies of psychotherapy practice, safe and effective use of self, refers to the psychotherapist's learned capacity to understand his or her own subjective context and patterns of interaction as they inform his or her participation in the therapeutic relationship with the client. It also speaks to the psychotherapist's self-reflective use of his or her personality, insights, perceptions, and judgments to optimize interactions with clients in

⁴ In this paper, *aesthetic analysis* refers to the process of examining the formal elements and media properties of artwork, as well as themes and representations in the artwork as seen by the artist, which could include aspects related to the creative process and meaning-making, or observation of the phenomenology of art-making, including the embodied experience of making or looking at the artwork.

⁵ For the purposes of this paper, an *aesthetic response* refers to the act of art-making or engaging with a creative process that leaves traces, be they ephemeral, embodied, ritualized or spontaneous, and authentic.

the therapeutic process. (p. 4)

Through my art practice with the Tarot, I moved from practicing self-care as an artist into a practice of safe and effective use of self as art therapist. I learned about my own subjective context and patterns, reflected on how this informs therapeutic relationships, and made effective use of this throughout client work in practicum settings. This evolution from self-care to SEUS is key in the personal transformation that occurred for me in becoming an art therapist. Through my self-care and through exploring my own identity and my place in the world, I used all the elements of safe and effective use of self and brought them into my practice as an art therapist and expressive arts therapist in training. For this reason, I argue that the art practice was indeed a practice of safe and effective use of self.

Although this work was deeply personal and has been very private until now, over the six years of practice, I shared the artwork with others, including my spiritual mentor, friends, and colleagues in the field and study of art therapy. This provided an opportunity to verbalize my process, which brought forward many questions about the benefits of this process for my personal growth, and validated the significance of my process. Further, I began to reflect on whether aspects of this process could be available and beneficial to others as I began my studies in art therapy and expressive arts therapy. This application of the Tarot and art together as a personal practice frames the Tarot as a theory of change,⁶ and exemplifies how a personal art practice serves as safe and effective use of self. This capstone project contributes to the field of art therapy by addressing a vocational intersection in art therapy praxis: supporting safe and effective use of self and becoming an art therapist.

⁶ As a framework, the concept of “Theory of change” is used here to express the directionality and pace at which people move through a continuum of suffering, healing and wellness: “The central question is not whether there will be change, but whether human change will be toward growth, deterioration, or whether there will be apparent lack of change in which the person grows or deteriorates so slowly in comparison with the surrounding world that it appears as stasis” (Yontef, 2019, p. 150.)

Transpersonal and Therapeutic Orientations in Art Therapy

In this paper, art therapy is seen through a transpersonal framework. Taylor (2016) described transpersonal art therapy as providing archetypes to work through inner conflicts or personal challenges and defined it as an experience where the individual extends the sense of self beyond their own identity. In this sense, the Tarot works as a transpersonal art therapy support structure, offering access to mythology, archetypes, and universal experiences of humanity like birth and death, relationship with the cosmos, and existential inquiry. McNiff (2019) asserted that art therapy is a transpersonal and transcultural space where art-making harnesses the potency of art as a conduit for healing. According to Taylor (2016), transpersonal art therapy brings together art, spirituality, psychology, and biology in service of personal development.

In my personal journey through the transition to becoming an art therapist, the Tarot anchored my art practice in an orderly and defined structure, drawing from the mythology and cosmology of the Tarot. As the creation of these art pieces was threaded through my years of study, the Tarot underpinned my experience and training becoming an art therapist as it does my personal life and trajectory as an artist. In these ways, it was serving as a transpersonal therapeutic orientation supported by the structure of the Tarot as a theory of change.

Overview of the Tarot

Many types of cards exist for play, gambling, divination, personal guidance or storytelling. Whether they are oracle cards, story cards, collectible cards, art cards, postcards, greeting cards or playing cards, they may be used for any of those purposes. My capstone project centers on a specific type of card system called the Tarot, and focuses on its use for storytelling and personal inquiry.

The Tarot is a deck of 72 cards divided into two parts, known as the Minor Arcana and the

Major Arcana. The Minor Arcana consists of 56 cards in four suits, which may vary along the lines of swords, wands, cups and coins, representing four classes in European society: military/nobility, peasants, clergy, and merchants, respectively. Each suit has 14 cards, including 10 numbered pip cards from Ace as one, to ten, and four face cards, the King, Queen, Knight, and Page. The Major Arcana consists of 22 cards numbered with roman numerals. They each bear names that vary but typically represent the alchemical symbolism of the Tarot. These typically follow a numerical order, as follows: The Fool, The Magician, The High Priestess, The Empress, The Emperor, The Hierophant, The Lovers, The Chariot, Strength, The Hermit, Wheel of Fortune, Justice, The Hanged Man, Death, Temperance, The Devil, The Tower, The Star, The Moon, The Sun, Judgement, and The World. Although the deck has been used in various ways throughout time and across great distances, this structure remains consistent in all Tarot decks, leading back to the oldest Tarot deck documented in existence, the Sola-Busca Tarocchi (Adams, n.d.; Adams, 2017). These Tarot cards are adorned by engraved and printed artwork made by a Master of the School of Ferrara, which endures on many Tarot decks that continue to exist today. The images represent the esoteric principles that were most prevalent in the conceptual world of the Renaissance, or its alchemical symbolism as it relates to spiritual transformation (Adams, 2017; Zucker, 1997). In this sense, although the meaning and interpretation of Tarot cards is not fixed, there is encoded meaning in the artwork and the names and archetypes of the cards. As Leon (2009) stated, “The Tarot is a visual explication of *spiritual ascension* affirmed perennially in Western and Eastern cultures [*italics in original*]” (p. 1).

From Artist to Art Therapist: a Personal Art Practice of Self-Accompaniment

The cosmology of the Tarot draws the connection to my ancestors through Roman mythology. The suits refer to the classes of Italian society, and origins in a countercultural practice that challenges one's sense of linear time, deterministic fate and fixed meaning. These attributes

make it a compatible tool for ritual, meaning making and personal change. In the context of this capstone project, my use of the Tarot has been in alignment with my personal spiritual practice, my commitment to the decolonization of that practice and the reclaiming of lineage, and my identity as an artist becoming an art therapist.

Self-Reflexive Spiritual Practice: Decolonizing and Reclaiming

My personal Tarot ritual and personal art practice arose from a deep personal journey into decolonizing my beliefs and my spiritual practice, while engaging in reflective allyship and self-education around my identity and lineage. As part of this, it was important to determine which practices I could develop or discontinue to avoid practicing cultural appropriation or causing harm inadvertently. The origins of the Tarot and its connection to the Mediterranean region are central to this work, not only because they support ancestral connection and reclaiming of lost ancestral heritage, but because the specific worldviews that come from those places, blended with my lived experience as a settler and diaspora in Canada also underpin my approach to Tarot.

Although there is extensive research on Tarot's origins and uses, research related to its applications in mental health care is limited, especially in art and expressive arts therapies. However, some authors have defined the relationship between spirituality and art therapy. My study rests on the premise that spirituality is an inherent part of the human experience, and that spiritually oriented art therapy can provide opportunity for self-realization and understanding, transcendence, and the search for meaning and purpose (Kirca, 2019).

Literature Review: Cosmology of the Tarot and Synergy with the Arts

This literature review addresses the cosmology of the Tarot and its relationship with the arts, reviewing key literature related to the origins of the Tarot, research about relevant worldviews in Italian culture, meaning-making through storytelling, and its use in therapeutic settings. I will focus

particularly on literature related to recovering lost history and folklore through Neopaganism and revival of spiritual folklore, including reclaiming Italian Witchcraft, also known as Stregheria.

Origins of the Tarot

The origins and occult use of the Tarot are contested. Its existence as a deck of cards is documented as appearing first in Milan in the first half of the 1400s, also known as the Quattrocento and throughout Northern Italy into the 1500s (Place, 2010). These early decks like the Sola-Busca Tarot are adorned artwork that depict allegorical scenes related to the then-prevalent Dianic tradition of Roman mythology and have been used for divination as part of a quest for the soul (Place, 2010). The Tarot has been adapted by various cultures since its first documented origins, although there is disagreement about influences from Muslim and Hebrew commerce and culture (Cohen, 2024; Peters, 2022; Place, 2010; Tishman, 2024). Several authors have noted the relationship between Tarot and the Romani people (Fregosa, 2021; Peters, 2022), while others have argued that its origins are Eurocentric (Failla, 2021). Several have also outlined its cross-cultural occult histories, suggesting that the cards themselves belong within multiple cultures and peoples (Davidson, 2001; Decker, 2013; Lavin, 2021; Place, 2010). Notably, recent research by Cohen (2024) examined the complex settlement patterns wherein Romani people were hired by Italian royalty for fortune-telling as a form of entertainment. Although the relationship between the Romani people and the use of Tarot for fortune-telling, any exclusive claim to the Tarot as a tool for divination remains elusive and there is no consensus on a singular origin or authority over the practice of the tarot. Cohen's (2024) work casts the Tarot in a clandestine light, highlighting the parallel between the Tarot's evolution and the presence of non-conformist cultures throughout the Renaissance period, drawing a connection between the rise of Christianity, the use of the law to criminalize the occult, and the use of Tarot as an act of resistance by those who practice magic or mystic ritual.

Historical Context, Existential Crisis and the Occult

The historical context of the Tarot provides further clarity on its occult use. The Black Death pandemic killed between 30 and 60 per cent of the population in Europe, leaving the way open for the Renaissance movement to respond to existential crises resulting from the massive breakdown of social foundations (Bedyński, 2020). The Quattrocento was marked by what Cohn (1997) calls a cult of remembrance, centered on recovering lost history, challenging power structures, and a need for understanding life, death, and mortality. Bedyński (2020) described a liminal space of profound transformation during which time the Tarot gained popularity, was distributed more broadly, and became used for a wide range of activities, including personal inquiry.

The Tarot also appeared in Italy as an aristocratic pastime made possible by commissioned playing cards (Olsen, 1994; Taylor, 2016). Taylor (2016) noted a class and gender distinction between the aristocratic intellectual pastime in court settings, and the use of playing cards for gambling and entertainment, associated with lower classes. The Tarot's occult use was first documented in Milan when the cards appeared as the original decks illustrated by the School of Ferrara, before spreading through mass production and distribution for entertainment and occult practice, the Tarot was in use throughout areas along Mediterranean trade routes. The use of the Tarot for fortune-telling was criminalized due to its associations with fortune-telling and to the legal regulation of Witchcraft, Paganism and the occult that characterized the rise of Christianity in Europe (Patrick, 2020). In contrast, while the occult use of the Tarot is documented throughout the Quattrocento, it was not used for fortune-telling until the 18th Century according to Taylor (2016). In this context, examples such as the Mantegna Tarot, which pre-date the current structure of the Tarot decks encountered today, are central to understanding the role of the Tarot in Italian culture. The Mantegna Tarot is a set of engravings that follow a different structure than other Tarot decks yet still hold representations and

meanings about Italian worldview and spirituality (Skopalová, 2014). The Tarot subsequently gained in popularity and practice during the Renaissance. The increasing use of printing, made possible by the invention of the printing press, made this historically occult practice widely available (Decker, 2013).

Contemporary Translation into an Enchanted Worldview

As there is no consensus on the origins of the tarot's use for divination, it is important to understand the historical context of Italian culture in the 15th century, where the rise of Christianity, the Bubonic plague, and witch trials set the stage for peasant life. While Cohen's (2024) work looked at the Romani diaspora that was present as a migrant population that moved the Tarot throughout Italy, some authors, including Peters (2022) cited the Tarot's presence in Europe before its broader global dissemination, and several outlined its cross-cultural occult histories (Davidson, 2001; Decker, 2013; Lavin, 2021; Place, 2010). Soranzo (2023) wrote about the period of the Italian Renaissance known as the Quattrocento, noting that spirituality is extensively represented throughout Italian art and culture from the 1400's. Others such as Grimassi (1999) provided historical context for the use of Tarot and other cards for divination in Italian culture. According to Grimassi (1999) use of the cards for divination is rooted in the cosmologies of La Vecchia Religione, or the Old Religion, also known as Stregheria or Italian Witchcraft. Magliocco (2009) made a further connection between Italian vernacular culture and the roots of these cosmologies. This points to an enchanted or magical worldview that many Italian Americans have sought to reclaim as a spiritual or folkloric tradition that provides an alternative to the Italian diaspora in North America (Magliocco, 2009).

Storytelling Through Tarot and Art

The Tarot has an established relationship with art, since the artwork on the cards are a central part of meaning making, anchoring the exploration of inner conflict in visual storytelling. The cards

are distinguished by the artwork which depict themes, personas, archetypes or other symbols originating in Northern Italy (Olsen, 1994; Place, 2010; Skopalová, 2014). Paintner (2017) argued that artistic expression is inherently spiritual, which lends a transpersonal dimension to making art inspired by Tarot readings.

Through commerce, trade and cultural exchange, Tarot cards have moved and coexisted cross-culturally through the span of centuries of human activity. The Tarot has been adapted by various cultures since its first documented origins, and, as noted previously, there is disagreement about Muslim and Hebrew influences (Place, 2010; Tishman, 2024). However, there is consensus around the storytelling embedded in the Tarot's allegorical structure and its relationship with Roman mythology. In addition, Place (2010) and Tishman (2024) suggest that a multiplicity of lineages across geography and culture made the existence of the Tarot possible, offering a wider frame of reference for storytelling.

In my capstone research, autoethnography bridges a gap between past and present, or ancestry and lived experience. I experienced first-hand that storytelling was central to the experience of reading the Tarot, where one's identity and lived experience are filtered through the archetype and meaning of the card to produce new insights and understanding. The stories of Roman mythology, dianic tradition and the folklore of Aradia⁷ run parallel to the stories that individuals bring to the

⁷ Aradia is a mythological woman and central figure and archetype in dianic witchcraft. Although folklorist Charles Godfrey Leland (1899) presented her as a female messiah (Sosteric, n.d.), Magliocco (2005) argues that she existed and survived under another name. The manuscript published by Leland (1899) is, according to Della-Pianna (2011), an interpretation of her incantations and the subject of a revival of witchcraft as Wicca (Manns, 2025), however there is a large body of evidence that these stories existed in Italian folklore for centuries prior to Leland's work, and that she may be based on a woman who lived in 14th Century Italy (Della-Pianna, 2011). These have been the subject of the revival of Italian witchcraft that unearths this lost heritage. Della-Pianna (2011) has stated that the real Aradia was born in Italy in 1313 and taught the craft widely. Her birthplace of Volterra was along the trade routes connecting with Florence, Milan and Rome, and across Italy where the Tarot could be found. Volterra was also the site of a significant witch trials that took place between 1400-1800 (Cesana et. al., 2017). It is worth noting that a biography of Charles Leland shows an image of "Maddalena, a Florentine 'Witch'" holding traditional playing cards, reaffirming the relationship between cards and witchcraft (Pennell, 1906).

cards. Humans around the world can now behold a diverse contemporary ecosystem of card decks that entertain, support meaning-making, and offer a practice of witnessing and storytelling.

Use of the Tarot in Art Therapy and Expressive Arts Therapy

Research about the use of the Tarot in art therapy and expressive arts is limited, however the merits of therapeutic applications of the Tarot have been supported by previous research (Bouchard, 2020; Cavallaro, 2023; Peters, 2022). Bouchard (2020) explored the Tarot as a tool to foster personal insight in the context of art therapy, and Peters (2022) applied the use of Jungian archetypes to demonstrate the transformative quality of the Tarot. Peters (2022) also discussed cultural appropriation in relation to their use of the Tarot in art therapy, and addressed ways to mitigate harm caused in its contemporary use, particularly in therapeutic settings. Cohen (2024) explored the Tarot's applications as a tool to verbalize emotions and access intuition, suggesting that the Tarot offers a bridge to the inner world. Cohen (2024) also named the importance of cultural safety and humility in using the Tarot in therapy. Because of its symbolism, and the fact that the cards already have artwork on them, the Tarot can allow seekers to imagine their experiences and frame their feelings through narrative inquiry and meaning making based in metaphor.

The motivations with which people seek esoteric practices have been described as a "transitional space" that bears resemblance to the process of psychotherapy (Davidson, 2011). Similarly, the Tarot offers the client or seeker a space where they can contemplate problems in the presence of a witness or guide with whom to co-regulate, that is, the reader or psychotherapist (Davidson, 2011).

Through my capstone project, I seek to add to the discussion about whether there is an ethnography of the tarot as belonging to the oppressed, outsider or marginalized peoples (Lavin, 2021) and how this relates to queering the tarot (Peters, 2022). I also hope to add to the relatively

new body of research emerging from practitioners of the tarot as a decolonizing methodology (Greenberg, 2023).

The Tarot as a Clandestine and Resistive Practice

Several authors have written about the sociology of liberation associated with the Tarot (Ann, 2020; Greenberg, 2023; Peters, 2022; Sosteric, 2014), which suggests that its use is compatible with empowerment, anti-oppression, and social justice-oriented practice as well as a way of decolonizing mental health specifically (Fregosa, 2021). Cohen (2024) examined how the Tarot's use in fortune-telling was criminalized. Cohen (2024) also described other struggles among diasporas to access folklore and mysticism in the face of empires and colonial societies that engaged in discrimination and violence to eliminate such practices. In contemporary applications, the tarot can be seen as a resistive practice in that it offers an alternative worldview, particularly in the context of modern revivals of Italian Witchcraft (Magliocco, 2009).

Research involving the tarot as a tool for self-exploration has highlighted the importance of recognizing that some people have been harmed in the context of its use. Writers have reflected on the Tarot's origins and have addressed concerns related to cultural appropriation by recognizing the relationships, practices, and cultures that surround its lineage and use (Peters, 2022; Stensland, 2021). Failla (2021) rejected the premise that ancestry or lineage is critical to ethical use of the Tarot and suggested that it can be used to connect to that ancestry and foster the kinds of self-inquiry that support community-based action. Sheedy (2024) reviewed how occult practices are utilized by queer communities as part of divesting from legacies of violence. As a decolonizing methodology, the tarot can be used as a resistive practice to redress these harms (Greenberg, 2023).

For some authors, engaging with the Tarot for fortune-telling as a divination practice is inherently a form of cultural appropriation because the Romani people have a close relationship with

the Tarot and have been historically persecuted and marginalized (Fregosa, 2021). While that close relationship is important, the ongoing and persistent use of the Tarot for divination and other personal development practices exists across many cultures and is broader than fortune-telling. It spans across geographies of human settlement, moving through cultural exchange and clandestine trade. This is consistent with its origins as a countercultural phenomenon of mixed origin (Cohen, 2024). The Tarot continues to be used to empower people who have historically experienced exclusion.

Similarly, and in relation to my inquiry, the affinity between Tarot and art as vectors of transpersonal empowerment serves as a point of alliance and liminality, which ultimately provided me with a space of connection with community, ancestry, cosmos, and creation during my personal practice of reading and drawing the Tarot. This is consistent with my perspective as an artist, activist, and art therapist; healing work requires synergy of personal and collective transformation, centering the role of the art therapist in social justice issues as well as providing a forum to explore and map alternative worldviews (Hocoy, 2005; Huss, 2023).

Arts-Based Research and Autoethnographic Self-Study

This project used arts-based research in an autoethnographic self-study by placing myself as the subject within a socio-cultural context to link my personal story with broader cultural phenomena (Ellis et al., 2011; McNiff, 2012; Potash, 2019; Poulos, 2021). An essential criterion for arts-based research, as distinct from arts informed research, is creating artwork as a researcher. Analyzing my own artwork served as the central method of inquiry in this self-study (Allen, 2012; Potash, 2019).

I examined my practice as a therapeutic intervention through the lens of autoethnographic self-study. This analysis framed the tarot ritual as a form of narrative self-inquiry. The aesthetic analysis was informed by the Expressive Therapies Continuum (Hinz, 2019) and ongoing research

about the Tarot. Framing the principles of the Tarot as a theory of change, and as a cosmology of self and community care, I share my reflections and findings related to my personal journey. My relationship with the Tarot was the result of a mentorship process that involved decolonizing myself and my spiritual practice, reclaiming lost traditions of my ancestry and lineage, and healing from personal and intergenerational trauma. As a praxis of cultural humility and in my personal journey to decolonize my spiritual practice, I become more discerning with cultural practices I engage with to minimize potential harm to cultures and peoples. Because of the Tarot's origins in Northern Italy, I felt comfortable, as a person of Italian descent, with pursuing my use of the tarot as part of decolonizing and reclaiming my spiritual practice. This use was in alignment with remaining true to my own heritage and lineage, as well as with what I feel personally called towards, namely, to engage in practices that are intended to work towards personal and collective healing. Using spirituality as accompaniment in post-traumatic growth ultimately underpinned my transformation from artist to art therapist.

My process involved aesthetic analysis of the artwork through a phenomenological approach as applied in art therapy (Guttman & Regev, 2004). This approach posits that relationships are reciprocal and questions the framework of transference, focusing on the here and now and on how clients see the world (Guttman & Regev, 2004). In the case of my capstone project I used principles of the Expressive Therapies Continuum (ETC) theoretical model, which is based in a neurobiological framework developed to understand sensory processing of artistic and creative expression, to decode my artwork (Hinz, 2019, Lusebrink, 1990). Although the ETC model is often used for clinical assessments, treatment and case conceptualization in art therapy practice, I used this framework, specifically the media properties, or Media Dimension Variables, as a framework for aesthetic analysis (Hinz, 2019).

In using the lens of the ETC, I reflected on the use of Tarot as a cosmology of care and praxis in self-care, particularly as Safe and Effective Use of the Self (CRPO, 2015). During this time, I was integrating my personal transition from artist to art therapist, wherein the art process served as a tether in the journey and illuminated how a personal art practice can be supportive to art therapists.

The differential analysis of process and product, as key characteristics of autoethnographic methodology (Ellis et al., 2011) is also central to combining arts-based research with autoethnography. I used the lens of the ETC retrospectively to complete an aesthetic analysis of the artwork as arts-based autoethnographic self-study by reviewing the six artworks created through an intentional practice of reading the Tarot and making art to process meaning through self-inquiry and reflection. The key to their alliance is that the insights identified from my art-making as a researcher were imbued with analyzing this artwork within a cultural frame of reference and in the context of my identity (Ellis et al., 2011).

The element of chance was also crucial in understanding the role of the Tarot as part of my healing journey. Following a life-altering medical diagnosis at the age of 32, I needed a way to process my feelings about my own mortality, survivor's guilt, anxiety about an uncertain future, and the trauma of a lifelong relationship with the medical industrial complex and a diagnosis that pitted my body in a war with itself. Surrendering to chance provided the freedom to heal. The Tarot works in a non-linear way, providing an anchor for self-inquiry, facing mortality, and holistic healing. Similarly, as Reilly et al. (2021) demonstrated, creative arts therapy provides a space where people with illness or who have faced loss can engage in existential inquiry around authenticity, fulfillment, and freedom, community, and meaning and purpose. These affinities made a natural union between the Tarot and art therapy, which I embodied in a self-reflexive artistic process of self-accompaniment.

I was then able to draw parallels between my own personal story and the greater narrative of my ancestors using autoethnography. A phenomenological aesthetic analysis of the artwork and reflection on my creative process provided an important opportunity for integration through storytelling and meaning-making. The meaning was framed by a critical autoethnography, drawing on the parallels between my storyline and that of my ancestors. Connecting with my ancestors provided the liminal transpersonal space required for healing and growth. My art process involved self-reflection on how my readings of the Tarot supported me as a form of self and community care. Since the practice of reading Tarot cards is part of my spiritual practice, it also served as a therapeutic orientation for me as an intersectional feminist, neopagan art therapist and expressive arts therapist. It also offered a foundation for the capstone project.

Through this Arts-Based Research capstone project, I gained an understanding of the therapeutic potential of the Tarot itself. As an intermodal creative process that engages with cartomancy, or the practice of reading cards and emotionally processing through art creates the conditions for flow. Aligning the allegory of the Tarot with life meanings while engaging in a personal art practice engages the Tarot as a technology of care. This idea of technology of care merges Wu's (2020) conceptualization of the Tarot as a technology with Michelson et al. (2024) findings on the Tarot's modality as carework. This technology of care is one that facilitates spiritual connection, personal and collective growth (Michelson et al., 2024). As a technology that is currently and has historically been used for self and community care, modeling the Tarot as a technology of care sets the stage for this capstone project's reflections and findings (Wu, 2020; Michelson et al., 2024).

My capstone project rests on a few core premises. First, that creativity is a human right (Kapitan, 2015). Second, that Tarot can be a decolonizing methodology (Greenberg, 2023); it must also include reflection on cultural appropriation broadly and relative to the tarot specifically

(Strenslund, 2021; Peters, 2022), alongside personal inquiry into positionality and whether one is an insider or outsider (Collins, 1986). Whether the Tarot was used by one's ancestors is not as important as whether it can be used to connect to foster the kinds of self-inquiry that support community-based action (Failla, 2021).

Aesthetic Analysis: The Process and the Product

From 2019 to 2025, I created an art piece to capture a yearly Tarot reading using the Tarot of the Wild Unknown (Krans, 2016). The structure of the Tarot remains intact in this deck, yet I was attracted to the images and Krans' interpretation of the four suits as animals and elements representing the natural world. For each reading, I approached the process as a ritual and pulled 13 cards for the year, one for each of the 12 months of the year, and an additional card for the year itself. As is typical practice, the cards were drawn at random, shuffling and choosing them without seeing the face of the card, and revealing it once selected for the reading. The artwork I created for each year depicted a hand-drawn reproduction and interpretation of the cards in the reading, showing the artwork featured on the cards. The original purpose of drawing the artwork was to prolong and preserve my time with the reading, and making the cards available for use. As I experienced the benefits of the practice, it became a personal artistic, spiritual, and therapeutic practice marking the passing of each year, with the artwork as a form of integration.

The use of a yearly ritual is in alignment with modern witchcraft and the Reclaiming tradition as led by Starhawk (Starhawk, 2011; Starhawk & Connor, 2015; Sosteric, n.d.). Much like previous pagan tradition, Reclaiming follows the Wheel of the Year, emphasizing natural cycles as an organizing principle to earth-based spirituality and casting contemporary neopaganism in a feminist and activist frame (Reid, 2006). It is worth noting here that Starhawk's work has been a significant influence in Canada due to its novel approach and because it was filling a gap in reclaiming Goddess

traditions or women's traditional roles in spirituality as healers, guides, and teachers (Reid, 2006). For me this gap was filled with recovering lost heritage alongside a contemporary North American revival movement of Italian Witchcraft that exists among the Italian diaspora. This connection to ancestry and lineage enhanced my sense of belonging and deepened my relationship with the Tarot.

Using a phenomenological analysis of the process framed by a critical autoethnography, I was able to draw parallels between my own personal story and the greater narrative of my ancestors, their struggles, and how those struggles connect with other social justice issues in an intersectional frame. Reflecting on my experience of the process as healing and transformative, and as a model of safe and effective use of self, this leaves open the question about whether the presence of an art therapist is essential for therapeutic benefits. This capstone broadened my understanding of self-care for mental health practitioners, expanded the applications of post-traumatic growth that I experienced, and raises the question about whether this can also be extended to other individuals or groups. The analysis in the section below speaks to the role of the artwork in the healing process. Rather than presenting an exhaustive and detailed interpretation of every card, I offer an overview of the reading and key highlights that support my reflections and findings.

The Role of the Artwork

Reflecting on the artwork and creative process completed in past years, and alongside an ongoing personal art practice involving tarot readings and art-making together, I used the framework of the Expressive Therapies Continuum (ETC) to look at my art retrospectively (Hinz, 2019). Applying the lens of the ETC to the aesthetic analysis provided a method to decipher and interpret the formal elements of the art in the language of art therapy to better understand my creative process. By examining the choice of media, the characteristics of the media and how this relates to sensory processing, I used the ETC to understand another layer of my healing process. I created the first

three pieces prior to learning about the ETC, and it was therefore applied retrospectively. However, I had experience in artistic practice bolstered by a rudimentary understanding of art therapy that I gained from independent coursework and training in art therapy, and training in meditation, mindfulness and somatic healing. I completed additional coursework as part of my studies at WHEAT, which allowed me to look at my work with an increasing understanding of the media and its neurobiological effects through art-making. My research built on the relationship tarot holds with time, simulating a time capsule effect due to the time elapsed between the reading, the events of my life, the art-making, and the aesthetic analysis.

For this tarot ritual and art-making practice, I dedicated the exclusive use of my Tarot of the Wild Unknown deck, created and illustrated by Kim Krans (2016), to each reading. I am grateful to the artist and author for wishing me well on my research project, whose work is shown in Figure 1 below. The following sections present each art piece and my aesthetic analysis.

Figure 1

The First Reading



Note: This figure shows the cards pulled for my first reading using the *Tarot of the Wild Unknown* by Kim Krans (2016).

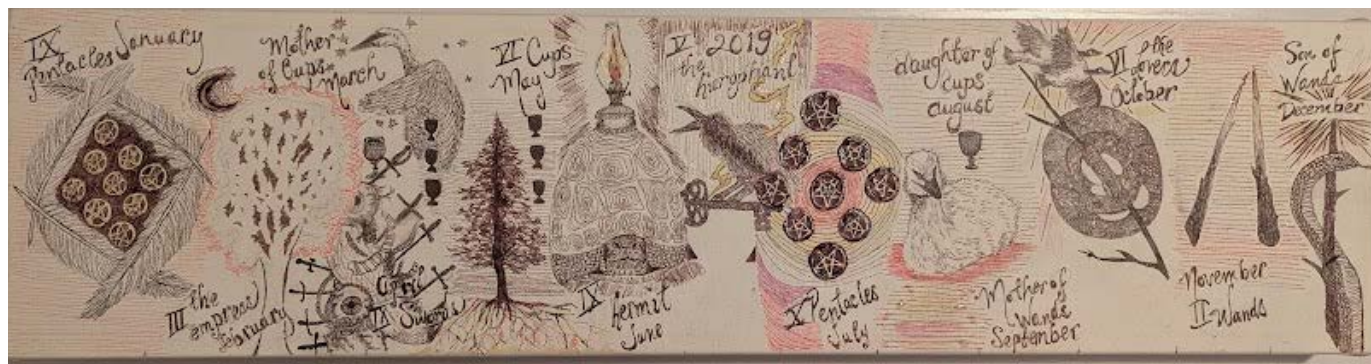
2019 - Devotion and Synchronicity

For the first art piece, I chose pencil outline, fine line ink pen, and working on canvas. This was painstakingly slow as it required repeated strokes for the fine tip ink pen to cover the coarse threading of the canvas' surface. This made it an exercise in mindfulness, patience, and highly stimulating tactile engagement for my nervous system. It was soothing for me to focus my attention on the minutiae of covering the thread of the canvas with a fine tip pen, and I found it calming to repeat the predictable motion of the pen. As a resistive medium, the pen on canvas provided control,

predictability and therefore safety for my nervous system as I worked on my art piece.

Figure 2

2019: Synchronicity & Devotion



Note: Artwork completed in 2019

Media: pencil, fine tip pen on mounted canvas, 6' x 24'

Cards shown from left to right:

- IX Pentacles, January
- III The Empress, February
- Mother of Cups, March
- IX of Swords, April
- VI of Cups, May
- IX Hermit, June
- V The Hierophant, 2019
- X of Pentacles, July
- Daughter of Cups, August
- Mother of Wands, September
- VI The Lovers, October
- II of Wands, November
- Son of Wands, December

My intention in choosing media that would make it a lengthy process that requires precision, was to enter a meditative state while working on the artwork. Committing to a prolonged process gave me hope as it gave me a sense of a long future and provided certainty in the repeated contact with the canvas. The theme of longevity came forward retrospectively. I did not know it yet, but I was creating a process to support long-term personal change and post-traumatic growth as the readings

paralleled a year, spending extended time reflecting on the cards and considering them in non-sequential and non-linear timelines. For example, in April 2019, there were floods throughout several areas of Eastern Ontario and Western Québec, and my husband and I supported some of the volunteer emergency relief efforts in the city of Ottawa. Later, my husband spilled water on my artwork by accident, and droplets of water landed on the drawing for the April 2019 card, highlighting the Tarot's inherent relationship with synchronicity, leaving traces both of the water and his involvement.

2020 - Post-traumatic Growth in a Global Pandemic

Then in year two, I worked with the fluidity of a new canvas using pencil, and pen, along with a thicker felt calligraphy pen that spread quickly and precisely across the canvas, which brought me sensory and emotional satisfaction and gave me a sense of permission to spend less time and still enjoy the art-making process. The parallel was a sense of permission for my body to hear and experience joy and hope about the future. Changing media made me more aware of my choices available for these aesthetic responses.

Figure 3

2020: Post-traumatic Growth in a Global Pandemic



Note: Artwork completed in 2020

Media: pencil, fine tip pen, felt ink pen on mounted canvas, 6' x 24'

Cards shown from left to right:

- VIII of Swords, 2020
- III of Wands, January
- Son of Pentacles, February
- V of Pentacles, March
- II The High Priestess, April
- X of Cups, May
- Ace of Wands, June
- VI The Devil, July
- XXI The World, August
- XI of Wands, September
- XVII The Star, October
- Ace of Swords, November
- The Sun, December

Drawing the cards and reflecting on their guidance was a familiar part of reading the tarot, however by extending my relationships with the reading as I continued to make art, deeper meaning emerged. In retrospect, as I depicted the cards throughout the year, the cards take on their full meaning: a cocooning butterfly surrounded by swords to define the year of the COVID-19 global pandemic, and a wilted rose in March 2020, when all our dreams and aspirations for the year were brutally halted by legally mandated lockdowns around the world.

2021 - Self-Regulation and Finding Reference Points

I completed a third reading and used a wooden surface with a pencil and a felt pen. This was partly a practical decision in a time when getting new art supplies during a pandemic was challenging and I had to use what was already in my home. It was also further exploring the freedom to change not only the media and style of my process, but allowing myself to use a different support for the art, which yielded a different experience as seen through the experience of the media. The pencil dug into the soft surface of the wood, and the ink bled into its porous texture, producing a bleeding effect that I had difficulty controlling, which forced me to work on regulating my frustration with the media, a stand-in for working through the frustration of living through the second year of a

global pandemic.

Figure 4

2021: Self-Regulation and Finding Reference Points



Note: Artwork completed in 2021

Media: pencil, fine tip pen, pastel pencil on a wooden board, 12' x 24'

Cards shown from left to right:

- X of Cups, January
- Ace of Wands, July
- Daughter of Swords, February
- IV of Pentacles, August
- Ace of Swords, October
- XX The World, September
- XIII Justice, May
- XIV Temperance, March
- VII of Wands, November
- VIII of Wands, April
- VIII of Swords, June
- III Empress, December
- IV of Swords, 2021

Practicing this skill in the predictable environment of art media helped me develop techniques to soothe myself, using the calming repetition of line and media on the surface to enter a space of flow or unity with all of time and the cosmos. This was healing as a practice of patience, acceptance and surrender to things I could not control.

By repeating the same process of responding aesthetically to the cards I pulled by drawing my interpretation of the artwork depicted on them, I was able to create safety through those reference points and practice self-regulation through body-based and sensory attunement to the media and art-making. This created a consistency that provided a soft place to land in difficult times. The thread of synchronicity also supported me when the alignment of cards produced retrospective meaning. One poignant example was when I drew the Daughter of Swords for February 2021, which was the month I lost my first pregnancy with my husband. This card took on its meaning in hindsight when I felt the deep cut of the sword to express the loss, and the figure of the daughter personified the lost child. This self-accompaniment through the symbolism of the artwork allowed me to grieve this unspeakable loss through the reflection and art-making process. The art held space for mourning, acceptance and healing in ways that other modalities could not.

2022 - Soft Landings to Support Integration

For my fourth reading, I had more information on the effects of different media to represent the reading, and I wanted to continue with wood, but try another medium that wouldn't bleed. Remembering the satisfaction of the calligraphy pen spreading quickly on canvas in comparison with the first piece, I wanted to work more quickly on the surface and see the drawings form more swiftly. I experimented with dry pastel pencils on the wood to avoid the bleeding effect and found that the chalk was less precise and made squeaky noises on the resistive wood, producing powder that was messy and that limited where and how I could work and store it.

Figure 5*2022: Soft Landings to Support Integration*

Note: Artwork completed in 2022

Media: pencil, fine tip pen, pastel pencil on a wooden board, 12.5' x 16.5'

Cards shown from top left to bottom right:

- Mother of Wands, January
- VII The Chariot, February
- X of Pentacles, March
- VI of Cups, April
- IV The Emperor, May
- III of Swords, June
- III of Cups, July
- V of Swords, August
- Daughter of Wands, September
- Daughter of Pentacles, October
- VIII of Cups, November
- VI The Lovers, December

- Wheel of Fortune, 2022

As I realized that art-making could channel embodied responses and support integration, I began to experience the benefits of healing from my life experiences. Of course, the Wheel of Fortune seems apt for the year that my child was born. I cannot think of better fortune than for this beautiful, creative, intelligent, capable, sweet, and magical being to grace my life and expand my capacity to love and give more selflessly than I ever have. The VI of Cups was drawn for April, and my child was born on the 25th of this month. The tree in this picture, with deep roots, followed by the Emperor tree in May, is a powerful image to behold, as my husband had brought a sapling home when the Champlain Township gave them out to residents. We planted it in our yard with the placenta from my child's birth on Mother's Day and completed a small ritual of lighting candles and making wishes for the new member of the family, Xavier. The tree has since been known in our family as the Xavier tree. I've drawn the tree many times and, unable to part with it when we moved in August 2024, I had it transplanted to our new home. For the month of June, I pulled the III of Swords, which is the month my husband accepted a job in Timmins, and our family was separated by distance for a significant portion of the time. We would spend the first 10 months of our child's life this way; my husband returned when our child was just a bit more than a month shy of their first birthday, the following year.

2023 - Tarot as a Bridge and Art as a Partner

I went back to canvas for the fifth yearly reading, choosing fine tip felt markers on a larger surface. The ink offered an easy to use, quick and very strong pigment on the canvas. The speed of coverage of the thicker marker allowed me to use up a larger space more quickly and the size and format allowed more space for each card. The larger canvas and quick esquisse of the drawings made possible by felt marker fit the cards into a different composition that brought the reading

forward not as a set of cards but rather as a whole. It was also significant that the movement of the marker across a larger surface demanded more physical engagement compared to the stillness of the original pen, and without the messy chalk of the pastel to clean up afterwards. The movement, cleanliness and fluidity of the media provided not only a sense of control, but also an experience of freedom and embodied agency. A drawing practice became a movement practice.

Figure 6

2023: Tarot as a Bridge and Art as a Partner



Note: Artwork completed in 2023

Media: fine tip pen, fine tip felt marker on mounted canvas, 16' x 24'

Cards shown from left to right:

- III of Wands, January
- XVII The Star, February
- IX of Swords, March
- Mother of Swords, April
- Daughter of Pentacles, May
- XVII Death, June
- II of Wands, July
- XI of Wands, August
- XIV Temperance, September
- Daughter of Swords, October
- VIII Justice, November
- XI of Pentacles, December
- III of Pentacles, 2023

In this artwork I allowed myself to simplify the drawings, trusting, after several years of this practice, that the meaning could emerge from the process, especially since a significant number of cards are showing up for the second time: III wands, XVII The Star, IX of Swords, II of Wands, Daughter of Swords, XIV Temperance, XI of Swords, XIII Justice are all returning cards. Eight out of 13, more than half. This seemed significant in and of itself, as though I was being asked to revisit the past and draw them again another way.

2024 - Becoming the Art Therapist

It was after completing the final piece for the 2024 reading that it became clear that this was a journey beyond the practice of making meaning from the cards. I felt a sense of integration and calm that I hadn't felt before. Dedicating my capstone project to this practice was the culmination of a years-long personal healing process that crystallized the healing process. This process brought awareness to my post-traumatic growth, made my life feel more fulfilled as a person living with chronic health challenges, supported me in my existential inquiry, and accompanied me through the journey of becoming a parent. But most importantly to the field of art therapy, I was actualizing a lifelong dream of becoming an art therapist, in an integration of my whole self.

Figure 7*2024: Becoming the Art Therapist*

Note: Artwork completed in 2024

Media: fine tip pen, acrylic paint pen on canvas paper, 12' x 16'

Cards shown top row and then bottom row, left to right:

- XI of Wands, January
- XV Strength, February
- Daughter of Pentacles, March
- Mother of Wands, April
- III of Cups, May
- VI of Swords, June
- XV The Devil, July
- XXI The World, August
- VI The Emperor, September
- XIX The Sun, October

- II The Lovers, November
- XIII of Pentacles, December
- Ace of Pentacles, 2024

The final piece was completed on a flat sheet of canvas, with acrylic paint markers, making the size, format, and media easy to work with, enjoyable and thus incorporating all the experiential learning from each previous piece. The paint marker spread beautifully on the flat sheet of canvas, with no bleeding or unpleasant sounds or textures. The flat sheet of canvas and smaller size was portable and easy to work with. The paint spreading so smoothly felt like an affirmation of the cumulative healing process. I found myself in a space of acceptance and completion, feeling that this body of work is complete: I am no longer the same person I was when I began this work, and my life has transformed so completely that it was almost unrecognizable. This was an unfathomable transformation I could not have envisioned six years prior in the depth of my trauma and existential crisis. I was able to trust the process because I was anchored in an art practice that provided space to go within, and because my experience was contained by the safety and the order of the Tarot. Trusting the ritual all along, I arrived at long last at the conclusion that this process has unwittingly been about my own growth through the transition from artist to art therapist.

Art Making: From Self-Care to Safe and Effective Use of Self (SEUS)

Creating the artwork to represent the readings had a few different purposes throughout my process. It began as a way of preserving the reading for ongoing reflection, then serving as a channel for sensory processing, facilitating embodied meaning making, and engaging in a creative process to support integration of the Tarot ritual into a personal art practice, which then became evident as a practice of self-care.

At the time I created the first drawing, I was moving from a space of survival to a space of post-traumatic growth. I did not know this would become a yearly practice when I started it, let alone

implement it as a yearly ritual. The year-long personal art practice that would span six years, then served as a tether through three years of studies in art therapy and expressive arts therapy. Through this period of time, I maintained my personal art practice, made meaning from the cards through the art-making process as well as through analysis of the artwork, and pursued the goal of becoming an art therapist. This brought me squarely before dreams and aspirations that I had felt I might never come to fruition when I was faced with the impact of illness on my uncertain future. I feel a strong parallel in my body between the cellular memory that connects me to my ancestors, including intergenerational trauma but also intergenerational knowing and wisdom. The use of the Tarot became more prevalent in Italy at a time when people were no longer in survival mode following the Black Death, and existing methods of healing and care did not answer all the existential questions that come with surviving a pandemic and the trauma of facing mortality (Olsen, 1994; Cohn, 1997).

What emerged from my art-making process was the outcome of a deeply personal healing process alongside my transition from artist to art therapist. Through this I gained a clear and embodied understanding of Safe and Effective Use of the Self (SEUS), a core competency in psychotherapy (CRPO, 2015). Through this model of art and ritual as an intentional and embodied practice of self-care, I trusted my felt-sense that I was developing something deeper, an underpinning of my work as a future art therapist, which called for further steps of integration.

As Ahonen (2017) demonstrated in a study of SEUS among music therapists, use of self in the therapeutic relationship is a key determinant of outcomes. Therefore applying SEUS highlighted core concepts and applications, such as working with the self as a wounded healer, managing countertransference, and understanding compassion fatigue or vicarious trauma. While making a distinction between self-care and SEUS, self-care directly supports SEUS (Ahonen, 2017). Self-care emerged in Ahonen's (2017) findings as foundational for SEUS: "The music therapist's

self-awareness, self-acceptance, self-regulation, and personal growth are crucial foundations for the use of self in the therapeutic process” (p. 15). The practices that a therapist engages in to practice SEUS are not prescriptive, and can include an art practice. However, while I argue that my practice of art-making is an example of practicing SEUS, not all art-making or self-expression is necessarily or inherently SEUS. My capstone project is predicated on the notion that in art therapy and other creative or expressive arts therapies, practicing art, ritual, and working with the Tarot are forms of self-care and therefore can, and in this case, did act as SEUS in my work as an art therapist and expressive arts therapist in training.

Podcast Trilogy: A Liminal Space for Personal Inquiry

Verbal processing was an essential part of making sense of the process of pulling cards, making art with them and making meaning that I could use in my life as guidance and healing. In this section, I describe how the art was a sensory experience, and describe the liminal space of personal inquiry I entered into through the ritual of tarot and art.

Through a podcast trilogy, I further explored the creative process, the artwork I had made and the role of the Tarot through discussions with my spiritual mentor Nikki Manzie. My long-standing apprenticeship with Nikki framed my personal inquiry around the tarot readings. In the podcasts, Nikki and I discussed the parallels between my life experience and reclaiming lost heritage, the distinction between art process and product, and the role of the Tarot in introducing synchronicity and chance in the creative process. These reflections included applications of ongoing anti-oppressive action in decolonization of the self and spiritual practice. This personal journey work is a responsibility that I cultivate through mindfulness as a practice of collective healing and community care. The following sections outline these key themes and reflections from the podcasts, which can be found in my Padlet under homonymous titles.

Podcast 1: Aesthetic Response as Storytelling

My art process suspended the creative act, creating the conditions to enter into a state of flow (Hinz et al., 2022). My experience of the creative process is one of internal mining, seeking and reflecting inwardly and creating something externally to reflect that internal state. Unlike an open or directed creative process, making art drawn from Tarot readings invoked responses that influenced my choice of media and my approach to the artwork over time. According to the Expressive Therapies Continuum, the state of flow arises when creative functioning occurs during a state of concentration wherein skills, emotions, thoughts of sensory experiences serve well-being and self-realization (Hinz, 2019; Hinz et al., 2022).

Ultimately, the Tarot provides a liminal space where meaning is not fixed, and over time, meaning was threaded through my life experience, and the cards became a reflective tool. I used this process to accompany myself throughout my program of study and to accompany myself as I accompany others, therefore using that liminal space for personal inquiry through creative processing. The connection with oral storytelling is also important, as cartomancy and divination are relational practices, and meaning-making in Tarot readings is created through transpersonal cultural exchange.

Podcast 2: Art as Artefact

Looking back, I was implementing self-compassion and self-empathy through my art making process, working through some specific embodied experiences like the challenge of physically sitting down and using my hands for the dedicated task of drawing for an extended period of time. Using my agency I decided what kinds of media to work with, the size and type of support, or how much time I wanted to spend drawing cards based on what they meant or how much I enjoyed drawing each one. Some of the cards were difficult to look at; they may have seemed scary or

ominous to me, while some others were hopeful, and most were quite open to interpretation. There was no fixed meaning, and my emotional response was part of the meaning-making.

Dedicating the time, finding a comfortable space to work, and sitting with the resistance and physical discomforts, embarking on this practice, I engaged in an exercise of patience, bringing mindfulness practice into my personal art practice, being attentive to my body and to the care of my nervous system. In this way, the process yielded a tapestry of artefacts that became available for analysis years beyond the initial card reading. My aesthetic analysis of the artwork was an exploration of these artefacts that offer a window into the human experience of questioning existence and mortality, suffering and healing, and cycles of birth, dying and the cosmos.

Podcast 3: Synchronicity and Chance

In contrast to art therapy directives that are structured and produce orderly containment, the Tarot offers the structure of the Tarot presented at random. A Tarot reading is based on one or more cards selected without seeing or identifying the cards, typically shuffled so that they are chosen out of order. Producing artwork in response to a reading highlighted the element of chance: I was not selecting what I would be drawing.

Through the element of chance, I engaged in the thoughts and feelings arising from looking at, drawing and reflecting on the cards. Working with the cards was also a practice of acceptance, agreeing to draw whatever came up on the card. I challenged myself to commit to drawing what was on the card, even if it was difficult or I didn't like the card or my response. When in a contained and safe space, however, the therapeutic potential of working through that resistance and practicing embracing what came up through chance helped to build the skill of acceptance, self-compassion, and working through challenging feelings. In this way, the tarot could be present for others as a technology to support personal growth. The creative process arrived as a third element in the room,

and as a process in and of itself. This modality stays true to the folk traditions around the tarot, recognizing that people create their meaning and can use the practices that connect them into a sense of divinity or what exists beyond their own self. This use of the Tarot is an exercise of transcending the ego and moving into a space of connection where one can tap into collective healing and healing the self in that collective. This collective healing is an individual pursuit, but it is a responsibility to the collective to be accountable for our own healing. As part of this personal commitment and responsibility as an art therapist, I am working through my own traumas to cultivate peace and minimize potential harms to myself and others.

I am in awe of the synchronicity that made itself known through the cards, the readings, the art-making and my life experiences alongside the personal practice. I could not have planned that I would have six pieces to present by the end of my studies, spanning six years, including the three years of my program. I started my art making practice in a spontaneous and authentic way, without planning, following instead the thread of synchronicity and chance.

Looking back, the opportunity to have a body of work created over the course of a six-year process has informed my work as a student art therapist and more broadly my worldview. I feel more trusting of things I cannot control like the element of chance, I trust the creative process, and I feel anchored in reclaimed ancestral knowing. Holding the Tarot as a therapeutic orientation has been an important source of wisdom and self-care. Through its use I have cultivated skills to have empathy towards myself and others, and a real openness to the unknown; this is synchronicity. This openness to the unknown is essential to the creative alliance, where working with clients requires trust and the ability to flow with the creative process in art therapy.

My art responses were not planned; they stem from an attunement to things outside oneself, perspectives, things one can't understand as one moves through life and experience as a linear

directionality. I experienced the synchronicity of the process as a guidance and used it as a reference point, allowing me to trust the process. The tarot offers an opportunity to leave space for freedom, intuition, and creativity. The element of chance can spark inspiration, stimulate creativity and highlight meaning through synchronicity.

Reflections and Findings

While it is not within the scope of this paper to describe every personal insight nor to interpret the meaning of each card, the meaning making informed my reflections and findings. To synthesize these into practicable understandings, I will address three main areas: my personal art practice, my embodied experience of the ritual, and my aesthetic analysis of my artwork. In doing so, I place myself in a role of witness and observer, elucidating how my personal art practice was a practice of safe and effective use of self, how embodied ritual supported the development of my therapeutic orientation in art therapy, and how the Expressive Therapies Continuum (ETC) framework supported my aesthetic analysis. Using the ETC's Media Dimension Variables alongside narrative inquiry in the aesthetic analysis provided additional information and insights that could be combined with autoethnographic study to inform a more holistic understanding of self.

As part of my practice of SEUS, I tend to the vulnerability of sharing this deeply personal work. Doing so requires applying a therapeutic orientation to my analysis. The concept of unconditional positive regard is pivotal in person-centered approaches to therapy, and is useful to this end (Rogers, 1995). Building on the work of Rogers (1995), Patterson (2013) also introduced the use of unconditional positive self-regard (USPR) in clinical practice. The stance of unconditional positive self-regard was key in my journey. It was vulnerable and scary to continue trusting the process I chose, trusting myself to know how to explore the themes evoked by the cards, and managing responses to inner experiences. These all required a strong creative self-alliance. The

creative alliance works by resourcing the therapist's experience, drawing from political purpose which makes the connection between self-care and community care (Joseph, 2011). In the case of my capstone project, my experience was a personal art practice within a frame of self and community care. What emerges from my retrospective analysis is a model for a personal practice in safe and effective use of self that supports anti-oppressive therapeutic orientations.

Personal Art Practice as Safe and Effective Use of Self

Due to my own lived experience of trauma, illness, exclusion and facing mortality, I sought alternative avenues for mental health and healing, and I engaged in existential inquiry while leaning into spiritual mentorship. Using a personal art practice became a tether that continued to keep me grounded through my studies in art therapy and expressive arts therapy.

Serving as a personal atlas of self-inquiry, the Tarot offered a personal and therapeutic orientation in the practice of art therapy and expressive arts therapy. This practice was itself a practice of safe and effective use of self in the context of using the Tarot for personal inquiry. An intentional personal art practice expanded into a practice of self-care. While creative arts therapists may not all be practicing artists, I argue that any mental health practitioner could use an art practice as SEUS. Because my personal art practice was anchored in my identity as an artist and was grounded in my decades of artistic practice, this was central to my journey and my practice of SEUS; however, prior experience or expertise in the arts is not required to practice art as SEUS. I also make a distinction between an art practice for self-care, and an art practice that serves as SEUS, which is by definition reserved for therapists as it takes place within therapeutic settings.

The Alchemy of Social Justice: Embodied Ritual as Allyship

Menakem's (2021) work highlighted the central role of the body in healing racialized trauma, and identified the body as a site of healing. It is in this sense that I frame my mindfulness practice

and embodied ritual as a responsibility to the collective through mind-body practices that address white body supremacy and other forms of internalized and embodied trauma and racism.

Committing to healing personal traumas also serves as a practice of safe and effective use of self since it supports a therapist to maintain self-regulation, remain present and focused on the client. As part of my spiritual apprenticeship and decolonizing my spiritual practice, I also needed to decolonize my own body. For me this was an exercise in reclaiming some lost heritage from my ancestral lineage, and relinquishing the use of cultural practices that are not mine. I learned cultural humility in working with the occult, and accessed the alchemy of the ineffable aspect of healing that transcends the personal through solidarity. In this sense, political purpose and creative alliance work together in this model of a personal art practice as safe and effective use of self.

Spiritual guidance was an integral part of this capstone project. Spiritual mentorship provided a frame and accountability in my decolonizing work. The discussions in the podcast trilogy crystallize a part of the mentorship experience. Presented as artist talks, the podcasts elucidated some of the key concepts that I explored in my personal journey and that were deepened through studies in art therapy and expressive arts therapy.

Weaving together the work of spiritual practice, therapeutic practice, and artistic practice, I entered the liminal space of personal inquiry, reclaiming lineage and responding aesthetically to the Tarot. This reclaiming lost heritage is in right relationship with my ancestry. Bearing an Italian name and a very visible Italian identity that has been a significant part of how I engage in the world. I'm aware of this on different levels, whether it be some of the oppression my ancestors experienced in terms of Italiophobia and some of the intergenerational effects of systemic oppression and displacement, or the discrimination towards Italians. I have chosen to connect into these experiences as a way to build empathy for others, to understand my responsibility towards social

justice and incorporate this into my practice of SEUS. In terms of my Tarot practice, this liminal space draws a parallel between my own circumstances and those of my ancestors. I imagine my ancestors in a broader collective sense, surviving the Black Death pandemic, entering the Renaissance and reclaiming lost heritage. In parallel, I have survived through my own personal health crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic, and enter the field of art therapy, as I work on reclaiming lost heritage through spiritual practice including the use of Tarot as ritual.

Anti-Oppressive Approaches in Art Therapy

Mindfulness, mind-body practices and somatic work are not only a responsibility to the collective, they are essential to racial healing (Menakem, 2021; Menakem & Maté, 2023). The practice of decentering in expressive arts is useful here as a practice of centering collectively, thus fulfilling a transpersonal experience of healing (Knill, 2000). Though I would not have questioned the relationship between somatic healing and spiritual practice, through my studies in art therapy and expressive arts therapy I now have an embodied understanding of the relationship between the embodiment of centuries of violence and intergenerational trauma which is passed down through lineage and culture as decontextualized trauma (Menakem & Maté, 2023).

As LeMay (2021) has noted, safety is not a universal experience, and social justice work, including anti-racism and reconciliation, require education and thoughtful action. Menakem and Mate (2023) and LeMay (2021) wrote that allyship demands that those who hold power and privilege use their voice, their influence, and their bodies to create meaningful social change. In my personal journey, returning to my own lineage as a settler and anchoring into practices such as the Tarot that align with my own lineage has been a way to work through embodied trauma. My spiritual practices of mindfulness have also been compatible with the work of practicing sitting with discomfort, a necessary step to allyship (LeMay, 2021).

To offer a safe space in the spirit and practice of allyship must include a commitment to understanding trauma, and its embodiment and to cultivating awareness and healing personal and intergenerational trauma. This creative process and the work through the cosmology of the Tarot served as a practice of presence to do just that. In working with clients without this awareness and commitment to a healing practice, a well-meaning therapist may inadvertently cause harm. In this way, my deep commitment to healing personal and intergenerational trauma is part of my ongoing commitment to social justice, allyship and racial healing.

Queering Magic and the Intersectional Feminist Queer Witch

This work builds on previous research on Neopagan spirituality and draws a connection between those healing practices and creative process, including those particular to traditional healing practices in Italy (Parmigiani, 2024). The use of creativity and art is intimately related to individual well-being, and has also been purported to support collective well-being (Ephraimson-Abt, 2025). There is also a long-standing relationship between witchcraft and feminism or proto-feminism in Italian paganism and the queerness of healing practices and liberation movements that serve collective struggles for social justice (Parmigiani, 2019).

As other authors have found (Davidson, 2009; Griffiths & Ross, 2008), community practice of creative expression are not only therapeutic in themselves, but also hold potentiality for collective healing. Through the co-creation of a learning community, engaging collective identity or shared social location, and participating in cultural transformation, they translate to structural changes through generational cycles. These participatory transactions are critical pieces of the experiential learning frame that “recognizes sociocultural challenges, acknowledges the relational violations of oppressed and marginalized individuals, and seeks to use language that does not pathologize human experience” (Ehrman-Shapiro, 2018, p. 299).

Broadening beyond identities of race where I enter from a place of privilege, I also experience the Tarot through a frame of queer spirituality (Brimacombe, 2024). Though it is not within the scope of this paper to identify the histories of violence towards 2SLGBTQIANPK+⁸ people and their historical exclusion from religion and other spaces, it is important to highlight the role of spirituality and magic in queer communities (Brimacombe, 2024, Prower, 2018). According to Brimacombe (2024), while these queer spiritualities may reinforce settler colonial practices, they also present an opportunity to dismantle them. Queer magic, then, offers an alternative discourse and system of beliefs that allies itself with anti-colonial struggles, while also providing alignment between spiritual practice or beliefs, and queer identity (Brimacombe, 2024). As part of this, awareness of the risks of cultural appropriation, reclaiming practices and the revival of Pagan traditions are understood as a way to return to one's ancestry rather than appropriating Indigenous or other spiritual practices that do not belong to one's lineage (Harrington & Kulystin, 2018). As a practice of inner change and outer results, magic serves as a vector for personal transformation in the context of shared liberation (Harrington & Kulystin, 2018). I have personally felt a conflicted relationship with Goddess traditions and the emphasis on women's spaces, as a non-binary and queer person. Magic and reclaiming traditions have offered me solace and an entry point into a spiritual belief system and practice that supports my commitment to social justice and anti-oppression, and my personal need for freedom and liberation from colonial systems including the gender binary and heteronormativity. I have found instead how the witch stands as a feminist figure, and as a queer figure (Österman, 2021). Indeed,

⁸ 2SLGBTQIANPK+ refers to Two Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Transexual, Queer and Questioning, Intersex, Asexual and Allies, Non-binary, Pansexual, Polyamorous and People of Colour, Kinship and + all other identities not explicitly mentioned who are gender non-conforming, practice or identify with alternative sexual identities, sexual or relationship orientations and world-views. While this acronym is in constant evolution through ongoing social justice movements, at the time of this writing it is understood and used as an inclusive acronym for justice seeking populations in relation to gender, sexuality, intimate partner or romantic relationships and alternative families and communities that challenge cisnormativity, heteronormativity and traditional norms of family and belonging.

not only is there historical evidence connecting witches and queerness in early Modern Europe, but these can be traced back through to the 1400s, placing them not only within the context of witch trials which targeted Pagans and queers alike, but also in the same time frame and location as the inception of the Tarot in Italy (Österman, 2021).

Retrospective Aesthetic Analysis Supported by the ETC

A retrospective analysis of my aesthetic responses brought forward an understanding of the somatic and neurobiological implications of my personal art practice. Using a phenomenological approach through the lens of the Expressive Therapies Continuum (ETC) showed me how and why I was selecting media, as well as what those choices meant about my embodied experience. Using the Media Dimension Variables in aesthetic analysis provided a language and approach to working with the artefacts of my creative process. Applying the lens of the ETC to my own work transformed the liminal space of inquiry into a space filled with meaning. In retrospective analysis, I now see the choices that I made with media within that lens, and have been able to further deepen the meaning by including the symbolism of the cards and layering in autobiographical storytelling and narrative inquiry. Combined with autoethnographic study to form a more holistic understanding of self, I practiced and developed the core competencies of empathy, self-awareness and cultural competency as an art therapist.

Tarot as a Theory of Change: A Model of Holistic Healing Through the Arts

The Tarot offers potential applications as a Theory of Change due to the creative aspect of storytelling and interpreting mythology. As an embodied ritual, it offers the conditions of flow that support personal development, and can hold space for liminal inquiry that is transformative. The transpersonal nature of the Tarot as a cosmology allows that liminal inquiry to move beyond the self through an experience of synchronicity by selecting the cards by chance. Together these principles

frame the Tarot as a Theory of Change. In therapeutic settings, the tarot can act as a technology of care and therapeutic orientation as well as serving as an anchor to thread meaning achieved by taking safe risks within the frame of the Tarot system and exploring outcomes through mythology as storytelling. The Tarot supports self and community care while providing a cosmology to orient narrative inquiry for personal transformation and social justice.

The Tarot as a Technology of Care for Justice-Oriented World-Making

According to several authors, there is a sociology of liberation associated with the Tarot, (Wu, 2020; Greenberg, 2023; Peters, 2022; Sosteric, 2014). Its use is therefore compatible with anti-oppressive approaches to support a social justice-oriented practice (Wu, 2020; Fregosa, 2021; Michelson et. al., 2024). In art therapy practice the Tarot supports a pathway of decolonizing mental health specifically (Fregosa, 2021). This makes the Tarot compelling as a tool for personal inquiry because the transpersonal cosmology fosters allyship, complicity, and restorative justice through anti-oppressive art therapy practice (Kapitan, 2011).

Through this arts-based autoethnographic self-study, I gained an understanding of the therapeutic potential of the Tarot. As an intermodal creative process that engages with cartomancy, or the practice of reading cards, use of the Tarot with art creates the conditions for flow. Aligning the allegory of the Tarot with life meanings while engaging in a personal art practice engages the Tarot as a technology of care. This idea of technology of care merges Wu's (2020) conceptualization of the Tarot as a technology with Michelson et al.'s (2024)'s findings on the Tarot's modality as care work. This technology of care is one that facilitates spiritual connection, personal and collective growth (Michelson et.al., 2024). As a technology that is currently and has historically been used for self and community care, this capstone is modeling the Tarot as a technology of care (Wu, 2020; Michelson et. al., 2024).

Michelson et al. (2024) wrote about the Tarot as a worlding practice, supporting the use of the Tarot not only for personal and collective growth but as an alternative way of knowing. Cohen (2024) has further demonstrated that the use of the Tarot requires an alternative framework resting on intuition, and that exists on the margins. As Sosteric (2025) stated, the Tarot was both appropriated by the elites and used by the masses. As a resistive practice, it can help move practitioners from appropriation of the tool to a transpersonal experience of growth (Michelson et al., 2024). Finally, Wu (2020) proposed that the use of imagination in connection with the wisdom of ancestors makes the case for the Tarot's potential for "justice-oriented world-making" as a technology of care.

The Tarot as a Therapeutic Orientation in Art Therapy

Tarot, like art, requires an alternative framework resting on intuition and creativity. As a theory of change, the practice of reading the Tarot models person-centered experiential storytelling and relational phenomenological aesthetic analysis. It offers a safe container for working with uncertainty through the elements of chance, and attuning to synchronicity and autobiography to create meaning. The Tarot has a historical relationship with personal inquiry, existential mysticism, earth-based spirituality, as well as connecting with ancestors and the cosmos. This transpersonal aspect of the Tarot is central to its healing potential as well as its potentiality for social-justice oriented world-making. Using the Tarot for personal and collective growth and healing requires the suspension of disbelief, and acceptance of the uncertain or the unknown, and embracing the idea that healing is possible. While the art-making provided a method to make sense of the readings, the Tarot was the anchor for contemplative self-inquiry, cultivating resilience and finding hope.

Implications for Art Therapy Practice

My art practice and capstone project shed light on some possibilities that exist beyond the integration of Tarot, cartomancy, divination or other esoteric practices. First, the intentional art

practice I pursued serves as an example of the benefits of a personal art practice for mental wellness. This practice can support art therapists and mental health practitioners as a form of self-care, and as Safe and Effective Use of the Self. Second, the combination of Tarot as ritual with art-making can serve as an entry point to access liminal space, offering avenues for meaning-making that both provide content through the artwork, narratives, archetypes, symbols and ascribed cultural meaning associated with each card. Third, the practice of the Tarot emerged as an orientation for me as a practitioner. It served as a bridge in my evolution from artist to art therapist, and as self-accompaniment during the process. This exemplifies how the transformative journey to becoming a therapist can be supported by personal art practice as self-care, and community care.

Finally, through this Tarot ritual and personal art practice I experienced deep personal transformation, personal healing and post-traumatic growth. Though my process was self-directed, the technology of the Tarot framed my personal development as a Theory of Change. As a resistive practice, and technology of self and community care, the Tarot marries personal and social transformation. Inherent in this process, the Tarot consolidates a worldview wherein healing is simultaneously individual, collective and cosmological. Ultimately, the Tarot provides grounding for existential questions while offering avenues for healing through narrative self-inquiry, while the art serves as a vector to express responses to these questions. Combining their use, then, elucidates the ways in which humans might seek answers and find them within themselves; which is eventually the deeper search for existential meaning, connection with something beyond our own existence, and transformation of one's suffering into healing, that one may seek to address in therapy.

Areas for Further Inquiry

Looking ahead, areas of ongoing inquiry may include further exploring the relationship between solidarity and allyship in art therapy. This is especially important when working with occult

practices or practices that have been historically marginalized. It is equally important when practicing with approaches that use mindfulness or spirituality and may be rooted in cultural practice.

Existing research in art therapy speaks to response art, which can be described as a personal practice for art therapists and other creative or expressive arts therapists. However, further research into the use of a personal art practice as safe and effective use of self may benefit the field of art therapy research and practice, and an improved understanding of its applications in therapeutic settings may enhance client work. Additionally, the relationship between spirituality in art therapy and self and community care merits further exploration both in research and in practice for the benefit of the client. This includes increasing our understanding of ritual and practices that offer potentiality as a Theory of Change as the Tarot does.

Ultimately, the aesthetic analysis rested on the presence of an art therapy framework, and the self-accompaniment served to support my personal journey in becoming an art therapist. Deeper analysis of the Tarot's role in relation to safe and effective use of self, and research into the Tarot as a theory of change would greatly benefit the field of art therapy where the Tarot's storytelling properties could further support narrative inquiry in therapy.

Concluding Thoughts

The way therapists exist in the world is not separate from ourselves or the lives we live our lives. Lived experience is the cornerstone of bringing my whole self forward as a healer. As a model of art and ritual serving as intentional practice of self-care, this six-year journey, where I moved from artist to art therapist, allowed me to develop a lived and embodied experience of personal transformation. I accomplished this through aesthetic responses anchored in the ritual and therapeutic orientation of the Tarot as a vector of synchronicity, a dwelling place of liminality, and as a cosmology of care.

An autoethnographic self-study of my artwork placed ancestral lineage as a key factor in connecting with the practice of Tarot reading. Weaving together the work of spiritual practice, therapeutic practice, and artistic practice, I invoked liminal space for personal inquiry, worked to decolonize my spirituality, reclaiming lineage and responding aesthetically to the Tarot.

The frame of autoethnography is central to cultural humility and anti-oppressive care practices. Not only is this important in terms of working with diverse clients, but also in terms of respecting the origins of this work; when invoking Paganism, witchcraft, earth-based spirituality and the occult, it is important to remember that women's spirituality and healing practices have been historically marginalized. The practice of fortune-telling with the Tarot and witchcraft more broadly has been criminalized. For these reasons, when modelling the use of occult practices, autoethnography frames respectful relationships with Pagan or earth-based spirituality. It also considers the propensity for the Tarot to be used as a resistive practice, and its potentiality as a technology of care. Within the frame of cultural humility, my practice of art-making as a ritual for art therapists emerged with core themes of synchronicity, connection to the cosmos, ancestral lineage, and relationship with the earth, or matter.

Additionally, narrative inquiry and storytelling supported a phenomenological approach to the aesthetic analysis of my art. Through my self-study, I found that the Tarot can serve as a theory of change because of its properties as a technology of care. It accompanied me through the work of reclaiming ancestral folklore through spiritual practice. Using the Tarot for self-inquiry alongside a personal art practice of aesthetic response to the tarot readings allowed me to process life events as they were unfolding and to create meaning retrospectively as self-accompaniment.

As a resistive practice, the ritual of the Tarot offers potentiality for personal and collective growth rooted in existential inquiry. Ultimately it is through the bewilderment of synchronicity, and

the sensory experience of the creative process, that one can experience the Tarot as magic, when the meaning of the cards emerge intuitively. The cosmology of the Tarot married to the embodied experience of art-making and meaning-making act as a practice of self and community care. The liminal space created when embodied ritual meets synchronicity supports a social-justice oriented worldview. The transpersonal aspect of the Tarot elevates its potency as a theory of change in art therapy. The self-accompaniment I experienced was also an accompaniment by my ancestors, by shared humanity, and by the cosmos in a process of healing and self-awareness that shoulder the use of art as safe and effective use of self.

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