

Pioneers and pilgrims: Finding invisible but felt ceilings and wondering what to do with them

Naomi Pears-Scown

Abstract

This reflective piece explores my wonderings about the professional identity of creative arts therapy and creative arts therapists in Aotearoa. I discuss my experiences of invisible but felt ceilings, especially as an insatiable learner and young professional. I reflect on my experiences of pivoting, the shadow side of journeying in an inhabited terrain, and the sense that I am experiencing a phenomenon that many (particularly younger) creative arts therapists in Aotearoa also experience. Finally, I wonder how creative arts therapists, personally and holistically as professionals, can continue developing our identities, gain professional credibility, and find expansion in healthcare spaces in Aotearoa.

Keywords

Aotearoa, ceilings, pivoting, poiesis, pioneers, pilgrims, professional identity

Introduction

At the end of 2020, I moved back to the sprawling city of Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland after living away for several years. The following year was then a time of wondering and playing with the question of “What next?” That morphed into a year of longer lockdowns (resulting in the completion of six 1000-piece puzzles and a small collection of watercolours titled *My home is my monastery*), studies in child and adolescent psychotherapy, personal therapy, and an expansion and settling into my new private practice. It was also a year of sensing the invisible but felt ceilings.

As an insatiable learner and perpetual student, I constantly seek new learning opportunities and avenues to grow and consolidate my professional identity. As a result, I find myself comfortable in liminal spaces, straddling different therapeutic contexts. Most of the time, I experience myself being in a state of fluidity rather than rigidity as I am “morphed and shaped by the other” in my learning and professional practice (Petruska, 2006, p.4). However, I now begin to reflect on this soft-bodied state and wonder if I am experiencing something collective about the profession of creative arts therapy in Aotearoa and our relative comfort with fluidity. I notice another echo of “What next?” growing inside me, but this time for our profession. I am curious whether other creative arts therapists hear this echo too, and wonder about stability, credibility and defined edges.

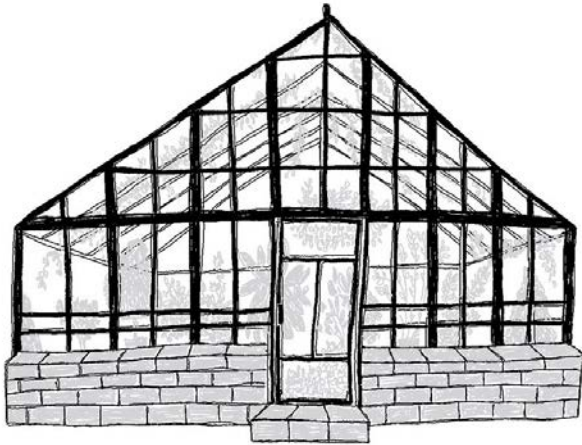


Figure 1. Naomi Pears-Scown, *defined edges*, 2022, digital drawing, 210 × 297mm.

The prompt for this wondering came from a confluence of events, experiences and circumstances that caused interruptions in my thinking and practice. Choosing to study child and adolescent psychotherapy came from researching the profession and noting opportunities for a pay increase and future stable employment. My intention was always to keep creative arts therapy as my foundation but to scaffold from there. However, this opportunity was cut short by a disruption at the end of the first year, when I applied for a master's programme and was not offered a place to study further and register. The institution did not believe that my professional registration and background as a creative arts therapist qualified me for the programme. It also indicated that knowledge of the psychodynamic model it taught required further preparedness on my part. The rejection stung. I had just hit an invisible but felt ceiling in my practice.

In this writing, I use metaphors of pioneers, pilgrims and ceilings, and arboreal imagery to help give shape and texture to my experiences. I will unpack the layers of these images throughout this piece, but begin with a question about my journey and the collective journey of creative arts therapists in Aotearoa. How do we continue to take root and grow, gain professional credibility, and find expansion in the field when we bump against ceilings? In a true soft-bodied fashion, I pivoted after my psychotherapy rejection and have embarked on a PhD to wonder about this question and the surrounding phenomena of professional identity for creative arts therapists in Aotearoa.

Learning to pivot

As a creative arts therapist in Aotearoa, I have noticed that we learn how to pivot and flow when we step into the world of practising. I have had many conversations with colleagues, supervisors and supervisees over the years who speak to this phenomenon, and their creative and innovative ways of entering a healthcare system that does not have readily created spaces for them to enter. We learn how to become self-advocating as we introduce, for the first time in many agencies, therapeutic experiences for clients that bring together aesthetic and psychological domains (British Association of Art Therapists, 2014).

In my own experience, I have described to my supervisor the feeling that every interaction I have in my personal life, with clients, and with education and professional development

scaffolds and builds a rich terrain for me to practise from. Nothing ever feels wasted, and all experiences feed the soul-work of healing. Being a creative arts therapist means committing to lifelong learning and deepening. I experience myself to be ever growing. Creative arts therapy is a glorious meadow to dance upon as a learner, due to its flexibility, acceptance of expansion, and generativity of newness. It is a career for way-makers, due to its permission and invitation to embody a spirit of openness and curiosity (Knill, 1999).

However, I have become an expert at pivoting when the terrain feels impassable, and I need to forge a new way forward. I have recognised the necessity of resilience and creativity to fuel the pivots. I believe that creative arts therapy supports these states and teaches us to embody and live them by embracing a spirit of poiesis. Heidegger's philosophy of poiesis refers to the physics of emergence, the bringing forth of energy that imbues living things, and the orientation to productive behaviour (Di Pippo, 2000). Poiesis, therefore, is our creative capacity to respond to emergence and change (Levine, 2019).

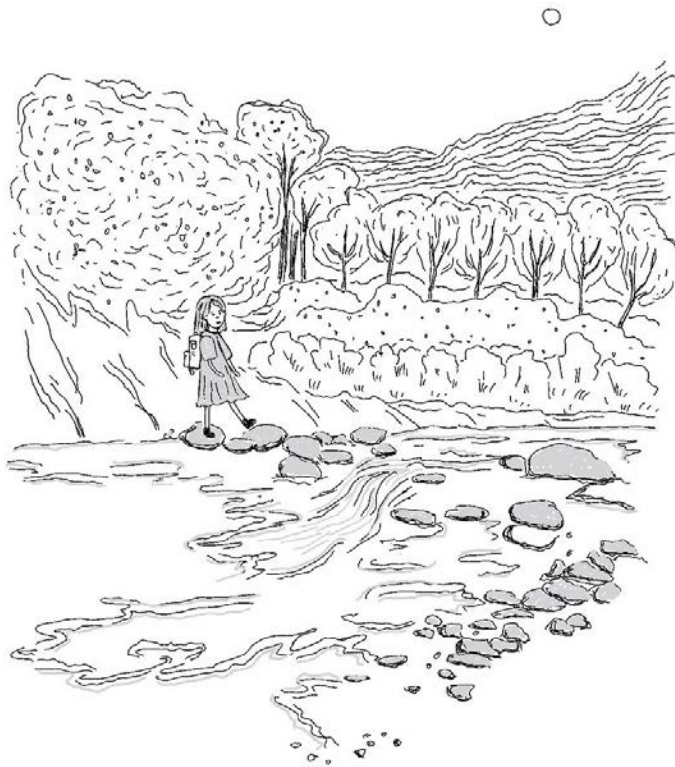


Figure 2. Naomi Pears-Scown, *Pivoting*, 2022, digital drawing, 297 × 210mm.

I echo Manolova et al. (2020, p.488), who believe that pivoting involves being flexible, moving in a context of flux and flow from a state of rootedness, and taking advantage of opportunities. To expand, I link this metaphor of pivoting and flow to the concept of the rhizome, coined by Deleuze and Guattari (as cited in St. Pierre, 2021). Contradictory to arboreal metaphors, which describe something stationary with a clear starting point and growth of branches in predictable patterns, Deleuze and Guattari introduce the philosophy that everything is always in a state of flow and becoming.

The movement of rhizomes holds a different quality of dispersal. Rhizomes are root systems that spread underground without direction, beginning, or end (Britannica, n.d.). The metaphor, therefore, describes the relationship and connectivity of things as branching, not

linear. So here, I pivot in my thinking and recognise that perhaps I am both a tree and a rhizome, grounded *and* expanding in my thinking and practice.

Concerning my foray into psychotherapy, I recognise now that I was looking for an arboreal learning model, a stable place I could graft onto and grow from in a linear way. However, the grafting did not happen, and I was left with rhizomatic and dispersed learnings that led me to deeply consider the conditions for growth and professional development.

Creative arts therapy is the ground I have chosen to dance upon, dig into, and grow from. However, I sit with the deepening realisation that the ground of creative arts therapy in Aotearoa is relatively fresh when compared with other professions. Whitecliffe College established the only creative arts therapies master's programme in Aotearoa in the early 2000s (Whitecliffe, 2015). While it feels loamy and rich to me, it requires those of us traversing it to continue putting down rhizomatic roots and contributing to its ecological health and diversity.

The shadow side of way-makers

I reflect on the metaphor of pioneers and pilgrims in the context of creative arts therapy in Aotearoa. I sit with the awareness that these terms are loaded with colonisation with patriarchal energies and connotations. Rather than romanticise the metaphor, I include this awareness into my discussion, knowing that as way-makers in the creative arts therapy space, we are attempting to move into already-claimed territory in healthcare. We enter a context that favours a scientific, Western medical model of health and well-being. Uniquely, we straddle the medical and art worlds, and learn the languages of both domains. I experience this to be true for myself in the spaces where I work.

Pilgrims and pioneers carry dark histories of not only marginalising and discounting the land rights of Indigenous peoples, but also violently removing them for profit and power (Hamilton, 2002). The history of dispossession and trauma for Māori people in Aotearoa is not lost on me when I use these terms (Pihama et al., 2019). I am not an Indigenous wahine in Aotearoa. I am a first-generation Pākehā immigrant woman from Scotland. I sincerely appreciate that I can call this land home now, but contextualise it in the dark history that has given me the privilege to do so. I acknowledge the document of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, a treaty supposed to bring partnership between the colonising Europeans and the Indigenous Māori (Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, n.d.). Te Tiriti o Waitangi, penned in te reo Māori, states the statute of kāwanatanga, the concept of governance offered to the Crown. At the same time, tino rangatiratanga, self-governance, was still held by the Māori people over their lands, dwellings and possessions. The Treaty of Waitangi (a mistranslated version) misconstrues the understanding whereby the Crown was given absolute sovereignty over Māori lands. The Treaty of Waitangi became the legally binding version of the treaty and the reason I am privileged as an immigrant.

Creative arts therapy aligns much more with Indigenous approaches to health and well-being than with the medical model, as it invites a holistic approach to identity. Mason (2000, p.9) notes that “art and arts therapy can support indigenous peoples to strengthen identity with cultural values and beliefs”. Kaupapa Māori arts therapy research is growing in Aotearoa and is shaping the relationship between creative arts therapy and Indigenous models of well-being. Anita Vlasić Manaia, a pioneer in this space, notes in her 2017 paper that “the principles of Kaupapa Māori philosophies can be integrated into arts therapy and applied side

by side in practice. There are commonalities between arts therapy practice, the strengthening of cultural identity, and a Māori worldview” (Vlasić Manaia, 2017, p.30).

When envisioning pioneers, I evoke more than the image of a 19th-century European breaking land and moving into occupied territory. I conceive of pioneers in contemporary fields making lives for themselves, introducing revolutionary ideas, and bravely asking questions that challenge the status quo. In the arts therapy world, the educator Margaret Naumburg and artist Edith Kramer are widely considered pioneers in our field. Stepping into new territories, Naumburg linked art to the expression of the unconscious and Kramer became an important figure in laying the groundwork for art therapy education (McCurdy et al., 2019). These women pioneered something and broke the land we now build from. Pioneers are individuals searching for a life and opportunities beyond those they have now. Pioneers must be able to dream, envision what is not yet possible, and create something for generations to come (McAdam, 2006). As modern-day creative arts therapy pilgrims, we journey into the intellectual, educational, and professional contexts that these pioneers established, and then move back out, transformed and orientated in a new way. Pilgrims are those who journey to holy, sacred spaces because they have heard that there is something magnificent there, and the walk itself is profoundly enlightening. I have walked a pilgrimage and experienced it as a deeply transformative process. The walk moved me into a “changing of location to reconfigure one’s inner orientation” (McGinn, 2005, p.93).



Figure 3. Naomi Pears-Scown, *Pilgrimage*, 2022, digital drawing, 210 × 297mm.

I reflect further on these metaphors and wonder how I can become part of something that already exists. What are the ethics and efforts involved in transforming an inhabited space? I realise that my endeavours here are poiesis in action, an emergence and response energy to the landscape I have stepped into (Di Pippo, 2000). Creative arts therapies have something unique to offer healthcare spaces in Aotearoa that requires consideration, especially in light of the mental-health crisis we are facing and the shortage of District Health Board staff (Michaeli & Michaeli, 2022). We have a history of stepping into spaces not yet populated by creative arts therapists in Aotearoa and we are equipped in our training to introduce and advocate for our profession.

Still, I reflect on the times I am asked, “Is it hard to get funded as an arts therapist?” I say, “Yes, I am classified as a counsellor instead.” When I say this, I feel a knot in my belly and a

sense that I am unfaithful to the profession I have committed to. I fear diluting a part of my essence in exchange for security, a frame of reference, and known-ness, a phenomenon Ahessy (2020) notes in his research on contemporary issues affecting creative arts therapists in Ireland. However, like many creative arts therapists, I work in a system and context that are much bigger and more established than I am. I have to be creative, innovative and flexible within it, especially when I bump into ceilings (Bucciarelli, 2016).

I notice the shadow side of our current ceilings in conversations I have had with other creative arts therapists and in experiences I have had myself. These shadows appear in job opportunities, acceptance into educational institutions, available funding opportunities, and other professionals' beliefs about the credibility and hierarchy of creative arts therapy. I notice the shadow side in myself too. How do I foster a deep belief about my validity as a mental-health professional in Aotearoa, despite challenges to progress professionally, the whisperings of imposter syndrome, and hitting invisible ceilings (Feenstra et al., 2020)? How do I journey ethically when there is a tension in the process of creative arts therapy becoming evidence based, which "lies between the discipline and the system in which it operates" (Gilroy, 2006, p.2)? Finally, and most importantly, how do I create new heights for others and myself to journey to?

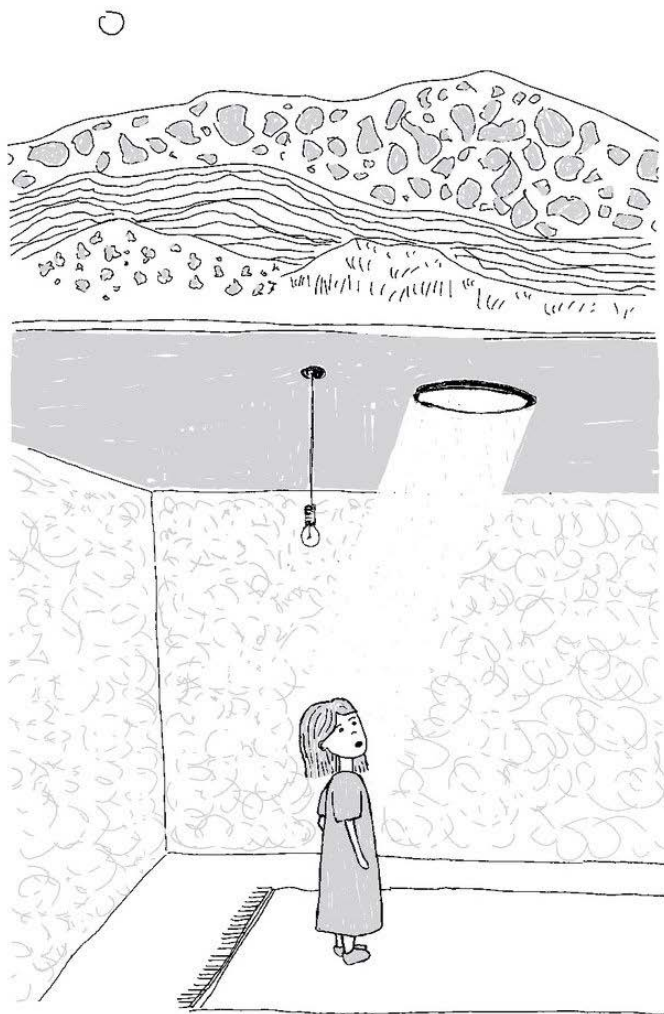


Figure 4. Naomi Pears-Scown, *Ceilings*, 2022, digital drawing, 297 × 210mm.

The current number of registered members with the Australian, New Zealand and Asian Creative Arts Therapies Association in Aotearoa is 128. Clients' existing public funding schemes are through ACC (Accident Compensation Corporation), WINZ (Work and Income New Zealand) Disability Counselling, or I AM HOPE (ANZACATA, 2022). Despite these gains for recognition in Aotearoa, we have a long way to go in order for us to be woven and integrated into mainstream healthcare services for our populations. Nevertheless, we are a workforce ready to populate spaces crying out for help.

I have embedded myself in the most prominent medical and health-science faculty in Aotearoa where I am surrounded by PhD candidates using quantitative methods of inquiry. From this position, I am embarking on a journey into identity, learning and professional-development pathways for creative arts therapists in Aotearoa, using qualitative methodologies. Still, I hear the echoes of St. Pierre (2021, p.3) lamenting battling the "scientifically based, evidence-based police" who determined that qualitative or post-qualitative research could not be scientific because it is only descriptive and uses narratives.

What is the 'evidence' I am seeking? Foucault (as cited in St. Pierre, 2019, p.4) argued that the human sciences depend on the [wo]man positioning themselves in the centre of their project – to be both the subject and object of knowledge. Therefore, my inquiry comes from a place of experience, giving language to that which Foucault (as cited in St. Pierre, 2019, p.3) stated "can and must be thought about". So, I centralise myself in this project autoethnographically and believe that the stories I will gather, curate and present will change something about the terrain. Poiesis.

The spirit of journeyers

In the face of these wonderings, I feel a fire in the pit of my belly. The warmth propels me forward to befriend the pivots, be curious about the terrain, and invite the stories.

I am a young creative arts therapist who chose this career path early on; thus, I am building my scaffold from scratch rather than having an existing career. I am creatively, intuitively and searchingly developing my professional practice, identity and sense of self. I feel the creative life force underneath me. The poiesis nourishes and invigorates me in the face of ceilings and invites me to consider what "intrinsically unique form may emerge from turmoil" and the not knowing (Green, 2021, p.83). I peer up and wonder how can I get up there and build a ladder for others to join me?

I sense that what I am voicing here is a collective experience of many (particularly younger) creative arts therapists in Aotearoa. I sense I am putting words to a phenomenon that many feel in their bodies and experience in their varied workplaces. That said, I desire to contribute to the soil I am standing in. I am wondering about and learning how to give back to the land and sow seeds that bear fruit for other creative arts therapists in the future. I am positioning myself to build spaces for others to convene and discuss experiences of ceilings and journeys in our therapeutic practices. It feels essential to create maps, chart terrain, and dream about our futures so that others can see these way-markers in the future. I am interested in my indwelt wisdom and the collective wisdom of others who have something to say about identity as a creative arts therapist in Aotearoa. To use the concept of ecological habits, coined by the sociologist Kasper (2009) as a metaphor, I aim to embody the practice of living socially and ecologically well in place, so I can contribute to creating a sustainable ecology for many.

Conclusion

This reflective piece has detailed my current and ongoing wonderings about creative arts therapy as a profession of way-makers in Aotearoa. My learnings continue to expand and contextualise as I begin my PhD and have conversations with other journeyers in this space. Furthermore, my reflections find tendrils in my clinical work with clients, as I wonder how creative arts therapy serves them and their needs. I continue to explore creatively, through my artistic self, what all of this means, and how I can make sense of my learnings through lenses of the arts and academia. I feel I am just at the beginning of something and am investing in deep self-work, deep learning, and expansion. I intend to discover the processes and pathways of continued education as a professional creative arts therapist and develop way-markers to chart on a map. I am interested in giving language and shape to the journeys of flow and ease and the sticky ones that feel insurmountable. I am committed to discovering how all of this could be helpful to our clients and the profession of creative arts therapy in Aotearoa. Journeyers, pivoters, and those who have experienced invisible but felt ceilings, I see you. Let us kōrero.



Figure 5. Naomi Pears-Scown, *An invitation to kōrero*, 2022, digital drawing, 297 × 210mm.

Glossary of terms

Aotearoa – the Indigenous name for New Zealand
kaupapa Māori – a Māori philosophy, concept or belief system
kāwanatanga – governorship; the authority of a governor or government
kōrero – talk, speak
Māori – Indigenous people of Aotearoa
Pākehā – Māori term for the white inhabitants of Aotearoa
te reo Māori – the Māori language
Te Tiriti o Waitangi – the Māori version of the treaty
tino rangatiratanga – political control by Māori people over Māori affairs
wahine – woman

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