A Method for Developing Multicultural Musical Fluency: Reclaiming a Relationship with Traditional Ashkenazi Music

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Abstract

Counseling and music therapy scholars recommend that students and clinicians engage in self-inquiry to explore their cultural values to build multicultural competence. I created an arts-based method for deep reflection using theory and techniques in the literature regarding culture-centered music therapy, including ethnographic inquiry, the cultural unconscious, intersubjective theory, active imagination, embodiment, and artistic reflection. I engaged with music from my own cultural background, which included Ashkenazi klezmer music and Yiddish folksong, to reflect on my cultural values and to build a living relationship with the music. Thematic analysis revealed eight themes, including the function of the music, personal memories evoked, emotions evoked, personal or cultural values uncovered, connections to the cultural unconscious, moments of intersubjective connection, empowerment, and catharsis.

In addition to improving multicultural humility, I found this process healing and empowering through reconnecting with ancestors and intrapersonal cultural resources. Furthermore, engaging deeply with my own cultural music improved my ability to understand the social function of each piece of music, enhancing my understanding of how cultural music can be utilized in clinical practice. I argue that cultural and traditional musics carry generations of wisdom and are *technologies of survival* that must be preserved and protected and can be used in clinical work for cultural identity formation and social reconnection.

Keywords: culture-centered music therapy, cultural unconscious, ethnographic inquiry, klezmer fiddle, Yiddish folksong

Author Identity Statement: Rachael Penn is a Jewish-American woman living and working in an underserved, rural, majority-minority community.

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Introduction

Author Identity and Positionality

I am a Jewish-American woman working in a majority-minority community primarily with Spanish and Native American people. Since moving to this rural area of Northern New Mexico 24 years ago, I have seen the living connection the communities have with their land and culture. There is a sense of home, place, and rootedness here that has survived through bloodshed, tears, trauma, and legal fights (Evans, 2023; Taos Pueblo, n.d.; Zentella, 2004). With their histories of perseverance and strength, these communities are still dedicated to defending their autonomy from the pressures of Western modernization and economic colonization.

Since moving here, I have also noticed a deep longing for a sense of *home*, a search for safety and belonging. This pull led me toward the local music community, which felt like a special kind of chosen family. Chance encounters over many years brought people into my life who inspired me to learn the traditional fiddle music of Appalachia, Scotland, Ireland, and Cape Bretton, as well as music from the Native American Métis Nation. I have fallen in love with the mystique and living history of traditional fiddle music from around the world, the experience of trying on the archetype of the *wandering minstrel*, and the people I have played with over many years. Traditional music brings people together through a shared experience rich with meaning; for me, learning this music has been an important bridge of connection and self-empowerment.

Connection to others from diverse backgrounds through sharing a musical language has been a bedrock for me as a Jewish woman whose last name carries the story of continual displacement and forced migration. During the 1880s, the increased attacks on the Jewish people

in Eastern Europe caused all eight of my Yiddish-speaking great-grandparents to decide to leave their home and come to the United States of America (Zuckerberg, 2022). Even though my relationship with music has been a healing journey, I still notice this inherited legacy of historical trauma from time to time as I carry the ongoing experience of feeling like an *outsider.*

So, how does my Jewish identity interact with the Spanish and Native American clients I have been working with as a music therapist in training? With such a noticeable contrast in background, cultural difference tends to be at the forefront of the therapeutic relationships I have been building with my clients, which is heightened because music is such an important cultural carrier. I have an interest in learning about the music of this area, both as intellectual and aesthetic pursuits and as a way to create a bridge of connection with the people with whom I have been working. But how can a Jewish-American woman learn and use this music in practice without crossing cultural boundaries, appropriating, or taking from cultures that have lost so much during their own struggles for survival? This is an especially critical consideration when working with the Native American community, which holds their traditions and cultural music within carefully protected boundaries.

Inquiry

These questions prompted me to seek guidance from music therapists who have extensively worked cross-culturally in search of ideas for developing sensitive multicultural musical competence. I have seen the therapeutic value of the local traditional fiddle music in my work and the memories, emotions, and resources it has offered clients. However, how can I be sure I do not unintentionally cross a cultural boundary when using this music in practice?

Sung (2002) recommends that counselors undertake an in-depth, introspective process to build a healthy relationship with their own cultural background, which is needed to develop the

insight to work cross-culturally in a sensitive, affirming, and interpersonally reflexive way. Similarly, Wheeler and Baker (2010) advise music therapists to carefully examine their worldviews, values, and biases to build cultural competence. As music therapists, it seems that using our gift of music as part of this self-examination process could offer a greater depth of understanding while helping build critical internal resources. For a process that multicultural competence scholars often describe as *emotionally challenging* or painful, a musical self-inquiry might bring a sense of joy to this experience (Hadley & Norris, 2016). However, other aspects of this type of self-examination need careful consideration.

While Waligórska (2013) does not define the term *cultural boundaries* in her discussion of the intercultural exchange that has always been a part of klezmer music, the traditional instrumental dance music of the Ashkenazi Jews, the author implies that an encounter with *the other* causes non-Jewish musicians who are invested in this music to reflect upon their own cultural identities. Similarly, learning the traditional music from other living cultures has helped me experience a sense of community and continuity. However, at this stage of professional identity development, it felt essential to reclaim my relationship with the music from my background, a relationship with which I have always felt ambivalent.

Through an ethnographic and reflexive process, I learned about the nature of my cultural boundaries and developed an understanding of the values, memories, and feelings I experienced from this music. Because the traditional music from my background is no longer a part of an embedded culture, I needed to delve into the painful history of a musical tradition that was exterminated and interact with those who are part of its reclamation (Rubin, 2000). I also reconnected with a living sense of my own culture using Swamy's (2011) applications of the cultural unconscious in clinical work. Through this process, I experienced a deep catharsis that

helped me reclaim cultural resources and recreate an internal sense of home, a renewed sense of confidence, curiosity, and openness in my clinical relationships.

As young Jewish musicians became fascinated with old-time Appalachian fiddle music in the late 1970s and flocked to study with the last living great players before the modern recording era changed the music forever, Tommy Jarrell, one of my fiddle heroes, was recorded saying, "Don't you people have none of your own music?" (Jarrell, as cited in Svigals, 2002, p. 213). After steeping in the traditions of the cultural music of *the other*, some of these Jewish musicians realized the value of returning to their own musical roots. With a little wise push from those like Jarrell, some of these musicians fostered the *American klezmer revival*, a reinvigoration of traditional Ashkenazi instrumental dance music in the United States. Similarly, at this point in my emerging career, I felt it was time for me to undertake my own journey from Appalachia, Ireland, and New Mexico back to my cultural roots to see what I could nurture that might be useful for the development of multicultural musical competence as a music therapist in training.

Literature Review

Multicultural Musical Competence

Moreno (1988) coined the term *multicultural music therapy*, offering a new perspective on the benefits of using ethnic music in clinical practice. He proposed the idea that working with the music from the client's cultural background can build a bridge of connection in the therapeutic relationship. Moreno recognized the history of Western ethnocentricity underlying the field of music therapy, which can unnecessarily hinder work with clients from diverse backgrounds. Therefore, he recommended that music therapists enhance their clinical musicianship by learning music from cultures around the world during their training and throughout their careers. He describes how this process can help clinicians hone the ability to

recognize, appreciate, and sensitively incorporate the subtle elements of different non-Western musics into their work. Moreno (1988) was the first to describe *multicultural musical competence*. However, he did not fully recognize many of the challenges clinicians face while building these competencies, including learning how to avoid cultural appropriation or addressing the imbalance of power in the therapeutic relationship, especially when the client is from a culture with a history of marginalization.

Moreno's (1988) work encouraged the field to recognize the need for music therapists to develop musical cultural competence to work effectively with clients from diverse cultures (Young, 2016). Hadley and Norris (2016) outlined a three-step process for building this competence, including an examination of the clinician's own cultural heritage as well as a broader reflection regarding how their values and biases structure their worldview. They define *musical cultural competence* as the ability to understand the "roles of the particular music, its specific relevance to the client, and . . . the personal and musical cultural biases that the therapist brings into the music therapy context" (p. 129). After such an exploration, the clinician will be more prepared to use their self-knowledge to note similarities and differences between their values and those of clients from diverse cultural backgrounds. The authors describe this process as "painful and uncomfortable" (p. 134), noting it requires a humbling examination of internalized hierarchical thinking and the need to loosen attachments to value systems learned in early childhood. They also discuss needing to go beyond simply learning traditional cultural music and recommend clinicians explore the values and norms those cultures hold around music. This step is essential to avoid unintentionally violating an accepted custom or norm.

While examining internalized bias is a humbling process, one might wonder if the self-examination needed to develop cultural musical competence could be something more, perhaps

an experience filled with joy and self-growth. Stige (2002) described a *culture-centered approach* to music therapy as the *fifth force* in the field and encouraged clinicians to move from dichotomous thinking to considering the nature of culture as a constantly evolving fluid historical and interpersonal dialogue. The author argued that it may never be entirely possible to distinguish between "a completely objective account of culture, with a precise balance of outsider and insider perspectives" (p. 44). In other words, deeply engaging with a cultural artifact, such as ethnic music, may change the clinician's worldview as the experience becomes a part of their enculturation.

Kim and Elefant (2016) discussed the need for more research into multicultural music therapy practices as practitioners are increasingly working in cross-cultural settings. They discuss how music therapy researchers need to examine the values from their culture(s) of origin, including "childhood musical experiences, family and generational factors, traumas, [and] spirituality" (p. 190) to develop an understanding of how their values relate to those of the people they are studying. They recommended this process to ensure that researchers do not base studies upon unconscious cultural values or confounded variables, thus skewing results or causing studies to appear culturally insensitive. The authors also discuss the need for researchers to move beyond simply studying the musical characteristics of ethnic music by examining the music-in-context to create what they describe as *a thick description* (Kenny, 2006; Kim & Elefant, 2016). Such an in-depth study of the music from another culture could spark an iterative process, helping researchers develop greater insight into their cultural values and biases, thus also improving their clinical work, cultural competence, and the sensitivity of further research.

Wheeler and Baker (2010) discussed the need for music therapists to learn about the locally based musical values, traditions, and customs of the people with whom they are working.

They recommend that clinicians avoid making broad assumptions about cultural norms regarding musical privacy and restrictions on musical expression. They imply that this is easier to do when the clinician is aware of their musical values, especially those concerning freedom of expression, which tends to be highly regarded among music therapists but is not cross-culturally universal. If this step is passed over, a therapist could unknowingly coerce clients to explore music in ways that are not culturally sanctioned. Offering a real-world example, Sadovnik (2016) discussed a situation when a client's need for self-expression warranted a clinical decision to override a cultural norm. However, to do so with sensitivity, he needed to check his internal biases, weigh the potential risks and benefits, and gain permission from community elders.

If culture is an ever-changing dialogical process, as Stige (2002) suggests, developing musical cultural competence must reach beyond simply learning music from diverse cultures. The music needs to be studied in a way that honors its living context and community, allowing it to inhabit and live within the player. However, there is always a risk that clinicians may render invisible agentic aspects of their own cultural background, making an honest cultural exchange without an imbalance of power impossible. Nevertheless, if done with the utmost care and humility, learning cultural music can empower the clinician, their clients, and their community.

While there is a growing knowledge base outlining how music therapists can develop musical cultural competence, there needs to be more research outlining the processes and challenges clinicians encounter developing these skills. Therefore, I propose the following questions: What are the professional and personal developmental benefits of undertaking a cultural musical reclamation process? How would the process improve a clinician's work?

Theoretical Frameworks for the Clinical Use of Cultural Music

Kenny and Stige (2002) discussed how many people who come to music therapy suffer

from a sense of culture loss and posit that music therapists are uniquely positioned to help them rebuild a connection to their culture as a source of strength and resilience. They describe how cultural music can renew a client's social identity and address existential concerns. There is ample literature describing ways music therapists use cultural and ethnic music in practice and research exploring how cultural associations are evoked from music (Aksnes & Ruud, 2006; Stige, 2002; Swamy, 2011). However, few scholars have offered theoretical frameworks to conceptualize the clinical benefits of working with cultural or ethnic music in clinical practice.

The Mythic Artery

Kenny (1982) suggested that music contains connecting patterns or images, which can offer clients healing through a renewed connection to self, nature, culture, and community. She described these patterns or images as part of a death and renewal cycle metaphorically expressed in music through a conduit she called *the mythic artery*. However, while sparking essential and meaningful intrigue, she left an explanation for how these elements create a bridge of connection to cultural resources to the reader's imagination.

Intersubjective Theory

Pavlicevic (1997), referencing the ongoing debate in music therapy about whether or not associations from music are referential or absolute, discussed how music can be a bridge to the unconscious. The author used Winnicott's concept of *intersubjectivity*, the safe space between mother and child created through careful attunement, to highlight the importance of considering the cultural aspects of music. This intersubjective space provides a young child with a safe place to test boundaries and learn about the self through play. Pavlicevic further described how music can help "embody and define the relationship between the individual and the community" (p. 22). When cultural references are made conscious, the intersubjective field of learning extends to

the larger community and culture, helping the child learn about the self in relation to others while strengthening the cultural boundaries that contribute to healthy identity formation.

Yehuda (2005) also used intersubjective theory to argue that music therapists who work cross-culturally need to develop a relationship with music from their own cultural background. The author describes an intersubjective *third space*, suggesting the music shared between client and therapist has a life and breath of its own. Thus, a therapist with a strong connection to music from their own cultural background can offer their clients an experience of being with a culturally embodied *other* whose presence might spark interest in experimenting with personal boundaries and cultural identity through music.

Additionally, ethnomusicologist John Blacking (1973) recounted his two-year musical immersion with the Venda people of South Africa and cautioned the student of cultural music against treating the music solely as a *sonic object*. He explained how only an in-context examination of ethnic music, including an understanding of the music's social function, is needed to develop a mature understanding of the music's meaning and emotional content. Blacking also described an "experience of becoming, in which individual consciousness is nurtured within the collective consciousness of the community and hence becomes the source of richer cultural forms" (p. 28). This perspective can also be viewed through the lens of intersubjective theory, where music functions as a transitional object, grounding and awakening the Self through shared communal experience. He added that an encounter with *the other* offers one a fuller understanding of one's own cultural background and sense of identity.

Through the framework of intersubjectivity, music can be seen as holding a safe space between the therapist and the client. Healing occurs when an attuned therapist actively mirrors the client's internal experience of a piece of music, thus helping the client reorganize fragmented

aspects of the Self. Conversely, even when a therapist and client have different internal responses to a piece of music, a *good enough therapist* can use the misattunement to contextualize the client's experience, furthering individuation by helping the client become more aware of personal and cultural boundaries. However, to do this with cultural sensitivity, a clinician would need to be able to distinguish between associations universally suggested by musical elements and those evoked from personal or cultural memories. A music therapist who has developed a relationship with their own cultural associations and personal imagery could thus provide meaningful context for the client, whether or not their experiences of the music are syntonic or dystonic.

The Cultural Unconscious

Helen Bonny's groundbreaking work with guided imagery and music harnessed the power of music to create an altered state of consciousness where powerful archetypal and personal memories could be uncovered (Swamy, 2011). However, the Bonny method was limited to Western classical music, and the framework viewed music from an absolutist perspective, as the universal power of a piece of music was thought to cross cultural boundaries. In clinical practice, cultural music has successfully been used in guided imagery sessions to evoke emotion and cultural associations to strengthen a positive sense of identity (Aksnes & Ruud, 2006; Thomas, 2020). Cultural music contains embedded themes, sounds, and references that can offer participants a transpersonal experience that increases connections to community, cultural identity, and nature as sources of resilience.

Aksnes and Ruud's (2006) study, based on Bonny's method, explored the use of traditional music in lieu of Bonny's classical music repertoire. Music was selected based on standard Bonny Method of Guided Imagery in Music (BMGIM) principles, including using an intensity arc corresponding to the goals of each stage of a typical BMGIM journey. The study

found that the characteristic Lydian mode of the fiddle and the dance-like rhythmic movement, dissonance, drone, and intensity of the music evoked strong imagery of regional landscapes and personal memories. Participants' imagery was also found to be culture-bound and included memories of specific cultural practices. The researchers determined that using traditional music enhanced positive emotional associations and sparked reminiscence linked to cultural themes. These findings offered evidence for the broader efficacy of using traditional music in BMGIM sessions to help participants access unconscious cultural sources of resilience.

Hanks (1992) used a Jungian framework to explain the significance of cultural-bound imagery evoked from music. The author discussed how music can be a powerful gateway to unconscious culturally specific memories, images, and associations. Hanks discussed how these images and memories, while often appearing in the listener's visual imagination, may also arise kinesthetically or through other senses. Hanks also suggested that this imagery may be imbued with archetypal significance when arising from the collective unconscious. Javier and Rendon (1995) furthered this idea by expanding Jungian theory to incorporate what they described as *the ethnic unconscious,* or latent content passed between generations within a cultural group. Thus, Hanks (1992), Javier, and Rendon (1995) collectively provided theoretical grounding to explain how music can evoke culture-bound archetypal imagery from the ethnic unconscious.

Swamy (2011) conducted the first research study using the concept of the ethnic unconscious to explore the nature, content, and effect of intentionally working with cultural associations of music in a clinical context. The author discussed how previous research and theory viewed the cultural unconscious from a pathological perspective by using it solely to describe forces and behaviors underlying group conflict and violence. A similar Jungian theory regarding *cultural complexes* theorizes that a rejected aspect of a culture can be projected onto an

evil *other* while exalting a within-group golden child, thus fueling the seeds of intergroup conflict (Singer & Kimbles, 2004). However, Swamy's (2011) study searched for ways of working constructively with the ethnic or cultural unconscious to help the Self move towards wholeness. The study found that the qualities of the music itself, as well as its cultural associations in combination with the intention set for the session by the therapist, determined the type of imagery evoked. Clients worked with images and memories on the personal, archetypal, transpersonal, and universal levels. This study presented strong evidence for the efficacy of working with the framework of the cultural unconscious.

Ethnographic Inquiry

While a personal exploration of associations evoked from music was needed for this study, an ethnographic review provided context. Stige (2002) defined *ethnographic inquiry* as "a tradition of social research [that] may be understood as a scholarly approach to the study and learning about the culture of a person or - more frequently - a group of people" (p 276). Stige recommended that music therapy researchers undertake an ethnographic approach to studying traditional or ethnic music to explore the history and cultural values embedded within the music. Ethnographic research can include examining and creating field recordings, interviews with key cultural informants, and historical research. Ideally, this is an immersive process where the researcher invests significant time interacting with or living with people from another culture, developing a deep understanding of the differences and similarities between their values and worldview and those from the culture they are studying. While a full ethnography of Ashkenazi music is beyond the scope of this work, I will highlight findings from the literature.

Klezmer Fiddle

Until recently, the word klezmer, meaning "vessels of song," referred to the instrumental

musicians, some of whom were itinerant and held a relatively lowly position in Jewish life (Netsky, 2002). Over several centuries throughout the Pale of Settlement in Eastern Europe, the klezmorim played religious, folk, and dance music at weddings and religious events. The status of these musicians fluctuated throughout Jewish history; however, their lowest point came during the eighth and ninth centuries after the burning of the second temple (Rubin, 2000). To ensure a time of grieving, the rabbi forbade music except for religious purposes. The klezmorim were male, as women were not sanctioned to play music publicly until modern times (Waligórska, 2013). Additionally, the musicians were associated with *the bad boy archetype* alongside gamblers, drinkers, and other socially liberal outcasts (Haigh, n.d.).

After smoldering over hundreds of years, anti-Semitism and violent pogroms against Jews in Eastern Europe increased during the latter half of the nineteenth century, culminating in the Holocaust that essentially destroyed embedded Ashkenazi culture and the tradition of the klezmorim in Eastern Europe (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2002). However, during the 1970s, a revival of this music began in the United States and Europe, which appropriated the word *klezmer* to describe the instrumental music itself. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2002) discussed the righteous irony of how the word *revival* implies a rupture of the living, culturally embedded musical tradition that once existed. The author invoked *social identity theory* to offer an explanation for this unspeakable violence. While the innate need for cultural identity and in-group membership can help maintain healthy self-esteem, the shadow side is how this can be turned against others, leading to scapegoating and violence.

Klezmer has since become a popular form of world music; it has also been adopted and appropriated by many non-Jewish musicians who appreciate the music for its complexity and intrigue, economic and social value, and who may also be searching for a way of atoning for the

atrocities of the Holocaust (Waligórska, 2013). In recent decades, Jews and non-Jews alike have realized the timeless value of this music and have been preserving and recognizing its importance as a purely aesthetic art form and a celebration of Ashkenazi culture.

Klezmer music is considered to have the ability to evoke emotions described as "affective elements of consciousness" (Williams, R., as cited in Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2002, p. 130) related to and embedded within a historical place, time, and once-living culture. The ornamentation of the fiddle is thought to emulate expressive elements of the human voice, including joy and sadness (Waligórska, 2013). Specifically, one can hear crying, laughter, and short, repetitive melodies reminiscent of traditional religious cantorial chanting in its sounds.

To understand the affective elements of this music, one must consider how this tradition is an amalgam of different sounds and idioms collected by the klezmorim over centuries through a process of intercultural exchange. Due to continual forced migration and assimilation over many centuries, the Jewish people in Eastern Europe became a diaspora (Rubin, 2000; Waligórska, 2013). Adopting the music of other cultures helped the klezmorim adapt to this hardship, as they incorporated sounds from Turkish, Greek, Romanian, Roma, and Hungarian peoples (Feldman, 2020). Thus, Waligórska (2013) described the Klezmer music of the Ashkenazi people as continually inhabiting *a space between.*

Yiddish Folksong

In contrast to the instrumental music played by the joyful and sometimes itinerant klezmorim, the traditional singing practice was primarily fostered by women who incorporated this music into every facet of daily life in the home (Rubin, 2000). The female voice was thought to be more soothing than the male voice, but boys were not exempt from singing secular songs, and religious chanting was part of their school curriculum. The genre includes lullabies, didactic

and game songs for children, love songs, and protest and political songs. Life was oppressive and brutal in the Pale of Settlement, and the Ashkenazi people found ways of expressing their pain, hope, and joy through their music and even covertly within children's song lyrics, which did not hold back on humor. In fact, humor and conspicuous social and political commentary were used as coping strategies for a culture struggling under centuries of oppression.

The political nature of this music caused Yiddish folksong to become associated with and appropriated by leftist, anarchist, and politically liberal movements, fueling a recent resurgence in this music (Shneer, 2015). Furthermore, Waletzky (2020) discussed how students of this music need to strengthen their *ethno-hearing,* the distinct ability of members within a cultural group to hear and understand nuance, by studying the subtle elements of this music and language so they do not become diluted or lost over time. However, as the Yiddish language is no longer spoken as part of everyday life, this nuanced understanding of the music in modern times can only go so far. Thus, Waletzky also argued that new participants need to bring fresh energy and ideas to this music to keep it alive and relevant for future generations.

Yiddish songs also allow space for the singer to bend the meter expressively, fostering a "space between flowing rhythm… and metric rhythm" (Zuckerberg, 2022, p. 460). These songs were the domain of the hardworking and self-sacrificing mother, and the music was a haven for her to freely, if sometimes subversively, express herself. Rubin (2000) also discussed how the creativity of this music was most strongly influenced by the women of lower social classes who poured poetic ingenuity and compelling melodic improvisation into this music.

Conclusion

While traditional music can evoke personal and cultural memories and associations, my connection to it has been ruptured because Ashkenazi music is no longer part of a geographically

embedded living culture, and my family assimilated into mainstream American culture two generations ago. Therefore, I needed to reach into the cultural unconscious to reclaim a meaningful relationship with ancestral communities who had an immediate connection to this music in their everyday lives. Additionally, even though the intersubjective third space described by Yehuda (2005) is created between two people inhabiting the same space and time, I used this concept as a way to conceptualize the personal and immediate connection I developed with this music and the impressionistic memories of ancestors the music evoked.

Methods

The Process

I started this process with a historical and ethnographic study of Jewish Ashkenazi music, specifically klezmer fiddle music and Yiddish folk singing. Then, I chose five Yiddish songs and three klezmer fiddle tunes to learn in depth. I learned the Yiddish songs from recordings of the artist who either wrote the song or was widely associated with the tune and participated in an online singing group. I learned the klezmer tunes by studying YouTube tutorials and taking an online lesson with a master player. After I learned these pieces, I spent time in embodied listening, movement, and artistic self-reflection with each recording to uncover the cultural associations, personal images, and feelings the music evoked. Then, I created an artistic response to crystalize the experience and played each song again myself to notice how this process changed my relationship with the music. After I completed this exploration for each song, I journaled until everything relevant felt like it had been documented (Figure 1).

The culmination of this exploration came from writing and recording a Yiddish song accompanied by improvisational klezmer fiddle, which catalyzed a healing experience that transmuted painful memories. I incorporated what I learned about the genre from this exploration

to create a song that felt authentic to the style while incorporating personal views. I started by writing a political song in English using one of my favorite klezmer modes and utilized a large language model to create a Yiddish translation and transliteration. I prompted the software to offer straight translation without changing the rhyme scheme or rhythmic flow. I recorded this song and repeated the movement and artistic exploration I used for the previous songs. Finally, I entered journal entries that felt particularly meaningful into a spreadsheet and categorized them by the theories and frameworks offered by the literature. I also added additional themes that emerged organically during this inquiry.

Ethnographic Inquiry

Blacking (1973) discussed how one cannot fully understand the meaning of cultural music without learning about its social function and historical context. Therefore, I searched ethnographic literature to learn about the recent and distant history of klezmer fiddle and Yiddish folk music, which led me to significant recordings from historically noted musicians. A wholly immersive experience with living players and communities would have allowed for a stronger contextual understanding of this music; unfortunately, that was beyond the scope of this inquiry. However, I was able to take a klezmer fiddle lesson with Chris Haigh (personal communication, January 26, 2025) over Zoom and participate in an online singing group through the Yiddish Singing Society (KlezCalifornia, 2023).

Entering into an Altered State of Consciousness

Blacking (1973) found that cultures worldwide, including African and Native American peoples, used music to create an altered state of consciousness. Indeed, Hassidic Jews understood the power of using chant to induce trance and generate a state of ecstasy and used this to enhance the power of prayer (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2002). Fachner (2011) describes how altered states

subdue cortical mental processes, allowing for increased focus on the music, which can open the psychic space for direct access to imagery, memories, and emotions. Therefore, I used dance, movement, and repetition to enter an altered state, which enhanced the imaging and emotional discovery process while listening to and moving with each song. I knew I had reached a trance state when mental chatter calmed, and I was fully immersed in the music.

Embodying, Moving the Music

Blacking (1973) suggests that the meaning of cultural music cannot be understood without experiencing the movement required to make the music. The author describes how the kinesthetic imprint of the music "is there in the body waiting to be brought out and developed" (p. 100). In addition to paying attention to the movements required to play each piece of music, I also moved to each tune to understand more about the social function the music might have had in a community setting. Blacking also recommends that the student of cultural music improvise within the style to deepen their understanding of the music, its functions, and subtleties. Therefore, I tried singing Hassidic *nigguns,* wordless vocable chants, and improvised on the fiddle in a few klezmer modes (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2002). I completed this exploration by writing a song in Yiddish accompanied by improvisational fiddle to create something tangible to crystalize this self-inquiry.

Active Imagination

Hanks (1992) discusses how Jung's *active imagination technique* can be used to explore one's personal and cultural connection to a piece of music. This process treats the music as if it were a living being; the listener uses the music to enter into an altered state of consciousness and then engages with it in an internal dialogue. This technique is theorized to open the doorway to unconscious memories and associations. I used this process to create a state of openness and

curiosity, which deepened my experience of the images, feelings, and personal memories evoked by the music. In practice, this looked like moving to the music, following natural movement impulses, while living within the world of the visual images and emotions evoked.

The Cultural Unconscious

Rather than forcing a connection to the cultural unconscious, I allowed the music to affect me without trying to direct the experience. Remaining in an altered state helped keep thinking at bay, which could have interfered with the process (Fachner, 2011). Swamy (2011) describes how contact with the cultural unconscious can come via images that contain the "raw material of ethnic myths and legends" (p. 231) (see Figure 3). While moving to the music, I recalled imagery from religious stories and symbols from my cultural heritage. Additional signals that I may have been connected to the cultural unconscious included moments of heightened emotion, seeing imagery that did not emanate from my personal history, and feeling unusual compulsions to try moving in specific ways.

Intersubjectivity

Yehuda (2005) and Pavlicevic (1997) describe intersubjectivity as an interpersonal exchange and discuss how music can become a transitional object or a living third space between client and therapist (see Figure 2). Even though this self-inquiry was completed in solitude, through active imagination, I experienced the music as an interactive encounter, which allowed me to establish a sense of kinship with ancestors and others who have deeply engaged with this music *as if* we were in community together. In this altered state, I connected with characters from the songs, ancestral relatives, and universal archetypal human figures, such as *the mother* or *the father*. While it would have been ideal to have experienced this music in community with living people, it is a testament to the power of music and the imagination that these connections could

be reestablished through deep engagement and self-reflection.

Artistic Response and Re-Embodying the Music

Carolyn Kenny (1982) discusses how patterns of human connection become conscious through imagery evoked from music. She describes these connections, "which mysteriously speak of our unity," as forces reminding us that "*we are never really alone*" (p. 6). Artistic response was used to externalize my connection to the music and sense of communion, to lengthen the time I spent interacting with each piece of music, to reflect upon my emotional responses, and to make conscious latent content evoked from the cultural unconscious (see Appendices A-I). I primarily used watercolor to paint images that appeared during the listening and movement experience. I allowed the painting to move freely, with as little judgment or critique as possible. These images often stayed in my mind for a few days after creating them.

After engaging with each piece of music through movement, deep listening, and artistic reflection, I explored how the experience of playing the music myself had changed through this process. Then, I journaled again about my experience with each song. During the thematic analysis, I noted entries that captured experiences that may have stemmed from personal memories, the collective unconscious, or a connection with the cultural unconscious.

Results

Eight categories were highlighted in the thematic analysis. These included the function of the music, personal memories evoked, emotions evoked, personal or cultural values uncovered, connections to the cultural unconscious, moments of intersubjective connection, empowerment, and catharsis. The songs I chose for this self-inquiry included Tumbalalaika, a courtship song; Tumbalalaika Parody, a political song; Kishiniever Bulgar, a klezmer dance tune; Ale Vasserlekh, a lament; Oskn, a children's song; 'S Brent, a political song; Bobover Wedding March, a klezmer

march; and Khusidlekh, a klezmer dance tune (see Table 1). I felt compelled to culminate this experience by writing a political song, Kemft Tsurik, written in the klezmer freygish mode.

Functions of the Music

Blacking (1973) discusses the importance of exploring the function of a piece of music within its cultural context, suggesting that the social function of a song is just as important as its aesthetic value. After completing this inquiry, I had a much stronger sense of the social function of each song, which included how these pieces of music supported the people. For example, I felt a sense of nurturing, balance, safety, and protection while listening to Tumbalalaika. It was as if the singer was offering comfort through the storms of romance, creating a safe place of grounding, almost like a lullaby. In contrast, Tumbalalaika Parody invited me inside a clever political joke, creating a feeling of empowerment despite a desperate situation.

The fiddle dance tunes lifted my energy, offering a sense of joy and ecstasy. I also felt the presence of covert flirtatiousness in the characters that appeared in my imagination while I listened and moved to these songs. While fantastical and humorous, the lighthearted children's song, Oksn, allowed the singer to keep her dignity while she projected all her dirty work onto magical beings. The tune offered stress relief as I imagined the animals in the lyrics taking care of my unending laborious chores. Similarly, the fiddle tune, Bobover Wedding March, with its slow, stately rhythm combined with its major key tonality, seemed to offer the man of the house in the scene that appeared a sense of pride and dignity as well as a way to showcase his generosity and wealth (see Appendix G). I noticed increased confidence as I listened to and played Tumbalalaika Parody and 'S Brent, which directly inspired my song, Kemft Tsurik, a modern-day political tune. The messages and the music of these three political songs held power that caused me to feel like they could change hearts and minds on issues with dire consequences.

Personal Images and Memories

Tumbalalaika and Ale Vasserlekh both evoked sweet and mournful visual and auditory memories of family members who have passed away. Kishiniever Bulgar brought forth joyful memories of playing at bluegrass jam sessions and reminded me how those groups offered a culture of combined joy and competitiveness. Khusidlekh brought forth images of several men from my mother's family. Interestingly, my song did not evoke personal memories; I believe this is because it was too close to my immediate consciousness.

Emotions Evoked

I noted how the soothing qualities of Rubin and Seeger's voices induced a feeling of warmth in my solar plexus as I listened to them singing Tumbalalaika together. Unsurprisingly, I noticed anger, vitriol, vulnerability, shock, and righteous indignation from the political songs Tumbalalaika Parody and 'S Brent. Oskn, a children's song, offered a fun, sly, sarcastic playfulness and stress relief. The fiddle dance tunes created a sense of joy as well as seductiveness. My song, Kemft Tsurik, held a wide range of emotions, including sadness, anger, sweetness, and joy. Writing this song also allowed me to bring together a range of musical forms and skills to express thoughts and feelings on longstanding concerns about political and economic conditions that have negatively affected my community, which felt empowering.

Personal and Cultural Values

The values this inquiry illuminated arose mainly from the non-musical aspects of the process, ethnographic research, and contemplation of this experience over several weeks. Through ethnographic study, I noticed an increased awareness of how my culture values intellectualism, as songs were written to educate children and improve literacy (Rubin, 2000). I learned how my people highly valued the written transmission of religious scripture and song

lyrics. I also noted my value around liberal cross-cultural exchange, which was mirrored by the fiddle music as it carries an eclectic range of modes and ornamentation absorbed from other cultures. Due to centuries of forced migration and the constant need to find creative ways of adapting to new circumstances, klezmer music became a collection of sounds from different peoples across Eastern Europe (C. Haigh, personal communication, January 26, 2025). This eclectic sound is one reason the music feels so captivating, which I find intriguing.

Additionally, many of the folk songs I learned contained leftist political themes and values. Through this process, I also noticed how important it felt to be able to play the music *competently*, which felt like a moral obligation to my people and family. I also noted how this music tends towards open and direct emotional expression, which I now realize reflects a personal value I hold dear.

Connections to the Cultural Unconscious

The first image emanating from the cultural unconscious appeared while listening to Tumbalalaika Parody (see Appendix B). I painted a boot symbolizing cultural oppression, snuffing out the question central to the song, which I depicted by painting a buried question mark. I felt that this image, along with the image of a gravestone with Hebrew letters, had archetypal significance due to their abstract, symbolic natures. Similarly, 'S Brent evoked a scene of horror and desperation as I painted an entire village senselessly burning to the ground (see Appendix F). This scene could have represented many different locations over generations.

Ale Vasserlekh evoked a particularly tender image of a mother comforting her teenage daughter. I believe this image arose from the cultural unconscious due to the way it felt like it almost painted itself. I also immediately felt the power of this image, which stayed with me for days, reminding me of how mothers from my culture carefully protected their daughters.

Additionally, I noticed uplifting images and kinesthetic impulses arising from the fiddle tunes. These included a feeling of lightness, a desire to reach toward heaven, and images of ancestors beyond the scene raining down their love and support. After reviewing the entire collection of images I painted, I also noticed a clear physical separation between the male and female figures, except for the response to Tumbalalaika, where the young man seemed to be trying to find a sneaky way to break this social practice (see Appendix A). This separation between the sexes was a cultural norm over centuries but was not something I consciously considered during this process.

Intersubjective Moments of Connection

Intersubjective experiences were subtler; I noticed these as immediate and personal connections to the music or the characters in the songs. When playing Khusidlekh, I felt like I was talking, crying, and wailing through the fiddle, even though I did not know what I was saying. I also felt warmth, joy, and relational safety from the characters in the image I created in response (Appendix H). When writing Kempf Tsurik, I felt klezmer and Yiddish music flowing out of me; the music seemed to mirror something I already held inside. I also journaled about how this music and this song *felt like home*.

After completing the listening and artistic reflections, I played the fiddle tunes with a greater sense of abandonment, as my fiddle and arms felt like they were dancing with the characters in the images (Appendices C & H). I also felt deeply moved by the song Ale Vasserlekh; I experienced the singer's voice as a mother who knew how to soothe my pain. The mirroring I felt was like a balm that contained the pain I was carrying so it could move through.

Empowerment

Reconnecting to my culture through this self-inquiry offered a sense of belonging and

safety, which I needed to write Kempf Tsurik. Learning the klezmer fiddle tunes and Yiddish songs helped me internalize elements of Ashkenazi music, which I used to write my own song. Specifically, I borrowed from the intensity of Jaldati's voice and the confrontational nature of the lyrics in S' Brent to gather the strength I needed to confront injustice, which was a central theme of this song (see Appendix F). I also felt an increasing sense of competence with the fiddle tunes over time, giving me a newfound relationship with a fiddle style *that has always been mine*, something I now feel empowered to carry with me for the rest of my life. Interestingly, this increased sense of artistic ownership mirrored the lyrics in my song, which offered an invitation to use *our art to create a heartbeat* to fight against injustice.

Catharsis

Oksn offered me a feeling of control and relief, transmuting the chaos, exhaustion, and hardship of stressors in my daily life. Even though ‘S Brent was about horrific events, the expression of truth allowed me to step back within myself, which freed me from feelings of burden and guilt. I also experienced a powerful cathartic reaction after recording Kemft Tsurik and wrote that it felt *like the top of a hydrant flew off*. I felt energy in my solar plexus and heart for hours afterward. When I listened to my voice and fiddle come together, I heard the voices of my ancestors offering a meaningful message of hope. *It felt like a special rare moment of contact with the deepest aspects of the Self*, transcending the personal, the unconscious, and the archetypal, creating a space where doubt and struggle temporarily disappeared. Paradoxically, this song also evoked painful memories; however, focusing on the music allowed me to settle into the imagery, which helped integrate these painful, traumatic memories.

Discussion

While developing the ability to work with cultural music in clinical practice with

sensitivity to cultural boundaries was the original impetus for this study, the findings centered more on the overall healing benefits of cultural reclamation. This experience helped me develop the musical skills I needed to reembody a connection with my cultural background from which I was previously detached. The music mirrored and strengthened existing internal resources, and the self-inquiry brought me back to myself through a deep reunion with personal and cultural memories as well as living family members.

Cultural Boundaries and Values

This process heightened my awareness of my family's values around assimilation and helped me realize just how much we left behind in the process. The benefits of achieving the social and economic mobility of the American Dream cost us a sense of belonging, as well as our culture, language, and everyday customs. By studying the history and meaning of this music, I have also grown to understand how much of what is often defined as *culture* goes beyond language and religious beliefs. Culture lives and develops within the often-trivialized aspects of everyday life, the choices people make, how individuals build social support, how important life decisions are made, and what role one plays in their community. Delving deeply into the music of my cultural heritage offered me a direct recontextualization of these values.

This exploration also helped me realize that the values I hold around cultural curiosity, intellectualism, the importance of developing musical skills, and openness to outside cultural influences are, in fact, culture-bound. My people survived through liberal cross-cultural exchange, assimilation, and geographic mobility, thus developing open cultural boundaries. This starkly contrasts with the people of the Taos Pueblo community where I have been working, who survived by fortifying physical and cultural boundaries over centuries (Evans, 2023). However, through this experience, I still noticed anger around the ways non-Jews are appropriating our

music to soothe feelings of guilt over the Holocaust, for economic gain, and for its aesthetic value (Waligórska, 2013). I believe this anger underlies an unmet need within my lineage to protect and fortify our cultural boundaries, as our living, embedded way of life was essentially obliterated by antisemitism and the forces of Western capitalistic assimilation.

The history of a cultural group can determine the type of boundaries they develop. The religious practices, music, and arts of embedded cultures worldwide contain knowledge and strategies developed over centuries to enhance their lives, maintain their emotional health, and protect their people from annihilation. As forces of modernization, exploitation, and racism increasingly threaten the wisdom they hold, these boundaries will continue to serve a critically protective function. This self-inquiry thus increased my understanding that the opposing values of liberal cross-cultural exchange and protective cultural boundaries are both essential tools of survival depending upon the context.

Cultural Humility

Through this exploration, I realized that my value around liberal cross-cultural exchange is culturally determined, which I need to be aware of in my clinical work. Given my values and prior training in traditional music from other cultures, this was an emotionally challenging and humbling realization. Specifically, this process helped me understand the need to avoid encouraging Native American clients to share their culture with me and to remain active and vigilant in protecting clients' culturally defined musical boundaries.

Multicultural Musical Competence

This experience also illuminated the importance of going beyond simply learning cultural music note by note and the need to avoid appropriation. I also grew in my understanding of how exploring the social function of a piece of music can help inform its use in clinical practice. For

example, the lyrics of a song with a covert political message could be changed to empower clients living in dangerous circumstances to express themselves safely. A song expressing vitriol from injustice could be used to help a client release painful personal memories. A lullaby with comforting lyrics could soothe a client's broken heart. A love song could encourage a client to risk opening up to others. Dance music could be used to create an altered state of consciousness to help clients experience joy and ecstasy and a renewed sense of connection to community, thus alleviating social isolation and symptoms of depression.

Intersubjectivity

One of the most intriguing findings of this study was how the intersubjective musical space catalyzed a healing process. Even though this work was done in solitude, the connection I developed with the music, the singer's voices, and the energy and joy in the melodies met and mirrored my emotions, allowing them to soften. This musical space witnessed and held intense emotion and buried memories, fostering the reintegration of parts of the Self that had been buried due to past traumatic experiences. My connection with the music was also deepened by using active imagination, which helped me develop a personal relationship with the sounds, stories, and characters in the music. Additionally, I grew to understand how cultural music can reconnect a person with their community, creating a sense of belonging, acceptance, and safety. This experience also helped me understand the need for careful consideration when using cultural music in clinical work, as it can easily evoke traumatic memories rooted in personal or cultural histories. However, the music can also create an aesthetic distance and emotional containment, offering clients a safer way to process personal and intergenerational trauma.

Waligórska (2013) describes how non-Jews who become interested in klezmer music can develop an increased sense of Self and cultural identity from an in-depth exposure to the music

of a different culture. Thus, encountering *the other* in a music therapist with a grounding in their heritage may spark a client's interest in reclaiming their own cultural identity and music. Having developed a personal connection with my cultural music, I am better equipped to serve as a midwife for clients who want to do the same. Familiarity with Ashkenazi musical idioms will also enhance my ability to create the third musical space described by Yehuda (2005), which can provide a musical canvas for clients to test and explore their cultural boundaries. Even when it is not clinically appropriate for a therapist to use their own cultural music in sessions, building this internal resource can offer clients a healthy experience of being with someone with confidence, self-awareness, groundedness, and clear cultural boundaries and identity.

The Cultural Unconscious

Contact with the cultural unconscious through the memories, images, and emotions evoked helped me reconnect with my community, which is no longer geographically embedded. For the first time in my life, I felt I belonged to a group that would have protected my well-being and vice versa. As I have felt like an *outsider* my entire life, I found this healing. The safety of this reconnection offered me the blessing of *freedom and agency* to create whatever I wanted musically, which was liberating. As Svigals (2002) discusses, "This is our music… having inherited it, we can now do with it whatever we wish" (p. 216). Conversely, this experience also caused a profound sense of loss, as I became acutely aware of how my culture is no longer integrated into daily life in Eastern Europe in a way that continually renews cultural knowledge.

As the forces of modernity spread, culturally rooted arts practices around the globe are in danger of extermination. If we allow this to happen, millennia of embodied wisdom, knowledge, and profound ways of knowing will disappear. Cultural and ethnic musics are more than just expressions of social identity; they are *technologies of survival* that need to be preserved,

studied, and reembodied by those who have the stewardship and authority to do so. They also hold a special place and power in music therapy practice.

Limitations

This study focused on the referential aspects of cultural music rather than aesthetic elements, such as form, rhythm, mode, melody, volume, tempo, and timbre. These musical qualities may have inherent properties connecting the listener to universal aspects of the human psyche beyond the personal and cultural unconscious (Figure 3). Thus, researchers would need to study both the referential and absolute musical associations to understand the full effect of any particular piece of cultural music on the listener.

This study was also highly personalized, using arts-based methodology. As the researcher was also the subject of this study, an entirely objective account of the experience was not possible. However crucial to this study, the ethnographic research influenced the researcher's relationship with the music. Thus, it is impossible to rule out that expectations and hypotheses from the literature may have led to confirmation bias. Additionally, the researcher is from a single ethnic background. Duplication of this study would be more complicated for researchers with multiple cultural heritages and those who do not know their ethnic background or do not have access to ethnomusicological information from their cultural background.

Considerations for Future Research

This study would need to be replicated by clinicians from diverse cultural backgrounds to verify the reliability of this method. Additionally, studies comparing cultural musical self-inquiry to a parallel process with music from another culture could offer additional insight into how clinicians develop cross-cultural musical competence. Finally, case studies would be needed to determine whether or how musical self-exploration benefits clinical work.

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Figure 1

The Method

Figure 2

Intersubjectivity in Music Therapy

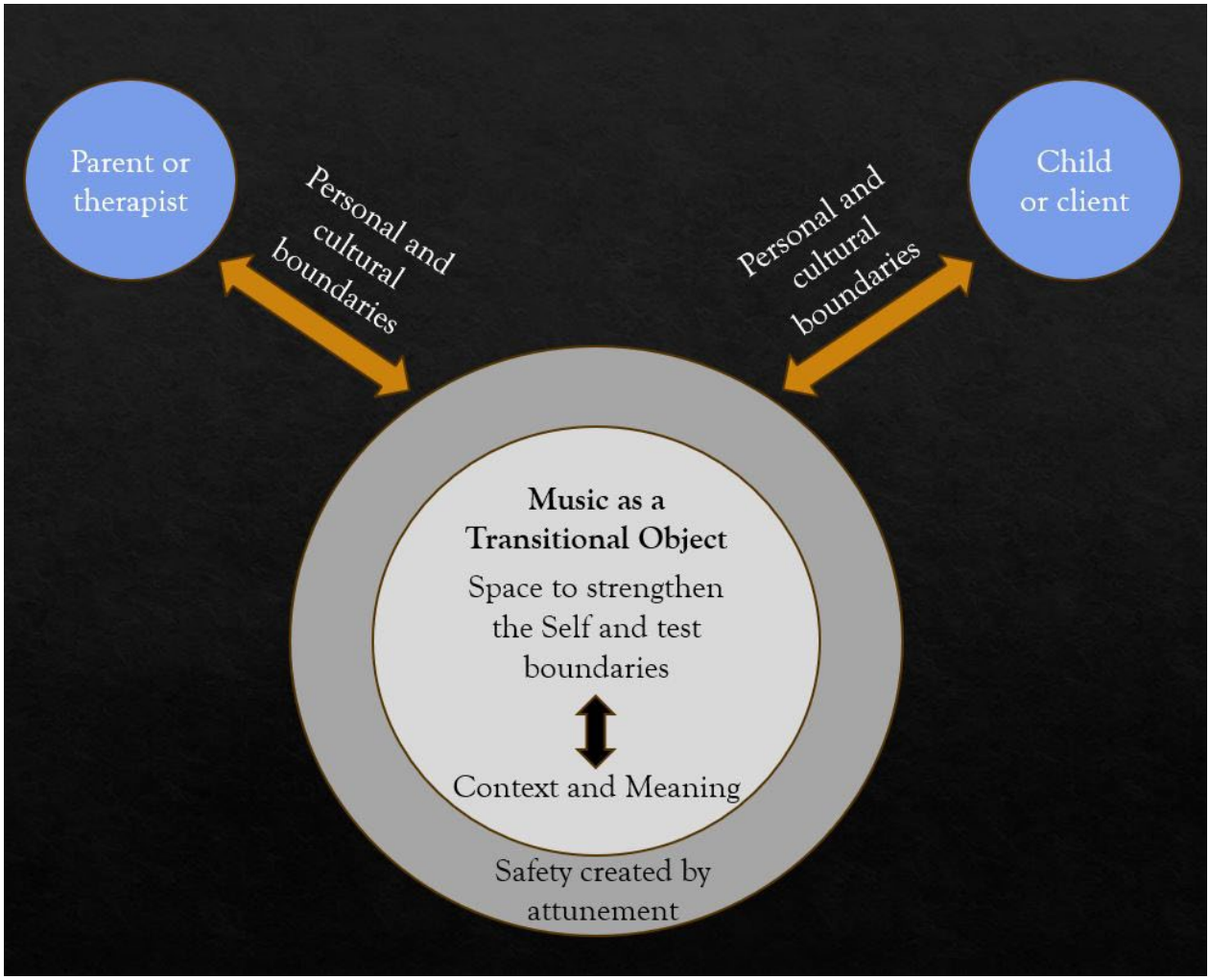
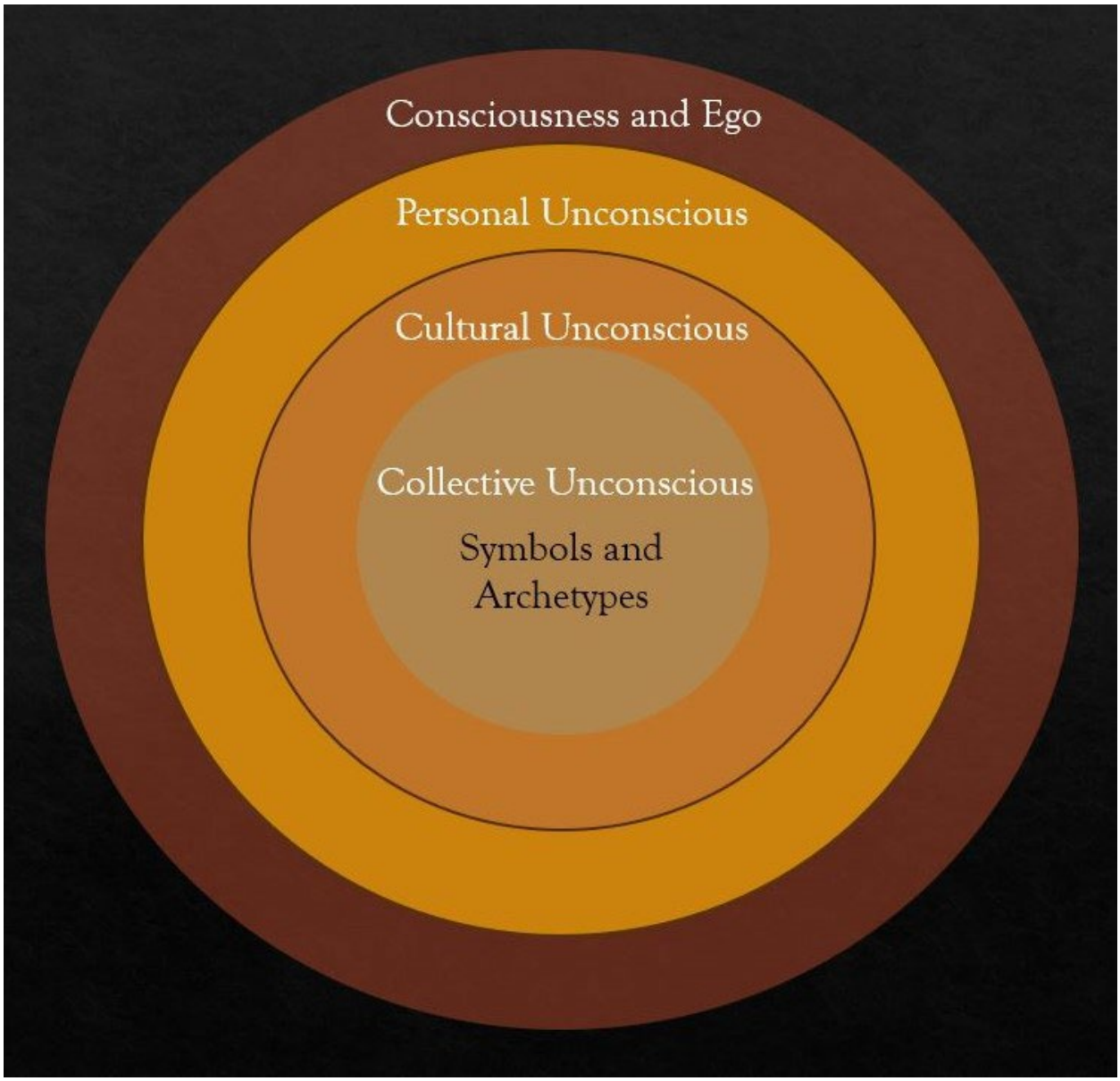


Figure 3

The Cultural Unconscious added to a Jungian Conception of the Psyche



Note. Adapted from "*The collective unconscious*" by A. Mathieson, 2024, Mathieson Fine Art.

Table 1

Songs Studied

Song	Subgenre	Artist	Link or Source (if available)
Tumbalalaika	Courtship	Ruth Rubin and Pete Seeger	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RTBOMT5bMRs
Tumbalalaika Parody	Political	Yiddish Singing Society	n/a
Kishiniever Bulgar	Klezmer dance	Chris Haigh	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uOWkzVtdkUU&t=10s
Ale Vasserlekh	Lament	Ruth Rubin	Folkways Records and Recording Corp.
Oksn	Children's	Ruth Rubin	Folkways Records and Recording Corp.
'S Brent	Political	Lin Jaldati	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WcrYRWTj6XA
Bobover Wedding March	Wedding march	Chris Haigh	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NUXRejWVVXY
Khusidlekh	Klezmer dance	Chris Haigh	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vaL37lVDqcE
Kemft Tsurik	Political	Rachael Penn	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AIhJeugbBtM

(gracielapozzebon, 2014; Haigh, 2020a; Haigh, 2020b; Haigh, 2021; Jaldati, 2018; Penn, 2025; Rubin, 1978; Yiddish Singing Society, 2025)

Appendix A

Tumbalalaika Artistic Response

(gracielapozzebon, 2014)

Appendix B

Tumbalalaika Parody Artistic Response

(Yiddish Singing Society, 2025)

Appendix C

Kishiniever Bulgar Artistic Response

(Haigh, 2020a)

Appendix D

Ale Vasserlekh Artistic Response

(Rubin, 1978)

Appendix E

Oksn Artistic Response

(Rubin, 1978)

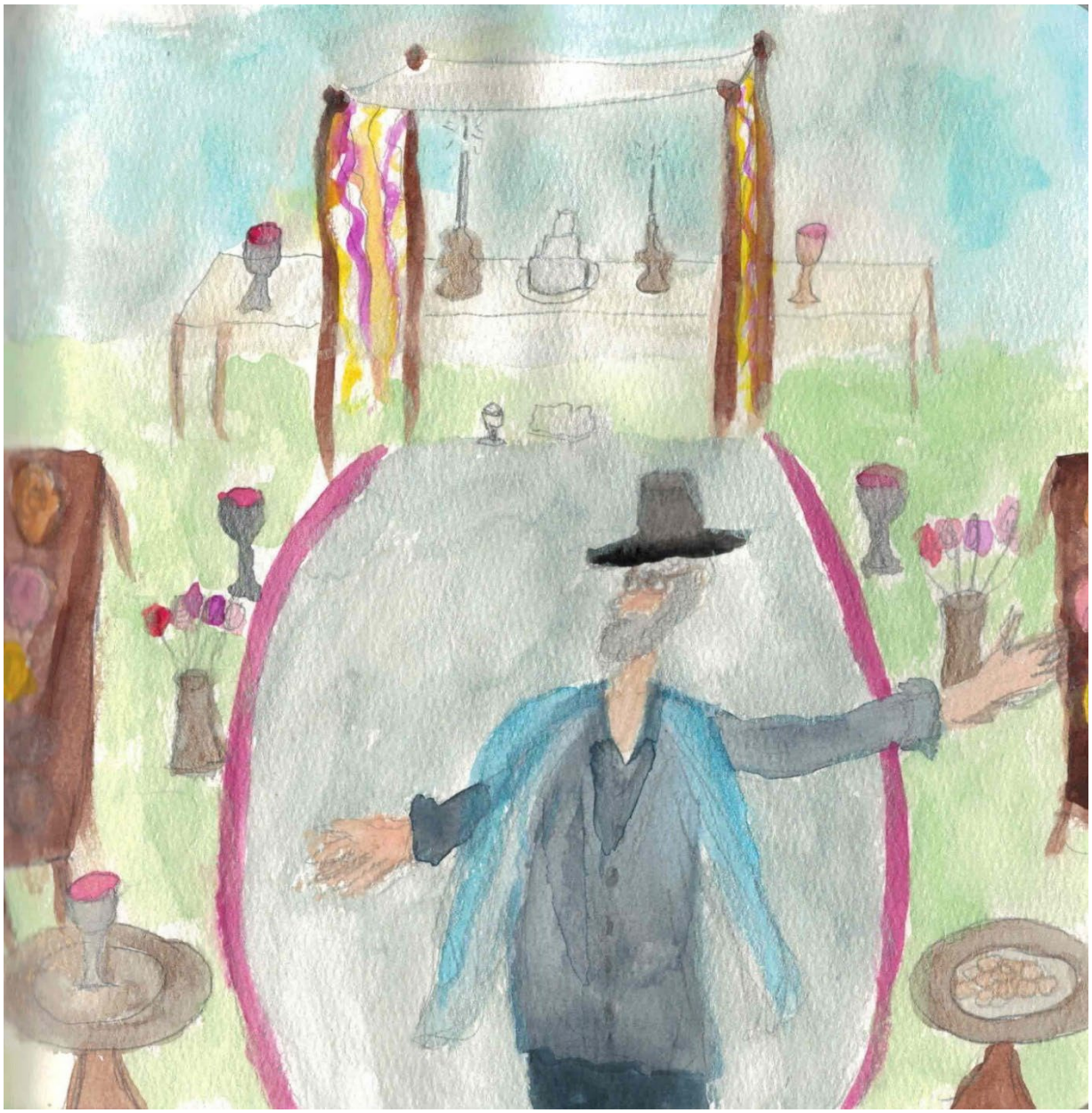
Appendix F

‘S Brent

(Jaldati, 2018)

Appendix G

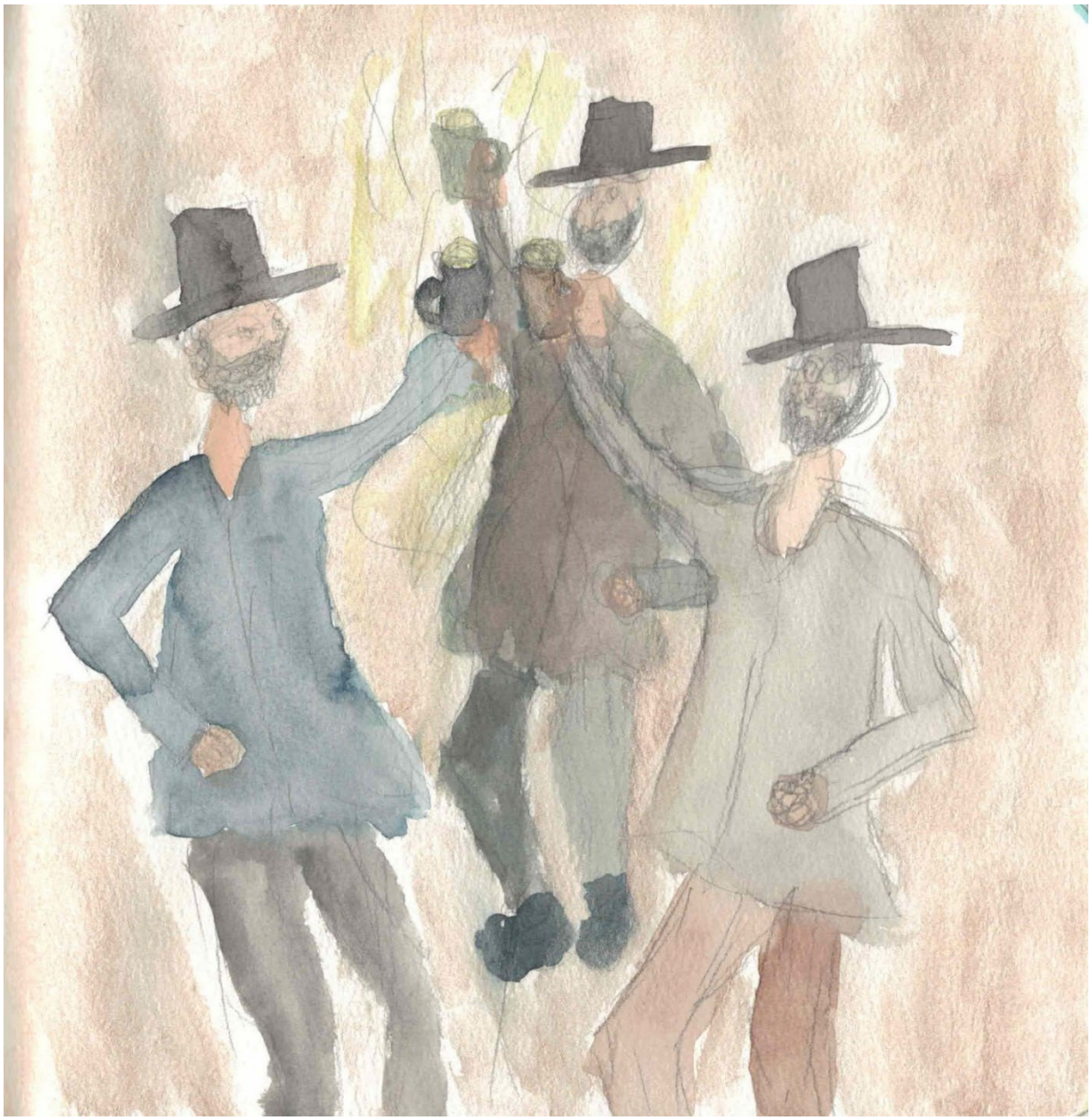
Bobover Wedding March Artistic Response



(Haigh, 2021)

Appendix H

Khusidlekh Artistic Response



(Haigh, 2020b)

Appendix I

Kemft Tsurik

(Penn, 2025)

THESIS APPROVAL FORM

Lesley University
Graduate School of Arts & Social Sciences
Expressive Therapies Division
Master of Arts in Clinical Mental Health Counseling: Music Therapy, MA

Student's Name: Rachael Penn

Type of Project: Thesis

Title: A Method for Developing Multicultural Musical Fluency: Reclaiming a Relationship with Traditional Ashkenazi Music

Date of Graduation: 5/17/2025
In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

Thesis Advisor: Leticia Prieto Álvarez, PhD, MT-BC/NMT, LMHC Leticia Prieto Álvarez