

INVITED SUBMISSION | PEER REVIEWED

May I walk in beauty: Reflections on the Indigenous writings of Carolyn Kenny

Sangeeta Swamy^{1*}

¹ Valparaiso University, Valparaiso, Indiana, U.S.

*sangeeta.swamy@valpo.edu

Received: 16 August 2018 Accepted: 30 September 2018 Published: 15 October 2018

Editor: Katrina McFerran Reviewer: Brynjulf Stige

Music therapist. Professor. Musician. Researcher. Native American scholar. These were some of Dr. Carolyn Bereznak Kenny's professional titles. For those who knew her personally, however, there was little doubt that she was warm, generous, strong, and opinionated. Like a true Elder, she was full of wisdom and power, never afraid to say what she thought, holding us accountable and challenging the boundaries of our field. Though Carolyn was prolific, most of her writings were not in music therapy. They were in Indigenous Studies. Born to a Choctaw mother who abandoned her heritage until the end of her life, for Carolyn, connecting to her Indigenous heritage was an integral part of her search for personal identity and wholeness. After her mother died, Carolyn was adopted into the Haida Eagle clan and became actively involved in other Indigenous communities. Indigenous knowledge and research became a major part of her professional life as well, in her role as First Nations Education/Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University and Professor of Indigenous Studies and Human Development at Antioch University. The breadth and depth of her scholarly work was extraordinary.

However, for many of us, including countless music therapists who had never met her, Carolyn was so much more than a distinguished scholar. Through her presence, energy, and words, she was a powerful role model, muse, and mentor. From the beginning of my music therapy training in the 1990s, I remember feeling an immediate connection to Carolyn through her cornerstone books, which were the only spiritual and cultural pieces of literature in our field at the time. As a graduate student, I did not fully understand the concepts she wrote about or how to embody them in my therapeutic work at the time. However, I was completely mesmerized by the mystery, poetry, and depth of her writing, the intangible and invisible mystery she evoked through her presence. Carolyn was a powerful storyteller. She often interspersed poetry and stories in her academic writings as a way to stay connected to beauty and indigenous ways of being. "Stories, especially in the oral tradition," she wrote, "provide powerful bridges that connect our histories, our legends, our senses, our practices, our values, and fundamentally, our sustainability as peoples" (2012, p. 4). In honor of this, I felt that it was appropriate to intersperse both stories and poems throughout this tribute.

Social justice and inequality

I first met Carolyn in person around the time that *Voices: A World Forum* was launched, at a concurrent session at the AMTA conference in Pasadena, California in 2001. As one of the first music therapists to focus extensively on culture and social justice, her

efforts made me feel, for the first time, like there might be a place for me in the field as a brown music therapist. While Carolyn's early writings expressed music as a universal rather than culturally specific medium, her views changed over time. As she embraced her own heritage, she began to see efforts towards social change and social justice as essential and integral to her mission. She became skeptical of universality and wrote about the marginalization of Indigenous peoples, historical oppression, and power inequities in the world today. "Because of my studies of the diversity of worldviews in diverse cultures, [...] I really question the concept of psychic unity and grand narrative, unless those grand narratives are extremely fluid" (2017, p. 918). However, she did not just talk about social justice, she lived it. She conducted several research studies with Aboriginal women in Canada and with the Maori in Aotearoa/New Zealand, shared ethnographic stories about her own family and Native American roots, and wrote about historical abuses and violence against First Nations people. She revamped research protocols for working with Indigenous populations, changed Aboriginal policy in Canada, and was instrumental in the inclusion of cultural genocide of First Nations people in Canadian higher education curricula.

She was a true leader, not afraid to challenge her colleagues about cultural appropriation and the true origins of ecological and community music therapy. "Much has been said about ecological music therapy. But very little of this work considers the forces of nature the way Yupiak scholar Oscar Kawagley intends. [...] Ecology, to the Native person is a grounded concept — one which invokes spirit and connection and Earth" (2016, p. 1011).

Of course, community music therapy is a very old idea. [...] Now being Native American I always try to point that out to these folks, that this was the way music functioned and **still** functions in tribal societies. So it seems to have gotten missed in the literature a lot. I'm sad about that. (personal communication, August 16, 2016)

She also protested the dangers of positivist and oppressive research designs, pointing to studies that abused the needs of Indigenous people and were conducted without their consent.

I have seen statistics and demographics used in unethical ways to shape policy and funding. Methods that reduce peoples' lives to algorithmic formula[s] are obviously offensive to people who have experienced the taking away of their names, their stories, their languages, their religions, even their children. (2016, p. 1024)

As a result, Carolyn was committed to participatory action research and research methods that directly benefited communities. She advocated approaches that incorporated Indigenous values within the research methods, analyses, interpretation and dissemination processes themselves. Lastly, Carolyn's activism was not limited to Indigenous causes, but to intersectional identities as well. For example, she felt that feminist theories disregarded Native women's struggles.

Most Native women have an ambivalent relationship with feminist theories. The romanticizing and commercializing of Native beliefs and practices is apparent in the women's movement. [...] White women's use of Native ritual structures has been a source of discomfort for Native peoples who are in a struggle to save their own languages and customs and who are reluctant to allow the marketplace to co-opt the very foundations of their cultures and societies. (2016, p. 1022)

Core Indigenous Values

About 10 years ago during my doctoral studies, Carolyn agreed to serve on my dissertation committee. As someone who never quite fit into traditional music therapy communities or models myself, I was drawn to Carolyn's renegade ideas. She particularly inspired me as someone who was outside the box and as someone who "broke all the rules" (2017, p. 898). As a member of my committee, Carolyn pointed me to ground breaking literature and authors from interdisciplinary fields. A true mentor, she was always available and patiently listened to my frustrations and stories. She offered her-

self freely as a resource and sounding board. I found myself continually drawn to her presence and ideas in my struggles to integrate music therapy, spirit, culture, and social justice. In fact, it was only when I began studying shamanism directly that I finally began to understand the foundation of her work.

It is from this shamanic context that I wanted to share the powerful dreams that I had about Carolyn near the end of her life. In May 2017, I sent her drafts from a recent interview for an upcoming publication. She told me that she was ill, but that she “planned on recovering completely” and was determined to finish the edits and transcripts. However, in September 2017, I had a series of emotional dreams that she had died. In the dreams, she had an important message for me and her music therapy colleagues. “Don’t forget the transpersonal! That’s most important,” she said. She told me that she relied on us to continue her legacy, to help other music therapists understand the work she started in shamanism, *the Field of Play* (1989) and *the Mythic Artery* (1982). She said that we should keep redirecting the focus back to beauty, aesthetics, mystery, and spirit. Also, it was our responsibility, she said, to bring music therapists together. “Play music together. Listen, really listen,” she said. “And forgive who you can.” I was deeply moved. I emailed her about the dream, and she told me that she had just entered hospice. She thanked me for allowing her to be in my dream. Her health was declining quickly, and she was losing energy. I asked for her permission and worked with my spirit guides to help her through her transition. She passed away shortly afterwards.

Since that time, I have continued to deeply study her work and ideas. In reality, the ritual, beauty, nature, aesthetics and consciousness that Carolyn wrote about are not new. They have been practiced for centuries and form the foundation of Indigenous values and ways of life. However, in many academic, medical, and music therapy settings, these were, and in many ways still are, radical ideas. While Carolyn often used terms that were accessible and universal, at its core, her philosophy is shamanic and Indigenous. In fact, she saw the music therapist as a “modern-day shaman” (2016, p. 308), someone who “is required daily to walk between these two worlds, much as the ancient shaman, who was required to dance the great dance between spirit and matter” (2016, p. 371).

Magic and Spirit

One core Indigenous value of Carolyn’s was an emphasis on the spirit world. She often spoke of Helen Bonny, expressing a deep sense of gratitude for her focus on beauty, aesthetics, music-centered and transpersonal approaches. “Helen had such a deep appreciation for the unique beauty that music could offer -- the depth, the transformational opportunities. [...] I miss her so for her belief in the coherence between our aesthetic being, spirit, and the music” (Summer & Kenny, 2010, para. 4-5).

Carolyn was also a very vocal critic of behavioral approaches that denied the whole person and excluded the spiritual. She questioned what had been sacrificed in order to neatly organize human behavior into categories. She wondered what had been left out as a result of an overemphasis on positivist approaches. She felt that such approaches contributed to “alienation, a deprivation from essential resources needed for our own survival” (2016, p. 296). Carolyn felt that music therapy had distanced itself from the magical side of music and aligned itself with the behavioral sciences for accountability and legitimacy. “It’s coming back again, this wave of positivism. I’ve had some very dramatic discussions with my colleagues I’m working with, about the fact that we don’t live in Petri dishes” (personal communication, August 16, 2016). Called a “pagan witch” at a music therapy conference early in her career, Carolyn felt that modern “science and magic do not mix” (2016, p. 306).

Carolyn’s legacy around the spiritual dimension of music therapy is perhaps one of her greatest contributions, and yet still remains hidden in standard music therapy textbooks, literature and curricula. In contemporary dialogue in music therapy, for instance, spiritual or transpersonal approaches are still often considered marginal. Expe-

riences in the Bonny Method, for example, are commonly explained in Jungian psychological terms, seen primarily as travels to the inner psychological world. However, Carolyn's description of spirit was much more than psychological.

Often we find ourselves traveling backward and forward through time, searching for something beyond the time-bound moment — some source, some meaning, some reason, direction, purpose. We search for the origins, the beginnings to resource and renew, seeking some sense of the primordial, a connection to the original creative act, our roots. Then we seek the ultimate, the absolute, a designation of path, some *raison d'être*, a guiding light. When we are lost in doubt, or dried up, or weary, or seized by pain, we reach backward and forward for strength and reassurance, to stretch beyond the present to some Greater Reality, some transcendental dimension. (2016, p. 294-295)

Connection to nature

Despite her critiques, Carolyn understood that the scientific and the spiritual were seeking to comprehend the same phenomenon, just from different angles. “The good scientists that I talk to, they talk like Native elders because they say that all things are connected” (personal communication, August 16, 2016). In particular, a connection to the Earth and nature is primary in Indigenous value systems. This theme is present throughout much of Carolyn's writings, in *the Mythic Artery* as well as in shorter articles such as *The Earth is Our Mother* (2006). She explains that bringing the psyche into harmony with natural and supernatural forces is necessary for psychological and physical well-being and facilitates true healing.

The Navaho religion provides the ritual for healing through a profound meditation on nature and its curative powers. [...] And healing is not directed toward specific symptoms or bodily organs, but toward bringing the psyche into harmony with the whole gamut of natural and supernatural forces around it. (2016, p. 145)

However, Carolyn did not see nature as only external. She explained that nature is an extension of the inner world and that our inner processes mimic the processes of nature. “Natural places became resource pools of images that I carried around with me into the world. They were always available internally. The social world was an extension of these rich landscapes.” (2016, p. 1032).

Carolyn also emphasized the importance of learning about ritual from the natural world. As opposed to viewing ritual as simply a repeated structure, she focused on the religious, tribal, and shamanic associations surrounding ritual. For her, ritual added a sacred element to the music therapy relationship. “Music therapy and music are related to tribal systems that use ritual at the core of their healing systems” (Kenny & Stige, 2008, para. 8). For Carolyn, ritual in music therapy was not just an art form or a psychological structure, but based on cycles and metaphors in nature. “The cycles of the Earth, the phases of the sun and moon, the developmental stages of peoples' lives, the processes of healing all depend on repetition for keeping the world in balance. So it is in music therapy” (Kenny & Stige, 2008, para. 19).

Music as the missing link

Finally, Carolyn saw the role of sound and music as the link between the everyday world and the spirit world, the human and the cosmic. Through its language of myth, symbolism and metaphor, she considered music a bridge between the inner and outer, past and present, the natural and supernatural world.

We need to go away and be quiet together on the Earth in order to hear the quiet sound, the sound of the heart, the sound of the soul, the sound of the mind, the sense sounds of the Earth herself. Then we will find peace. (Kenny, 1988, p. 53)

These intricate art patterns and songs weave the relationship between the people, the land, and the creatures on the land into a fabric of resilience and strength, one that has stood the test of time in the face of tremendous challenges throughout history. (Kenny, 2002, p. 1219)

For her, music and art were not special activities separate from everyday life, but forms of beauty and a vehicle for health and well-being.

There is an immediacy to Haida art, song, dance, carving, weaving, any form. Art is for life. Art is to support human beings in their efforts to live a good life, to survive, and thrive. In the Navajo world, art is not divorced from everyday life, for the creation of beauty. [...] Beauty is not separated from good, from health, from happiness, or from harmony. (2002, p. 1220)

Although Carolyn cautioned music therapists against focusing too much on bureaucracy and positivism, she was “thrilled” about recent developments in music therapy and expressed hope and optimism that any lack of understanding or division in our field will all pass away. She had a reassuring way of seeing the big picture.

It will come and it will go and that’s the way it’s just always going to be. That’s the nature of energy, it moves, it’s always fluid and dynamic, we aren’t stuck in this. Through our conversations, through our work and working together, we move through the waves together (Personal communication, August 16, 2016).

Teacher and Elder
 Listener in the dark
 Poet, storyteller, weaving stories in between our thoughts
 Scholar, seeker of truths, mentor to all
 Mother and caretaker
 Excavator of stories, protector of the tribe
 Spirit whisperer
 Asking the big questions, pondering deep mysteries
 We are so grateful for your guidance
 and look forward to more conversations
 beyond time and space.
 May you walk in beauty

References

- Kenny, C. (1979). The artistry, the magic, the challenge of music therapy. In *The proceedings of the 6th annual conference of the Canadian Association for Music Therapy* (pp. 19-26). Canadian Association for Music Therapy > .
- Kenny, C. (1982). *The mythic artery: The magic of music therapy*. Ridgeview Publishing Company: Ridgeview, CA.
- Kenny, C. (1988). A song of peace: Dare we to dream? *Music Therapy*, 7(1), 51-55, <https://doi.org/10.1093/mt/7.1.51>.
- Kenny, C. (1989). *The field of play: A guide for the theory and practice of music therapy*. Ridgeview, CA: Ridgeview Publishing Company.
- Kenny, C. (2002b). Keeping the world in balance - Music therapy in a ritual context. *Voices: A World Forum for Music Therapy*, 2(2), <https://dx.doi.org/10.15845/voices.v2i2.84>.
- Kenny, C. (2006). The earth is our mother: Reflections on the ecology of music therapy from a Native perspective. In S. Hadley (Ed.), *Feminist perspectives in music therapy* (pp. 81-96). Gilsum, NH: Barcelona Publishers.
- Kenny, C. (2012). Liberating leadership theory. In T. N. Fraser & C. Kenny (Eds.), *Living Indigenous leadership: Native narratives on building strong communities* (pp. 1-14). UBC Press.
- Kenny, C. (2016). The field of play. In *Music and life in the field of play* (pp. 370-565). Gilsum, NH: Barcelona Publishers.
- Kenny, C. (2017). *The lives of music therapists: Profiles in Creativity, Volume One* (Moreno, J. J., Ed.). Dallas, TX: Barcelona Publishers.
- Kenny, C., Faries, E., Fiske, J., & Voyageur, C. (2004). *A holistic framework for Aboriginal policy research*. ON, Canada: Status of Women Canada.

- Kenny, C., & Neil, R. (2000). A sense of place: Aboriginal research as ritual practice. In R. Neil (Ed.), *Voice of the drum: Indigenous education and culture* (pp. 139-150). Canada: Kingfisher Publications.
- Kenny, C., & Sa-Ěts, N. J. (2002). Blue Wolf says goodbye for the last time. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 45(8), 1214-1222, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764202045008005>.
- Kenny, C., & Stige, B. (2008). The greatest distance between people is not space but culture. *Voices: A World Forum for Music Therapy*, 8(1), <https://dx.doi.org/10.15845/voices.v8i1.444>.
- Summer, L., & Kenny, C. (2010). Recollections. *Voices: A World Forum for Music Therapy*, 10(3), <https://dx.doi.org/10.15845/voices.v10i3.566>.