



Introducing the IEATA November 2023 Member Spotlight **REJI MATHEW, PHD, LCSW, REAT**

What drew you to the field of expressive arts?

The expressive arts are central to my worldview, work, life, and social activism. I am an [award-winning](#) intermodal artist, thinker, educator, and neuroscience-informed psychotherapist. Integrating different art forms is intrinsic to my creative process and therapeutic approach. My philosophy for therapeutic expressive arts is grounded in several core principles that inform my approach to healing, teaching, and training.

My therapeutic worldview is based on narratology and narrative therapy. This intersects with a commitment to understanding our complex identities, including class, culture, location, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and accessibility. I begin my understanding of a person in the context of time, place, and culture.

My graduate education in social work, cultural studies, and community health at New York University shaped my therapeutic framework. I specialize in evidence-based treatment approaches, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), interpersonal psychotherapy (IPT), mindfulness, positive psychology (PP), resiliency, and mind-body wellness. My approach is also trauma-informed, and I have trained in eye movement desensitization reprocessing (EMDR).

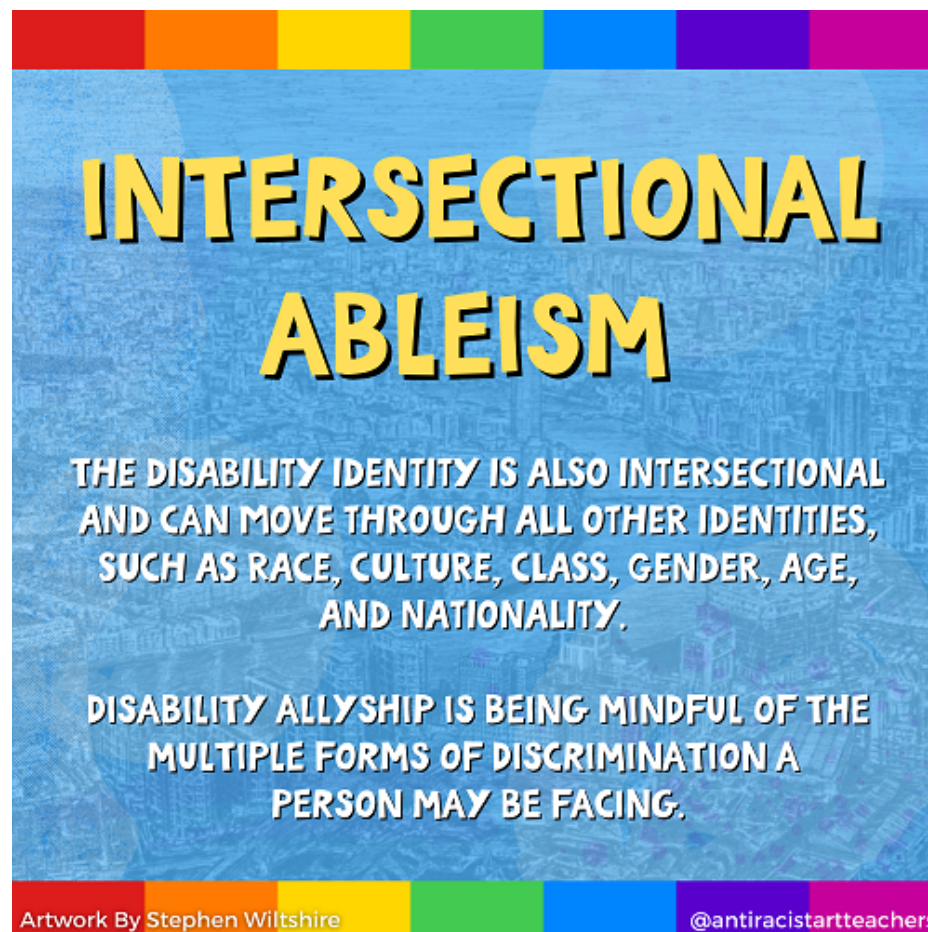


How are you implementing multimodal expressive arts in the domains of therapeutic work, artistic practice, consultation, education, and activism?

Human experience can sometimes defy language, and the arts can provide the safety of aesthetic distance and limitless accessible entry points through movement, sound, story, art, and imagination to find one's personal narrative. In the expressive arts, intermodal is a concept that offers the arts as processing tools. The "intermodal invitation" conceptualization guides my counseling approach; specifically, how does this person or community enter their inner world?

I am a person with a lifelong neuromuscular disability (chair user). I am an intermodal artist, thinker, and educator. Expressive arts are my lifelong path of healing, discovery, and integrating mind, body, spirit, and imagination. The mission of my work is to teach the benefits of cultivating inner artistry as a direct problem-solving tool to bring to life challenges.

Each day, I move through the world relying on my artistic aesthetic sensibility. Inner musicality is a metaphor to think about the nuances in problem-solving, Visual arts help me have a broad imagination. My dramatic instincts bring out a sense of playfulness and serve as a balm in conflict situations. The Expressive Arts are an inner resource for me, and the mission of my work is to inspire people to cultivate inner artistry as a tool to bring to the challenges of daily life. I live my daily life with the spirit of this mission.



How do you envision your work and artistic practice moving forward?

In my expressive training, I have built a broad palette: for art, I work with [digital animation](#), [drawing](#), and [sketching](#) as my visual processing tools. For writing and poetry, my background in journalistic writing helps me understand how [narratives](#) are constructed and re-imagined.

My storytelling is informed by my education in academia, mental health, social work, and community advocacy. I am currently the [Arts Reporter for the Disastershock Arts & Recovery](#) team and am curating a narrative on the role of the arts in trauma recovery and a secondary project on [Dance for Health, Movement Stories Project initiative](#).

In drama, I specialize in using improv as a tool to cultivate spontaneity. I also have a passion for cinema therapy, using short films as a tool for processing complex emotions. Lastly, dance/movement and music are

intertwined expressive forms for me. As a disability and accessibility advocate, I have both studied and witnessed firsthand the power of music, movement, and imagery as a resource in neuro-medical-rehabilitation recovery. [The Dance for PD \(Parkinson's Disease\)](#) model is a powerful source of inspiration for me, informing my creative process and philosophy.

What are your thoughts on the current role of expressive arts in your region and internationally?

In my expressive arts training, I have also learned that each person has an expressive range, and methods of therapeutic expressive play can be a path for self-expansion, problem-solving, and developmental growth. In 2020, I received an ARTS Leadership award from [BRIDGES](#), the Rockland Independent Living Center, for my community-based arts initiatives.

As a street academic, [I present in settings](#) ranging from non-profits to hospitals, primarily speaking on providing mental health coping skills education with culturally affirming attunement. I collaborate with various communities to teach evidence-based psychotherapy models integrated with an expressive approach to healing and well-being.

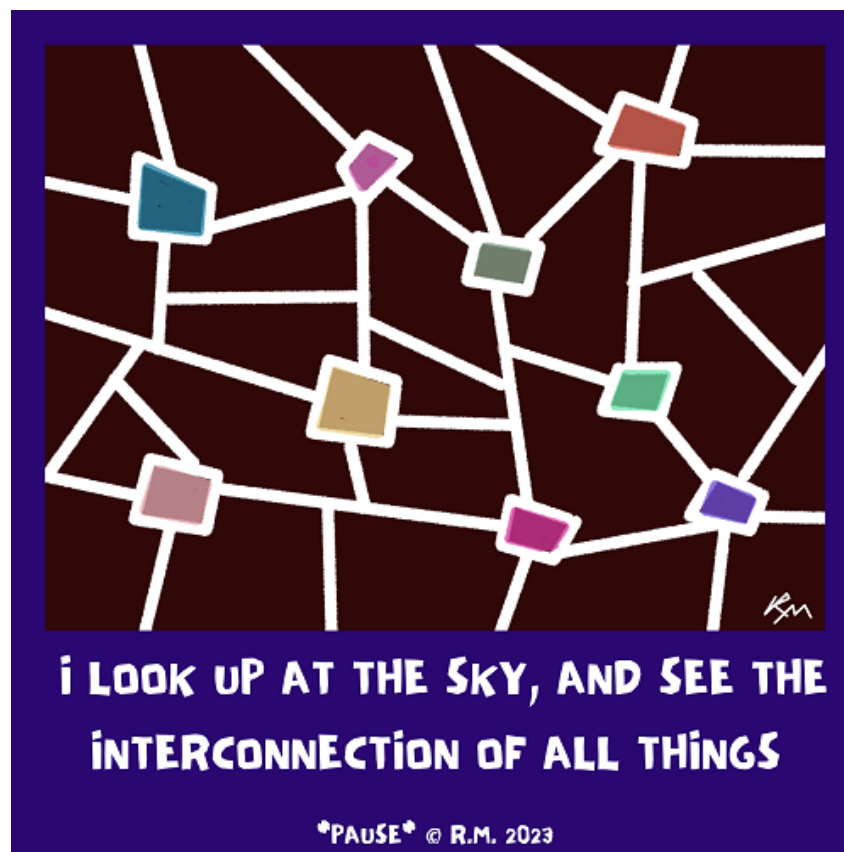
For my own arts-based work, I am an intermodal artist. My current art practice includes arts advocacy and art creation. My art installations are intermodal, and I create work in several mediums: visual, narrative, animation, and live spoken-word performance. My art explores themes of wonder, resiliency, and expressive play. I am a board member of BRIDGES, the Rockland Independent Living Center, and on the advisory board for [Rockland Music Conservatory](#). I am honored to be the Arts Accessibility Educator and [Activist for Anti-Racists Art Teachers](#).

How does being a part of IEATA impact your work in expressive arts?

Expressive arts are my lifelong path of healing, discovery, and integrating mind, body, spirit, and imagination. The mission of my work is to teach the benefits of cultivating inner artistry as a direct problem-solving tool to bring to life challenges. I live my daily life with the spirit of this mission. I am proud to share I am a board member of IEATA and collaborate with Dr. Merav Berger. We hope to curate an intersectional, cross-cultural narrative on the story of ARTS & healing in our rich community. We are both deeply inspired on a daily basis on the power of the arts to heal and want to tell this kaleidoscopic story.

Additional Thoughts...

Having a neuromuscular condition and relying on a complex set of mobility/adaptive equipment is a constant challenge in affirmative coping and accessing my inner resilience. When I realized that every year or so as my condition evolved and my body changed, I had to accept that evolving the way I move and live is the world is a journey of accepting pivoting as a way of life.



To face this challenge with more creativity, I spent time learning more about improvisation through dance and music classes which shifted the paradigm for me to think of every day as choreographic improvisational challenge and not only a stressor.

I hope my story can make a path for persons with complex disabilities to see an arts-based path for themselves in the expressive arts field.

Professional Links

Current Creative Projects

[Website](#) [Instagram](#) [Facebook](#) [Linked - in](#)

[Reporter's Notebook](#) [Dance for Health](#) [Arts Accessibility Advocate](#) [Expressive Arts for Kids Blog](#) [Disability Advocacy](#)
[Resilient Griever](#) [New – Imagine](#)

Welcome Reji Mathew to the IEATA Board as Co-chair of the Public Relations Committee!

What brings you to volunteer as a Board member and for the committee you are with?

I am a member of the PR team. Along with Dr. Merav Berger, we are seeking to tell a cross-cultural, intersectional, international story of the power of the expressive arts.

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Welcome Jennie Kristel to the IEATA Board as Co-chair of the Governance Committee!

Biography

Jennie Kristel, MA, REAT, APTT received her degree in expressive therapies from Lesley University in 1986 and her REAT credential in 2014. Her background in theatre also informs her work and she trained extensively in psychodrama and is a Playback Theatre trainer. Jennie has known since she was in high school that she wanted to enter the art therapy field after "accidentally" using art and drama as a way to explore her own inner world.

Her professional canvas spans diverse clinical and non-clinical settings and populations, including inpatient and outpatient hospitals. She has a private practice doing both telehealth and in-person work, that focuses on transgenerational and ancestral trauma and the forces that shaped the persons and their relationships; personally, spiritually, and collectively using Sociometry, Sociodrama, Playback Theatre, and expressive art therapy. She is a professional artist focusing on mixed media and has trained extensively in printmaking.

A passionate educator, Jennie flourishes as a visiting Core instructor at Lesley University teaching foundation courses. Beyond academia, she extends her expertise globally, offering workshops and training in expressive arts therapy, Playback Theatre, and "The Listening Hour" internationally. As a supervisor for individuals in expressive arts therapy, she thoroughly enjoys the process of supporting people in this field. She has written on using the arts in therapy including co-writing *Using Art Therapy in Diverse Populations: Crossing Cultures and Abilities*, and published chapters and articles about using the arts in community, postpartum care, and grief.

Immersed in the pulse of her profession, Jennie actively contributes to the field's advancement. She holds a longstanding membership with IEATA, is on the REAT credential review committee, and is now Co-Chair of the Governance committee. In addition to being on the Board, she is the co-coordinator of the Northeast IEATA chapter.



"Like a Tree We Grow Tall"

International Expressive Arts Therapy Association

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