

UNRAVELING MY CONSTRUCTED SOCIO-CULTURAL IDENTITY: A HEURISTIC
ART-BASED CRITICAL SELF-INQUIRY

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A Contextual Essay for an Arts-Based Research Project

in

The Department of

Creative Arts Therapies

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of Master of Arts

Concordia University

Montreal, Quebec, Canada

AUGUST 2021

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CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY

School of Graduate Studies

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Critical Self Inquiry

and submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (Creative Arts Therapies; Art Therapy Option)

complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with
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August, 2021

ABSTRACT

UNRAVELING MY CONSTRUCTED CULTURAL IDENTITY

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In the field of art therapy, scholars with a critical lens have criticized the reductionist shortcomings of the multicultural competence trend. They argue for the need to integrate an intersectional framework and social justice approach in art therapy that acknowledges structural power and systemic oppression and urges art therapists to undergo critical self-reflexivity. In line with this approach, and through a postcolonial feminist lens, the researcher investigates her sociocultural identity. Starting at a cognitive level and then digging into her body, mind and soul through artmaking, imaginal dialogue, and writing. This research utilized a heuristic-arts-based methodology to address the researcher's own journey in critical self-examination of her different identity markers shaped by interconnected systems of oppression. The researcher was guided by Moustakas' (1990) six-step heuristic inquiry and used various approaches and forms of art throughout the research process. The main themes deciphered are discussed in this contextual essay and portrayed in the video performance: *Unraveling and Reconciling Fragments of Myself*.

Link: <https://nataliortiz77.wixsite.com/fragments>

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to give thanks and express my gratitude to all those who supported me in this challenging, yet rewarding journey of becoming an art therapist, and in this research:

Agradezco especialmente a mi familia, a mis papás y hermanos por su amor incondicional, por siempre apoyarme en mis sueños, por ensayrme que los mayores límites estan en la mente y por inspirarme con su creatividad. A mi abuela, por plantar semillas de arte que no sabia que crecerían hacia este camino.

To Py, thank you for all your care, love and support. You were my rock during all this pandemic, and I will be forever grateful.

To Josée Leclerc, my research and practicum supervisor, for guiding me throughout this process, encouraging me to deepen my self-reflection and teaching me so many valuable lessons.

I also thank the professors involved in the Department of Creative Art Therapies, for sharing their knowledge, experience and diversified passions within the field.

I feel grateful for the people that I met within my art therapy cohort and for the incredible support I received from you Jade, Lily and Nina. Thank you for always listening to my thoughts, opinions, and heart. For lifting me up in so many ways. Your friendship is a treasure.

Finally, I also want to acknowledge all the individuals I had the privilege to have as clients throughout this art therapy journey. Your stories, resiliency and courage touched me deeply and taught me more than words can say. Thank you

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Chapter1.Introduction

To set the foundation for this heuristic arts-based research, I must first introduce myself as the sole artist and art therapy researcher and address my positionality. I was born and grew up in Ecuador, South America, in the Andean region, in an upper-middle-class family. I am a racialized, non-disabled, cisgender person. My mother tongue is Spanish, and I learned English since I was young. I underwent this heuristic journey and wrote most of this paper in Tiohtiá:ke/Montreal, Canada, situated on the traditional territory of the Kanien'kehà:ka Peoples. I came to Canada to pursue my Master's degree in art therapy with legal immigration status. Due to the regulations implemented because of the COVID-19 pandemic, I could not return to my home country for one year and a half. However, in July 2021, I was able to visit Ecuador, where I finished my heuristic arts-based research project. Although a land acknowledgment and recognition of my positionality are significant, they are not sufficient. Thus, a deeper analysis of part of my journey in engaging in the path of critical cultural humility is presented. Through a rigorous and lengthy process, which will be described in detail, I investigated the following question: *What is my lived and felt experience exploring and deconstructing my socio-cultural identity through artmaking informed by an intersectionality and postcolonial feminist lens?*

Chapter 2. Literature Review

Multicultural Competence

In the past two decades, art therapy scholars have made efforts to bring multiculturalism to the center of discussion (Talwar, 2015). In its code of ethics, the American Art Therapy Association (2013) argues that multicultural competency is essential to an ethical art therapy practice and to work with diverse populations successfully. The Art Therapy Multicultural and

Diversity Competencies (2015) adopted the "developmental sequence of cultural awareness, knowledge acquisition, and skills" (p.1), which are present in three categories: 1) Art therapist's awareness of personal values, biases, and assumptions (p. 2); 2) Art therapist's knowledge of clients' worldviews (p. 3); and 3) Art therapist's skills in developing/implementing culturally appropriate interventions, strategies, and techniques (p. 5). Nonetheless, it is essential to note that this three-phase model of cultural competence has had various critiques, further discussed below.

Cultural Humility

Cultural humility, a concept first coined by Tervalon and Murray-Garcia (1998), criticizes the idea of cultural "competence" and proposes that cultural humility is not a goal that a person can reach but a lifelong process of self-reflection. Cultural humility requires art therapists to commit to an ongoing self-reflexivity, an "intentional and comprehensive introspection" (Hocoy, 2007, p.29). Additionally, implied in cultural humility is the principle to readdress the power imbalance in the therapeutic relationship. Nonetheless, Jackson (2020) asserts that "both humility and competence in cultural approaches within the field of art therapy are needed" to bring cultural awareness to a deeper level (p. 15).

Critique of Multiculturalism and Cultural Competence

While the recent emphasis in art therapy literature and education on multiculturalism and cultural competence are significant contributions in this field, some scholars have criticized these diversity frameworks more harshly, pointing at their limitations. Goodman & Gorski (2015) argue for the need to decolonize "multiculturalism" in psychotherapy, which also applies to art therapy. The authors contend that multiculturalism and cultural competence can create the sensation in well-meaning therapists that it genuinely addresses the oppression of marginalized

people when in reality, it might just be replicating it. Such is the case since the model of cultural competence and multiculturalism "help us avoid questioning the way power and hegemony have structured human relationships" (Talwar, 2015, p. 100). For example, Gipson (2015) argues that a cultural competence lens fails to acknowledge the systemic violence experienced by Black individuals and that it is crucial to understand the effects of White supremacy. Therefore, the argument is that the focus should not be on honouring differences but on questioning the systems of oppression at play.

Critical Consciousness and Intersectional Reflexivity

As a response to the critique of multiculturalism and cultural competence, several art therapists have argued that the discourse on diversity frameworks within the field of art therapy should include an intersectional framework (Gipson, 2015; Karscher, 2017; Kuri, 2017, Talwar, 2015; Talwar, 2019). Talwar (2019) argues that art therapists should develop critical consciousness and intersectional reflexivity, which will require an understanding of how their identity has been socially constructed based on systems of power and privilege (p. 42). Talwar (2010) explains that intersectionality considers the different markers of social identity: race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality, functioning not as isolated dimensions but as being simultaneously affected by multiple larger systems of oppression, which are also interlocked. As Kuri (2017) also explains, intersectionality "focuses on deconstructing how social identity and inequality shape one another, creating layered forms of oppression" (p. 119). Therefore, in contrast to the concept of multiculturalism and cultural competence model, an intersectional framework does not simply acknowledge individuals' differences but seeks to understand structural oppression and its impact on people's lived experiences.

In a similar vein, Gipson (2015) argues for a social justice pedagogy in art therapy. She

describes her efforts in helping her students recognize their privileged identities and express their emerging feelings of discomfort, which she sees as only a step toward raising critical consciousness since "a more complex engagement with social issues" is needed (p. 142). Drama therapist Nisha Sajani (2012) also calls creative art therapists to take "response/ability" instead of talking about cultural competence. Sanjani (2013) argues that performance ethnography with an intersectional framework has the potential to foster reflection, inquiry and creates a means "to speak out against sexism, racism, and xenophobia" (p. 384). She explains that her process of performance of lived experience involves researchers, participants and audiences, and allows their stories about their identity to arise, then to be transferred into improvised scenes and finally to the creation of their monologues, exchanged with an audience. Therefore, Sanjani (2013) claims that participants are able to "inhabit contradictions, call deeply held ideas about our roles into question ... [Thus], silenced realities are given form in gesture" (p. 385). A process taken place within a safe and dialogical space.

Art Therapy and Latin American Individuals

As just shown, currently many art therapist scholars advocate for the awareness and knowledge of intersectionality in the field of art therapy, but they have provided a detailed account mainly from the context of the United States, where these scholars are located (Hamrick & Byma, 2017; Gipson, 2015; Talwar, 2019). As such, literature regarding art therapy in the context of Latin America has been scarce and predominantly based on case studies. In addition, available cross-cultural studies in art therapy have centred on Latino clients residing in North America, focusing on topics of acculturation and migration (Hernandez, 2011; Linesch et al., 2014). Therefore, the literature available has had a simplistic approach by placing individuals from Latin America into one racial category, failing to acknowledge this country's regional

complexities and historical contexts. In order to better understand the social construction of cultural identity in this vast continent, it is significant to turn to postcolonial studies and postcolonial feminism. Such is the case since these approaches analyze the roots of systems of oppression shaping Latin America.

Postcolonial Feminism

Postcolonial feminism and intersectionality emerged in the third wave of feminism of the late 80s out of the critique of the second wave of feminism. Intersectionality was first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) to criticize Critical Race Theory and White feminist discourse in the United States for their exclusion of Black women. Using an analogy for traffic in an intersection, Crenshaw (1989) argued that Black women exist in the intersections of sexism and racism. Furthermore, Postcolonial feminism argued that 'women' have been treated like this 'other,' marginalized, subordinate within a patriarchal system (McEwan 2001). Postcolonial feminist scholars like Gayatri Spivak (1988) and Chandra Mohanty (2003) criticized Western feminism for being predominantly of White, liberal and upper-middle-class women, which homogenized "third world women" as a single category, failing to acknowledge the complexities and experiences, silencing their voices. As such, postcolonial feminism focused on how the colonized "other" has been constructed, represented and romanticized in Western knowledge and history (Spivak, 1988).

Furthermore, it is essential to acknowledge that a significant argument of postcolonial theory is that knowledge and power are intrinsically related. Postcolonial feminism further explains that knowledge has been mainly shaped by a Euro-American male lens, marginalizing other ways of knowing, which Spivak (1988) refers to as "epistemic violence" and argues that the role of the intellectual has not been a passive one. Thus, as McEwan (2001)

explains, postcolonial feminism "seeks to disrupt the power to name, represent and theorize by challenging Western arrogance and ethnocentrism and incorporating the voices of marginalized peoples" (p. 93). Therefore, postcolonial feminisms aim at providing space and voice to the marginalized women to speak of their identities.

Modernity/Coloniality

Postcolonial studies from Latin America have centred explicitly on the discourse of "modernity/coloniality" to criticize the era of "development." Postcolonial scholars argued that the 'development project', which began after World War II, has continued a way of "Othering" by the 'West' towards the 'Rest,' to further maintain their ideas of progress and modernization (Escobar, 2010). As Walsh (2012) explains:

...the epistemological perspectives that emerge from colonial subjectivities, histories, memories, and experiences ... that do not simply remain anchored in the colonial past, but are (re)constructed in different ways within the local and global coloniality of the present. These are the "other" knowledge, the "other" philosophies—knowledge and philosophies otherwise—that the continental model continues to refuse and deny (p. 14)

The discourse on development divided the world into two categories. On the one hand, the countries of the North considered 'First World' and 'developed' in economic terms and ways of living. On the other hand, the countries of the South were classified as 'Third World' and seen as 'underdeveloped' (Escobar, 2010). Therefore, postcolonial scholars argue that the project of 'development' is a continuation of imperialism and fostering Western frameworks and knowledge, promoted as universal, advance and civilized (McEwan, 2001). Such is the case since the developed/underdeveloped narrative created the idea that "Third World" countries have

to follow the unavoidable capitalist model to be successful. However, as Escobar (2010) argues, the idea of Western development has failed, which is why he calls it a "maldevelopment". Such is the case since, in reality, capitalism and neoliberalism, guiding the idea of development, have actually "exacerbated economic, racial, and gender inequalities" (Mohanty, 2003, p. 509).

Therefore, postcolonial scholars from Latin America argue for alternatives to the Western model of development, which will include Indigenous ways of knowing and being (Ayala, 2017; Escobar, 2010; Walsh, 2012).

Ecuador's Legacy of Colonialism

Postcolonial studies argue that systems of oppression are embedded in historical and colonial roots. Therefore, I now look into the history of colonization in my home country, Ecuador. Due to the scope of this essay, I will only provide a brief account. Before the colonization of Spain in 1531, the territory that is now Ecuador was part of the Inca Empire. During the initial period of colonization, the Spanish established a triangular cast system with them at the top, followed by people of mixed descent (mestizos), Indigenous populations and black people of African descent (Ayala, 2004). However, unlike other places, the Spanish colonization did not eliminate all Indigenous cultures and knowledge in Ecuador. Indigenous peoples managed to resist and maintain their cultural heritage. There was also a cultural blending between Spanish and Indigenous cultural traditions (Ayala, 2004). Although Ecuador was granted independence from Spain in 1822, the residues of colonialism and centuries-old systems of oppression and prejudice remained as seen through the ideology of *mestizaje*, which will be further explained (Wade, 2016).

Mestizaje

In simple terms, mestizaje is understood as "the 'mix' of different bio-cultural categories" (Wade, 2016, p. 325). However, in Latin America, mestizaje is a contested term with different meanings. Mestizaje describes a national ideology, the process of becoming a nation-state and a "modern" republic of many Latin American countries like Ecuador after their independence. Ecuador utilized mestizaje as a tool masked for political unity amid vast diversity, spreading the belief that all Ecuadorians share in mixture (Wade, 2005). However, this national identity based on mestizaje was built on an imaginary homogenous population, prioritizing Eurocentric modes of expression and "systemically erasing Indigenous cultures and leaving little room for other types of cultural expression" (McAllister, 2014, p. 234). As such, the discourse of mestizaje, which lasted over two centuries, enabled Ecuador to be ruled politically and economically by a small elite, characterized by those who look more European, and have lighter skin (Wade, 2016).

Therefore, like other Latin American countries, Ecuador has been described by within-group differences regarding skin colour, physiognomy, and colorism, meaning that skin tone is linked with privilege and socio-economic status (Adames et., 2016). More specifically, it has been premised by white superiority, by "blanqueamiento" (whitening) (Roitman, 2008). As a result, Indigenous and Afro-descendent populations in Ecuador have been pushed to the margins and experienced the most oppression in Ecuador (Walsh, 2012; Beck et al., 2011). As Wade (2016) puts it, "people classified as black and indigenous are seen as inferior and backwards" (p. 326). Therefore, although the national project of mestizaje pretended to be about inclusion, it was instead the opposite.

Furthermore, it is essential to acknowledge that the political project of "mestizaje" was also rooted in the idea that Indigenous cultures prevented the country from "developing" since Indigenous traditions and knowledge were considered "savage" and "primitive" (Ayala, 2004). From this perspective, Walsh (2012) argues that the Ecuadorian national identity has been constructed based on denials and a "depreciation of all that is indigenous." Nonetheless, since the 1990s, Indigenous groups in Ecuador came together due to their historic marginalization from the mestizo nation to challenge the mestizaje national identity. As such, Indigenous movements have occupied more space in national politics (Ayala, 2017). They have proposed the shift towards an Intercultural nation, "a political project aimed at allowing subaltern groups in national public life without having to sacrifice their cultural differences or be otherwise assimilated into the dominant culture" (McAllester, 2014, p. 237). However, although these are significant gains towards a more inclusive Ecuador, racism and discrimination continue to govern the country. Therefore, healing from colonial wounds and residues will more likely be a long process.

Chapter 3. Methodology

Heuristic Inquiry

In contrast to most research methodologies, in a heuristic inquiry, the researcher's personal experience of a particular phenomenon and unique insights are central to the study (Kapitan, 2018). Heuristic research uses the "self" as the participant to inform how one understands the general essence of the lived experience being questioned. Douglas and Moustakas (1985) defined a heuristic inquiry as "an effort to know the essence of some aspect of life through the internal pathways of the self " (p. 39). Thus, at the core of heuristic research are human experiences rooted in tacit knowing (Moustakas, 1990). Tacit knowledge refers to the

personal knowledge that is usually not available to conscious awareness, but "to that internal place where experience, feeling, and meaning join together to form both a picture of the world and a way to navigate that world" (Sela-Smith, 2002, p. 60). Although Moustakas (1990) explains that a heuristic inquiry does not have a specific methodology, he developed a heuristic model involving six stages: initial engagement, immersion incubation, intuition, acquisition, illumination, explication, and creative synthesis. He argued that heuristic research methods "are open-ended, and unfold in their own way, unique to the researcher and the research question" (p. 43). The heuristic stages will be described in more detail as I narrate my unique heuristic research process.

Arts-Based Research

Different forms of artmaking have been combined in heuristic research. As Sultan (2018) argues, "artifacts have the ability to tell stories that words cannot possibly tell. Artifacts honor the process- and content-focused nature of heuristic research" (p. 16). However, arts-based research (ABR) does not have a single method but takes numerous forms and stands out by differing from qualitative and quantitative research. Kapitan (2018) defines ABR as "the creation of knowledge using artistic means within a research perspective" in which the "art practice becomes the 'site' for research problems and methods" (p. 235). Central to this research is symbolic language and forms of art practice rather than a mathematical or verbal language (Levy, 2015). In this context, it is important to acknowledge the work of McNiff (1998), who introduced an ABR into the field of art therapy. McNiff recognized the value of heuristic investigations but emphasized the importance of the role of art in this process. He proposed a relationship between the researcher and the art images emerging from a creative process. He also argued that works of art are also works of research (McNiff, 2008). Furthermore, according to

Talwar (2019), an art-based methodology can also "add to an intersectional discourse around identity and difference as they are located in the materiality of the body" (p. 40).

Research Question

Using arts-based and heuristic research methods, the following research question will be investigated: What is my lived and felt experience exploring and deconstructing my socio-cultural identity through artmaking informed by an intersectionality and postcolonial feminist lens?

Ethical Considerations and Potential Biases

Commonly, heuristic research utilizes co-researchers to collect data in the form of interviews (Sultan, 2018). However, in this research, I am the sole researcher, and there was no data used from other participants, but only the data produced and analyzed by myself. Therefore, the ethical considerations pertained to ensuring the research process was safe for me (Kapitan, 2018). I was aware from the beginning that my research topic could be emotionally charged. That is why I did not force or rush the process but allowed it to unfold naturally at a pace that will help avoid overwhelming feelings. I also found it crucial to utilize art making throughout the whole process to allow some emotional distance offered by image-making and journaling. It was also important to prioritize self-care and self-compassion besides my research's frame, to further process challenging feelings related to the research process and other areas of my life. Another ethical consideration in undergoing this research, especially in writing this paper, was to be mindful of the confidentiality of my family members and not to include any personal names or information about them, and to keep in mind how to address cultural issues with respect.

Furthermore, as an immigrant, an international art therapy student in a predominantly white and Canadian institution, I am aware my lived experience may influence a tendency

towards emphasizing certain themes and ideas, enhancing my values and worldview. However, self-reflexivity was central to my research, enhanced through an intersectional and postcolonial lens to help “one navigates the cultures internalized within oneself” (Kapitan, 2015, p.108). Therefore, my research allowed me to bring awareness and recognize any personal bias. Nonetheless, I recognized that engaging in the path of cultural humility is a long process. Although I will try to ensure a careful examination of my biases, some might go unchecked due to the length of this research. Additionally, Sela Smith (2002) acknowledges that personal resistance to self-inquiry is common in heuristic research. As she puts it, “if the topic is personally painful, the researcher may unconsciously resist the actual personal problem and consider something less threatening” (p. 69). However, having this in mind, I was open to being vulnerable to this heuristic process to truly capture my lived and felt experience of deconstructing my socio-cultural identity.

Chapter 4. Research Process

Initial Engagement

In the initial engagement, the researcher aims to discover a personal interest or passionate concern. However, one that will also hold critical social meanings, "in a way that is autobiographical and touches significant relationships within their social context (Moustakas, 1990, p. 64). In my Undergraduate studies, I completed an interdisciplinary degree that included International Relations, Sociology, Psychology and Visual Arts. Therefore, I studied different theories such as postcolonialism, feminism, and intersectionality. However, I was only allowed to integrate these theories mostly at a cognitive level. Moreover, in my art therapy studies, I noticed the lack of a shift from a Western lens and more inclusion from these theories. Although I could have done a theoretical research, I realized that I wanted to research my own experience

of having a constructed socio-cultural identity, not only from the literature but also by engaging with my body through artistic means. Therefore, I realized that a heuristic arts-based should be the method to help me investigate my socio-cultural identity. Working with clients with a different culture than mine, also made me realize of the importance of first understanding my own culture and biases. In addition, I felt the need to contribute to the lack of studies in art therapy with the Latino/a population and shed light on its complexity.

Immersion: Data Collection

Once the researcher has defined the question to be explored, in the second phase, of immersion, the researcher "lives the question" consciously and unconsciously while awake, asleep, and even while dreaming (Moustakas, 1990). Thus, this phase requires that the research undergoes a self-searching process to turn inward and engage in spontaneous self-dialogue (Douglas and Moustakas, 1985). By attending to my lived and felt experience stated in my research question closely, the data collected during the immersion process involved an artmaking ritual, which is described below in more detail. My data was also collected through spontaneous sketches (see Figures 10-19) and written reflections on my journal for two months, through which I recorded my thoughts and feelings regarding my research question. I only used watercolours and markers to help me capture the essence of my felt experience. As Sela-Smith argues, a heuristic research is about the " 'I-who-feels', or interior, subjective experience" (p. 83).

Art-Making Ritual

For seven weeks, once per week. I engaged in approximately 45 minutes of an artmaking ritual inspired by the Intention Witness Process (Allen, 1995, 2005), described in more detail in the appendix. I chose this method since it can be used to gain insight and repair through

spontaneous artmaking and fosters the idea that art is a powerful way of knowing (Allen, 1995). Every time, I began my ritual with a moment of stillness, followed by my intention. I used my research question as my intention, rephrased as: "I explore my lived experience of deconstructing my socio-cultural identity through artmaking informed by an intersectionality and postcolonial feminist lens." I then engaged in spontaneous artmaking, allowing myself to intuitively choose with what material to work with. Initially, I wanted to work only with clay. However, due to Covid-19 regulations, I could not buy the modelling clay that I wanted. I could have bought it online, but I realized that I could also immerse myself in the materials I already had available at home. Otherwise, there were no limitations on the type of works I could make or the media and materials I would use.

After engaging in art making, I followed the process of 'witnessing'. This is the opportunity to actualize the initial intention by paying attention to what has been received in the art making. Allen (2005) writes, "like intention, witnessing requires stillness" (p.61). I described my artwork with my eyes and touch to further explore felt sensations in my body. Finally, I engaged in dialogue with my artwork and wrote down whatever came up. I have chosen fragments from my imaginal dialogue with the seven works of art made during my ritualized art making in order to give a glimpse of what they revealed to me, which helped me explore different pieces of myself. The artworks are presented in the order they were created.



"You seemed like a vessel, or perhaps a boat? A journey I am about to begin. A journey to the self. I feel scared. Are these pieces all part of you? Do I put them inside or outside? Once you dried, you broke, but I tried to repair you. I hope this wire holds you. I see you as fragile and broken."

"Figure 1. Pedazos Rotos/Broken Pieces (modeling clay and wire)



"Raw and organic clay in contrast to a sharp wire. Could it be an expression of modernity taking over? I see many sides of you. You are malleable and also odd. What about these loose threads? I cannot simply define you. You do not look like anything else. Formless and unique. A mix. I can relate to you."

Figure 2. Formless (modelling clay, wire and threads)



"I notice, your wrinkles, all your lines. Our story is written/inscribed in our body told by our wrinkles and constructed race. Open you seemed like a map, a map that is hard to read. What is your connection to this gray rope? Whose power is stronger? I reflect on my privilege and oppression regarding my race."

Figure 3. Wrinkles Map (acrylic paint on paper and rope)



"Disintegrated, to disintegrate, Desaraigada (rootless). You have to deconstruct your identity little by little. Fragile, yet we need to grab hold on to something, Roots in the air. Are you grounded? My immigration experience evokes a sense of not knowing where to belong. My socio-cultural roots are painful, but I can avoid examine them"

Figure 4. Desarraigada/Uprooted (rope and branch)



"As I began to unravel your threads, I felt angry, my speed increased, as if I wanted to discover what lied underneath. I felt ashamed of my Spanish heritage. I felt the rupture caused by colonization. An open wound. Covered, by this piece of tulle? Yet not properly healed."

Figure 5. Capas de Tejido (fabric, tulle and wire)



"Searching for a sense of belonging I found these materials from Ecuador in my room. These threads are hard to unravel, I cannot connect to them, my indigenous self has been erased, a piece of fabric made in what I call home, but I cannot say it is mine. A shell from the ocean can hear the claim of reclaiming loss origins"

Figure 6. Fragmented Nostalgia (piece of fabric and shell)



“Warm colours, soft textures. Weaving these different wools feels empowering, they remind me to be self-compassionate. The threads magically interconnect. I see you as a nest, what are you holding inside? Is that a broken piece of me that needs nurturing? You looked more contained.”

Figure 7. *Container of Fragments* (synthetic wool, threads and modeling clay)

Incubation

The incubation phase occurs when the researcher has reached a point of saturation and puts the question aside. During this pause, the belief is that "the tacit dimension pushes the question into deeper levels of the mind outside of conscious awareness" (Kapitan, 2018, p. 194). During this phase, I took some distance from my research question. Instead, I centered on my art therapy internship and the other classes of my art therapy graduate program. However, in many classes, topics around intersectionality, decolonization, and oppression kept appearing. Therefore, although I no longer collected data in a disciplined way informed by the guidelines of my artmaking ritual just described above, I continued to record my thoughts, feelings, and reflections around my research question.

Illumination

The researcher is not supposed to plan the illumination phase, but it is supposed to come naturally. This phase is about "a modification of an old understanding, a synthesis of fragmented knowledge, or an altogether discovery of something present for some time yet beyond immediate awareness" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 25). These may involve "an awakening to new constituents of the experience... corrections of distorted understandings or disclosure of hidden meanings" (p.

29). My "aha" moment did not happen at once, but I had different moments of illumination through the incubation period in which I did my ritual artmaking. Another revealing moment came through a dream and when I dyed my pieces of fabric, which I will elaborate on further on chapter 4.

Explication: Data Analysis

The explication phase is when the data analysis takes place. In which, the researcher returns to a kind of immersion to deepen the exploration of central themes, qualities, and components of the question by critically examining their found meaning, "to discern general patterns in the data that emerge from intensive analysis" (Kapitan, 2018, p. 194). Furthermore, Sultan (2018) suggests that in the process of data analysis in heuristic research, the researcher should return to the data collected with a new curiosity and perspective.

During this stage of my research, I distilled the themes from the data collected through different means. The first step was to take pictures of all my artwork since I wanted high-quality photos, and I wanted to organize them on my computer to observe the common themes visually. After taking the pictures, to assist my data analysis, I made two collages with my photos. I made one collage from the art produced during my ritualized artmaking and another one from the artwork created on my sketchbook as seen bellow.



Figure 8. Ritualized Art Making Collage



Figure 9. Journal's Artwork Collage

Another step was to analyze my data from my written reflections and pieces from my Intention Witness process kept in my journal, looking for insights and main themes. Many of the written parts from my journal entries were in Spanish, so I also translated them and tried not to lose their essence. Sultan (2018) suggests that during the data analysis in heuristic research, the researcher should "remain open to specific words, phrases, or symbols that offer a nuanced description of the topic of inquiry and encapsulate its essential nature" (p. 29). Therefore, although I initially struggled to decide whether I should use a coding system based on other qualitative methodologies, I was guided by Sultan's (2018) words to see the data collection as a whole and understand its overall.

Furthermore, although Moustakas (1990) elaborated on this detailed process of heuristic research, he also stated that heuristic research is not a linear process and that the stages can occur more than once in cycles. Additionally, I did not want Moustakas's heuristic model to dominate my research, but I wanted to have artmaking in most stages. Therefore, I also further analyzed my data through a different approach to artmaking. This time, I ripped a cotton fabric/ blanket into different pieces. My initial idea was to then paint the main symbols and themes from my data collection. However, this process took an unexpected turn. I realized I did not have enough paint to paint such a large piece of fabric. Therefore, I realized it could be an opportunity to dyed it with natural materials, revealing some of my findings more clearly. Nonetheless, working with the pieces of fabric, in a way, became like another phase of incubation, which gave me further data to analyze. The themes found will be further developed in the Findings section of this paper.

Creative Synthesis: Video Performance

Lastly, the creative synthesis phase is characterized by the researcher's evident discoveries regarding the explored question and a sense of mastery of the new knowledge of the data acquired. This last phase requires the researcher to reveal and present the findings creatively (Kapitan, 2018; Moustakas, 1990). Sela Smith (2002) argues that when a creative synthesis truly captures the essence of a heuristic research, “there will be something that resonates deep agreement within the observer...there will be a sense of connection and transformation that cannot be falsified” (p. 69). As part of my creative synthesis, I brought together the components and themes of the whole research into a video performance that I felt reflected both the process and the research content. I also decided to write a poem that I recite in my performance, reflecting my experience of heuristic arts-based research.

Although this was not planned, my video performance was filmed in Quito, Ecuador. To me it is metaphorical of reconnecting with myself, with my roots and with my home. I hope to portray that the experience of unraveling my constructed cultural identity is an embodied experience. In the video performance I made, I interact with the mended piece of fabric (*see Figure 25*). I used the fabric to represent my constructed body and identity. I try to represent the conversation with time, with my past and my ancestors that my heuristic-arts-based research directed me to do. In my performance, I also hope to represent the fluidity of identity. I unraveled and tore, but I also mended and sewed the fabric. It is also a representation of the "personal and political." I show the intimate and vulnerable experience of my heuristic experience ultimately through my body, mind and soul.

Chapter 5. Findings

Navigating a Multidimensional In-between Identity Experience

When looking at my artwork produced during my ritual of artmaking, I feel the multidimensionality and complexity of my identity. All of the artwork produced using the Intention Witness Process (Allen, 1995, 2005) summarized in a collage (seen in *Figure 8*), is in 3D form, which allowed me to explore my research question more deeply. In the witness section, dialoguing with my artwork, I noticed their formlessness, which connects with my experience of being in-between different cultures and places and consistently trying to understand where I fit.

Although I tried to explore my different identify markers, my racialized identity was what my research directed me to dig into the most. At first, in a way, I felt guilty that I was giving more attention to this identity category since an intersectionality framework sees all categories as equally important. This is why I used the same intention during my ritualized artmaking instead of exploring each identity marker separately. However, I realized that one identity marker intersects and is experienced differently for some people like myself, depending on the geographical location. Therefore, I will describe my experience of my racialized identity in Ecuador and Canada separately.

In Ecuador: An Ambiguous Privileged Identity

My 3D art pieces (*Figures 1-7*) are mostly done with mixed media. The unexpected exploration of non-traditional art materials allowed me to embody my experience of "mestizaje" more deeply. I grew up identifying myself as mestiza (of mix Spanish and Indigenous heritage) because this is what I was told. However, I never really questioned what it entailed, not until I was in college. Being a mestizo/a in Ecuador looks different for every person since it is not a homogenous racial category as the political project pretended. To identify myself as a mestiza

reflects that I am from the dominant group. Due to my "light" skin and upper-middle-class, I have had enormous privileges, only experienced by a small percentage in Ecuador. I grew up in Quito, the capital city, in a Western and "modern" way of living. I went to a private American school, where I learned English and ultimately considered American culture the primary reference. Therefore, although I am supposed to have a mixed cultural heritage, I cannot claim I am "bicultural" since I do not have any close connection with my indigenous heritage. My artwork and journals lead me to explore my experience and feelings of having a constructed identity that enhanced the Euro-American framework at the expense of erasing any indigenous traces.

Therefore, my artwork accompanies a sense of loss. I know about my Spanish settlers' descendants, but I cannot track any indigenous ancestors that I might have. In unraveling this experience, I first felt a void, as explored in (*Figure 12*), from not knowing a part of myself. In the process of dialoguing with my artworks, many childhood memories arose. I felt puzzled, discomfort and guilty by my mestiza privilege. However, I also experienced anger, sadness and nostalgia from this sense of loss of origins. These feelings were heightened when I worked with a shell and piece of fabric made by an Indigenous Ecuadorian group (see *Figure 6*). Although this piece initially reminded me of home, I experienced an emptiness in my cultural heritage. I also noticed these feelings through the blurriness of the pictures I took from my artwork produced during the incubation phase, which I also wanted to portray through the faded colours of my pieces of fabric (*Figure 24 and 25*). Origins and stories have been lost, erased, or suppressed due to colonization. This personal experience made me feel a diminished sense of belonging, anchoring and grounding, portrayed through the repeated symbol of root-less in my art, through the fragmented pieces and loose threads.

In Canada: A Flattening Identity

When I took the pictures of my artwork, I struggled with fully capturing those made during my ritualized artmaking. Looking at my data from my camera lens was symbolic for me of the lens from which we see the world and construct cultural identity. In my case, it has been a Eurocentric, anthropocentric, male lens, which has impacted all realms of my life and identity. Moreover, taking the pictures of my 3D artworks (*Figures 1-7*) also made me reflect on how often human beings are flattening and reducing people's experiences and not taking a complete perspective on someone's socio-cultural context and background. The way my racialized identity is constructed in Canada reflects this. In Canada, I am seen as BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour). However, I feel this category reduces my experience. Throughout my studies in art therapy, I had this conflict of whether I should accept this term or not. However, after having a dialogue with my racialized identity, I now confidently question it.

My experience is nothing like that of "black and indigenous people" in my country or in Canada. Therefore, I acknowledge that I carry more privileges than oppressions. I came to Montréal by choice and because my economic situation allowed me to. Nonetheless, in Canada, I am "othered," principally based on my race. All the complexities that I tried to explain are reduced to one label and as a result I feel my identity is flattened. In a way, it is more comfortable for me to accept the label of BIPOC because it would not require me to question and acknowledge my mestiza privilege in Latin America. However, I rather resist to another constructed racialized identity.

Towards Resisting my Gendered Femininity

Furthermore, looking at my artwork created in my journal, summarized in the collage in (*Figure 9*), I noticed that there are mainly bodies that appeared more female. Through these

images, I notice how challenging it still is for me to think outside of an heteronormative lens. The exploration with the tulle material (*Figure 5*) and pieces of fabric (*see Figures 25 and 26*) took me to question some feminine labels, that I feel still characterized me, such as being “passive, fragile, gentle and nurturer”. Labels that have been gendered and considered weak or sometimes also endorsed with more sensibility and nurturing. This also took me to question my pursue as a future art therapist and to recognize that a part of doing so was to fulfill the “role of nurturer” that is entitled more to women in different places like in my home country. Knitting and sowing are also seen as a female craft and I was hesitant to explore this material further. However, I engaged with the fabrics and sowing imperfectly as an activist act against my constructed identity markers.

A Journey Closer to the Soul

"There is something that pulls a person toward this journey, way back, deep inside, is a memory, there is something inside each of us that come from behind that veil, behind the place of our own birth" (Ram, 1971, p. 10)

Through different ways, my research spoke to me with the message to "reconnect to your soul". Different art materials and symbols spoke to me and showed me that even my relationship with my soul had been colonized. I realized I was so focused on social topics that I was feeling fragmented and disconnected. However, the final artwork done during my ritualized artmaking felt more contained (*see Figure 7*). I saw it as a nest, and it told me that: "I am holding the painful and fragmented parts of you". Working with the wool material by felting made me feel empowered and gave me hope that I could try to mend my identity. Furthermore, I also noticed a shift in the artwork from my journal. I began to feel less fragmented and as if something was slowly emerging as seen in my last sketches (*Figures 16, 17 and 18*) Additionally, on my last

drawing, (*Figure 19*) I felt an urge for self-compassion and although my initial drawing still had roots on the air, this time I took the decision to add some grounding to it, by making a collage (*see Figure 20*), that was symbolic of what I also realized I needed in my life.

Dialoguing with my artwork also took me to look at my spirituality. I was raised Catholic, the dominant religion in Ecuador. However, when I was eleven years old, I "converted" to the Protestant religion, signifying a big moment in my life since all my family is Catholic. Therefore, I faced many discussions with my family. However, after some years, I realized that I was feeling oppressed by this religion as well. I then decided to distance myself from all religions. However, some years later, with an immersion into yoga, I began to slowly reconnect with my spirituality and perceive the union of my body, mind and soul. Allen (2005) claims that art is a spiritual path and although this was not the intention of my heuristic-arts-based process, it also brought me closer to my soul. I had forgotten Hillman words (as cited in McNiff, 1986) that artmaking is like "soul-making" (p. 104). However, at first, I was resistant to acknowledge this.

Furthermore, due to my settler feelings, I reflected how indigenous cultures in Ecuador have a closer connection with nature, but I did not feel entitled to do the same. However, through the process of dyeing the fabrics with organic materials that I found in my home, I realized I could still reconnect with nature and how this could be an avenue to deconstruct my "modernized" identity. In the process of working with the avocado seeds and skin (*see Figures 21 and 22*), I more vividly felt how a human being's essence, symbolized to me as the seed, has been covered by many layers of oppression and constructs. However, underneath, there is an essence. This was revealed to me when I boiled these materials (*see Figure 23*) and was awed to see the colour of the water turned fuchsia, a colour I would have never imagine that can come from an avocado and onion.

Additionally, the monarch butterfly came to me in a dream when I felt very overwhelmed and fatigued from the pandemic and my research. The monarch butterfly was the symbol that I researched in a symbol's class during my first semester as an art therapy student. Throughout the two years of the Master's program, the monarch butterfly became a symbol of connecting with myself and encouraging me that this journey of migration to pursue my Master's degree in art therapy was worth it. Butterfly comes from the word psyche, which means soul. Therefore, it also symbolizes a connection with my soul and an attempt to connect with my ancestors. Thus, I realized that my heuristic journey was more in-depth than I expected.

Chapter 6. Discussion

To embody my research question through artmaking allowed me to deepen my understanding of my sociocultural identity. During the initial phase of my research, I kept looking for answers in the literature. In a way, I was hesitant to undergo my heuristic journey and exploring myself because I was scared of what I might find. Therefore, before engaging in my inner dialogue, I spent some time reading different articles related to my research. However, this made me feel overwhelmed by information, as expressed in (*Figure 10*). At first, I was trying to understand my research question too much at a cognitive level. However, as soon as I started my ritualized artmaking, I unleashed a door that allowed me to process and explore my cultural identity from the experience of my body and soul through art making. Furthermore, although expressing myself through art was self-revealing in a way, it was also painful. However, turning the mirror back upon myself and my cultural background, and taking an honest look within was a challenging yet transformative journey.

As portrayed in this research, identity is complex, and it can be a painful path to undergo. Therefore, this can lead art therapists to avoid undergoing deep introspection. However, it is a necessary and an important process. Engaging in the path of cultural humility with a critical lens involves a willingness and openness to reflect on oneself as an embedded cultural being. Engaging in the path of cultural humility with an intersectional and postcolonial feminist lens has the potential to avoid stereotypes and simplifications and achieve a more profound self-reflexive process. Through this research, I also hope to illustrate that Latin American identities and experiences should not be reduced to one category. However, art therapists wishing to work with clients from a Latin American heritage should also understand the effects of colonialism and how race has been constructed in this continent. I advocate for the importance of listening to people's unique stories and experiences, considering their socio-historical context in relation to larger systems of oppression. Therefore, "an art therapy practice informed by intersectionality explores the embodiment of lived experience from personal, social, and political perspectives (Talwar, 2019, p. 40). In addition, I believe that art therapy with a social justice framework can give people in the margins a voice. However, to achieve this, art therapists should make efforts to learn from different ways of knowing in order to avoid a continuation of "epistemic violence" (Spivak, 1988).

There is no recipe for how art therapists can engage in the path towards critical cultural humility. However, using creative exploration can be a helpful processing tool, as it can help contain complex processes and emotions and foster aesthetic distance. My heuristic process has demonstrated that the creative and artistic process helps express emotions and memories that may have been previously inaccessible and not easily captured in language. Thus, artmaking

processes and images can serve as containers of painful and raw experiences, such as the residues of colonialism on the body, mind and soul.

Validity and Limitations

Heuristic research is a qualitative approach that focuses on the subjective and lived experience of a phenomenon. Therefore, the findings are not generalizable, and their credibility and value lie not in statistics and correlations but in their ability to convey meaning. The heuristic researcher must nevertheless be rigorous and committed to the topic and the process. As such, the research can be judged according to the dedication given by the researcher (Sultan, 2018), as well as by the degree to which the creative synthesis can communicate the experience to the audience. Moustakas (1990) asserted that the validity of heuristic research is inherent in the methods used and the total commitment of the researcher to these methods. To the extent that the researcher undergoes a “rigorous, exhaustive self-searching” (p. 32). For this study, using the pre-existing framework of the Intentional Witness Process during the incubation phase provided structure and valuable parameters to guide the process.

Conclusion

Exploring my identity has permitted me to begin to reconcile with my fragmented self. I do not deny that I still find this proposition of self-exploration frightening. However, my heuristic arts-based process, has helped me realize that what comes to light will be answers and more questions. This is what makes this a journey of a lifetime. It has not been about me finding my identity, but rather unraveling, deconstructing my identity. I gained a fresh perspective by being able to view myself from different vantage points. I am more acutely aware that I must not allow my cultural values and biases to override those of the clients I serve. Expressed through art, interwoven with my thoughts, my very own story is laid out, even if partially.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.5070/T413012880>

Appendix

Journal's Artwork

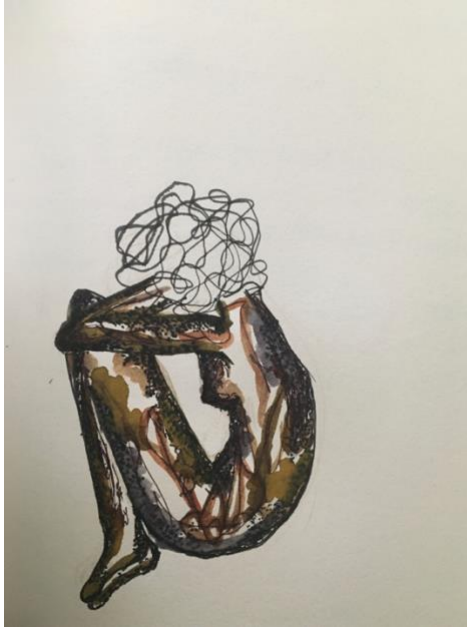


Figure 10. Confusion

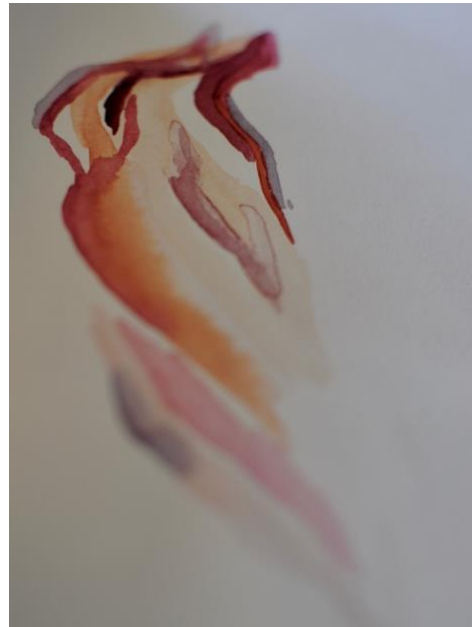


Figure 11. Glimpse de Semilla



Figure 12. Void

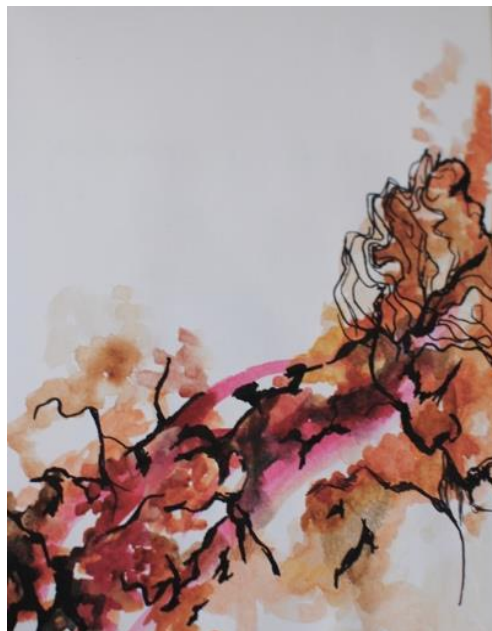


Figure 13. Layered Pain



Figure 14. "Othered"



Figure 15. Interconnections



Figure 16. Emerging, Taking Form.



Figure 17. Fluidness



Figure 18. Something is Growing.



Figure 19. Abrazarte



Figure 20. Rooting.

Dyeing Process, Abstracting the Essence



Figure 21. Avocado Seeds and Skins



Figure 22. Onion Skins



Figure 23. Boiling Process



Figure 24. Dyed Fabrics



Figure 25. Mended Fabrics

Unraveling and Reconciling Fragments of Myself

*To unravel, to reform, to mend
Broken pieces of fragments
de un mismo ser
Me envuelvo, me hago ovillo
Miro hacia adentro
y siento un gran vacío
A void, a nostalgia
Desarraigada, ambiguas raíces
Rootless
Painful roots
embedded in a colonial past, and present?*

*Mi cuerpo guarda una historia,
muchas historias
Some I can unpack; others are too far, too deep
Rasgar, romper,
Tearing all that has been imposed on me
Colored, blended, you are a mixture
But I only know a side of you
The other part has been blurred*

*Stitch, by stitch I reconcile my disregarded selves
Interconnected threads and pieces
A journey of reconnecting with my body, mind and soul
Sowing, mending all my scars
I resist my gendered and racialized identity
I make room for a new way of knowing and being
I welcome you*

The Intention/ Witness Writing Process

Based on Pat Allen (1995, 2005) -The Open Studio Art Process

Before Intention: Notice your body, slowing inhale, exhale, relax, become present to the moment. Allow your mind to settle and allow an intention to form. Notice your body. Breath into any tension and let it go.

Intention: The intention can be specific or general. It can or cannot be goal directed. It can be in the form of an inquiry, engagement or celebration. The intention is written before engaging in art making. It is written in the first person and present tense without using the word “want” before engaging in art making

-I explore my lived experience of deconstructing my socio-cultural identity through artmaking informed by an intersectionality and postcolonial feminist lens

1-I learn something about my role as....

2-I would like to understand the influence of my gender roles

3-I would like further clarification about how I am both subject and subjected to the discourses within society?

4-I release the tension I have been feeling in my chest regarding the ambiguity of my racialized identity

*How do I mediate and interrelate the pre-existing images with my ever-changing self-image?

Art Making: Set aside your Intention and for the next 45 minutes or so make art. Allow yourself to be drawn to a material or an image or simply begin with a mark.

Witness: This is the opportunity for the artist to actualize the intention by paying attention to what has been received in the art making.

Following these steps:

-Sit quietly for some minutes in front of your art and notice what it feels and looks like.

-Describe in writing what you see in the artwork “to extend the creative act as well as to record our experience of the image by focusing our attention” (Allen, 2005, p.62).

-Write down what is coming for you at present moment, any feelings and thoughts

-Dialogue with the image or a part of the image; write it down as it comes, including any seemingly extraneous thoughts or tangents.

-Return to the original intention by asking your artwork what it has to do with it.