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BAAAMM

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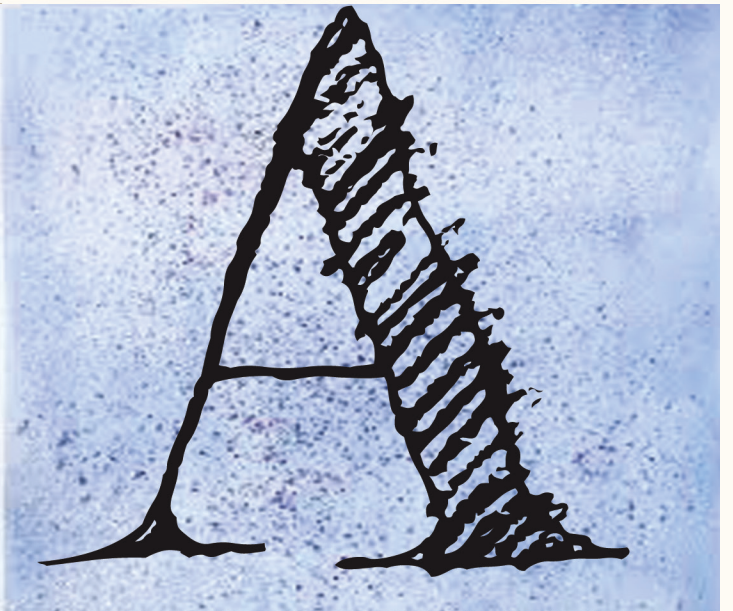
BAAAMM

by
Angela R. Miller
Alice Mary Thomas
Melissa Rivera
Brooke A. Pfaff
Ana Zuanic
Monica Esquivel

A thesis presented to the
Faculty of the Department of
Marital and Family Therapy
Loyola Marymount University

In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Marriage and Family Therapy

May 2017





"When Culture is Felt"



BAAAMM

BAAAMM was born in April 2016, when a group of six creative researcher-artists came together to investigate cultural identity through art making. Through searching, reaching, and wrestling, the group developed creative experiential processes by which to discover and communicate cultural identity through art and language. Over a few weeks, the creative researcher-artists generated a body of work expressing their unique cultural identities and felt responses to one another. This diverse collaborative wants to share their work to stimulate others to enter the realm of creativity, vulnerability, and receptivity to understand themselves better.

BAAAMM is an exploratory cultural happening exhibiting individual and collective creative findings.

BAAAMM is a collaborative endeavor to understand, communicate, and connect oneself to others.

BAAAMM is a multicultural work of progress.

This Jagazine (journal and magazine) chronicles the seven phases of BAAAMM's research. It provides brief biographies of the creative researcher-artist and captures our extended findings, additional art and written work inspired by the investigation.

This Jagazine is part of our original research project in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Art at Loyola Marymount University within the Department of Martial and Family Therapy. This jagazine will be presented at the American Art Therapy Association Annual Conference on November 9, 2017.

Warning! This dynamic research is not the for faint of heart. It tests boundaries, schemas, nerves, and feelings. Those who passionately search for opportunities to express themselves artistically and verbally, disagree, negotiate, be called out, humble, connect to others, and be heard may find that this cultural identity research framework stimulates growth and gratification.

For more Information you may contact us at BAAAMM2017@gmail.com

Initial Engagement

The beginning of our research was a process of sifting through our collective experiences and knowledge of identity and culture while paying attention to what sparked our interest. For about one month we soaked up all we could about cultural identity, meeting once a week to dialogue, share, and respond. From poetry and photography to rap music and academic articles, the ideas and concepts helped us conceptualize culture and identity. We learned that we each have very unique ways at looking at and dialoguing with our own cultures. Little did we know that this ritual of sharing and reflecting as a group would become the heart of our research method. We began to piece together our research proposal, including a series of worksheets that would help us along our process of art and reflection with the goal of answering one question:

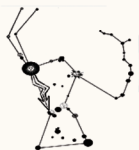
How does art-making inform our understanding of cultural identity?

Artwork made: poetry, sewing, music, drawing, photography, sculpture, etc.

Worksheets used: Initial Engagement Reflection (IER)—6 total, 1 each



Initially I wanted people to understand who I was. I thought I knew who I was. I thought I had this naive control over my identity. During the beginning I was struggling with trying to show who I was to myself; a conflicted girl who struggles with being half black and white, oppressed in so many ways.



Cultural identity is...is...uhh...?

Where do I begin to communicate cultural identity?


Tackling this question opened doors to my mind and heart.

Let me explore your culture to understand my own.

Tell me about who you are to know who I am.



My understanding deepened: of how intensely personal, meaningful, and valuable my art process and making are in my human development, of how pain and discomfort can strengthen understanding and trust when held intentionally and empathically, and of our devotion to being creative researchers exploring cultural identity.



How do I see this mark on my skin
Shadow and light, playing a game
Sticky like sap,
The imprints find their place on me
Do I cast a shadow
Or am I a canvas for your thoughts
What say do I have
On what stays and what goes
What do I allow to touch me
And what do I touch
Subject and object
Duality dancing
Choreographed and slow
Or impish and wild
The rhythm of the wind is unpredictable
The dichotomy separates us
But it is a show
A dialogue between parts
The touch
The interaction
The reciprocity
How I react to others reacting to me
The place where the mark meets my skin



This phase was my least favorite. Beginning something that I am unfamiliar with means to me that I will be challenged. In this initial engagement my individuality was challenged to collaborate with others. The challenge was to accept that I was not going to explore my cultural identity by myself.



We yelled, we cried, and some of us shut down as we wrestled with the power dynamics forming in the group. It wasn't until we were able to connect this experience in the group as the cultural process we needed to research that we were able to truly connect with the process of exploring our cultures and identity.

Immersion

Now that we knew the process that would guide our research, our next step was to immerse ourselves in our own cultural identities. We did this by allowing each cultural researcher to create an art piece that reflected their individual culture and identity (CIP), primed by one of our worksheets (Pre-CIPI). When it came time for presenting our CIPs, we faced the predicament of needing a safe and containing environment in which to share our vulnerabilities. We came up with a creative solution: build a fort at the end of the hallway. In this fort we took turns presenting our artwork and leading discussions within the group in our individual ways. Another worksheet (CIPPPN) helped guide and capture our conversations. At home we each created response art (RAR) informed by the presenter's CIP and filled out a worksheet to document our *felt experiences* (RARJE). It was our hope that through this process we would immerse ourselves in the study topic, absorb information, thoughts, emotions, judgments, biases, insights, perspectives, and felt experiences while remaining open and receptive to what may happen through the process.

Artwork made: Cultural Identity Piece (CIP) – 6 total, 1 each
Reflective Art Response (RAR) – 30 total, 5 each

Worksheets used: Pre-CIP Investigation (Pre-CIPI) - 6 total, 1 each
CIP Presentation Process Notes (CIPPPIN) – 30 total, 5 each
RAR Journal Entry (RARJE) – 30 total, 5 each



Fearing the depths of self-disclosure
I grabbed vulnerability and I bathed in it
I took parts of me and wrapped them in art
I showed you the darkest parts of me
Observing from a distance how you react
I whispered... "Look at the art and understand
me through it"



My CIP revealed that my primary motivation for making art is to process experiences. Art gives me space to grapple both physically and visually with raw emotion, helping to distill the essence of what is unsettling me. Art is self-validating and helps me move forward in greater self-awareness.



"If you could look me in the eye and tell me
you do not see a monster.
Tell me that I am not the only reason that you
lost her.
Look into the mirror now and tell me what
you see.
If you look just closely, you'll find we're all
monsters like me." -MidnightNation

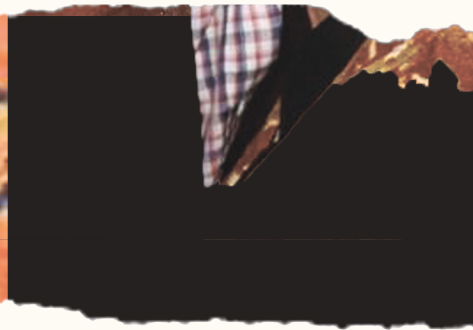
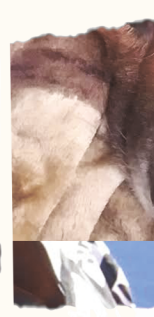
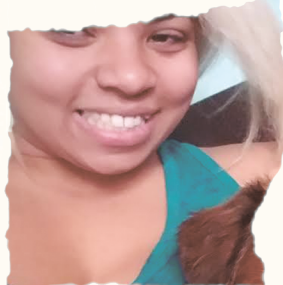
"I'll be just fine. Pretending I'm not . I'm far
from lonely.
And it's all that I've got" - The Used



Incubation

In short, we took a break from our research. We went on with our lives but now looked at ourselves through an omnipresent and inescapable new lens of cultural identity, subconsciously questioning who we thought we were. We allowed ourselves to be receptive to moments of insight but did not seek out those moments. We allowed for intuition and awareness to come to us. By giving ourselves adequate time and space, we allowed ourselves to turn inward, not forcing or imposing meaning and value. We let our intuitions percolate while we redirected our energy towards enjoying winter break.

No artwork made in relation to the study.
No worksheets used.



Illumination

Back to our research after a month-long retreat, we met up to reveal our responses and revelations with the group during a "marathon day." We took turns presenting our response art (RARs) and talking about what we have begun learning about ourselves through group process. We discussed how others' art work and identities mixed with the group dynamic and how our own art making has caused us to see ourselves differently.

After this we created art (IGIPP) to reflect on our discoveries and the internal transformations we were feeling. Of course, there was a worksheet to go along with this art response (IGIPPWR)...these acronyms started getting out of hand! We were all having fun creating our own language for our worksheets and art.

Art work made: Individual Group Illumination Process Piece (IGIPP) – 6 total, 1 each

Worksheets used: IGIPP Written Response (IGIPPWR) – 6 total, 1 each

Acronyms

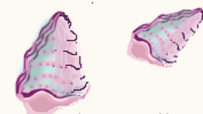
- *Cultural Identity Group (CIG)
- *Initial Engagement Reflection (IER) worksheet
- *Cultural Identity Piece (CIP) art
- *Pre-CIP Investigation (Pre-CIPI) worksheet
- *CIP Presentation Process Notes (CIPPN) worksheet
- *Reflective Art Response (RAR) art
- *RAR Journal Entry (RARJE) worksheet
- *Individual Group Illumination Process Piece (IGIPP) art
- *Individual GIPP Written Response (IGIPPWR) worksheet



I see you, reflected in me, reflecting in us.



Sharing my RARs revealed my intention to understand my peers by adopting their art materials. It felt like I was showing diary entries of how I wanted to be closer to them. Seeing how my peers responded to me through art melted my heart. I felt heard, understood, and supported.



Looking at the art allowed me to make meaning from my experience in the group. I realized that the connections I made between the images, reflections and discussions honored my own and others' vulnerability as a source of wisdom and strength.



"There is telepathy between hearts"

My intention was to creatively express the connection I experienced with each of my peers and their intent to connect with me using art felt like true intimacy.




Something internally was shifting for me. I was adjusting, accepting, and adopting identities that were not mine but that were becoming a part of me.





Explication


In the explication phase, we considered all that was awakened; drawing out the spontaneous discoveries, core themes, and tacit knowledge aroused individually and collectively. The group met for a second extended afternoon session to arrange and rearrange all the artwork we created thus far, exploring themes and patterns in the process, content, quality, and conversations around the art. Also discussing what came up for us in the process of creating our IGIPPs and IGIPPWRs. In sharing our individual discoveries, inspirations, and considerations, a great deal came forward about the intersection of our cultural identities and their interactions with those of the group.





 This isn't something I want to carry around and pronounce as my identity. I want my identity to be made up of the things that I'm proud of. It's hard to find the strength to deviate from the themes in the group. We are so interconnected in so many different ways that I'm learning how to bring these to light. Yes, our difficulties and pains are there. But so are our strengths, passions and individualities, and even through our individualities we are connected.

 I came to understand through this process that communicating with others through art, writing and discussion was a truer expression of my culture and identity than anything I could identify with or define for myself. I realized that I was always actively communicating and creating my cultural experiences and that they were largely based on my emotional responses to others. I realized that culture is an experience you feel happening in concert with the hearts and minds of others.

 I respect all of you for who you are, for what you are, and for what has made you. I felt myself understand the way I give respect for what I am not.

 I let everyone in. The crying was evidence for that. It was crazy to see what happens when you experience something wholeheartedly.

 At moments during our cultural identity research process, I felt attached and detached from my peers. I wanted to connect but also disconnect from them and the research process. I questioned at what intensity I was choosing to display intimacy or distance. Working in a group dynamics deepened my understanding of the meaning of "I" and "we". Over time we had become unique threads woven intricately together to make our own cultural fabric. Never able to replicate it again, but forever remembered.

 Unexpectedly, I felt my connection to the group deepen to another level. In the process of revealing our IGIPPs, I could more clearly see our own group culture emerging.

Creative Synthesis

The creative synthesis phase of our research is a culminating reflection of our insights, discoveries, and comprehension about how the art making process informs our understanding of cultural identity and vice versa. Collectively we created this jagazine and individually we each created additional artwork for a culminating show which we feel reflects the integrity of our transformative research. Through both this jagazine and our final art pieces, we have integrated our unique understandings to develop a deep connection as a group and created meaning out of the self-discoveries and transformations that transpired from researching cultural identity.



Culture is everything and one thing at the same time. We deem ourselves worthy when we take control of who we are and embrace the outside world whole heartily. We love. We feel joy and give gratitude. We cope. We survive.

Communicating with others about culture and how it represents us is difficult. Western concepts of culture have largely evolved from anthropological and ethnographic studies that center around defining others' experiences and categorizing them..... I have realized how important it is to include the awareness of my own lens and how that corresponds to the historical, social and political framework I exist in, and to understand that the beliefs and values that I communicate to others are largely based on my emotional responses to my experiences and my perceived position of power within them. I can never be a neutral observer. I am an active participant in any cultural space or conversation.



Further investigating phenomena that stood out to me was validating and connective. It also revealed to me that this heuristic search for meaning and understanding will continue beyond the borders of this thesis. Making art to synthesize my findings seems awesome in all its meanings: humbling, overwhelming, remarkable, and grand. Working in this group to create our jagazine and show is an honor.

Validation

During this last phase of research, we have contemplated if our Creative Synthesis (this jagazine and our show artwork) encompass the discoveries, meanings, and essences of our research. We recognize that truly expressing and representing our lived experiences and everything we have gained through our research is next to impossible; Nevertheless, we think that validating our work through a participatory sharing with others in an art show will further reveal to us the meaning of our work. It will communicate the importance and the essence of the relationship between expressing one's cultural identity and understanding another's cultural identity in a safe group through the limitless and intimate medium of art. We aim to encourage and inspire you to engage in your own heuristically informed inquiry on the relationships between art making, identity, and culture. We hope that what we have created will serve as a guide for others wishing to replicate or engage in a creative, art-based research endeavor exploring cultural identity.



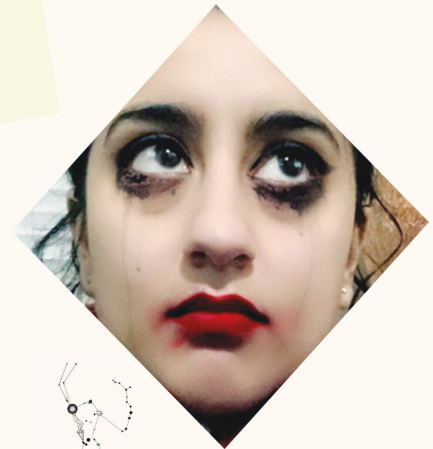
The Creative Researchers



Name: Angela
Age: 43
Born & Raised: Pasadena, CA, now living in Glendale, CA
Cultural Identities: Caucasian, middle-class, married, childfree, heterosexual female; avid dancer; pet parent, drought-tolerant landscaper & environmentally conscious citizen; home & business owner; Catholic by culture.



Name: Alice
Age: 28
Born & Raised: Born and raised in San Francisco, raised half Sacramento, live in Ventura county
Cultural Identities: Gangster, rocker, geek, captain america fanatic, bitch, a storm, a renegade, fur mom, a best friend, singer, creator, listener, motivator, psycho, book worm, individual, a bro, a dude, a sister, a girlfriend, gal pal, fag hag, nor-california, alcoholic, partier, explorer, technology freak, style goddess, pop culture addict.



Name: Melissa
Age: 24
Born & Raised: In the hood of Escondido, CA
Cultural Identities: Hispanic, wolfian, mujer and tomboy, freedom thinker, eccentric af, adventure seeker, nature lover, student of life, nocturnal being, spontaneous, resilient, healer.



Name: Brooke
Age: 30
Born & Raised: in Nashua, NH
Cultural Identities: artist, sister, daughter, feminist, healer, bruja, nature lover, friend



Name: Ana
Age: 25
Born & Raised: San Pedro, CA
Cultural Identities: woman, daughter, sister, dog mom, Croatian, creator, artist, glass-blower, photographer, singer, gardener, rock-climber, explorer, island adventurer, dancer, animal lover, baker



Name: Monica
Age: 28
Born & Raised: Los Angeles, CA
Cultural Identities: Demonica pero salvada, lunatica pero radiante, ink me, imaginator, creator, chula, shape-shifter,



Extended Findings



I cannot deny the transformative power this process has had on me, nor the connections and bonds it had allowed me to form. These connections have made way for an expansion of myself through the witnessing of others. I have delved into understanding myself on a new level, this group context showing me intricacies I was blind to before. However, I also cannot deny the fears and worries I felt during the process.

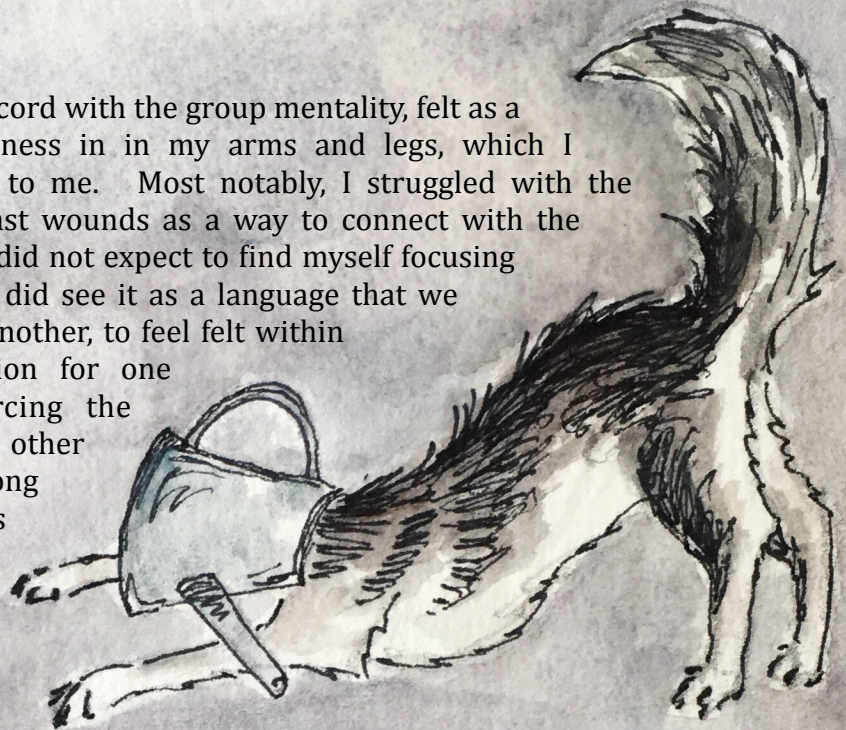
“Woundology”

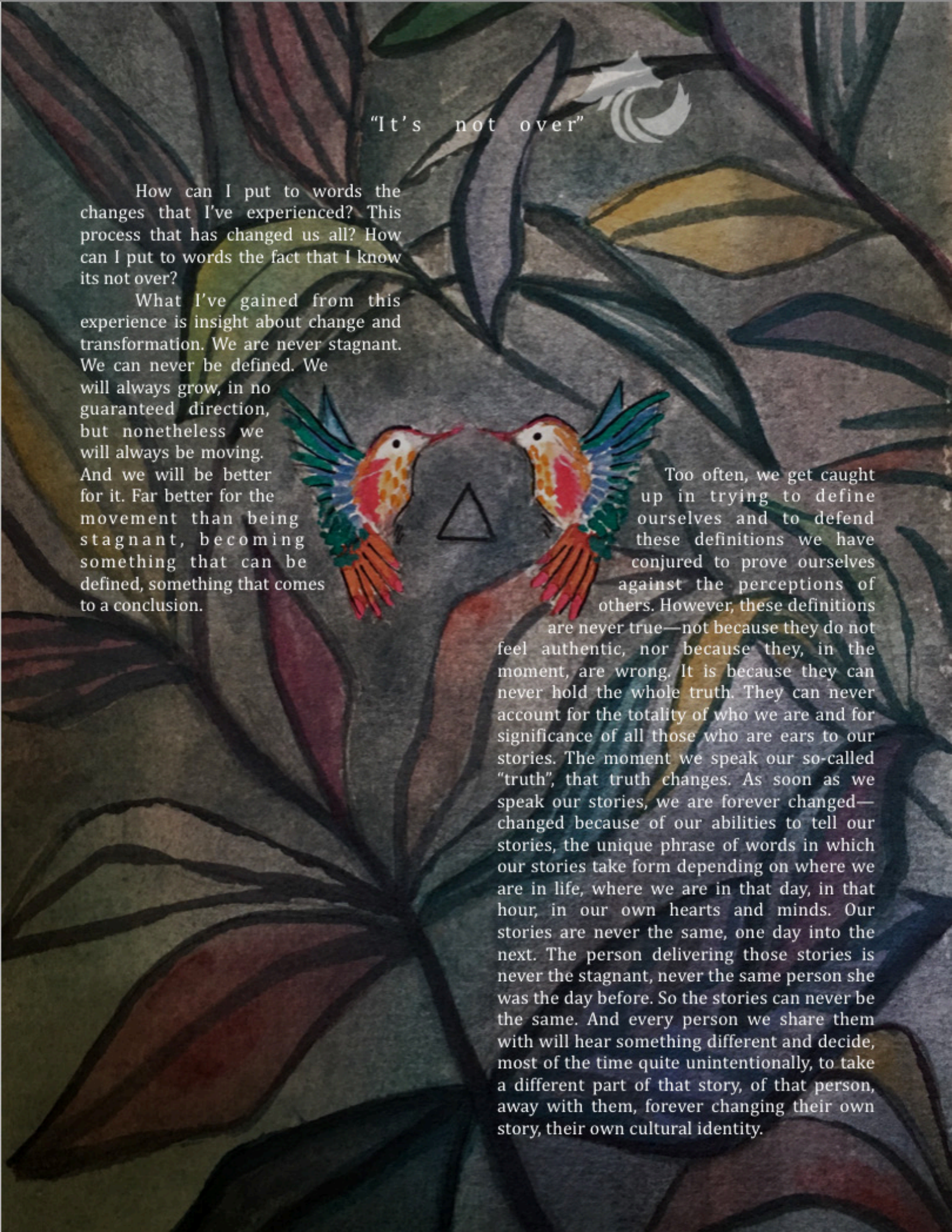
It was the times that I felt discord with the group mentality, felt as a twist in my stomach and restlessness in my arms and legs, which I recognized what did not feel true to me. Most notably, I struggled with the recognition that I was using my past wounds as a way to connect with the group members and their stories. I did not expect to find myself focusing on this aspect of my identity, but I did see it as a language that we were all speaking to relate to one another, to feel felt within the group, and to find compassion for one another. My instincts of reinforcing the similarities I found with what the other women were sharing were so strong that I did not realize that I was victimizing myself until I felt this pang of tension in my body.

My fear was of getting “stuck” in the sharing of our wounds. Caroline Myss calls this formation of trust and intimacy through the sharing of wounds “woundology”. She claims that by forming relationships based on sharing and understanding each other’s wounds we can eventually threaten those relationships when one person decides to heal. By remaining trapped in the power of our wounds, we limit our ability to transform. Although the other women in our group are by no means necessarily “stuck” in their wounds and unwilling to heal, my compassion grew in realizing that we all have our individual and fluid relationships with our wounds. The experience revealed to me my readiness to heal, moving past my identification with my wounds,

and my unwillingness to victimize myself for the threat it posed of getting trapped in the stickiness of “woundolgy”, despite the potential for expedited bonding and intimacy it created for me.

I felt the shift of my relationship to my wounds from deep within. In the beginning of this journey I was someplace between denial of my wounds and great aversion of allowing my wounds define me. Now, I feel that shifting. Witnessing my group members’ open honesty in sharing their stories opened me up to reevaluating my relationship with my own wounds.






"It's not over"

How can I put to words the changes that I've experienced? This process that has changed us all? How can I put to words the fact that I know its not over?

What I've gained from this experience is insight about change and transformation. We are never stagnant. We can never be defined. We will always grow, in no guaranteed direction, but nonetheless we will always be moving. And we will be better for it. Far better for the movement than being stagnant, becoming something that can be defined, something that comes to a conclusion.

Too often, we get caught up in trying to define ourselves and to defend these definitions we have conjured to prove ourselves against the perceptions of others. However, these definitions are never true—not because they do not feel authentic, nor because they, in the moment, are wrong. It is because they can never hold the whole truth. They can never account for the totality of who we are and for significance of all those who are ears to our stories. The moment we speak our so-called "truth", that truth changes. As soon as we speak our stories, we are forever changed—changed because of our abilities to tell our stories, the unique phrase of words in which our stories take form depending on where we are in life, where we are in that day, in that hour, in our own hearts and minds. Our stories are never the same, one day into the next. The person delivering those stories is never the stagnant, never the same person she was the day before. So the stories can never be the same. And every person we share them with will hear something different and decide, most of the time quite unintentionally, to take a different part of that story, of that person, away with them, forever changing their own story, their own cultural identity.



"Indra's Net"

"Far away in the heavenly abode of the great god Indra, there is a wonderful net which has been hung by some cunning artificer in such a manner that it stretched out indefinitely in all directions. In accordance with the extravagant tastes of deities, the artificer has hung a single glittering jewel at the net's every node, and since the net itself is infinite in dimension, the jewels are infinite in number. There hang the jewels, glittering like stars of the first magnitude, a wonderful sight to behold. If we now arbitrarily select one of these jewels for inspection and look closely at it, we will discover that in its polished surface there are reflected all the other jewels in the net, infinite in number. Not only that, but each of the jewels reflected in this one jewel is also reflecting all the other jewels, so that the process of reflection is infinite."

THE AVATAMSAKA SUTRA
FRANCIS H. COOK | HUA-YEN BUDDHISM
THE JEWEL NET OF INDRA 1977

Within our group, I have witnessed the power of interconnection: the exchange that happens when take away from another's experiences and who they are and they take away from us.

When we *see* one another, we gain something from the sight, from the witnessing, and we grow from it. Through this process of take away, we are put into a cycle of constant expansion and evolution. As we grow from the experience of witnessing another, they take part of us and move and change themselves as well. As long as we are open to one another, the cycle of mutual exchange and transformation is endless, just as in Indra's Net. In this group, we have touched one another's hearts in a unique and intimate way through our delicate process of discovery and witness. We will continue to be impacted and transformed countless times throughout the remainder of our lives, by countless individuals, all stemming from their own cultures and experiences and their own personal growth. The way in which we touch one another's life does not end when we witness one another; it will always remain the thread of connection, forever carried with us as part of our ever changing identity.





The Purgatory

In the beginning, I was not engaged in the concept of culture. I had this naive idea that everyone assumed that culture meant where you were from and what ethnicity you are. I was not influenced by those labels because I never let them define me. I also believed I knew who I was, that I had control over myself, and with this naive sense of knowing I started this exploration with answers that I wanted to share with others. Answers for questions I realized I had no idea how to answer.

The Proposal

"What is your cultural identity?" We asked. "How is that expressed through art making?" We tried to discover. How will six very different people make a discovery that is more than a cliché of "we bonded, we're sisters now." In the beginning, I was struggling with major depression. I was a heavy alcoholic, isolating myself, and dealing with a lot of suicidal ideations to the point that I almost got kicked out of school and had to have an intervention with my friends. I felt trapped in a brick house locked away from the world and myself. So, what was my current cultural identity? Which breaks down to who are you? Who was I? Who are you?

I am a group member sitting in my teacher's office with my other classmates. I was the only person who appeared to know who they were. I was the only person who seemed to know what they wanted to do. I was the one who seems to be in control of what I thought this research was going to do. I wanted to show everyone who I was, but who was I? This fictitious persona that I provide for people when I have to leave my brick home? Did I want to spend a year focusing on showing people a self that I did not even like? That is when I surrendered and started over. I had a lot more questions to ask myself and answer if I wanted to have an authentic answer for our research.

The Plan

Being in a group with five different personalities and stories gave me the framework for what to ask myself. Brooke allowed me to think about the inner battle I was having being raised in a society of Blacks vs. White and being both black and white. Ana influenced my creativity with *Big Magic*, a book that made me question where my creativity comes from. I was able to think about my environment, ask questions, and make realizations about common traits that being raised in the ghetto attributes to, thanks to Melissa. Angela made me wonder what I found important about my life with her array of photos of stuff that created its interesting meaning. Monica allowed me to express my hatred for abstract painting while allowing me to be comfortable enough to express my feelings.



The Result

After all of the questions, it was time to answer them. What is my cultural identity? I come from trauma, neglect, and abuse. I came from love, support, and strength. I am conflicted about the person I am physically, but I love the person I am inside. I am a girl. A girl who has had her issues. I could go on, but that was the answer to what my culture identity is. My culture identity is everything about me; However, explaining everything is impossible. There are certain things I was too afraid to explain, so I narrowed it down. To be seen, to be understood, and for others to understand. For that to happen, I had to show them and I had to be vulnerable.

The Jump

To understand vulnerability, I focused on the theories of Brene Brown from her Power of Vulnerability lecture. She talks about how vulnerability is the result of shame, fear, and anxiety. However, it also causes joy, creativity, longing, and love. To fully embrace life is to have courage. Courage is the passion for making connections. Courage is the passion for telling the world who you are with a whole heart.

IS THIS IT?

**HAVE I SPENT, A LIFETIME OF
REGRET.**

NOT KNOWING, WHAT I WANT.

**GIVING UP ALL OF MY
THOUGHTS,**

**BUT I'VE CHANGED, WHO I
AM.**

I'LL START OVER AGAIN.

**CHANGE MY WAYS, CHANGE MY
LIFE,**

I AM FINALLY ALIVE.

-Deceiver by Ipravail

The Scapegoat

Question: *How did my art influence these new discoveries and processes I was having with myself?* To put it simply: My art became my witness. For every feeling that was brought up. For every question that was too hard to answer, and for every answer, I had to hold onto I put in the art. My art carries my cultural identity. My art takes me. It allows me to utilize it; it allows me to cope. My art encompasses everything, and illuminates what is important.

The Reality Check

Through this journey, I have come to the conclusion that saying culture is everything became too vague. In the sense of who am I, Of course, I am capable of being everything, but that would be exhausting; however, I have come to realize my art allows me to showcase the everything, and I focus on one aspect to be the foundation in the creation of Alice. I started this not being able to control my foundation to the fullest. In the end, the real question was never what is my cultural identity and how I express it with art, but what has the process of investigating one's culture through art done for me. What do I want to other to experience? I realize who I am to the best of my ability since every day I change with the knowledge that I learn and the experiences my environment gives me. The process of art I use to make sense of this shift. The process has healed me. It has given me a power that I did not see before, an ability to do something I have never done before. A way to break toxic patterns, to grow as a person. I am a force. I am a beautiful storm. I can love myself. Culture is life, and life is worth living.





In contextualizing my **discoveries** of this profound, creative, and enduring exploration of self among others, I think words need supplementing with **art** and **interpretive movement** to more fully **communicate** the deeply internal heuristic **significance** of this wonderfully complex experience.

Words can hint at what the art embodies and the essence that movement communicates.

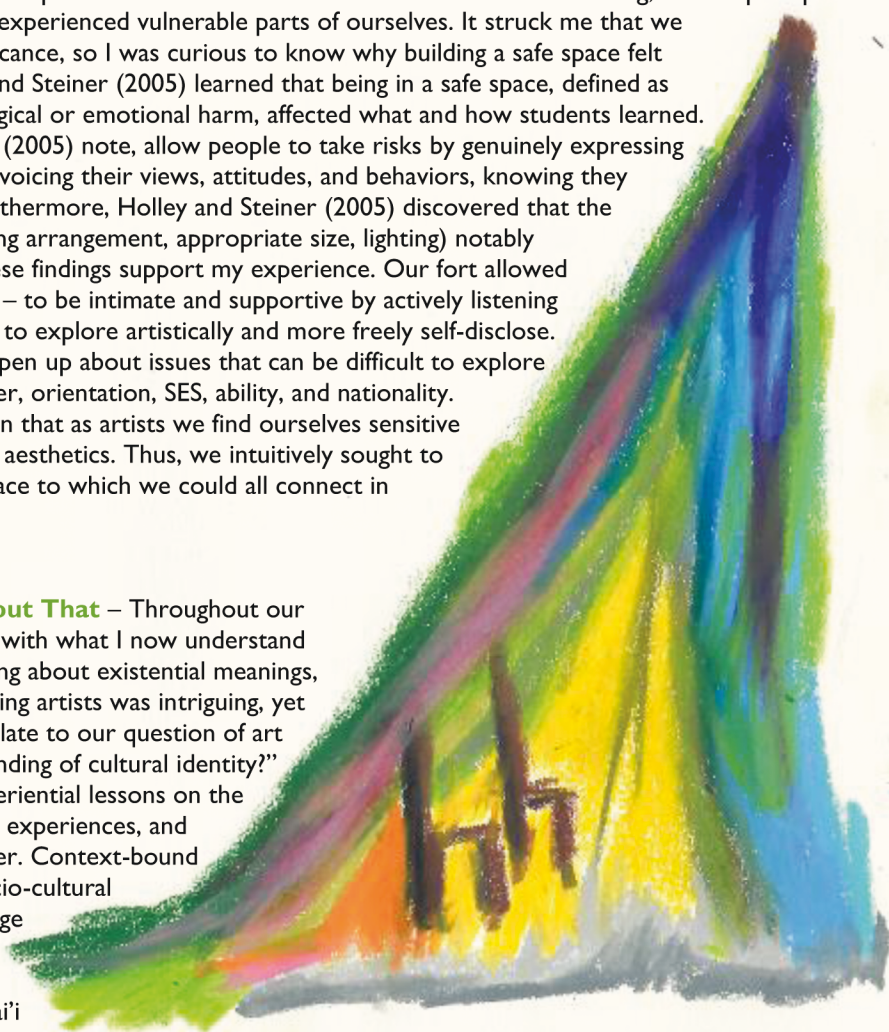


Building Community, Building a Fort – For the first CIP session we spontaneously created a safe, intimate, and playful space by resourcefully building a fort from available chairs, clothing, fabric, window treatments, and fasteners. The fort instantly connected me to the wonder of my childhood imagination and playfulness. This space felt perfectly natural to us, so we continued the practice for the three successive CIP sessions. This snug, secret space provided protection as we revealed and experienced vulnerable parts of ourselves. It struck me that we intuitively understood its significance, so I was curious to know why building a safe space felt essential to our work. Holley and Steiner (2005) learned that being in a safe space, defined as being protected from psychological or emotional harm, affected what and how students learned. Safe spaces, Holley and Steiner (2005) note, allow people to take risks by genuinely expressing their individuality and honestly voicing their views, attitudes, and behaviors, knowing they will not suffer deeply for it. Furthermore, Holley and Steiner (2005) discovered that the physical environment (i.e. seating arrangement, appropriate size, lighting) notably contributed to safe spaces. These findings support my experience. Our fort allowed me room to be wholly present – to be intimate and supportive by actively listening and engaging – and take risks – to explore artistically and more freely self-disclose. It gave us protected space to open up about issues that can be difficult to explore in group – race, privilege, gender, orientation, SES, ability, and nationality. Another impetus may have been that as artists we find ourselves sensitive to the effects of environmental aesthetics. Thus, we intuitively sought to craft a nurturing, communal space to which we could all connect in order to support our work.

Talk About This, Draw About That – Throughout our research I found myself uneasy with what I now understand as the discursive process. Talking about existential meanings, systemic oppression, and inspiring artists was intriguing, yet I wondered, “How does this relate to our question of art making informing our understanding of cultural identity?”

These conversations were experiential lessons on the circular nature of relationships, experiences, and worldviews forming one another. Context-bound discursive interactions hold socio-cultural significance as cultural knowledge is negotiated and lives in recurring episodes of group interaction (University of Hawai'i 2016). In our unplanned discursive

practice, power relationships surfaced which were shaping our group culture to parallel the power, privilege, and oppression of the dominant US culture. My thoughts and behaviors, driven by culturally shaped knowledge and values regarding time, expectations, responsibilities, and work, contributed to marginalizing peers - not what I intended to do but was. According to Sue, Capodilupo, Nadal, and Torino (2008), “To accept the racial reality of POC inevitably means confronting one’s own unintentional complicity in the perpetuation of racism” (p. 277).



Conflict exposed this, and a painful encounter brilliantly revealed my culture to me. As Roberto Almanzan says in *The Color of Fear* (1994), “The cure for the pain is in the pain.” Before me was a growth opportunity to process discomfort and confusion through reflective art making, journaling, and reading. Utt (2013) laid out in simple terms how the impact of actions and words weighs more than the intent. Art provided a safe space to release difficult feelings - like guilt, anger, fear, defensiveness, and frustration - and examine them. Journaling helped expose how certain ways of thinking hinder me. Because of this experience, I walk forward in life with expanded self-awareness of my biases, assumptions, cultural values and beliefs, enabling me to be more culturally sensitive and humble and use my privilege to empower others.



Art Attunement, Art as Knowing – Corey, Corey, Corey, and Callanan (2015) maintain that culture rules our lives and defines our reality whether we are conscious of it or not. I requested the cultural identity research group to grow my awareness of how culture shapes and guides me because I was largely ignorant of my cultural identity until entering LMU's MFT program. I also requested this research because the challenge of working in group and the progressive nature of arts-based research fascinated me. To make art is infinitely stimulating and satisfying. To absorb another person's art is illuminating and expansive. Wadeson (2010) observes that the creative experience is so satisfying because the creative material takes one out of oneself, putting one in touch with a more collective experience, and, somewhat enigmatically, connects one more deeply to oneself because the creative material is so intensely personal. Creating my own CIP unearthed vulnerable parts of myself I had difficulty accepting and reconciling. Sharing my CIP in a trusted group provided support as I continued integrating my cultural identity. Taking in my fellow creative researchers' very personal art and words expressing their cultural identities gave me a

deeper, more complex felt experience of them, something words alone could never do. Making my RARs, I applied empathic imagination by stepping into the emic code of the creative researcher in appropriating their art making processes and materials. In art I explored my understanding of myself and others in tangible form. Lambourn (2009) suggests that images lead us beyond the image to a more expansive place of meaning. I found this to be true as I experienced profound meaning and connection to my colleagues and myself in creating and receiving art. The elements of a person's cultural identity are subjectively and intimately known to that person. Words can help describe one's cultural identity. But art, as an extralinguistic modality, offers abundant material and multiple visual and tactile dimensions by which to express it and be understood.



It the physical self, the shadow, the light,
the absence of light, and the air that surrounds

It is the flight of the butterfly
and the butterfly

It is...

being
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...it is



GEE, **VOGUE** THATS A POLITICAL QUESTION



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Who am I

Posing the question of: Who I am and how I want to present myself through the art, was the foundation from which I began to explore my cultural identity. It was a simple question I could return to when I felt overwhelmed by the complexities and contradictions that surfaced. As I began to develop a concept of self I felt my awareness shift from a state of being to a state of identifying with. Instead of seeing myself as Brooke the individual I was beginning to question whether the labels that represent cultural identifiers like my race, sex, gender, economic status and ability were better representations of who I really was; especially in the context of explaining myself to others. I found myself wanting to question these categories. I felt like I wanted to be able to choose in the moment whether I was white, female..etc. That I somehow needed to gather proof and weigh whether I was really more poor than rich, female than male, white than black or something else altogether. I felt this strong need to be able to choose who I wanted to be because although I knew that my sex was female my skin considered white I wasn't really sure what that meant and how it made me who I am. At the same time I was able to recognize how my whiteness and gender has provided me with advantages and disadvantages that shape my awareness and understanding of how I move in the world. This same question Who am I, was posed to adolescent females in a research study about the process of identification. Walton & Fissette, (2013) highlighted the girl's struggle to articulate cultural identities in relation to themselves. Although they noted the girls were able to identify categories of identity and the social expectations associated with them. Many of the girls reported feeling a tension between who will make meaning of their lives, how to translate that meaning into a lived experience, or their lived experience into meaning. My experience of engaging with cultural labels as a way to represent myself to others felt problematic for the same reasons that this study revealed. I too felt like an adolescent trying to grapple with the meanings of categories I did not create and felt unsure of how those meanings reflected, who I was.

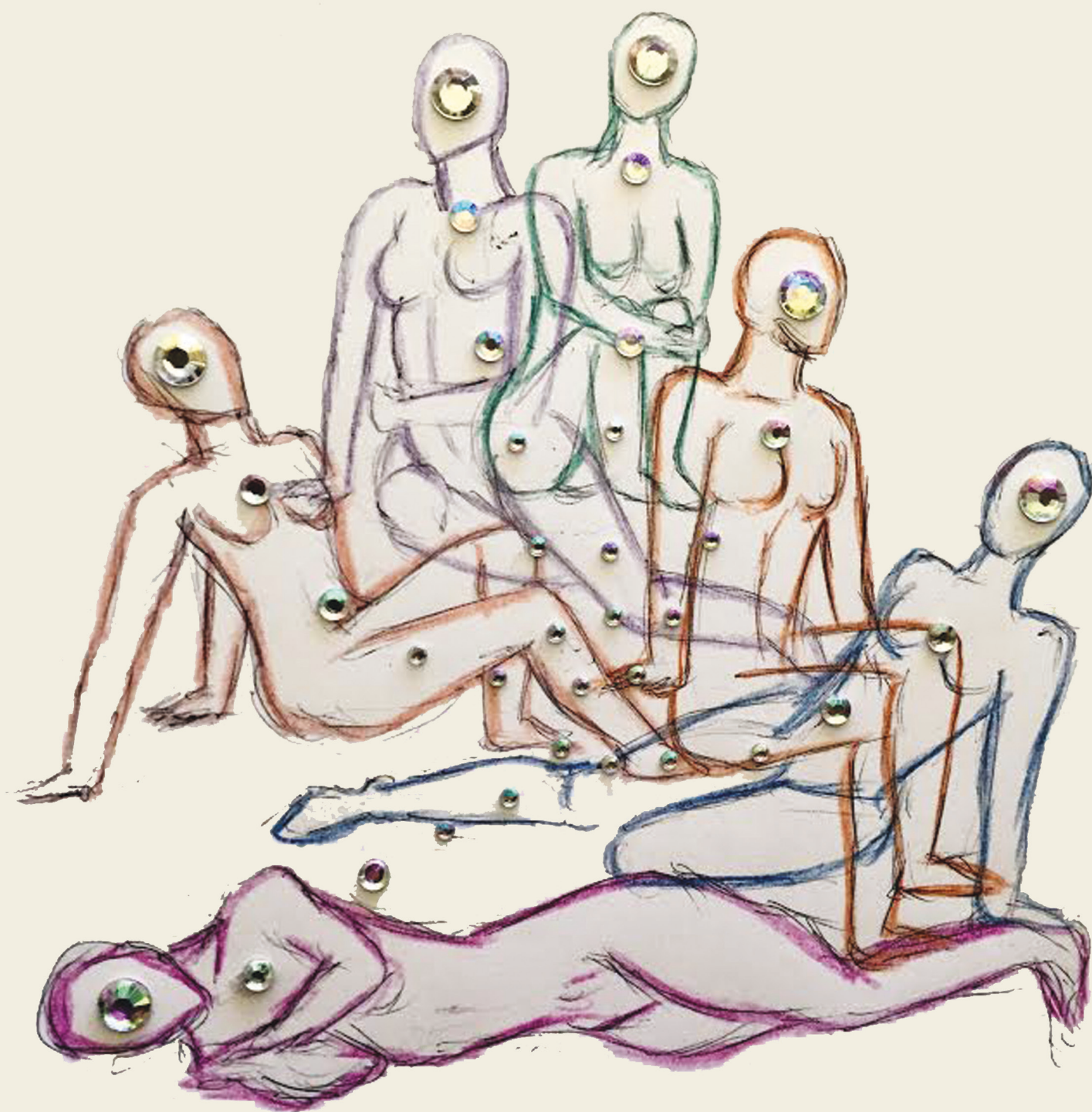
How do I communicate my identity

I also felt that by being in the group I was expressing my cultural identity through my participation. How I chose to interact with others, use my voice, lay witness to others or support or challenge group dynamics was a way of being that I recognized as actively expressing my identity in a cultural space. I saw my role in the group as active and varied. I made a conscious commitment to ask questions of the group and myself that would challenge us to explore areas of identity and culture that felt uncomfortable. I wanted to examine the power dynamics of the group itself in order to explore what cultural dynamics were influencing the group. I was curious about whether the group members as well as myself were able to be honest with each other about our beliefs and feelings and if there were identifiable barriers to vulnerability that we could overcome. The tension and uneasiness that I felt was often an indication for me, that I was not comfortable with certain group dynamics; even when I felt I was a part of the dynamics directly.

The politics of my vulnerability

I was speaking with someone the other day about our research that, helped me to piece together the myriad of ways I have been thinking and feeling about our experiences in this group. What spoke to me was my friend's understanding that culture and cultural identity was in essence relational. So simply put, it seemed to account for all of the concerns I had about traditional concepts of culture and identity. Previously, I found it difficult to explain how I felt culture was an active experience when much of what I had read in the literature presumed culture and identity to be observable categories of how others lived or who others were. I related this to the phenomena of colonialism and empiricism's dedication to valuing hierarchies that enforce power structures to dominate people, places and land. The awareness that my country is a colonized space made me wary of my personal impressions and awareness in the group. I understand the self/other dichotomy is pervasive in the literature, to be a paradigm that structures our relationships in hurtful ways making the experience of difference something outside of myself. Full disclosure- it makes me angry. My growth in the group was an internal experience looking at the beliefs and values I held as something that I could separate from my emotional experience of connection. I have learned that connection is paramount. That discourse, research, and academic enterprises have not accounted for the emotional process of connection in relationship. I have learned that all of my strivings and eagerness to incorporate a critical theoretical approach to my interactions are not an end game or the "right" way to conduct myself. I have learned that they are mere signposts toward a restructuring of my heart and mind that make political my vulnerability. I have learned that culture and identity are not static fixed concepts to be examined and categorized into value systems and belief structures but active experiences of connection that I feel.



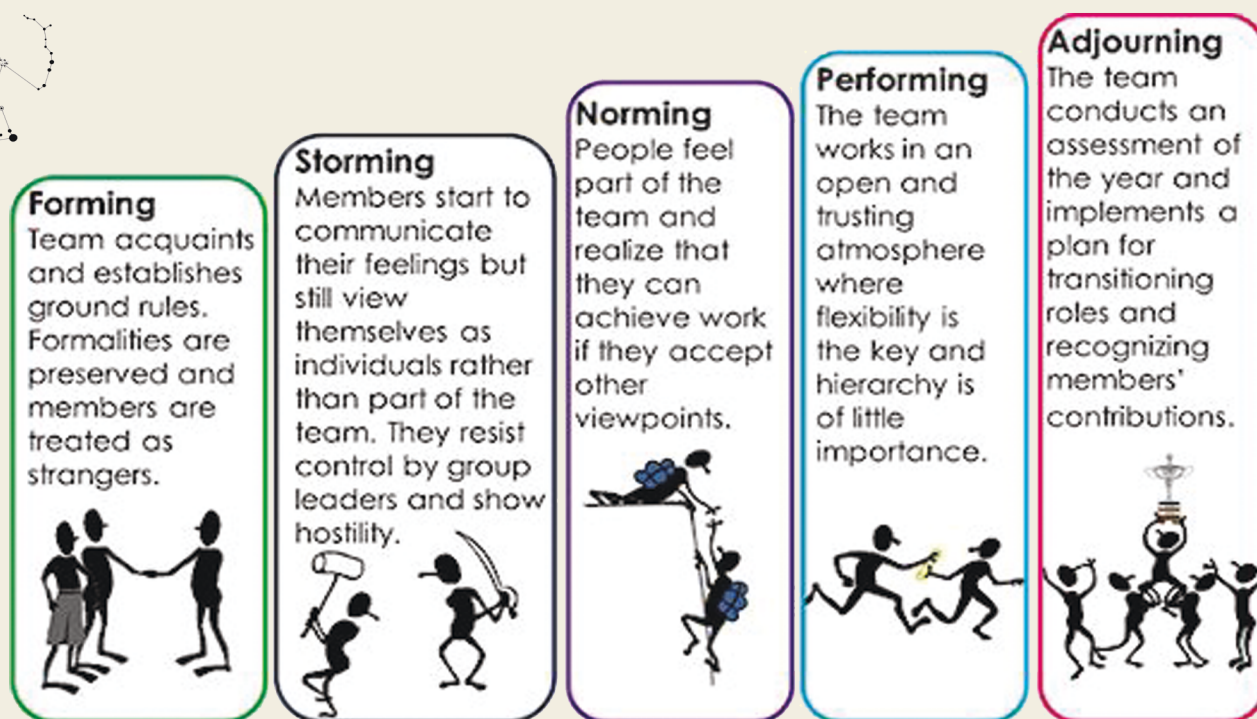


The essence of an individual's cultural identity is constructed by infinite elements. Each researcher came into the group with their own beliefs, values, experiences, narratives and perceptions of their own cultural identity. My own cultural identity is in constant flux essentially "I am a part of all that I have met." In joining a group we engaged in verbal and nonverbal communication with deeply felt moments that were both harmonious and conflicting. It is in the moments of conflicts that I began to realize that our group itself had its own identity. There was a particular way we navigated interpersonal relations and engaged in group processing. Our research group experienced Tuckman's five-stage model (1965; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977) a model of group development: forming, storming, norming, performing and adjourning.

After we began forming a group I began to socially compare myself to others, assessing their attitudes, behaviors, and emotions. When the first storm came I voiced my opinion and I attempted to defend group members. This was not an egotistical desire to relieve the 'situational distress' in the space but was instead a display of what Batson (e.g., 1991) defines as 'situational empathy.' In the second storm I shutdown and experienced a phenomenon termed 'social loafing' (Latané, Williams & Harkins, 1979), I began putting less of my energy into the group due to feeling unheard and replicating my own patterns of dealing with personal conflicts, avoidance. During the storms, our research mentors broke out of their role as bystanders and joined the group in a bystander intervention' to help us understand and appreciate one another other so we could be an effective group again. In the research process, it was intriguing to me the moments I gave and received social support from within the group and outside of the group. Our group reached a level of 'performing' in which I experienced feeling safe, understood, held, wanted and a part of a whole. The social identity of our research group developed over a series of stages as an authentic group in flux.

A significant part of exploring cultural identity relied on the art making process and sharing. The art was used as a tool for communication and functioned as a mediator, supporter, advocate, defender, and messenger. It is through art that I was able to explore and understand my cultural identity, it is the tool that allowed me to be vulnerable and feel a sense of safety to connect with others. It is in the moments the art was present I felt connected with others and in awe of how we were able to find personal and group peace, clarity, and intimacy through the art.

Despite our Individual differences, we came together not by sharing the same attitudes but by sharing the same space and passion for art making. Werner & Parmelee (1979) found that friends tended to share the same preferred activities much more than the same attitudes, as the title states, "Those Who Play Together Stay Together." Within the process of making art and sharing I witnessed each individual let go of social constructions and beliefs that create barriers for human connection. Our desire to connect, to understand and be understood was greater. It's magical to know that during a certain time and place I was in a journey of self exploration with wonderful women that sprinkled light into my life. "I am a part of all that I have met", Monica, Brooke, Ana, Angela and Alice.





My initial engagement to this cultural identity group, as a creative researcher, slowly became a personal odyssey of discovering how I was engaging with the cultural identities I consciously and unconsciously selected to present with. Every phase of the groups heuristic approach became a distinctive and repetitive interrelation shift for me that I used as the source to my interpersonal healing. Being a part of this group has called forth the importance of finding a connection to build a safe space for me to reveal what I think my cultural identity is. Parisian (2015) illuminated this kind of experience by explaining identity as a set of complex, often contradictory and conflicting psychological, physical, geographical, political, cultural, historical, and spiritual factors. Identity results from piecing together these scattered parts, involving an inward and outward journey that connects us to the larger world. Lately, our understanding of identity formation has been deepened by the attention given to an intersectional framework in which identity is seen as multifarious. This piece of information made me question my reasons for needing such a connection because my needing connection meant that I required acceptance and understanding in order to trust. This congruent piece of information led me to another set of questions of my reason for requiring such kind of acceptance and understanding and the only answer that I was able to accept was that I needed this in order to become vulnerable.

In my process of experiencing the group dynamics, I found more than cultural identity and found pieces of myself in every member which provided me a sense of wholeness and integrity. The group naturally experienced a variance of forms of communication and being, this divergence resulted in disagreements. In these moments of conflict, I resulted in disengaging and turning to silence, I would purposefully isolate myself emotionally and would feel myself return when things were resolved with as little of myself involved as possible. This was yet, another piece of information that I provided myself with the question of what the reason behind this action was, I had a fear that I felt was better to be seen as a barrier or as a resistance. My fear of showing that I cared enough to want to resolve a conflict was bigger than the conflict that was happening around me, I wanted to protect myself by not involving myself. I wanted to prove somewhere in my actions that it was better to separate than to integrate, to be silent than to speak-up, to not feel to avoid a hurtful expression. In these quiet thoughts and quiet action I was just as involved equally in the conflict with my silence as the spoken words that were being said. It was in these moments of my own silence that I was able to feel my immobility, I was letting my present moment disintegrate by remaining in the patterns of my past. It was in these challenges with the group that I have found the safety to want to change that. This process of rebuilding a sense of self requires holistic transformation, as well developing a sense of purpose within meaningful social roles and relationships. But this is a task of great complexity, as it involves affirming the characteristics of self that were once of value and strength while simultaneously recognizing the need for change in other aspects. It requires a constant self-critical questioning and then realigning of perceptions about who we were, who we are now, and who we want to be in the future (Van Lith, 2014).

I experienced myself in moments where I had no words to state the gratitude and the admiration I had for the group members and it was in the process of the art making that I was able to find courage to express that level of care. As stated in an article by Hilbuch, et.al, (2016) because the art making process involves all the senses, it evokes dormant memories, activates them, and makes them retrievable. Accordingly, the art making process opens up a transferential space for procedural representations (namely, representations on how to accomplish a task) where a person deals with the material as they have been or would like to be treated. During the art making process, these representations rise to consciousness and can be processed in a concrete tangible manner that promotes reintegration of alienated parts of the self and encourages a sense of self-cohesion. I felt something transform interpersonally as I adjusted, adopted and accepted the identities of the other members, I felt my identity shift to form a connection with the identities that I was feeling from the other group members. Experiencing these transpersonal events with the group awakened an understanding of my ability to create my own safety from using the safety provided to me from the other members. I experienced my cultural identity become richer with diversity and simultaneously become further impossible to simply identify what my cultural identity is. Therefore, I am what can be seen and cannot be seen, I am all of me with a little bit of all you.



Communicating Cultural Identity through Art

Heuristic and Arts-based
Research Process
For: Groups, Art Therapists,
Educators, Students, &
Artists

Overview

This is a blueprint for navigating the often difficult process of communicating about cultural identity within groups. It is our hope that the art will facilitate a dynamic process of relating. Inspiring a thoughtful examination of difference- as a celebration of individuality, vulnerability and dynamic growth.

Objectives

To use art making, response art and journaling to dialogue about the potential for the expressions of culture and identity.

To explore the emotional content of our values and beliefs

To experience culture and identity as an active process of relating

Process

Eight steps correspond to a minimum of eight weeks of group work. Adjust the time frame to suit group needs. In our experience the process took 12 weeks to allow for ample time to share individual artworks.

1. Information Gathering - individually collect content about culture and identity and share with the group
2. Rules of Engagement - discuss emotional safety, communication styles and critical thinking techniques to help facilitate open communication.
3. Develop an Area of Focus - that corresponds with how the group wants to explore culture and identity
4. Make Art - exploring your area of focus, utilize worksheets or journaling to ask and answer questions about the art making experience
5. Share Art - share the artwork with the group
6. Make Response Art - make response art to what was shared in the group, respond through journaling and questionnaires about the experience of sharing cultural experiences
7. Collective Viewing and Discussion - look at all artwork, written materials and response art together and explore themes
8. Final Response Art - make a final piece to document your experience with the entire process and share what you have learned

Adaptations

Our group found it essential to implement models of communication rooted in Critical Theory in order to address the social, historical, and ideological elements to our written and visual cultural narratives. We cannot express enough how valuable these models were in exploring our beliefs, values, and biases. We encourage new groups to find and develop their own models for safe and open communication.

Materials

Group of willing participants

Any art materials of choice

Access to internet, digital content

Dedicated group meeting space

Other Resources

Below is a list of terms that may be helpful to explore during the Information Gathering and Rules of Engagement phases of the process.

Critical Theory

Intersectionality

Response Art

Art Therapy

Culture

Identity

Multiculturalism

Critical Thinking

Communication Styles and Techniques

Heuristic Process

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