

Immigrants' autoethnographies as artists' books: overcoming dark times through the power of imagination.

Les autoethnographies de personnes immigrantes comme livres d'artistes : surmonter les temps sombres grâce au pouvoir de l'imagination.

Vera Heller

The arts-based, autoethnographic research described in this presentation allowed a group of immigrants of diverse origins to make their life stories visible through art and fictionalization. The art therapy workshops took place at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, whose virtual art collection stimulated the participants' creativity. Based on first-person accounts linking lived experiences to their sociocultural context, the participants' autoethnographies have been co-created and shared within the group; the process facilitated the integration of scattered fragments of experiences into more coherent narrative identities.

Like Hessel (2011), Walter Benjamin (1972, in Gori, 2017) envisions creation as a means of resistance during dark times; he encourages us to "overcome the negativity of the world through the despair of our imagination". This autoethnographic project responds to Benjamin's invitation by using artistic creation to counter the stereotypical view of immigrants, often conveyed by the media as an anonymous mass of individuals with no personal stories (D'Onofrio, 2017). By focusing on trauma and acculturation issues at the expense of immigrants' definition of their own identity and needs, researchers and mental health professionals may inadvertently contribute to a view of difference "as a simple deficit vis-à-vis the prevailing standards" (Métraux, 2018).

According to Ricoeur (1983-85), recounting one's life story is the best way to answer the question "Who am I?" Tengelyi (2010) adds to Ricoeur's definition of narrative identity – which is exclusively based on language - a deeper layer composed of a multitude of wild,

shapeless micro-narratives. To become conscious, this tacit dimension must first be translated through creative means, such as art. As they are given form and voice, these vague traces of experiences may renew one's answer to the question "Who am I?" Drawing from these ideas, the art therapeutic approach used in this project utilises creation to resist oblivion and regain dignity and hope.

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Le projet de recherche autoethnographique décrit dans cette présentation a permis à un groupe de personnes immigrantes de rendre visibles leurs histoires de vie à travers l'art et la fictionnalisation. Basées sur des récits en première personne reliant les expériences vécues à leurs contextes socioculturels, les autoethnographies cocrées et partagées en groupe ont permis l'intégration de fragments épars d'expériences dans des identités narratives cohérentes. Les ateliers d'art-thérapie ont eu lieu au Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal, dont la collection virtuelle a stimulé la créativité des participants.

Comme Hessel (2011), Walter Benjamin (dans Gori, 2017) envisage la création comme un moyen de résistance; Benjamin nous encourage à « dépasser la négativité du monde par le désespoir de notre imagination ». Ce projet autoethnographique utilise la création pour contrer la vision stéréotypée à l'égard des personnes immigrantes, présentées souvent par les médias comme une masse anonyme d'individus sans histoire personnelle (D'Onofrio, 2017). En se concentrant sur les traumatismes et les problèmes d'acculturation des immigrants au détriment de leur propre définition identitaire, les chercheurs et les professionnels en santé mentale risquent d'accentuer la vision de la différence en tant que « simple déficit par rapport aux normes en vigueur » (Métraux, 2018).

Selon Ricoeur (1983-85), le récit de vie représente la meilleure façon de répondre à la question *Qui suis-je*. Tengelyi (2010) ajoute à la définition basée sur le langage de Ricoeur une couche plus profonde qui est composée d'une multitude de micro-récits sauvages et informels. Afin de devenir consciente, cette dimension tacite doit d'abord être traduite par des moyens créatifs tels que l'art. Au fur et à mesure que ces vagues traces d'expériences prennent forme, elles renouvellent la réponse de l'individu à la question *Qui suis-je ?* S'inspirant de ces idées,

l'approche art-thérapeutique de ce projet utilise la création pour résister à l'oubli et récupérer la dignité et l'espoir.

Biography

Vera Heller is an art-therapy professor in Montreal, at the University of Québec in Abitibi - Témiscamingue (UQAT), a psychotherapist and fine artist. Her training includes the disciplines of art therapy, social work, and fine arts, and a Ph.D. in Expressive Therapies from Lesley University. Vera has facilitated workshops in Quebec, Cuba, and Mexico, and has taught in Brazil, Japan, and Thailand. These activities inspired her research projects, which consist in exploring lived experience from a variety of perspectives such as displacement, narrative identity, and artistic creation. Vera's research equally draws from her long-term artistic practice. She conducted her latest project titled *My life, an artist's book* at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. This arts-based, autoethnographic research addresses the concept of narrative identity and its development through life narratives co-created and shared within a group of immigrant people.

Recent publications and conference presentations

Heller, V. (2023, June). **Why paint? A narrative of artistic practice.** Presentation at the conference of Studies in the practice of the arts. University of Quebec in Rimouski (UQAR). Lévis, Canada.

Heller, V. (2023, March). **What is behind the mask that silences me?** Presentation at the international conference: The masks of virtue used by propaganda. Cluj-Napoca Technical University and North Baia Mare University Center, Romania in collaboration with UQAT, Rouyn-Noranda, Quebec (Key speaker).

Heller, V. (2022, September). **Visual autoethnography: mapping memory through art and**

reflexivity. Presentation at the international EArTE conference: Memory: Shaping Connections in the Arts Therapies. Vilnius, Lituanie. (Long paper).

Heller, V. (2021, June). **Knowing existential migration through art-therapy: creating a more compassionate living together in the world.** Presentation to The Art Therapy International Seminar, Stockholm (Siguna), Sweden (key speaker).

Heller, V. (2023). **The Hero's Journey: A group intervention with existential migrants.** In L.Pelletier and J. Lambert (Eds.). Art therapy with groups: theoretical reflections and clinical developments. PUQ.