



Artistic Journey Through Migration: An Autoethnographic Return to the Self

Voyage artistique à travers la migration: un retour autoethnographique vers soi

Vera Heller

Inspired by Cavafy's poetic call to inner adventure, this autoethnography traces an artistic journey viewed through a retrospective lens grounded in art therapy. The presentation reflects on a creative process that began a few years after the researcher's arrival in the host country and evolved over time in cycles shaped by the recurring theme of displacement. Through autoethnography and the use of response art, this return to past artistic production seeks to uncover new meanings in the present, offering deeper insight into both inner experience and external reality.

For many immigrants, the long-lost Ithaca lives only in memory; for them, homecoming represents a symbolic return to a more integrated sense of self. Art and storytelling lay down the landmarks that were absent during the migratory passage. Like the Phoenicians in Ulysses' voyage, they offer hospitality and a sense of direction, guiding travelers safely back to themselves.

Revisiting earlier artworks reveals that each creative cycle reflects a stage in the journey, gradually shifting in color and mood from darkness to light. Each series of images seem to contribute to the integration of the initial identity fragmentation inherent to migration into increasingly coherent compositions. Echoing Jung's influence, the artist Anselm Kiefer views art as an alchemical process that transforms lead into gold. This metaphor parallels the researcher's own understanding of color, composition and the cyclical development of the artistic process as indicators of the psychological and emotional transformation evoked by alchemical work.

Visual art and art therapy function as communicating vessels, enriching one another and revealing deeper layers of experience. Research methods such as autoethnography and



response art allow for the collection, reactivation, and integration of meaningful fragments scattered along the way. Even years later, the experience of displacement remains alive in the migrant psyche, fostering a renewed awareness of the inner treasures uncovered through the journey.

Biography

Vera Heller is an art-therapy professor at the University of Québec in Abitibi - Témiscamingue (UQAT) in Montréal, a psychotherapist and fine artist. After having studied in social work, fine arts, and art therapy, she obtained her PhD from Lesley University. Vera has taught in Brazil, Japan, and Thailand, and facilitated workshops in Quebec, Cuba, and Mexico.

Along with her artistic practice, these art therapy-based activities inspired her research projects about displacement issues, narrative identity, and artistic creation. Her research projects consist in explorations of lived experiences from a variety of perspectives. Most often, they include both the artistic and the psychotherapeutic components of art therapy. Vera's latest project titled *My life, an artist's book* took place at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts; it explores a group of immigrant coresearchers' life stories from an autoethnographic and artistic perspective.

Recent Publications

Heller, V. (2024). **Visual auto-ethnography: A transformative practice of remembering.** In M. López Fdez. Cao, R. Hougham, S. Scoble (Eds.). *Memory: Shaping Connections in the Arts Therapies* (68-90). Routledge.

Heller, V. (2024). **The visual life story approach, a tool for transformation and well-being in museum art therapy with immigrant adults.** *Canadian Journal of Art Therapy*, 37/1, 30–49.

Heller, V. (September 2024). **Immigrants' autoethnographies as artists' books: Overcoming dark times through the power of imagination.** Presentation at the *17th ECArTE (European Consortium for Arts Therapies Education)*. Gent, Belgium.