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Ana Laura Treviño Santos*

Art Therapy, a Powerful Tool for Finding Meaning, Connections, And Social Power across Borders

When I think of North America, I imagine two scenarios. One is under the ground, where the roots of three countries that make up a territory meet and embrace, helping each other to grow, nourishing each other, sustaining each other, distributing minerals and water, connecting, including the earth, the subsoil, and the tectonic plates in constant movement. The other scenario is North America on the surface, the one we see every day, the one we walk on, travel on, move through, on which buildings, houses, cities, states, countries and borders have been built, where we share spaces, teachings, and lessons, but where moving about is com-

plicated because it involves laws, tedious paperwork, interminable regulations, and divisive walls, generating irruption, division, and threats in the connections; territories that are very diverse and at the same time similar, in the sense that their inhabitants share human life and everything that implies.

Modernity has created historic constructs, economic, political, social, and emotional borders that today are compromised by symbolic dividing lines that create physical and imaginary territories. Symbolically, borders both protect and make us vulnerable; we create them and make them disappear, depending on circumstances. They serve to “defend ourselves from the other,” accentuating our insecurity in the face of the unknown, sparking intolerance, rejection, finger-pointing, leading to identities and

*Ana Laura is the founder and director of the Mexican Institute of Art Psychotherapy; you can contact her at anatrevo@hotmail.com.

categories that separate, injure, disintegrate, and generate ambiguity and fear. I think about the universality that the ancestral and current first peoples of these three territories had and have in common, today divided by imaginary lines. Among many are their artistic expressions: music, dance, buildings and rituals, folklore, and histories that talk about the way they live, think, signify, and resolve the mysteries of life and death. It is interesting to observe how perception and comprehension of the arts has varied over the years. For long periods, the fine arts have been given a prominent place, making invisible the art not included in the Western Anglo-Saxon world, including all the manifestations of first peoples' art. Perhaps that is why in recent years a movement has emerged, critical of the traditional Western interpretation of art and culture with its Eurocentric bias, which has neglected and oppressed the cultures of the first peoples.

Canada, the United States, and Mexico have a valuable, diverse shared history in many areas: migration and economic, social, and cultural agreements, among others. However, little attention has been paid to the artistic relationship, its history, its expressions, and how it has given voice to the most vulnerable sectors of society. The first peoples in the three territories defined their past through art and created and developed a philosophy of life, languages, spaces, narratives, values, and beliefs, with individual, collective, and community interactions that confirm their current existence, creating a sense of identity and belonging.

In Mexico, pre-Hispanic murals show vestiges of our ancestors' world view: gods, symbols, sacrifices, concepts of life and death, an understanding of the internal and external worlds; they make the ordinary special with psychological, social, religious, and cultural meanings. The pyramids, frescoes, pottery, metal, carpentry, music, textiles, etc., express ancient daily life, their belief system, their kinds of relationships, their fears, and their concerns. In those times, art was always within people's reach, in the

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streets, in the constructions, and in rituals. Later, when the Spaniards conquered Mexico, art was transformed; theology and the way it understood the world permeated artistic expression, incorporating aspects of both worlds in all areas. This led to the declaration of migration, politics, and colonization, creating significant artistic synchronism in the period.

In the early twentieth century, in an independent Mexico, the muralists and their artistic and cultural movement opened the way among the population in general to establish dialogues related to culture, identity, nationalism, politics, and society. José Vasconcelos was one of the main driving forces behind that movement, while Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros were its best-known representatives. From that moment on, Mexico's social movements, influenced by these kinds of representations, established creative spaces with political weight and the ability to denounce and transform our country's main inequalities: poverty, marginalization, and inequality. Underlining artistic representations, linking them to history, politics, power, and the economy leads to seeing divergent ways of looking at a country's history, creating symbolic spaces for rebellion, injustices, culture, identity, changes, pain, loss, and illness. In this context, Frida Kahlo used artistic expression as a therapeutic tool when she incorporated symbols, metaphors, and emotional and political meanings into her paintings, attempting to accommodate and re-signify her personal experiences. She used to say, "I don't paint my dreams; I paint my own reality."

Art, a Therapeutic Agent on Both Sides of the Border

Given the existence of borders — whether geographical, social, or psychological — art becomes a powerful device for approaching the real or imaginary limits of issues and situations that usually lack words. This is because it communicates sensorial and emotional information, especially for naming experiences such as ambiguity, vulnerability, control, and sensitivity, among others.

Important proposals exist on both sides of the Mexico-U.S. border, like *Erase the Border*, a performance piece in which artist Ana Teresa Fernández painted some of the bars on the wall separating Tijuana from San Ysidro, with

a landscape of sea and sky, creating an optical illusion that makes the wall seem to disappear.

This is how art becomes an agent of activism that offers the possibility of developing complex themes from different angles and contributes elements to help us understand the territories and borders created by human beings. Based on common and ancestral languages, the walls of “normality” can be bypassed and fluid communication established between agents that generate power and the people who receive it. This opens up spaces for emotional resonance, together with material objects, ideas, arguments, reflections, proposals, and relationships, where the information generated by the art directly influences those who receive it so they can question and think about the work’s intrinsic aspects. Understanding this from the viewpoint of art therapy and the extension for community healthcare outcomes (ECHO) psychosocial model allows nations to sketch another version of history and spark reflections to implement different ways of compensating for the roots, which, as I said, are joined underground but above ground are divided.

Art therapy is a psychotherapeutic model that favors creative expression to find meaning and re-signify experiences using artistic materials and the process of making art and verbal and non-verbal language. From the perspective of this therapy and considering cultural, social, political, and geographical aspects, we can question our roots, the artistic expression, and mental health in migratory processes. Interventions with migrants through art therapy facilitates overcoming limitations and implicit barriers by generating possibilities for integration. When it makes visible problems and their understanding, it minimizes dramatization and the lack of control, co-creating resilience and connections among migrants.

It is from this combination that I find in art and artistic expressions areas through which we may be able to recover plurality, acceptance, and respect among the regions. This would allow us to name, accompany, process, repair, and re-signify historic and both painful and fraternal beliefs, experiences, and dreams of complicity and resilience.

A few years ago, I began exploring the experiences of families who stayed in Mexico when their relatives — above all men: sons, husbands, brothers-in-law, etc. — went north to the United States and Canada to get better jobs, support their families in Mexico, and improve their

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quality of life. We went into a very poor community on the outskirts of the city of Querétaro, Mexico, where the land is very arid and there are few animals or places for agriculture. We approached the families through creative expression to hear their life stories and create programs for socio-emotional support. Most of them were women, wives, mothers, sisters, and their children under twelve; the rest of the community was already in the “Norte.”

We worked with several families, all eager to share their experiences and find spaces for verbal and pictorial narration that would allow them to name experiences of fear, loneliness, worry, anger, uncertainty, among many other emotions. One of the stories that made the biggest impact on me was that of Mrs. J., a woman of about 70, the mother of six children, two women and four men, already on the other side of the border. The exercise consisted of answering the following questions with the materials we had given them: What do you feel like when your loved ones leave? How do you feel when they get to the border? How do you feel when they finally get to the other side? How do you feel when they come back?

The children, her daughters, and her daughters-in-law used the materials we had given them (markers, colored pencils, oil pastels) with no problem. Mrs. J. turned to look at the materials and said, “Miss, I have never in my life picked up a pencil. I don’t know how. I can’t do this.”

I was at a loss for words because in that moment, I understood that my “materials” were extremely condescending for that experience, and that my job was to fix the damage in less than a minute. I picked up different colored pieces of cardboard and said, “Don’t worry. We don’t need to use those materials. Let’s do this: pick a color for the feeling you have when you children leave.” She picked brown for when they left, folded it several times and put it to one side. She picked the color black for when they arrived at the border, wrinkled it more, crushed it, saying “This is the hardest part, because we lose communication for about three days. We have no news of them



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and we're afraid that the drug traffickers might catch them, that when they cross over, the police from over there will find them, or that they'll drown in the river. That has happened, and that's how I feel, with my heart crushed." For when they cross over and get into the "other side," the woman picked yellow, also wrinkled it, and made it into a little ball. "I have my heart crushed, but it's another color. When they call me, I can finally rest and get back to my life here." Finally, she picked red for when they return and she didn't wrinkle it; she put it, smooth, on the table. "That's how I feel when they come back. Calm and full of joy at having them with me again." When we finished, she said, "Miss, nobody had ever asked me how I felt; they never had; much less had I put a color to how I felt. Thank you for making me think about my feelings. Now I know what's happening to me."

Symbolization, the use of materials from a different place and being accompanied in the process of understand-

ing her needs allowed Mrs. J. to name her experiences, arrange them, re-signify them, and process them.

Art and the capacity of symbolization, seen from this angle, are a device for change. It can make it possible to approach people from different territories, looking at a symbolically safe, firm common ground, in which they can speak the same language: artistic expression. It is a safe haven for the process and the resources and makes it possible to underline the diverse social realities, facilitating the voicing of delicate topics, ignored and above all not heard. This invites reflection, communication, and empathy.

When we have a safe haven, we can reconfigure dominant discourses, complex ways of seeing, and inaccessible borders, to create spaces for co-existing and fluid exchanges, despite our different positions. We can also rethink the power of both ancestral and today's art as a political, social, therapeutic, historic, cultural, and geographic act; that is, as an agent that underlines the individualities that make up the culture of each region, country, or group of countries, through which we can trace their color, their materials, and their stitches, allowing us to "see" the structure of the weave to understand it better. ■■■