Expressive Creativity: Narrative Text and Creative Cultural Expressions as a Healing Praxis

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PERSPECTIVES

PERSPECTIVES is a special feature included in this issue of the Journal of Creativity in Mental Health that provides mental health professionals with an opportunity to discuss their positions on a variety of creativity-related topics. In this article, Josie Méndez-Negrete, a sociologist, clinical social worker, and associate professor of Mexican American studies, shares her perspective on the healing qualities of creative expression. She offers the story of her personal recovery from sexual abuse and domestic violence and provides a testament to the healing that creative expression can yield.
Expressive Creativity: Narrative Text and Creative Cultural Expressions as a Healing Praxis

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Creative expressions as a self-help tool can facilitate healing from the trauma of incest and domestic violence. In this essay, I rely on my own retrospective recollection and document the process of coming to memory and voice, and thus healing through creative expression. I speak to the positive outcomes that the use of creative expression can yield and narrate the process of healing during the completion of a book that examines living inside a house of incest. My path to recovery is narrated in the context of a violence-free childhood and the socialization of valuing creative expressions. This was the foundation for overcoming the abuse survived in adolescence by the daughters of a father who was diagnosed as a sociopath and who was also a serial pedophile.

KEYWORDS creative cultural expressions, culturally informed reflections of survival, self-reflexivity, path to recovery, abuse, creativity

In my healing journey as a survivor of abuse and domestic violence, I have long intuited an association with artistic expression and recovery. Although I had engaged in artistic expressions—singing, sewing, and painting, in particular—to cope with the pain in my life, it was The Courage to Heal (Bass & Davis, 1994) that gave me the words to understand the ways in which I had relied on creative expression—writing and art—in my own recovery. Most recently, examining creativity, counseling, and teaching, I have learned

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to see how my own recovery is enveloped in the research, teaching, and service I provide as an activist scholar.

No longer a clinical practitioner, I continue to make a connection to my art in relation to my continued healing and in relation to how it may influence my teaching or research. Reading the works of O’Brien (2006/2007) and Waliski (2009) about expressive and creative techniques alerted me to the use of art and the healing process for those who seek to recover from injuries, albeit from a personal perspective rather than in supervision or instruction. These authors also encouraged me to reframe my situation to cast a new notion of healing as a process of internalizing emotion understanding of the healing experience in the context of my teaching and research (O’Brien, 2006/2007, p. 19). Waliski (2009), Rubin (2005), and Kennedy (2008) provided a frame of reference for understanding expressive and creative techniques in counseling, as they spoke to various modalities that create venues for healing through creative expression. Although these modalities have been accepted in counseling practice, there are still questions as to the most appropriate manner of introducing these approaches in the preparation of human service professionals or their recovery. Waliski (2009) wrote about the ways in which professionals incorporate expressive techniques as a way to impart pedagogical beginnings for those who are preparing to become helping professionals. This opens the possibilities for the integration of artistic expression in our everyday lives as part of recovery.

In this article, I offer a retrospective case example as a way to reflect on my healing processes, as I examine the impact and continuity of creating artistic expression in my healing journey. Influenced by my work as a sociologist and clinical social worker, it was this journey that availed me with the opportunity to develop ways to use creative approaches in my practice. For example, I relied on family myths and tales to carve out role-plays and stories that went to the heart of the problem, from each person’s point of departure—siblings or the parental/marriage dyad. I used Salvador Minuchin’s structural family therapy and Adlerian play therapy as the bases for these interventions (Jernberg & Jernberg, 1993). I was then inspired by the possibilities as I read Creative Interventions in Grief and Loss Therapy (Duffey, 2007) in which the author and her collaborators explored innovative approaches to cope with grief and loss. These readings further validated that my survival journey, although not dealing with death of the physical self, has been realized because of writing, music, and the creative expressions I have continued to incorporate into my daily life to become whole.

Clearly, for me, the use of painting, songwriting, sewing, and playwriting were not part of an intervention designed by a helping professional—self-help strategies and talk and group therapy were venues that assisted me in voicing my experiences. For me, it was my consciousness and intuition that guided me to utilize creative expression to begin healing from the trauma of incest and domestic violence, and to confront the power and authority that
informs the cultural and social violence that allows abusers to perpetrate injuries on children and their caretaking adult female relatives.

**ARTISTIC EXPRESSION AS A PATH TO RECOVERY**

Sewing, dancing, poetry, and singing were creative expressions that my great aunts Rosenda and Hermlinda Méndez taught me from an early age. As I remember, they taught me creative domestic arts as a form of self-expression, rather than as preparation for or a potential to garner the domestic capital that is associated with responsibilities of raising a family. Embroidery, knitting, and pattern-making to sew my own clothes were the initial lessons I received from them. Because of their efforts, I became quite handy in clothing design. This is a creative outlet I now utilize to create attire for my reading presentations or to give as special gifts for those who are celebrating baptisms or marriages.

As I point out in *Las hijas de Juan: Daughters Betrayed* (Méndez-Negrete, 2006), it was the sewing lessons that gave my sisters and me access to the cultural life in our community. When I agreed to sew clothing for the coming-of-age celebrations for young women at age 15, this allowed us to participate in the *quinceañera* cultural celebrations. Depending on the number of godmothers who would accompany the 14 girls and the *quinceañera*—who had to have a special dress—I created as many as 20 dresses at a time. In the autoethnography I wrote to narrate our family’s survival, I recalled, “I sewed dresses . . . [and] designed two wedding trousseaus for friends and two sets of formals for quinceañeras, including fifteen formals and five madrinas each. I was able to get my sisters and me free fabric” (Méndez-Negrete, 2006, p. 156).

Now, creative expression through sewing and designing clothes is a practice I have not lost. Sewing has become creative energy that lessens the anxiety and nervous activity stemming from the expectation of meeting deadlines on projects that take too long to achieve an outcome, such as the completion of a manuscript or a book. In addition to embroidering *huipiles* or blouses and dresses, I also create stitch art as gifts for my friends. In the selection of the colors and stitch choices, as I form the pieces, select the material, and create the project I set out to complete, I relive a childhood that empowered me to be creative and to think for myself. Some may argue that my aunts were socializing me in a gendered way, with the domestic chores they imparted. I would disagree. Although the work I did was culturally expected of females, my aunts’ aim was to teach me to design, develop, and carry out a project from beginning to end. I gained skills I would later come to appreciate—the ability to meet deadlines is one example.

*Artes manuales*, or manual arts, were not the only creative expressions nurtured by our great aunts and Amá prior to her migration to the United
States to join our father. Dancing, music, and poetry were also cultural expressions they encouraged us to pursue. As the oldest and most mature of the three sisters, I was the first one to sign up for Mexican folkloric dance, flamenco, and poetry. All these talents came in handy when Adolfo Ruiz Cortines, the president of Mexico, visited our town of Tabasco, Zacatecas, in 1957. It was then that I danced and performed my favorite poems for him. I can still imagine myself as that 9-year-old girl performing my favorite Amado Nervo poem I memorized.

En Paz/At Peace
Muy cerca de mi ocaso, yo te bendigo, Vida,
At the end of my days, I bless you, life
porque nunca me diste ni esperanza fallida,
You never gave me any false hope
ni trabajos injustos, ni pena inmerecida [. . .]
Or unjust work, or unwarranted pain [. . .]
Amé, fui amado, el sol acarició mi faz.
I loved, was loved, and the sun stroked my face.
¡Vida, nada me debes! ¡Vida, estamos en paz! Life, you owe me nothing.
Life, we are at peace. (Nervo, 1915, para. 1)

Because my childhood life was simple and pleasant under the care of women who saw to it that we were safe, I, like Nervo, learned to think of life as fair and equal.

Along with reading poetry, I wrote cuentos, or stories, to document the tales that were narrated orally during our community storytelling sessions. That was the creative expression I developed in our community, the practice that led me to record and document the lived experiences in our family—creating diary in poetry form.

Later, I was able to use written narrative to cope with difficult or anxious times. This served me well when my younger sisters and I migrated to the United States. When our father stripped us of our community and took us away from those who nurtured and loved us, the only way I had to express my innermost feelings was through narrative text and the creative arts. Because my father thought that art was a valueless outlet, the only way I could express my creativity was through sewing. However, I found a way to keep up my writing and poetry by keeping them, as well as the drawings and sketches I completed, from his sight.

I did not fully reclaim my love for art until I began writing my book. A way to externalize all that I carried within, art became the venue by which I was able to find my voice. This was especially true during those times when my sisters or mother corroborated or expanded the narrative of my text with the recollections they had about the atrocities my father committed against his own daughters.
My work with art during this phase began with clay—touching, molding, and shaping the clay into a figure of the man—my husband, Jorge—who had encouraged me to voice the experiences of our family life. The first piece I produced was a representation of Jorge (see Figure 1). From memory, I formed the figure of the man who had helped me to overcome my distrust of males—the man who, in a supportive way, had actively helped me reclaim myself in all of my humanity.

FIGURE 1 Dancing Dream, 7-inch clay figure completed with the guidance of Dee Zapata Murff.
Clothed in jeans, with a matching jacket, and wearing his summer sandals, the clay figure is dancing the *cumbia*, a tropical dance of Mexico that came through Colombia—an activity that brought much joy to us. Head high, Jorge is looking forward as if to welcome the future. The figure gave me comfort, almost as if he was saying, “llevatéla suave,” or “take it easy,” inspiring me to continue writing the story that was taking so much out of me to complete.

I continued my work with art by painting portraits of women. It was as if the spirit of those strong women who had nurtured me to find strength and creativity called me to act. Away from that idyllic childhood I had lived in my Mexican village, with all the women-centered nurturing and support that had shaped me to become a person who would be able to survive in the new nation that would become my home, my artistic expression came in handy.

Still working with clay as the base, the next piece I completed merged my connection to the culture and land of my birth. It is a clay plate with the portrait of Veronica Castillo H., an international clay artist from Mexico (see Figure 2). With her presence in my life, Castillo made me more appreciative of artistic expression. She was evidence that I needed to be surrounded by art and artists to feel whole. Inspired by her work, I used a discarded base to paint her.

As I continued to work on my book, other ways of expressing my creativity surfaced. Singing has most often been the way in which I deal with the loneliness, isolation, and anxiety that is connected to being a survivor.

**FIGURE 2** Santa Vero del Barro, 9-inch acrylic on clay.
Music had been our survival call. Felisa, my youngest sister, and I could get away from it all by listening to music as we dealt with the displacement of migration, and prior to that, with our mother’s back and forth movement to South Texas, where she became another battered wife who could be more easily controlled away from her family. My father relegated her to agricultural work to seek out a living for the family they supported with their remittances to Mexico, as they were barely able to support themselves. For Mague, my middle sister, however, the music died because the abusive monster relied on it to drown out the screams of his violations.

With the release of *Las hijas de Juan: Daughters Betrayed* (Méndez-Negrete, 2006) by Duke University Press, I was challenged to paint a chapter from the book. So, I did. The product was *Amá: La Flor del Nopal* (see Figure 3). It was through this painting that I gave voice to the conflicting ideologies that inform motherhood for me, as a survivor and a cultural Catholic. Painted in the strokes of the background are the fear and craziness of our household. The image articulated the tensions of Catholicism and expectations of domesticity, and while Amá carried the cross of her horrid marriage, per her Catholic belief of “until death do us part,” she was surrounded by the cactus of her life, pierced by the thorns of her injuries. In her face, I see her looking forward and to the side, as if on the alert to warn of incoming danger, while she carries her pierced heart on her shoulders.

![Figure 3 Amá: La Flor del Nopal, 22-inch × 27-inch acrylic on canvas.](image)
Most fascinating to me when I finished this work was the notion I had internalized about Amá’s color—she was pink, rather than brown as most Mexican-descent individuals are taught to perceive themselves based on pigmentation. In the image, she was the personification of Mrs. Cleaver of the 1950s family show (Connelly & Mosher, 1957), and the woman surrounded by cactus thorns simultaneously appears protected and kept in her place by the very pads of the cactus she adores.

Writing my book and including Amá and my sisters’ recollections allowed me to expose the horrors of abuse, as I reclaimed and validated the experiences we had survived. Their willingness to talk, or not, gave voice to their respective experiences. Before I began to write Las hijas de Juan, none of us had ever told anyone or talked to each other about what we survived. It was then that I learned about the extent of Juan’s abuses, beyond what I had personally experienced. It was a comfort to have my memories and recollections validated by the females in my family, but it was not in my imagination that he had the propensity to be so cruel. None of what I wrote has been imagined, and my work with art gave me the insight to go deeper into the crevices of pain so that I could look at it, analyze it, and reflect on the ways in which the violence shaped me to become the person that I am.

Since the publication of the book, I have continued to use artistic expressions in my daily life, primarily focusing on sewing, painting, playwriting, and songwriting. The songs I write speak to the struggles of my people as they confront social and cultural violence due to being marginalized. I write songs to document the culture and history we are living in the present and to record the inequalities with which we still contend. My play—Cancionera Naci: Toña La Negra (Méndez-Negrete, 2008)—examines cultures of silence and denial when it comes to race in Mexico.

My sisters and I continue to work toward our healing—our experiences will never be put behind us and will never go away. This was our life and our aim was to continue making it better. My sisters are the best promoters of Las hijas de Juan. They have learned to see it as an intervention that teaches those who read it to release themselves from the bondage of guilt and responsibility, to place the blame for the sexual, physical, and emotional violence where it belongs—in the betrayal of a father who did not honor his daughters and violated a sacrosanct relationship.

Since the book came out, we talk about what we remember and how we recall it. We have learned that Felisa and I have an excellent ability to recall faces and details in their exactitude, while Mague carries 7 years of amnesia because of the brutality she endured. She remembers she is safe. Everyday—with all the domestic chores and responsibilities heaped on her—she, too, copes through creative expressions; she knits and crochets, among other manual arts. Mague has embraced the past and has decided to place it in context. She recognizes that her creativity and spiritual life saved her and
have given her the ability to overcome sexual and physical trauma. We do not dwell on the horrors we survived, but instead, we have moved beyond to recognize the spirit and strength of our ability to overcome.

When Mague lived in San Antonio, she posed for a portrait (see Figure 4). I painted the sister I loved, the woman with whom I grew up—the one who took care of us and gave herself up, thinking she was protecting us and sparing us from the pain. She had no clue that we were living with a sociopath who was also a serial pedophile. Without a conscience, all he cared about was power and control, and sex and brute force were his weapons of choice.

Although she was in her late 50s when I painted Mague I captured the young, innocent, adolescent girl. However, her face reflects the residues of the trauma. Without intending to, I captured the terror that still lives in her eyes. For me, self-portraits have also become a means of documenting my emotional life. The paintings speak of depression and pain.

In the process of healing, creative expressions have helped me to reclaim the person-in-process, as a result of the hidden injuries I carried before I came to consciousness and voice. Most recently, I painted my
second watercolor with the aim of creating the cover for the translation of my book. It is a portrait of my sisters and me, no more than 1 or 2 years after arriving in the United States: Mague, Josie, and Felisa, *Las hijas de Juan*, next to each other, long after our childhood had been stripped from us, carrying secrets and silenced by the culture of violence, silence, and denial when we did not tell. In our child’s heart, it would have been worse to lose our family—so we endured the dehumanization we were experiencing at the hands of our father.

*TAN TAN ESTE CUENTO NO ACABO—LIFE IS ONGOING*

The loss and harm we experienced in our household could have brought about our cultural death. Destruction came so near that each and every one in my family could have been destroyed for life. However, our spirit, resistance, and ability to express our creativity allowed us to survive, aided by Amá’s valor when she told the authorities, “If my daughters say he did those horrible things to them, he did. Do with him what you please.” When the evidence was there for her to see, Amá stood up for us. Her support paved the beginning of our healing. However, for each one of us, it would take other work to reclaim ourselves as *Las hijas de Juan*. For me, it came in varied forms of artistic expressions—dance, song, writing, and manual arts like sewing, crocheting, knitting, and other such activities. For my two sisters, it took different forms.

In “Images of Trauma: Pain, Recognition, and Disavowal in the Works of Frida Kahlo and Francis Bacon,” Jeorg Bose (2005) argues that Kahlo speaks to the outright expression of pain, as compared with a less direct approach used by Bacon. According to Bose (2005), their work simulates an intrapsychic connection of the disassociated self and a state of consciousness that is shaped by trauma. Similar to these artists’ work, my self-reclamation is a representation of being present and documenting experiences as a way of reconstituting the self in the context of pain. The use of expressive arts as a way to recover and document the survival of trauma, whether through the facilitation of a creative counselor or as a self-therapeutic intervention for healing, allowed me to understand the trauma from the outside in, as the survivor. I reconstituted my fragmented self, in the process of exploration of the pain, to purge it from my body, mind, and spirit.

The work of creative counselors is imminently necessary in the treatment of individuals who have survived social and cultural violence. Artistic expressions, even when not perceived as an intervention for healing, may be necessary when treating survivors of trauma. In addition to documenting and facilitating a survivor’s awareness and consciousness about the survived trauma, creative and artistic practices yield artifacts that become testaments of one’s ability to reconstitute oneself as resilient. Creativity allows helping
professionals, as well as those who teach, to reconfigure a world inside historical legacies of pain and trauma and to reclaim survivorship, healing through the creativity.

REFERENCES


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