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The Role of Acculturation in the Professional Identity of Art Therapy and Counseling

International Students

by Ana Marcela Tobar Chávez, Bachelor of Fine Arts

A Research Project Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Master of Arts
in the field of Art Therapy Counseling

Advisory Committee:

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Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Edwardsville
May 2, 2024

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ABSTRACT

THE ROLE OF ACCULTURATION IN THE PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY OF ART THERAPY AND COUNSELING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

by

ANA MARCELA TOBAR CHÁVEZ

Chairperson: Megan Robb

In a country of immigrants, the concept of acculturation needs to be familiar to almost any professional in the mental health field and it is a reality for immigrants and international students. As international and immigrant students continue to join the Art Therapy Counseling profession, it is important to understand how acculturation plays a role in the development of their counseling professional identity. Unlike most master's students in the art therapy counseling profession, international and immigrant students go through unique experiences such as being born and raised in a different country with difference in cultures, languages, and immigration statuses that further confound their personal and professional development. This art-based heuristic phenomenological study aimed to understand the personal experience of a Latinx international student in the field of art therapy and counseling and how her journey through her personal and academic world has influenced her counseling professional identity.

Keywords: Acculturation, Art Therapy Counseling professional identity, Immigrants, Latinx immigrants, International students.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

For six years, multiple people repeatedly asked me, "Do you plan to stay in the U.S. after graduation?" It is the most frequent question I am asked after I say I am from El Salvador and it happened during my undergraduate and graduate school years. I always answer the same way, "I wish I knew, but it is a little more complicated than a yes or no answer." When I explain the differences between international students and students who are U.S. citizens, I always give the "why" to that complicated answer. I have probably had this conversation over one hundred times in the past six years.

My experience as an international student in this country is not highly unusual. *Borderlands theory* explores these cross-cultural experiences of Latinx individuals "to acknowledge the experiences of women navigating many different cultural expectations and ways of knowing while challenging academic conventions" (Hinojosa & Carney, 2016, p. 199). In addition, this theory may translate to the mental health training of immigrant and international student populations. It is no surprise to me that my professional therapist identity development looks more like a maze rather than a well-defined line graph.

In the United States, immigrant populations are rising rapidly. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2020), they make up 13.7% of the U.S. population, and Latino immigrants in the U.S. make up 44% of the 44.7 million immigrant population. In the U.S., only 9.9% of master-level students in all areas are composed of non-U.S. citizens, including males, females, and alternative identities (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). The international counseling student population, including males, females, and alternative identities, is only 0.01% of the overall counseling masters' students in the U.S. (CACREP, 2021). The Art Therapy Association membership indicates that only 1.5% are international students within the field,

specifically holding membership (AATA, 2021). In a system set up for the majority, immigrants and international master students find themselves adapting, changing, and developing in their academic and personal lives. It is crucial to note, that even with similarities in acculturation experiences, international students and immigrant students may experience different levels of adaption based on their status in the country. Some immigrant students may hold a U.S citizenship, DACA, etc. and international students can hold different kinds of temporary student visas such as F-1, J-1 and M-1 visas. Furthermore, the student's country of birth impacts the different opportunities of obtaining residency in the United States (U.S. Department of State, n.d.).

According to Berry et al. (1987), acculturation is “culture change which results from continuous, firsthand contact between two distinct cultural groups... acculturation refers to psychological changes in the individual (in both behavior and internal characteristics) whose cultural group is collectively experiencing acculturation” (p. 491-492). In this manner, acculturation brings an extra complex layer of developing the therapist's professional identity.

Acculturation

All these new environments, cultural differences, academic differences, etc., may cause a multifaceted effect on acculturation and resettlement (Clearly et al., 2017). Berry et al. (1987) created an acculturation model with two distinct dimensions: receiving-culture acquisition and heritage-culture retention. In the acculturation process, individuals decide how much to keep from their heritage and what they should acquire from society's cultural system. Immigrant individuals may engage in one of four acculturation strategies (Flores et al., 2022)

Acculturation is one of the main predictors of immigrant wellness. Sakamoto (2007) defined acculturation by following Rogler's definition: "the changes in the immigrants' cultural beliefs and values towards those of the host society" (p. 519). Berry et al. s (1987) model of the acculturation process establishes five influential moderating factors.

The first moderating factor considers the attitudes and perceptions of those within the dominant culture towards immigrants, ranging from a high tolerance of diversity to a drive to maintain only the dominant culture's norms. The second moderating factor includes the five different identifications among the acculturating group, divided into immigrants, refugees, sojourners, ethnic groups, and native people. The third moderating factor refers to the different models of acculturation, which incorporate the attitudes of immigrants toward the dominant culture and their attitudes towards their culture. The fourth moderating factor consider social positioning, demographics, and social characteristics, which may influence how much an individual has been exposed to different societies before moving out of their home country or culture. The last moderating factor includes the individual's personal psychological development and how their attachment style may predict the individual's success in adaptation (Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006).

Berry et al. (1987) theorized that the individuals outside of their dominant culture will wrestle with four different modes of acculturation.

1. **Integration:** Which allows the individual to identify with their culture and the host culture.
2. **Assimilation:** The individual create high identification with the dominant culture and low identification with the personal culture.
3. **Separation:** Divides the individuals by only placing a high value on their culture while simultaneously diminishing the dominant culture.

4. Marginalization: Leads the individuals to reject their personal and dominant cultures.

The process of undergoing these stages is deleterious to the acculturated immigrant's emotional and mental health (Berry et al., 1987). Regardless of whether they embrace total assimilation into the dominant culture, they maintain a marginalized status and a low power position. Depending on which acculturation mode the individual chooses, there are different impacts on acculturative stress and adjustment (Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006).

Acculturation and Professional Identity

Developing a professional identity is crucial for counselors as it includes an integration of personal and professional growth influenced by the professional community (Dong et al., 2018). The idea of the professional counseling identity frequently begins with a combination of the educational program's vision, the student's vision of the ideal counselor, and the actual practice of the profession (Gazzola, 2011). Overall, acculturation has a role in the professional identity development of art therapists, as it is impossible to separate the persona; acculturation process, and its influence on professional development.

Burkholder (2012) discussed a four-level framework to better understand professional identity formation at the academic level. At the first level, "professional identity comprises personal attributes and personal training" (p. 300). The second level, conceptualization, involves masters' students reflecting on their professional training, characteristics, and how those intermingle in their profession. The third level, contextualization, encompasses the environments where students express their professional identity. Lastly, level four, expression, allows students to link observable behaviors to their professional identity.

According to Burkholder (2012), the fourth level explores application, discovery, teaching, and integration, consequently categorizing and organizing students' professional behaviors. Counseling programs seek to provide an educational environment that allows

students to grow in how they see the world, the counseling profession, their self-perception, and how they see others (Nelson & Jackson, 2003). Professional identity development in counseling includes the timeline of the student gathering and applying information. First, graduate students acquire conceptual learning, and most students refer to this stage as extremely useful for their growth in the field. However, experiential learning through internships, practicums, and counseling technique classes becomes pivotal for the counseling development identity (Auxier et al., 2003).

One of the significant highlights of developing a therapist's professional identity is that it will be an ongoing process of development and growth throughout a counselor's career (Dong et al., 2018). According to Gazzola (2011), counseling is multidisciplinary and predisposed to sociohistorical realities. The field's current practice borrows from psychoanalysis, clinical psychology, and psychiatry. Graduate and doctoral students undergo an evolution that integrates their multiple identities (Flores, 2021). Students continue their journeys in academia and the field, and extra layers, as mentioned before, influence the kind of therapists they become.

Gap in the Literature

Latinx immigrant students, immigrant, and international students seem to be underrepresented in research involving the development of one's counseling professional identity (Awais & Yali, 2015). There is underrepresentation of this population among art therapy and counseling graduate students, making heuristic perspectives of one's art therapy professional identity development unique and important for those facing similar circumstances when navigating the counseling academic world.

Counseling profession educators must acknowledge those differences and encounter academic support, development, and acculturation of immigrant students as part of their

curriculum and understanding. Ultimately, teaching with a broader perspective and being able to provide support is significant in aiding students (Li & Ai, 2020). The immigrant, Latinx immigrant, and global student population would benefit from expanding the knowledge of Borderlands theory (Hinojosa & Carney, 2016).

Research Aim

Further research is needed to explore acculturation and its influence in the art therapy counseling professional identity of the international graduate student population. This art based heuristic study will involve studying the personal response to acculturation and the professional art therapy and counseling identity development within the following research questions:

1. How does acculturation affect my art therapist counselor identity development as an international graduate student?
2. As an international art therapy and counseling graduate student, how do I handle feeling othered and the constant changes of cross-cultural development?
3. What identifiable factors have positively influenced my art therapist and counseling professional identities as an international student?

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Figure 1 displays the key areas discussed in this study: acculturation, therapist professional identity, and Latinx and immigrants and international students. The literature review discusses the overlap between the three main intersecting areas of the study. I utilized the following databases: Google Scholar, JSTOR, EBSCO, and ProQuest (using ERIC, Academic Search Complete, ScienceDirect, Taylor & Francis Online, and PubMed Central). Alternate search terms for the three main search terms are incorporated in Table 1.

Figure 1

Intersection of search terms

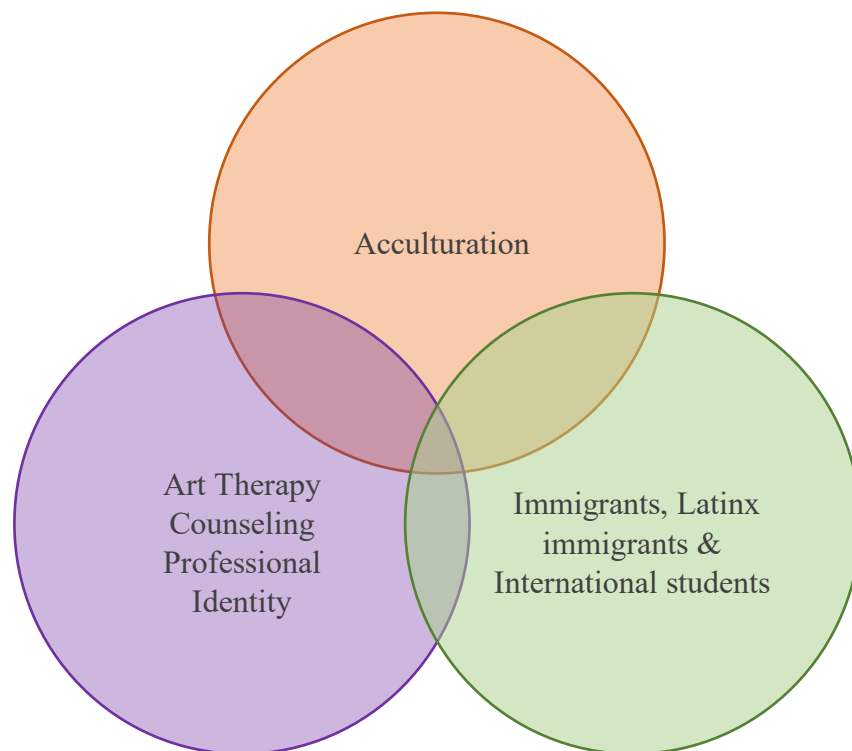


Table 1*Alternate Search Terms*

Acculturation	Latinx immigrants	Art Therapy Counseling Professional Identity
Acculturation	Immigrants	Identity
Stages of acculturation	Latino	Professional identity
Acculturation process	Latinx immigrants	Counseling identity
Immigration process	Refugees	Counseling professional
	Immigrant families	development
	International	Counseling student
	students	development
		Art Therapy student
		development

Immigrant and Latinx individuals and the Art Therapy Counseling Professional Identity

Immigrants and Latinx students sometimes face different racialized circumstances that affect their perspectives on professional counseling development (Flores, 2021). Latinx students often find themselves entangled in their personal and professional identities. They experience cultural dissonance between academia and their identity as the professional and academic cultures in the United States tend to emphasize independence, competition, and individuality, often at odds with the inherited collectivist values within the Latinx community (Flores, 2021).

Immigrant and international students in the counseling field face changes in their environment. Once relocation begins, immigrants and international students may encounter the many views U.S. citizens hold about foreigners. In addition, post-migration well-being usually worsens for immigrants as time increases in their new relocation countries (Rasmussen et al., 2012).

Latinx immigrants, immigrants, international students, and refugee individuals are often “othered.” In the case of Latinx immigrants, they may experience these circumstances due to race, immigration status, skin color, language, and ethnic differences. Because the Latinx immigrant population is diverse, their experiences are not universal (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2019).

Latinx Immigrants: The Impact of Immigrant Faculty

The counseling profession is predominantly white, with 75% of educators and 60% of graduate students belonging to the majority race in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020), thus creating an effect of power and privilege that usually manifests within white contexts (D’Andrea & Daniels, 1991). All these setbacks may differ from the standard linear process of the counseling professional development of students.

The percentage of Latinx faculty nationwide from the 2021 Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2022), including males, females, and alternative identities, is 5.64% in comparison to a 65.82% of white Americans. International/immigrant faculty numbers are so low that they are not even included. Only 10.17% of master's students are Latinx, including male, female, and alternative identities, and 0.01% of international students, including male, female, and alternative identities, are Latinx. In comparison, 55.94% are white American students (CACREP, 2022).

According to Awais and Yali (2015), paraphrasing Sue and Sue (2013), in the Art therapy field, a single voice could prolong a traditional pedagogy without considering efficacious ways to attend and teach diverse and minority populations. It is crucial to understand that whenever immigrant, international, and minority students face a white standardized environment, they face representation limitation and a lack of perspectives of those who may share similar experiences in the field (Awais & Yali, 2015). Awais and Yali (2015) concluded that less than 18% of students identified as minorities. However, the clients they served were 65% ethnic minorities. Even for white students, being taught predominantly by only white faculty may be challenging as they will treat a population that is primarily diverse or non-white.

Overall, role models are valuable for developing the counseling professional identity of immigrant and international students. Without having “role models from diverse backgrounds or ones educated in multicultural competencies, it is difficult for subjective norms to shift” (Awais & Yali, 2015, p.115). Diverse role models allow students to experience a sense of hope, being seen, and possibly a more accessible expression of situations they may experience with their international, immigrant, or minority status. Further research is needed to understand Latinx, immigrant, and international student populations in the field to capture an in-depth understanding of academia’s influence on the counseling professional identity development.

Acculturation: The Borderlands Theory on Latinx Counseling Graduate Students

A study of Mexican-American female graduate students reported feeling like they live within two cultures: their culture of birth and upbringing and the culture in academia (Gonzales et al., 2001). Gonzales (2001) referred to this cross-culture as a “border-crossing

phenomenon” (p. 199). This phenomenon led to the creation of Borderlands theory, which provides an exploration of these cross-cultural experiences (Hinojosa & Carney, 2016).

Borderlands theory serves to explain the navigation of different cultural expectations in Latinx women as they also challenge academia. This theory explores four areas written in Nahuatl (the language of the Aztecs and Pipiles) and Spanish terminology: *nepantla*, the space in-between borders of identity categories; *coatlicue*, a space that allows individuals to acknowledge the positive and negative aspects of their identities; *coyoxauhqui*, which represents the space of integration in which one creates a new sense of self or identity; and *la conciencia del mestizo*, where the definition of *mestizo* is a person with mixed ancestry which, in this case, is used to epitomize the growth and development that individuals experience as they navigate these multiple stages of identity (Hinojosa & Carney, 2016).

The influence of borderlands theory on Latinx graduate students is exemplified by the re-invention of their identities as they incorporate their professional identity into the ones that came before and the integration of research into their professional identities which resembles Buckholders framework of acculturation. These identity transitions come with a combination of self-protection mechanisms in academia. Latinx students may experience self-protection by either using their voice or remaining silent. These self-protection mechanisms ensure they finish their graduate programs with the most minor complications (Hinojosa & Carney, 2016).

Acculturation of Latinx Immigrants and International Students and the Art Therapy Counseling Professional Identity

Understanding the nuanced experiences and specific needs of international and immigrant graduate students in the field is essential for fostering inclusive and culturally receptive art therapy counseling programs that promote holistic professional identity

development. Extra challenging circumstances add to the already complex development of the art therapy counseling professional identity in addition to the task of acculturation as delineated earlier.

Multiple research cases conducted in the UK on international graduate mental health students found these commonalities: international students experience cultural shock, which is displayed in the form of homesickness, fear, loneliness, depression, vulnerability, disorientation, economic stress, stress, and anxiety. International students' common concerns were language skills, accents, social mistakes, and struggling with cultural norms (Skaife & Reddick, 2017)

In the classroom, international students displayed clear distinctions between learning styles, responses to group dynamics, and expression of feelings. These distinctions changed from country to country (Skaife & Reddick, 2017). For institutions and academics within graduate programs, it is imperative to understand the cultural and academic differences between international students, immigrant students, and students born and raised on U.S. soil. Counseling educators need to identify and address potential challenges that may arise and ensure that these students are not labeled as “lacking” compared to their American counterparts (Li & Ai, 2020).

In post-colonial societies, the term “international student” embodies a financial position instead of an academic distinction, it is better explained as a legal immigration control label. The terminology enforces a system description rather than depicting the journey, development, and acculturation of these set of students (Skaife & Reddick, 2017). Unfortunately, this label that encourages separation creates confusion in understanding the lived experiences of immigrant and international graduate students. International students have to build a professional identity at the same time as they experience acculturation.

Adapting the broad acculturation model to particular fields of study can help educators pinpoint the acculturation strategies of their students and help give specific support to their international and immigrant students (Li & Ai, 2020). Immigration status plays a massive factor in the acculturation process of immigrants. The differences in temporary or permanent status affects the student's planning after graduation. Some students may experience an extra layer of mental health consequences that may differ from "U.S citizen immigrant student" status to that of "international student" status (Linesch et al., 2012). Undeniably, these challenges shape the professional identity development and performance in the practice of international and immigrant art therapy counseling students.

Conclusion

As research progresses and the immigrant population rises, it is understood that assimilation was historically considered the ideal outcome instead of acculturation. However, this is no longer the belief, and the ideal acculturation outcomes happen when the individual practices integration (Sakamoto, 2007).

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

I implemented a heuristic art-based inquiry to explore my art therapy counseling professional identity as an international student in the United States (Moustakas, 1990). Moustakas described “heuristic” as a word from the Greek term *heuriskein*, which means to locate or discover. The term ‘heuristic process’ describes an internal inquiry that entails “creative self-processes and self-discoveries” (as cited in Bell, 2018, p. 67) to ascertain the nature or significance of an experience. This was a introspective search. I was able to explore my thoughts, questions, and reflections on my acculturation process over the past six years and my art therapy counseling professional identity over the past year and a half.

Art-based inquiry using a mixed media approach supported this heuristic research. I used diverse art supplies such as watercolors, printmaking, drawing, clay and bookmaking. These art mediums offered perspective, questions, stimulation, engagement, movement, and expression (McNiff, 2011).

Procedure

I followed Moustakas’s (1990) heuristic six-step research methodology. These six phases of the heuristic inquiry include (1) initial engagement, (2) immersion, (3) incubation, (4) illumination, (5) explication and (6) creative synthesis.

1. Initial Engagement: During this phase the researcher engages in the research topic involvement to increase an profound understanding of the experience under study.
2. Immersion: The researcher engaged in exhaustive exploration and data gathering, through different methods such as, journaling, artmaking, interviews, and observations, etc.

3. Incubation: This phase allows the researcher to pull back from the data collection stage to ponder on reflections of the gathered information, allowing insights and understanding to occur naturally.
4. Illumination: During this phase insights and patterns become clearer to the researcher and allows them to gain profound understanding of the topic.
5. Explication: This phase requires researcher to articulate and explain the insights collected from the data through multiple forms of interpretation.
6. Creative Synthesis: The final phase grants the researcher space for synthesis of final finding and they are summarized in an coherent meaningful framework to contribute with knowledge in the field of study.

Initial Engagement

According to Moustakas (1990), the initial engagement is when the researcher begins collecting and learning about the topic. I started in the Spring of 2023 when I began my literature review. I had begun journaling in response to the literature I had been reading and creating response art to the material as needed. I continued this form of engagement throughout the phases.

Immersion

Immersion is a process that allows researchers to engage in intimate terms with the research questions and to grow in knowledge and understanding of it (Moustakas, 1990). My immersion occurred in El Salvador and Belize in the summer of 2023. I engaged in art creation as a response to literature and the initial engagement with my research topics. I used materials to incorporate the art pieces created in El Salvador and Belize, such as watercolors, drawings, and gouache paints, into future books. These art pieces were essential elements to incorporate into the artwork created during the summer Book Arts class.

Consecutively, during my time in El Salvador, I explored my acculturation and personal development through continued reading, journaling, and artmaking (Moustakas, 1990). I contacted Salvadoran artist Gilberto Arriaza, who completed his fine art degree in Argentina, and the only art therapist residing in El Salvador, Ruth Gutfreund, who studied in the United Kingdom and practiced for multiple years in Israel and London, and Dr. Berenice Badillo, a Latinx, Board Certified Art Therapist, Marriage and Family Therapist, who resides and practices in the West Coast. I engaged in informal conversation to explore how acculturation influenced these individuals' professional development.

I used nine voice recordings to help me remember some of my reflections to use in my art journal entries. I also reflected on music lyric associations in both English and Spanish. There were four main songs that played a crucial role in my journaling and understanding of my acculturation process: *Hasta la Raiz* by Natalia Lafaucarde, *Ni de Aquí Ni de Allá* by Le Venz, *Darlo Todo* by Marissa Mur, and *Immigrants* by K'naan featuring Residente, Riz MC & Snow. These songs became a reflecting ground on not only my own experiences with immigration but also the experiences of these musicians.

These songs gave space to reflections with thick descriptions in both English and Spanish. I prioritized investing in these various synthesis processes right after I completed multiple paintings.

Cyclical Process: Immersion, Incubation, and Illumination

The immersion phase was more cyclical as I immersed myself, reflected during incubation, and illuminated findings in both art and journaling (Moustakas, 1990). According to Moustakas (1990), Incubation is when the researcher steps away from the immersion phase to reflect on information. I decided during this period to take time to rest, take walks

around nature in El Salvador, continually listened to songs that had given me inspiration during the initial stages of art making, everything was more in the back of my mind.

In the illumination phase, I went through all of the compiled data. It was extensive, specific in some areas, and broad in others. The data included artwork, journals, voice recordings, photographs, and lyrics in both languages.

Explication

Explication is when the researcher comprehensively examines what is awakened in the consciousness to understand its various layers (Moustakas, 1990). I read and listened through the different data mediums multiple times and compiled all relevant information into a collection of highlighted documents and art pieces to prepare for the Book Arts course.

Creative Synthesis

The creative synthesis is a three-book original integration of all the material reflecting my experience, intuition, knowledge, and development. The three books created a metaphoric tale that summed up the depicted data. They gave words to areas of my experience and development that I had yet to address.

After the Book Arts course, I incubated again. I focused on personal care and cultivation during this phase to encourage understanding, insight, and integration. I urged myself not to worry about specific timelines that could alter the process but to embrace the experimental time it takes for germination and growth. I constantly reminded myself to maintain tranquility to reduce my anxiety.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Prior to the artmaking and data collection stage, while writing my literature review, I came across Borderlands Theory (Hinojosa & Carney, 2016). This theory heavily influenced the framework and direction to engage in the artmaking and became a crucial part of the immersion process. In the Books Arts course, I made 3 books. The following book descriptions explored the four major concepts of Borderlands theory: *nepantla*, the space in-between borders of identity categories; *Coatlicue*, a space that allows individuals to acknowledge the positive and negative aspects of their identities; *coyoxauhqui*, which represents the space of integration in which one creates a new sense of self or identity; and *la conciencia del mestizo*, where the definition of *mestizo* is a person with mixed ancestry which, in this case, is used to epitomize the growth and development that individuals experience as they navigate these multiple stages of identity.

My Third Identity Book

The first book I created for this class was a pop-up book assignment; I decided to explore my professional and personal identities. As a professional in the field who is an immigrant, it is nearly impossible to separate these identities. For this book, I decided to explore what I will call my “third identity.” I started to generate ideas from this book by using previous sketches I had made during my stay in El Salvador during the summer of 2023. I wanted to create a more organized concept that physically embodied the experience of juggling two worlds and how I, as an individual, have changed in the past seven years. This book explores the *Nepantla* stage, as it represents the “Space between borders” as well as the *coyoxauhqui* stage, which represents the space of integration in which one creates a

new sense of self or identity (Hinojosa & Carney, p. 199, 2016). This book became a depiction of my new identity.

Through colors and playful shapes, I decided to create a happy environment for the book (see Figure 2). I wanted to showcase complex and complicated topics, experiences, and feelings in any way that was more digestible for the viewers. Color has the power to embrace the complicated and aid understanding. The first page symbolizes El Salvador, the country and environment that saw me grow up. Along the different organic shapes in the book, one reads in Spanish, “*Donde creces te forma y te deforma*” (“Where you grow up forms you and deforms you”). For this section, I created a detailed accordion folded tunnel to represent the start of a layered journey (see Figure 3). The second page represents my third identity: the tension built by the organic-shaped paper strips became a critical depiction of what it feels like to be pulled by two worlds, two worlds that sometimes feel so contrary. The overlapping paper strips allowed me to understand the interactions between these two places that have influenced my identity (see Figure 4).

Figure 2

My Third Identity Book



Figure 3

El Salvador 1st Page



Figure 4

My Third Identity 2nd Page



The following page contrasts in color with the “Salvadoran page,” unlike the Salvadoran with cool tones, “The United States page” has warm tones and a small drip design with a see-through lens that symbolizes my ability to see realities differently and how growing up in El Salvador and living in the United States for seven years has given me the ability to work and live with a better understanding of both places (see Figure 5). The last page is a pop-up “file” cabinet with multiple small, colorful shapes. I wanted this file cabinet to signify how I was making sense of these experiences. As a professional, it is crucial to have a place that holds that understanding, a place that strives to make sense of and organize feelings, a place that allows me to work on the countertransference I will experience in this line of work (see Figure 6).

Figure 5

The United States 3rd Page



Figure 6

The File



Linea de Vida Book

The second book is my personal favorite (see Figure 7). I put my heart and soul into this book. For this project, I wanted to experiment with creating two different kinds of paper: Western-style paper, a more standard paper-making style, and *amate-style* paper, which is a more artisanal way of paper-making that involves creating paper by placing boiled bark fibers on a flat surface, and then tapping them with a stone until flattened. Then, the flattened sheet is left to dry to create the *amate* paper. The process itself became an metaphor as *amate* style paper requires “beating” which creates an allusion to the odds one has to face as an international student. I felt drawn to work with both styles of paper because it would allow me to master two different kinds of paper-making, which mirrors my desire to master working professionally and personally within multiple environments. The papermaking process was extremely interesting. I decided to use watercolor and observe how the paint interacted with the wet Western-style paper (see Figure 8). As expected, the watercolor droplets interacted and spread differently in both papers; the environment influenced how the color spread (see Figure 9).

Figure 7

“Linea de Vida Book”



Figure 8

Western Style Paper Making



Figure 9*Color Spread*

The book exemplified the ADDRESSING framework, which seeks therapists to understand, recognize, and comprehend the intricacies of individuals' unique identities and their interaction with each other (Hays, 2001). Through the paper-making and color-drop interaction I was able to create a reflection of how my power changes depending on the society in which I reside. While working, I realized I wanted this book to open multiple ways. I created a small prototype to figure out how I would make that happen, and somehow, the accordion flag book design became the best choice (See Figure 10). Somehow, I figured out how to open the book in five different ways (See Figure 11).

The book itself touched ground on different statements I had told myself about my development as an immigrant months before starting this project. I created a book that sought to understand another one of the stages of Borderlands theory, *la conciencia del mestizo*, a term used to epitomize the growth and development that individuals experience as they navigate these multiple stages of identity (Hinojosa & Carney, 2016). I found a way to include those statements but reframe them instead of only focusing on anger and isolation. I could focus on statements that embraced those areas of my life that guide me to the support I find in others and myself. The whole book assured me that a good foundation for an

immigrant art therapist is finding the “things,” “people,” and “experiences” that allow me to have a traveling safe space, safety that transcends borders. On the book's colorful spine, a statement reads, “Mi Lugar Seguro se Mueve conmigo,” meaning that my safe space travels with me (see Figure 12).

Figure 10

Prototype

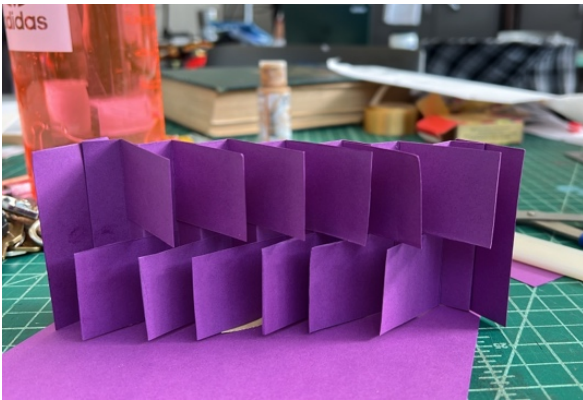


Figure 11

Five Ways Design



Figure 12

The Spine



The Acculturation Dictionary Book

I altered a 1954 racist dictionary for my last book project. Something was compelling about cutting up something that does not seem to deserve to be preserved (see Figure 13). Repurposing this book empowered me as a Latina in this field and as an immigrant in the United States by giving back some of the power and agency that systems usually take. Altering this dictionary allowed me to create a collection box that now holds all of the thesis artwork I have created in Edwardsville, El Salvador, and Belize (see Figure 14).

The piece holds artwork that tells stories of racism, classism, acculturation, change, feelings of incapability, resignation, frustration, etc. Allowing myself to create artwork exploring these sad and angry areas of my journey was necessary to process and create this altered book. Borderland's theory of stage *Coatlicue*, a space that allows individuals to acknowledge their identities' positive and negative aspects, was a crucial element in developing the diverse paintings in the book (Hinojosa & Carney, 2016).

Figure 13

The Acculturation Dictionary

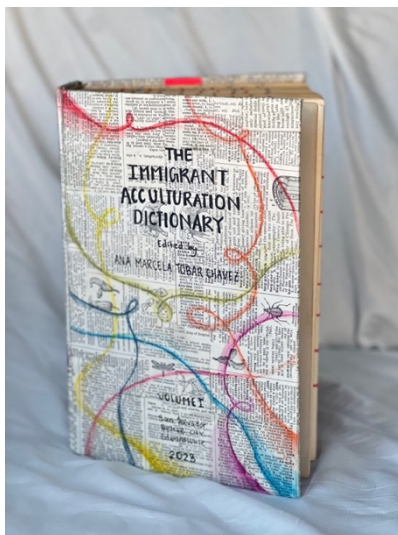
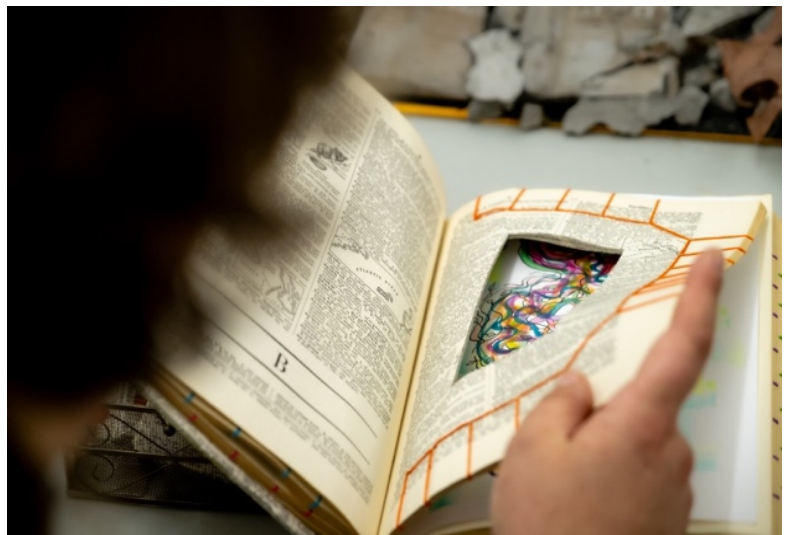


Figure 14

Building Homes



A part of myself thinks that creating artwork outside of the United States was crucial for my professional development and gave room for solid emotions to come out through the artwork rather than in any other setting. The dictionary was divided into thirteen sections. The sections were sewn together, and each section contained a window that allowed the viewer to see a partial image of the paintings. However, the last cut window changes and expands so that the viewer can see the whole image (see Figure 15). The process was exhausting and meticulous; it required hand-stabbing two templates for each paper section. This action allowed an overlapping pattern to appear on the sides of the book (see Figure 16). I also color-coded the thread to one color in the image to tie the sections to each painting.

Figure 15

Expanding the View

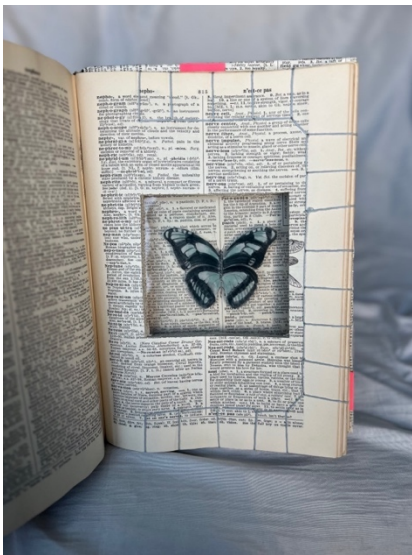


Figure 16

The Sections



The process became more than just creating a space for each painting. It was as if I was creating a small home for each painting (see Figure 14). I could have glued and cut, which would have taken less time. However, the process became a parallel to my life. Becoming an art therapist has yet to follow a list of simple steps. It has been one struggle, one win, one failure, and one step after the other. There is no easy manual on becoming an “Acculturated immigrant art therapist,” mainly because this process may not look the same for every immigrant. This book required major thinking ahead. I found myself constantly figuring out the steps required to create this book.

Learning through Artmaking

Throughout the heuristic study, themes emerged from art-making that offered a time to reflect and identify my feelings on acculturation, the third space. I am an art therapist in training. The emerging themes were acculturation, feeling othered, and positive development, which are described more thoroughly in the following sections.

Art Process and Acculturation

As mentioned before, creating artwork in three different countries allowed me to fully experience emotions of anger, sadness, disappointment, frustration, etc. These are a list of emotions I usually tend to brush off or give myself small fractions of time to feel and process them. Nevertheless, this time around, my experience was completely different. I finally gave myself the time and space to feel. In one of my earlier discussions, my former art therapy peer, Kirsten O’Loughlin, asked me a few questions that sparked many thoughts, such as, “What do you think changed during this trip? You have been returning to El Salvador for seven years. What made this time different?” My summer 2022 trip was significantly different from my summer 2023 trip.

During the summer of 2022, I was going back to El Salvador after being unable to go for two and a half years, I missed being with my family, friends, culture, language, and environment. Prior to that summer, I had been idealizing going back. I wanted my experience to be joyful, plentiful, and full of everything I had been missing. I believe that at the time, I could not face realities that did not align with that “Happy Place” I had been idealizing for years. Our bodies know what they need sometimes more than we consciously do.

I went to El Salvador again during the winter, 2022. Christmas has always been an important holiday for most Salvadorans, and it comes with a long list of celebrations in the community with family and friends. Again, I had not experienced Christmas in El Salvador in three years, and idealizing my time there became a way to cope with the past Christmases I had missed and the people I had lost while being “trapped” in the United States. I used to joke that “I was trapped in the land of the free.” Looking back, I do not think my mind, body, and soul could face the circumstances and realizations I decided to face in the summer of 2023.

In the first book, I created a clear lens representing glasses. These glasses show how, during this trip, I was consistently aware of the glasses I had put on, and to a certain extent, it felt as if I could no longer take them off. I see things differently than when I initially moved to the States. I see things differently in the U.S. because of my heritage. The art creation allowed me to explore intersectionality through “the table of oppression” (Greene et al., 2016), an analogy that explains the four legs that uphold patterns and systems of oppression. Each leg represents privilege, targeting, internalized superiority, and internalized inferiority. I saw things differently in El Salvador having ‘lived abroad for seven years. It all became a juggling of two worlds, two worlds that have allowed me to keep those glasses on proudly:

glasses to see injustice, glasses to see racism, glasses to see realities beyond my own all the time.

These realities allowed me to converse with individuals at home about some of these issues. I could talk to them more freely regardless of their relationship with me. Before this trip, I was too scared to face these conversations. I did not want any confirmations about their thought process, and confrontations, I did not want to do the hard work. I did not want my fears to be confirmed, and I did not want to relate to people I love with any of these descriptions. However, in the summer of 2023, I was no longer afraid to face this and was no longer willing to take the glasses off for my convenience.

I sat through conversations I never wanted to have. Family members and I had too many disagreements about my most fundamental values. These are values I cherish not only as a professional but also as a human being who strives to live within a moral standard. During the Belizean trip, I was invested in reconnecting with friends I had not seen in over seventeen years, some of who were individuals who had impacted my life during that developmental stage. I had conversations with family members and friends. Overall, I encountered several conversations where my professional development influenced my thought process and view of culture, race, community, oppression, colorism and discussions of these matters.

Looking back on those conversations, the most challenging part was realizing my family members did not see it. People needed to see and acknowledge the apparent differences in opportunities and privilege that affect individuals at a social level. I continued those conversations with my family members. I did not want to let it go. I talked to them about how intersectionality influenced a different outcome for some individual's experiences in Belize and in El Salvador.

I created response artwork to this conversation (see Figure 17). The painting uses the trashcan to symbolize the acknowledgment of things I need to discard in my life, even if I grew up normalizing them, even if it comes from people I love or even if it is a cultural norm. The piece explores how I, as a professional, will intentionally retain the characteristics, values, and culture that deserve to be embraced but discard what does not deserve to be embraced. There is a level of juggling new knowledge, understanding, and history versus old knowledge, understanding, and history.

In late June of 2023, during my trip to El Salvador, I went on morning walks every day in my neighborhood. This practice permitted a greater understanding and application of Bronfenbrenner's illustration of “nesting circles that place the individual in the center surrounded by various systems” (Kilanowski, 2017, p. 295). As I walked every morning, I saw houses with walls upon walls. It reminded me how social class can cause separation even within the Salvadoran collective culture. I created a painting to depict this experience (see Figure 18). The emerging reality around me reminded me of my positionality within the ecological system. Before this trip, I came back to El Salvador every time, unwilling to think of my positionality, and I believe now I can interact within the different levels of the system, instead of just focusing on my microsystem. I created artwork that helped me explore these areas of my life that I had decided to ignore for a long time.

Art Process and Feeling Othered

Artmaking permitted me to explore the times I felt like an outsider in my country. I created artwork that allowed me to give space to all the times people have told me I am not Salvadoran enough anymore. I depicted an image reflecting the term “Chancleta” in Salvadoran slang, which translates to sandal in English. The image reads, “La chancleta ya no es tan chancleta,” which translates to “The sandal is not that much of a sandal anymore”

(see Figure 19). All the times friends have said as a joke that I am a “Salvadoran gringa”, that I am a “gringa” now, and that I am different, have influenced how I react to things. People often do not understand how much the words they say affect me. They think it is funny. They think it is not a big deal. However, it is a big deal. They do not know this, but every time they say these things, they take away one of the most important aspects of my identity.

Figure 17

“A la Basura”



Figure 18

“Y Estos Muros, ¿Qué?”



Figure 19

“The Birkenstock”



It is also my reality in the United States when the certainties of a complex immigration status remind me of privileges I do not hold, such as residency status, work permit, extra paperwork for almost any process or permit. I face a constant reminder of the different complex layers of a system that is not designed for immigrants' success and established career barriers to non-citizens. According to Dominguez et al. (2022), International students in master's programs might believe they do not have enough time to become comfortable with sociocultural differences, learn the language well enough, and become used to the standards of academic and professional programs in the United States. In my case, in many circumstances without ill intentions, I have had professors and peers disregard my difficulties and give statements such as: "Your English is so good," "It is just so hard for me to believe that language is a struggle for you," "I did not even consider that you had to write your thesis in your second language." Sometimes, it feels like I have to "other" myself to receive some understanding and grace.

Art Process and Positive Acculturation Development

The second book was beneficial in identifying the positive factors that have influenced my development. I could identify the individuals who have created a steady environment: family members, friends, professors, and myself. I was able to recognize that my strengths, my knowledge, my studying, and my life experiences have changed me for the better. A major support for my experience in a master-level program has been the presence of a foreign-born professor. Foreign-born professors benefit international and immigrant students by making them feel understood and represented (Dominguez et al., 2022).

For the past two years during my graduate program, I have been learning practical skills to understand myself more and ensure that I can handle becoming an art therapist. The ability to understand my professional and personal change is something I have gained. I have

expanded a better understanding of how to navigate both worlds properly. Xu and Flores (2022) described how counseling fields in the United States highlight cultural awareness, diversity, and critical conscientiousness as part of the training. I have incorporated these major highlights into the Salvadoran predominantly homogenous cultural context. My life experience and immigration situation gave me a better understanding of working with immigrants in the United States.

My artwork gave me specific insight into the way I process and change. Suppose one were to analyze art pieces. In the past seven years, I have created a shift in the art making, process, color selection, material choice, and discussion topics. My artwork from 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2019 had a dark, heavy, and sorrowful inclination, people used to describe my artwork as not matching the artist, as I had a more exuberant and outwardly positive persona. My identity as a Latina and immigration experience were not predominant topics in my work. When I ventured into my immigrant status or my target identities, I created community work, not work that was explicitly directed to my experience. However, during the last two years, I have created colorful and bright work, where color became essential, even when it discussed hard, angering, and sad topics.

I first saw this emerging theme in the Fall of 2021. At the time, I was grieving after losing a close friend. A few days after his passing, I decided to paint a portrait of him. My blank slate went away by an even coat of bright orange paint. His favorite color was so bright, and even though sadness felt all dark and consuming at the time, I knew that it was not what dominated his memory. After that particular tragedy, I repeatedly painted tragedy, pain, change, and resilience with bright colors. Colors gave me control, strength, positivity, pride, and confidence. Prior to starting this program, sadness in real life became dread and depression in my artwork world. For the longest time, my artwork was a place to dump rather

than transform. I do not want to imply that “dumping” is not a beneficial part of healing and transformation: In fact, I think it is. However, at the time, I did not have the necessary skills to let my artwork reflect all the heavy work I was doing outside of my art world.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Before the "Book Arts" class, the thought of presenting work that would be seen mainly in an artistic way intimidated me. For the past two years, I have been creating art without considering design principles and predominately focusing on my processing. The "Book Arts" class allowed me to make three specific books that became pivotal to my professional development and gave space and a home to previous artwork I created to understand my journey and growth.

Acculturation Conceptualization

Themes of intertwined personal and professional stages of development mingled with justice orientation in personal and professional engagement, oppression, class systems, positive influences in the field, acknowledging and embracing learning differences. The art empowered me to understand the significant roles and learning processes that I explicitly encountered in the past three years. The acculturation process seems palpable in each of the created books. Borderlands theory (Hinojosa & Carney, 2016) allowed me to understand the different cultural expectations of Latinx women as they also challenge academia.

Through bookmaking and painting, I discovered areas of my life in the academic world, such as resilience, the pull of two worlds, and the overall understanding of the challenges in my experience. The theory allowed me to use the books to conceptualize my acculturation journey and its stages.

My findings included understanding that in my personal experience and understanding of my journey, art-making was instrumental to my processing and professional identity development. It gave space for exploration beyond words, beyond academia, and overall beyond my own judgment. In multiple ways, bookmaking became parallel to my life.

Buckingham and Suarez-Pedraza (2018) describe my acculturation experience as an assessment of potential adaptations of values and practices. These adaptations include values, language, core beliefs, family roles, and autonomy. These changes can reflect a combination of the new culture, environment, and historical context while maintaining their original community's identifications, values, and practices. It requires an insane amount of effort and professional development to understand how to use this knowledge in your professional practice.

Art creation and writing have allowed a level of personal accountability. There is a clear difference between thoughts that remain confined within the walls of your brain and speech that flows from your mouth and disappears in space. Art and written language allow thoughts and change to live permanently. It gives them a house, it makes them real, and they get stored in space and time. There is a reason we keep art pieces in museums and books in libraries.

Symbolic Artmaking and Bicultural Competence

The difficulties in the art-making process, the language barriers, and the limitations of fiber and bookmaking knowledge became a symbolic mirror of different acculturation stages in my professional development. The longer I created and explored, the more I noticed how my education was creating a disconnection at times from my family and areas of my culture. Hui-Spears and Park-Saltzman (2022), emphasized the key elements of bicultural competence, and how critical thinking and integrations begins as the therapist in training begins to recognize those home country systems, and understandings the oppression their marginalized communities experience. Through art making, I learned to discern my role as an immigrant art therapist. My behavior and thought processes changed as I learned how to

handle those differences that have grown over time, and it helped me develop a holistic bicultural professional identity.

A significant confirmation and finding through my arts-based heuristic research was experiencing cultural dissonance between academia and my cultural upbringing. Flores (2021) discussed the differences between the United States and the value of independence, competition, and individuality, unlike Latinx culture, which values collectivism. I encountered this realization during my four years of undergraduate school and three years in my master's level program. Even areas of my artwork reflected on "Boundary Setting," a concept that sometimes may feel unfamiliar or dialled down within Latinx culture.

The Benefits of Support Systems

However, contrary to Rasmussen et al. (2012), my thoughts on declining post-migration well-being as time increases are vastly different. My personal and professional identity development, and post-migration well-being have not worsened over time. My support system and appropriate acculturation process have positively influenced my life and professional development in the United States. The second book in my series became a clear example of how I find safety and security in myself and the people around me, as even the book states, "My safe place travels with me".

It is crucial to mention the noticeable benefits of diverse and immigrant faculty. As I was researching percentages of immigrant faculty members in related mental health fields, I noticed there are so few immigrant faculty members in this field, that their percentages are omitted. Yet, I had the opportunity to be in a program with a faculty member who is also an immigrant. Through my thesis journey, I noticed this faculty member's influence and support through my writing and during the entire program. There was something remarkable about asking questions about cultural dissonance and having a faculty member normalize those

feelings. It felt validating to have a professor understand my experience, not only because they had noticed it within their previous students, or because it is part of their profession which fosters cultural awareness, but because they experienced it themselves and in their cultural upbringing and personal, and professional identity development.

Art Therapy Programs' Limitations

It is also essential to identify the limitations within art therapy programs nationwide. Awais and Yali (2015) discussed how art therapists mostly provide services for minority populations, even though the providers in the field are predominately white. Academic influence is crucial for a therapist's professional identity development, and even in class discussions and practicum exposure as students in the field, we notice the differences in practice, preparation, and awareness. The artwork showcased the layers of culturally aware academic knowledge that have been part of my professional identity development over the last three years.

In the results chapter, I discussed the effect of Borderlands theory (Hinojosa & Carney, 2016) on my journey as a graduate student in the art therapy and counseling field. However, even the theory has limitations, as it was developed to depict Mexican-American graduate students' academic experiences. Nevertheless, the theory became critical to my understanding of the "border crossing phenomenon" of cross-cultural exploration, specifically for Latinx individuals in the field (Gonzales et al., 2001; Hinojosa & Carney, 2016). Through art making and theoretical research, I navigated the multiple stages of my professional identity development and the re-invention of my identity as I integrated the academic and professional. These transitions came with a desire to use my voice as a self-protection mechanism to ensure the completion of my graduate-level program and know my place and importance in the field. Hinojosa and Carney (2016) stated that Latinx graduate

students may use these self-protection mechanisms to ensure minimal complications within their graduate programs. I realized how much I went against that grain whenever I told my father I was planning to present the oral defense in English and Spanish, and his initial response was, "Why?" There is no reason you should have to do that just for your sister and me. You should present based on the majority." At some point, he expressed his worry about me jeopardizing my presentation for a political stance. This discussion served as a reminder that I have never remained silent for the sake of minimal complications. As Latinx people, we deserve to take up space unapologetically. Though I still make an apologetic claim of space, it is still better than silence.

Naming Without Language

Through the bookmaking process, I was able to comprehend Skaife's and Reddick's (2017) understanding of the cultural shock international students experience, as some of the most common concerns I experienced, such as language skills, accents, social mistakes, and cultural norm struggles aligned perfectly with their research. Partially, artmaking became an easy way to express my professional identity development as language was less relevant in the process. I felt free to create much of my artwork in Spanish rather than English.

Artmaking allowed me to explore this growth area without making me feel insecure about language barriers and expression.

International and Immigrant Student Differentiation

I want to specify that my international student status creates a layer of extra stress that I have been experiencing during my last year in graduate school. There are differences between immigrant students, Latinx-American students, Latinx-immigrant students, international students, and Latinx-international students. These slight distinctions are relevant to each of their futures. For instance, immigrant and Latinx American students in our

program will have permanent status in the United States, unlike international students who have temporary student status in the United States, which limits their stay and professional journey. However, even among international students, there are differences in student visa restrictions and visa applications. Some Latin American countries are excluded from different immigration applications, and I happen to be from one of the countries with stringent limitations on immigration.

Immigration status plays a significant role in acculturation because it is always in the backs of our minds. You have to plan ahead, but you cannot plan with too much anticipation because nothing is assured yet. You have to plan a life in two countries because your work visa status depends on decisions outside of your control, and most of all, sometimes you feel like you cannot plan your life because the intermittent fear of being forced to leave resides in your brain at all times. During my artmaking time in El Salvador, I explored these feelings with one of my paintings; I wrote the statement, *"En ningún lugar puedo echar raíz por miedo a tener que volverme a ir."* which translates to "I cannot take root anywhere for fear of having to leave again." As I develop my professional identity, I find myself promoting and advocating to expand my knowledge and the knowledge of others of the extra complex layers within international art therapy students in the field and the importance of being aware of how to support these students in their academic and licensure journey.

Importance of Heuristic Research

Art-based heuristic research allows the researcher to understand their specific area of study better. In my personal experience it allowed me to understand and develop my professional identity development as an immigrant art therapist in The United States (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985). The process challenged areas I had yet to process. In Conti's (2022) arts-based heuristic study, they develop a better understanding and reflection of a

heuristic approach as it heightens the immersion into the research topic, self-awareness development, and insight.

Limitations

Even though heuristic research has multiple strengths, it is essential to understand the limitations of this type of research. One of the main limitations is time constraint. Because one is engaged in self-research, it is sometimes hard to identify and explain to readers what one's process looks like, the emerging themes, and what needs further explanation. Another difficulty involves the level of emotional exhaustion. It is complex to write about circumstances that have been difficult in this journey. As the writer and researcher, remaining objective when emotions are running high is challenging.

Strategizing to account for this activation is essential to conduct further research and comprehend the role of acculturation in the lives of international and immigrant art therapy graduate students. This research is just one personal perspective on what that specific journey looks like; however, depending on different stages of acculturation and personal characteristics, the process and development could look very different for each individual.

Conclusion

In summary, the research allowed me to depict my personal experience in a way that comes naturally to me. Artmaking immersion gave me the backbone to discuss and explore areas I feared. The process invited change, which became highly significant to my professional identity development. The research itself became a modality for therapeutic change within me. My experience has made me aware of my voice, my role, advocacy, representation, and my acculturation journey. It also made me aware of the differences and strengths international students possess in both countries. I no longer see the differences between my peers and me as a burden but rather as a strength in my practice.

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Appendix A

My Third Identity Book



Appendix B

El Salvador 1st Page



Appendix C

My Third Identity 2nd Page



Appendix D

The United States 3rd Page



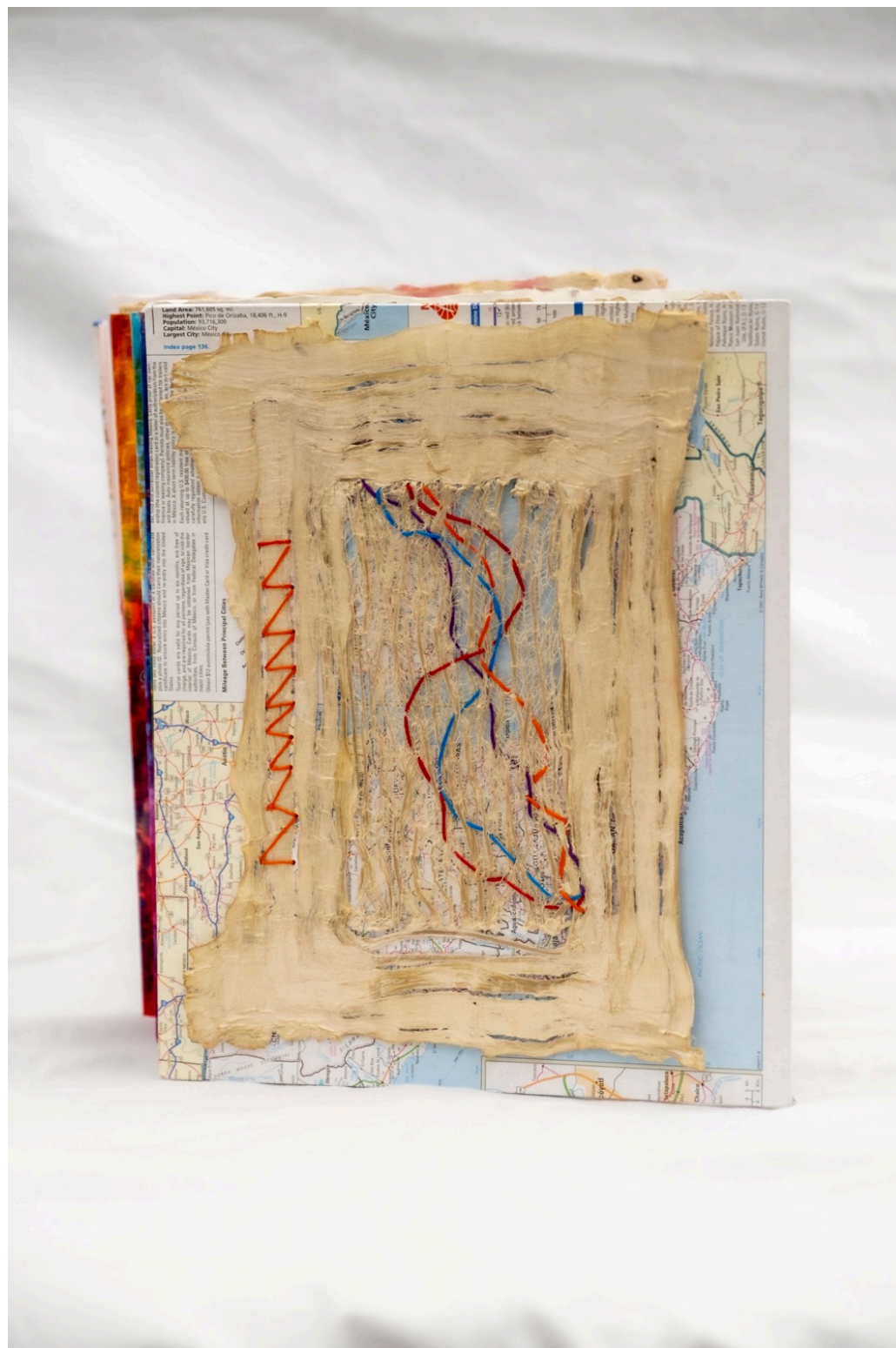
Appendix E

The File



Appendix F

Linea de Vida Book



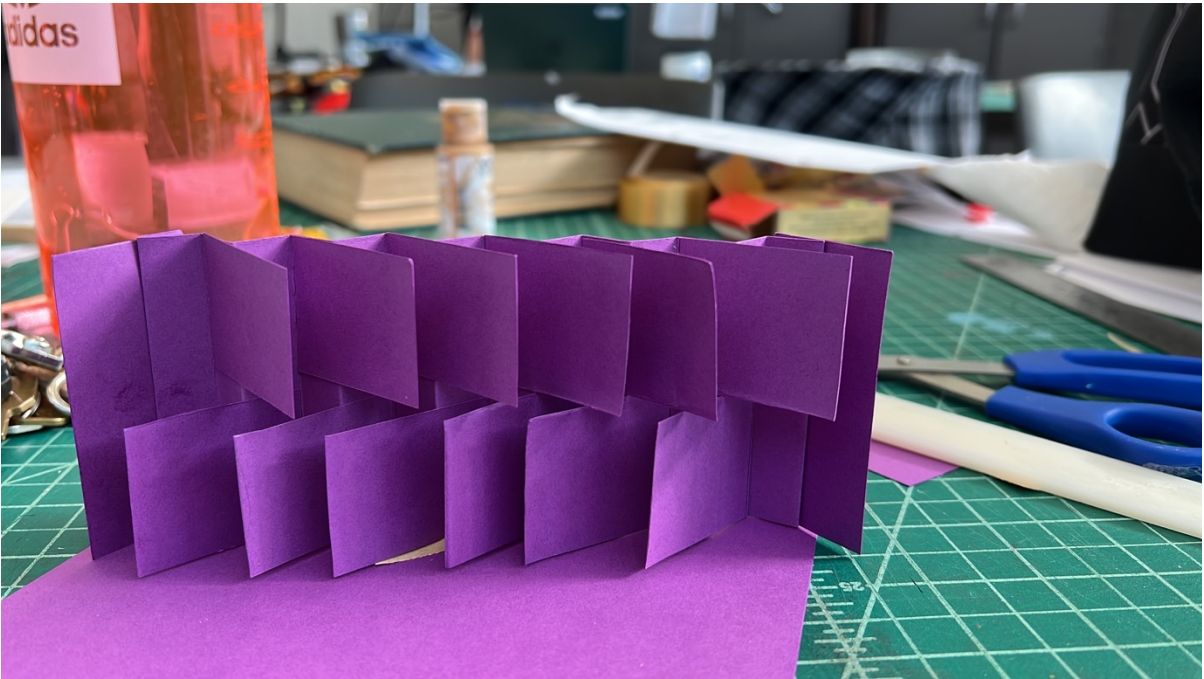
Appendix G

Western Style Paper Making



Appendix H

Prototype



Appendix I

Color Spread



Appendix J

Five Ways Design



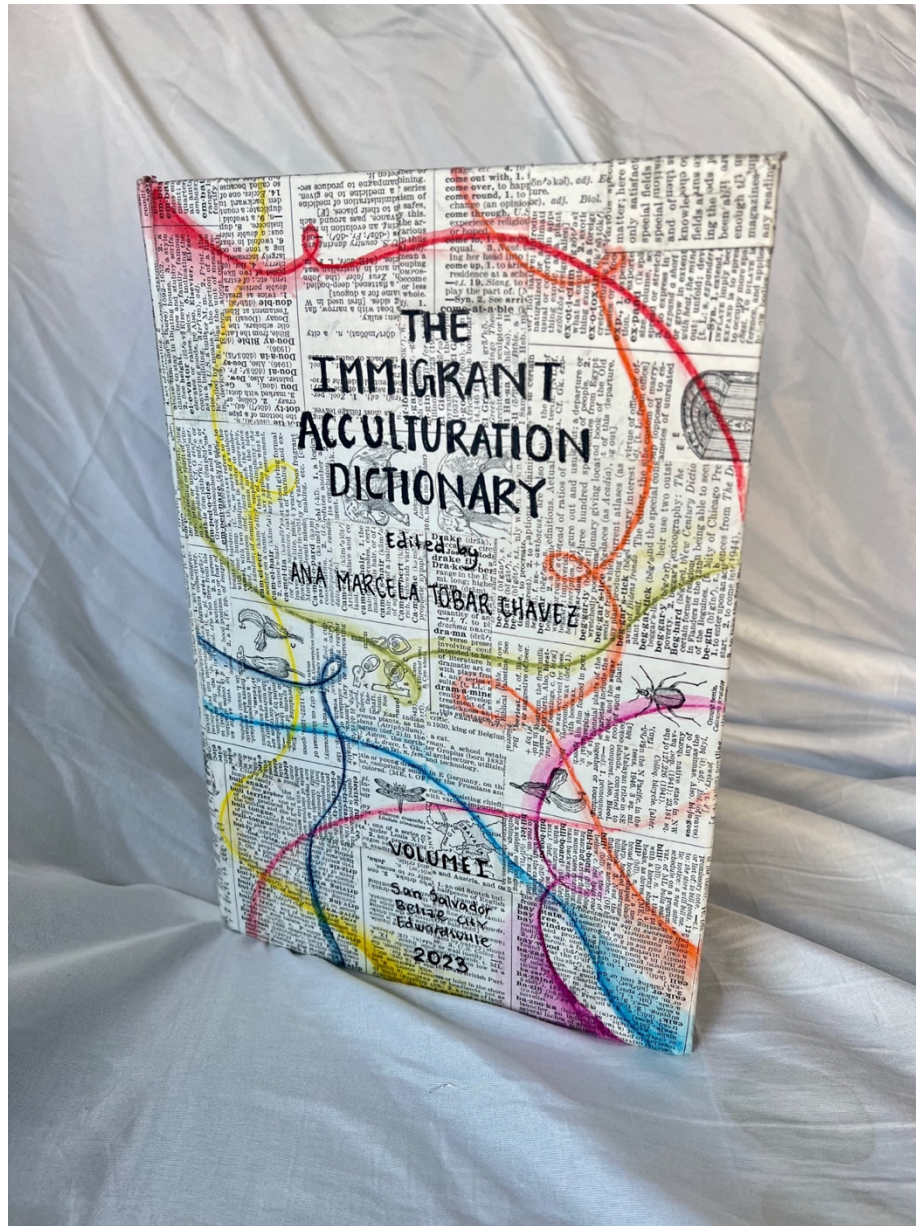
Appendix K

The Spine



Appendix L

The Acculturation Dictionary



Appendix M

The Sections



Appendix N

Expanding the View

Appendix O
Building Homes



Appendix P

“A la Basura”

England, freight. 21. (pl.) U.S. Colloq. wares; esp. in what has been

sentimentally good; affecting goodness. —(interj. 3. wonderful! how nice! [f. good, ad]. + -y!)

GUARDANDO LO QUE
RESPECTO, DESECHANDO
LO QUE NO MERECE SER
ABRAZADO.



act, able, dare, art; ebb, equal; if, ice; hot, over, order, oil, book, ooze, out; up, use, urge; a = a in alone; ch, chief; g, give; ng, ring; sh, shoe; th, thin; th, that; zh, vision. See the full key on inside cover.

Appendix Q

“Y Estos Muros, ¿Qué?”

construyamos
mesas más largas,
no muros más altos

TODO CONSTRUYEN MUROS



INCLUSO CUANDO YA

HAY MUROS

Appendix R

“The Birkenstock”

