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Unveiling Existentialism and Self-expression: Utilizing the Arts

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University of Northern Colorado
Greeley, Colorado

UNVEILING EXISTENTIALISM AND SELF-EXPRESSION:
UTILIZING THE ARTS

A Thesis/Capstone

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment for Graduation
with Honors Distinction and the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

Raquel Eduardo Nuñez
College of Performing and Visual Arts
May 2024

Unveiling Existentialism and Self-Expression:
Utilizing the Arts

PREPARED BY: _____

Raquel Eduardo Nuñez

APPROVED BY

THESIS ADVISOR: _____

Mark Fetkewicz

HONORS DEPT LIAISON: _____

Departmental Liaison OR Honors Faculty Fellow

HONORS DIRECTOR: _____

Honors Director

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Table of Contents:

Title Page -----	1
Signatures -----	2
Acknowledgements -----	3
Table of Contents -----	4
Abstract -----	5
Introduction -----	6
Manuscript	
Culture and Existentialism -----	7-11
Image 1: Do You See Us Now -----	8
Image 2: Mi Marchanta -----	10
Interacting with Others -----	12-16
Image 3: Braided Heritage -----	13
Image 4: Our Steps are One -----	15
Cultural Relativism -----	17-19
Image 5: Craftmanship -----	18
Murals for Cultural Existentialism -----	20-21
Image 6: Los Paisanos -----	21
Conclusion -----	22
References -----	23-24

Abstract:

This analysis is an exploration of identity through the examination of art as a means of self-expression and societal critique. It delves into existentialism to explain the impacts of art on both positive societal experiences and negative interactions unique to the immigrant and Mexican American community. The artist, Raquel Eduardo Nuñez, examines their own art to dissect their position in life as a Mexican-born individual living in a foreign country. This method was chosen to allow a space of self-reflection and awareness to explore the components that shape identity and reveal art as a medium for interpretation of links between individuals and society.

Introduction:

There is visual evidence when a community is facing afflictions or rejoicing in their identity. The following images in this analysis support this statement. People choose to express their struggles through different approaches and art is a common method. It is arguable that the first step to analyzing one's own contribution to society is to ponder what has shaped who we are. Yet, it is critical to partake in self-awareness of our actions to create a self-expression rooted in social acceptance. The question of existentialism is addressed by artists constantly. The philosophy of existentialism states that identity is shown through the experiences that make us a person such as themes of choice, alienation, responsibility, freedom, and truth (Benjamine, 2016). Artists have asked these questions of existentialism for years and these same questions have helped them develop a sense of self and address these topics through their unique execution of art. In this project, six artworks by the artist Raquel Eduardo Nuñez are examined for their relationship linked within a deeper meaning and theoretical insights of existentialism and self-expression.

Culture and Existentialism

The culture around us impacts the way we act. The article, “How to think about... Nature vs. Nurture,” by Robert Plomin, research professor at the Institute of Psychiatry King's College in London, observes studies from behavioral genetics related to culture. While people are born with certain traits, culture also impacts a person's development through their environment and their life occurrences, which also mold and shape a person's personality (O'Callaghan, 2019). For instance, cultures influence how people will dress, talk, and interact yet, people can choose whether they will pick up these habits and ways of living, yet culture appears to seep in whether it is expected or not. It is a personal choice to apply this nurture to their own lives and adopt them as their own culture. It is in people's nature to look for a society that comes together and accepts individuals for their different backgrounds, cultures, and social experiences. There are cases when people modify their cultural habits when exposed to a new location. This is seen in Mexican American people who have immigrated to a new way of life. From a personal perspective and experience, the fusion of these two cultures is a method to survive and adapt to a new way of life.



Image 1: *Do You See Us Now*, Photograph, Raquel Eduardo Nuñez, 2022.

This photograph titled, “Do You See Us Now” was taken in Mexico City. It is a documentation of the reproaches and disapproval towards leaders. It is evident that Mexico has forgotten about the people living in poverty, while corporations continue to be funded. This statue of a Mexican governor was violated in response to the disappointment of not supporting basic needs of the community. This statue is surrounded by huge luxury buildings that are being vastly funded, yet the majority of Mexico’s people are living in poverty and given little to no attention.

This image represents the lack of fulfillment of obligations from the Mexican government to their people. As Elizabeth Benjamin, a researcher and professor at the University of Birmingham states, “Responsibility, freedom and truth, posits that are evident in data in existentialism all advocate the creation of a self that aims for authenticity through ambiguity” (Benjamin, 2016). For example, the method chosen by the individual who vandalized this monument was to insinuate the facial structure of a clown and boldly write the word “trans” on this authoritative figure. Whether this is ethical or not, it is a form of self-expression and arguably a form of art that questions the structure of command within this society. This photograph represents the negative interactions that occur between the people under authority and their leaders. When people are mistreated and misrepresented, it influences the questioning of existentialism within a negative command and way of life. The method of choice for self-expression is vandalism and reflects the conflict faced between the people of the country and the choices made by the authority figures within it.



Image 2: *Mi Marchanta*, Photograph, Raquel Eduardo Nuñez, 2022

“Mi Marchanta” analyzes existentialism as a method of awareness of others’ existence and contribution to society. This image brings light to the existence of a single individual. It was captured to honor the contribution of merchants in creating a sense of community and togetherness for a functional system in the lives of others. This image helps explain how our own existence is linked to those around us, in one way or another. Merchants in Mexico bring solidarity to families. They travel far distances to bring traditional and highly desired foods right to people’s doorsteps. They contribute to the continuation of Mexican culture and make Mexican culture more accessible. Existentialism analyzes the existence of a single individual who affects those within that same community with factors such as actions, culture, and experiences (Pereboom, 2019). There is a shared culture and interactions that connect the merchant to the buyer; therefore, without the existence of one, there would be a malfunction in the community and the way of life known in Mexico.

Culture can be identified as the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterize an institution or organization; this implies that people can be of different races and still be part of the same culture (Reyes, 2017). This helps people recognize that there are diverse cultural norms, beliefs, and values within one society. Within the country of Mexico, there are a plethora of races and ethnic groups yet they all function within the same social group and life customs. Such as merchants who identify with a more indigenous background and others who identify with a colonial background yet are placed in a socialization process that introduces people to the same social norms and customs. For example, a benefit of this socialization is how it has created a smooth functional system that benefits both the merchant and the consumer.

Interacting with Others

Past experiences help define a person. It is important to become aware of others' wounds in life, to become more patient, and to comprehend their actions and afflictions (Fagundes, 2022). Self-expression can be a powerful tool in tackling serious societal issues like violence, racial discrimination, and self-acceptance. Some of these societal issues can be explored through the arts for the discovery of these issues within one's own life.

It is essential to have a deeper understanding of evidence from social interactions to gain knowledge of social problems that can be monitored and influence positive social consequences (Pereboom, 2019). There is a need for diversity of conversations about differences in culture, language, and experiences that form a unique view of self-image. The basis of self-cultivation is related to interactions with other people and their behavioral outcomes (Young-jin & Haeng-hoon 2016). As people interact with each other, they have the capacity to create a positive influence. This can also have the opposite result and contribute to negative stereotypes. Social interactions impact the development of people, creating experiences that form individual personalities. This topic can be illustrated through art that dives deeply into the beneficial and harmful outcomes of our interactions with each other. Creative freedom and visual representation are new ways to bring relief to social injustice (Lopez, 2016).

Art serves as a powerful means of communication, particularly in situations where it is complicated to find an effective method to represent through words, especially when there are language barriers. There is a substantial amount of impact that a single person can have on others throughout a lifetime, either positive or negative. Social experiences are a big contributor when it comes to shaping a person's personality traits and sense of self. The utilization of art as a communicative medium enhances the comprehension of complex concepts.



Image 3: *Braided Heritage*, Yarn & Acrylic Paint on Canvas, Raquel Eduardo Nuñez, 2023

Some famous writers, researchers, and artists look to the method of creativity to analyze existentialism within themselves through autobiographical works. These include Mark Twain, August Strindberg, Walter Benjamin, and Christa Wolf (Rugg, 1997). They are examples of individuals concerned with the transformative power of photography and the arts to communicate and develop a form of self-image through existentialism.

The painting displayed in *Image 3*, titled, “Braided Heritage,” aims to create a romanticized depiction of indigenous features as a Mexican woman. The acrylic painting was used to create a self-portrait where the focus is rooted in conflicting emotions as an individual who has inherited untamable brittle hair. Vast layers of acrylic paint are placed in this painting to represent the constant back-and-forth emotions of acceptance and dissatisfaction with self-image. This painting highlights the beauty of luscious black hair that has been passed down through Mexican lineage. There is a tangle of yarn utilized for the shape of the hair within the painting to represent the struggles that have also been passed down as part of the lineage. Physical textures are enhanced to create a pronounced emphasis on the beauty and richness of Mexican culture. The image itself is a sense process of healing and despair from negative structural stereotypes that have discriminated against racial features. It is debated how much of our personalities are determined by our interactions with society. Determinism is a theory where an individual's actions are determined by social interactions. In the issue “Journal of Ethics” by D. Pereboom, the debate discusses what notion of free will is required for determination and responsibility. “Determination is compatible with us having the control in action required by moral responsibility in the basic desert sense” (Pereboom, 2019). Ultimately, Pereboom's argument underscores the complexity of moral responsibility within deterministic frameworks, offering insights into the nature of agency and accountability in a deterministic world.



Image 4: *Our Steps are One*, Fabric & Acrylic on Canvas, Raquel Eduardo Nuñez, 2023

American philosopher of social psychology, George Herbert Mead, believed that people develop self-images through interactions with other people. He argued that the self, which is the part of a person's personality consisting of self-awareness and self-image, is a product of social experience (Gunderson, 2017). Mead's theory of the formation of self-connection to the development of culture or socialization incorporates hobbies, affiliations, abilities, personality traits, and spiritual beliefs as different parts of people's sense of self (Ylvisaker, 2006).

Art is a form of expression that allows a pathway to capture people's reality of life. It documents through a lens of truth that can be used to display the harsh reality of what social acceptance or rejection of culture may look for some people. *Image 4* titled, "Our Steps Are One," strives to achieve awareness of the cultural formation of a sense of self. This piece spreads an understanding of the experience of mothers within the Mexican culture and encourages the cultivation of cultural customs. This represents the component of society where people develop their sense of self through experiences within family traditions. A sense of self includes the attributes, behaviors, and associations that people consider most important to themselves. This image of a mother with her baby wrapped around her back holds strong value as an individual of Mexican descent. This is a metaphorical approach to the resilient spirit of upbringing as someone of brown skin. Functionalism is accomplished through materials like cut fabric that was mounted and painted to stand out of its frame. In the same way, this tradition of carrying the child on the mother's back stands out from other cultures, such as in American culture. A functional society is a system of interconnected parts that work together in harmony to maintain a state of balance and social equilibrium. These two forms of functionalism connect to symbolic interactionism, to enhance the social behavior that emphasizes physical traditions (Gunderson, 2017).

Cultural Relativism

Ethnocentrism is the evaluation and judging of another culture based on how it compares to one's own cultural norms (Oberg, 1960). For example, people with an ethnocentric perspective take a narrow-minded approach and only see one way of living based on their own cultural practices. Prejudices build a barrier between them and the acceptance of other cultural norms or beliefs. This impacts how people view minority cultures because it creates either an understanding perspective or a demanding perspective. Every cultural norm, social group, and social class has some influence on what is considered a social norm, something acceptable or expected from society. This is a complicated situation because it depends on the individual's approach and attitude toward the differences within a community, which can be positive or misled into misunderstanding and disrespect (Oberg, 1960).

Cultural relativism is the concept that advocates for understanding and evaluating a culture based on its own values, beliefs, and practices, rather than imposing external standards (Oberg, 1960). People who look at things from a cultural relativist viewpoint understand diverse cultures and prefer to look at other cultures in terms of their uniqueness. This claims that there is no universal or absolute standard to judge cultural norms. Therefore, it is rejecting the idea of a single "right" way to live.



Image 5: *Craftmanship*, Photograph, Raquel Eduardo Nuñez, 2023

Members of a society learn their cultural rules, norms, and beliefs through their connections, such as through family, the places they live, and through socializing (Bousalis, 2017). The photograph in *Image 5*, captures a man from the state of Puebla, Mexico, who has innovated his bicycle into an occupation of sharpening knives and tools for locals. He developed this handicraft by noticing a need in the community based on his location, culture, and social interactions. This man has dedicated years to bringing this service to the community and this way of life is now seen as a common norm. Through cultural relativism, it is encouraged that other cultures and individuals will respect his occupation, admire this man's work ethic, and value his contribution to the community.

With cultural relativism, people can be encouraged to recognize the diversity of their own cultures and appreciate the culture within their unique contexts. Through society, people form the basis of self-cultivation, since interactions with people act as one's behavioral guide (Young-jin & Haeng-hoon 2016). The behaviors that individuals absorb over time become part of their lives, developing into their habits and personalities. For example, in the instance that a person from a different culture were to witness this man's occupation from *Image 5* and become accustomed to the interactions and way of life of these people, they would be open to understanding other cultural norms. But first, cultural relativism would need to be in place.

Murals for Cultural Existentialism

Researcher Correll Polk studied impactful influences through symbolic murals when looking at Latino communities (Correll, 2014). *Image 6* is the mural created for the representation of Hispanic communities in Yuma, Colorado. It brings strong engagement to the community by highlighting the passionate and hardworking hearts of the Mexican American population living in the United States of America. The goal of social impact murals is to speak up for diverse identities and promote strong encouragement for Latin culture.

Discovering the questions of existentialism can affect how people interact with each other and digest factors that determine a person's character, such as culture (Ramirez, 2018). Society is described as a group of people who share a common culture, occupy a particular territorial area, and constitute a unified and distinct entity (Sanauddin & Chitralli 2015). Therefore, a society can be formed from a mixture of sub-groups with sub-cultures, sharing the same way of life routines, morals, and values as other people within the society.

There are artistic forms that inspire the expression, negotiation, and renewal of individual and group identities through social-impact artwork. This mural aims to be one of them. It has been discovered that there is an exchange of social awareness within different identity groups across different lines of discipline in art (Dixon, 2020). Culture is most recognized as the customary beliefs, social norms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group. This specific mural is a relevant example of collective interpretations of the Latino populations in the rural Northeastern region of Colorado. Therefore, this specific piece, with a social design, contributes to a different kind of artistic approach that is not just created with a topic in mind, but is an active movement that tells the story of the immigrant population.



Image 6: *Los Paisanos*, Photograph, Raquel Eduardo Nuñez, 2023

Conclusion

The work of Raquel Eduardo Nuñez uniquely focuses on life as a Mexican-born individual seeking to empower a greater sense of self and encourage individuals to hold their influence on others with responsibility. This analysis aims to foster positive contributions to social development in American communities around acceptance of Mexican American immigrants. Existentialism significantly influences our awareness of others in the community, emphasizing the profound impact of our actions, and the immense need for cultural relativism. This topic highlights the contribution to society that art can accomplish by raising self-awareness and appreciation of other cultures. Through art, there can be a positive community impact that addresses societal needs and enables profound, extensive, and enduring solutions.

Art provides a platform where the public can collectively examine how shared experiences bring unity through positive interactions. It is a visual approach that facilitates a comprehensive understanding of concepts of identity and offers impactful communication through visuals. Existentialism provides a foundation for understanding the rationale behind our choices and encouraging individuals to explore themselves and others in society. Overall, this research enhances self-awareness of our unique identities, promotes the development of mindful designs for social change, and enables the visual sharing of individual stories.

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