

Creativity as an intervention strategy with Mayan women in Guatemala

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This article explores the transformative potential of creativity, including the creative arts, embodied practices and Mayan storytelling and rituals. These were used as strategies in psychosocial and feminist rights based interventions and participatory research conducted by Guatemalan civil society actors with Mayan women in the aftermath of gross human rights violations committed during the 36 years of Guatemalan armed conflict. Drawing on a series of participatory creative workshops, facilitated by the authors, this article highlights rural Mayan women's understanding and assessments of their engagement with creative resources as a means to address the effects of the armed conflict. The article argues that performing these interventions offers possibilities for personal transformation, through both individual and small group experiences. Additionally, these interventions contain the potential to encourage communities towards social transformation.

Keywords: creativity, Guatemala, Mayan women, psychosocial

Introduction

'... [I am] old, without suffering, without fear and without shame. Today I am capable of doing all that I can. I am like a bird. I can fly with large wings.'

Chuj Maya woman, July 2011

According to Martín-Baró (1996), the tension and stress from living in situations of 'normal abnormality' (within a context of war and/or ongoing violence), are carried in one's body. However, the creative performance of these lived experiences offer possibilities for personal transformation through individual and small group experiences,

and the potential for encouraging communities towards social transformation. This article discusses the use of creativity, including the creative arts (drawing, collage, storytelling), embodied practices (massage, human sculptures, role plays, theatre), and beliefs and practices from the Mayan worldview (ceremonies and rituals) as resources in psychosocial and feminist rights based interventions and participatory research conducted by Guatemalan civil society actors (also referred to as companions or intermediaries) with Mayan women. These women were the targets of gross human rights violations, committed during the 36 year Guatemalan armed conflict (1960–1996), and are now seeking to act on their own behalf, that is, as protagonists¹ of their own lives. This article analyses a series of workshops (facilitated by the authors), using creative techniques, to ask the following question: can Mayan women's self-representations and performances be understood by themselves and/or interpreted by those who accompany them as reflecting enhanced advocacy? Three thematic findings are presented: firstly, the evolution of a sense of freedom and of engagement with other women who have been through similar experiences; secondly, the development of relationships with outsider intermediaries; and thirdly, the articulation of affect through embodied performance. The article concludes with policy recommendations to guide future work in this arena.

Background

In the early 1980s, at the height of the armed conflict, genocide was committed against particular Mayan communities

(CEH, Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico (Commission for Historical Clarification), 1999). This violence was deeply gendered as well as racialised, with Mayan women the specific targets of the systematic perpetration of sexual violence by the Guatemalan army and paramilitary groups (CEH, 1999; Fulchiron, Paz & Lopez, 2009). Rural Mayan women survivors of these systematic forms of sexual violence that occurred during the armed conflict often lived in close proximity to the perpetrators, generating conditions of insecurity and the ever-present possibility of re-victimisation (Fulchiron, Paz & Lopez, 2009). Many of these women have been ostracised by their own communities, or accused of being *'military women'*. Many of those who were widowed during the war lost access to land, livelihoods, and community structures. The violence of everyday life, resulting from histories of colonisation and, in particular, the violence of Mayan women's extreme impoverishment, are structural realities that have been exacerbated by decades of militarised violence (CEH, 1999).

These gendered and racialised experiences of war and impoverishment remained under-reported, or effectively silenced, over several decades. One initiative that sought to break the silence began in 1991 when the first author began working with Maya Ixil and K'iche' women in the rural town of Chajul and its surrounding villages in the northern Quiché region of Guatemala (hereafter referred to as Project One). In this initiative, the women engaged in psychosocial processes (described below) to seek truth telling and justice, while also participating in community based, economic development work to *'create a better future'* for themselves and their children. From 1997 to 2000, 20 women from the Association of Maya Ixil Women – New Dawn (ADMI) joined the first author in a PhotoPAR (participatory photography and action research process); taking pictures, interviewing those

photographed, telling stories about the pictures and then analysing the stories. Through these processes they developed a collective story of the armed conflict, local Mayan beliefs and traditions, the war's effects on one Mayan community and women's advocacy in response to the war (Women of PhotoVoice/ADMI & Lykes, 2000).

A second process began in 2003 when a group of rural Mayan women, who self-identified as survivors of sexual violence, started working with the National Union of Guatemalan Women (UNAMG), the Community Studies and Psychosocial Action Team (ECAP) and several independent feminist activists, to address the individual and collective psychosocial effects of their experiences of war and to seek truth, justice and reparation for the harm suffered. Fifty-four women, between the ages of 40 and 70, from four Mayan (ethnic) groups (Chuj, Mam, Q'eqchi' and Kaqchiquel) in three regions of the country (Huehuetenango, Chimaltenango and Alta Verapaz), participated in this process (hereafter referred to as Project Two). Many told their stories as part of a four year oral history project (Fulchiron et al., 2009), some testified before a *Tribunal of Conscience for Women Survivors of Sexual Violence during the Armed Conflict* held in March 2010 (Crosby & Lykes, 2011), and many continue to present their demands for justice and reparation to the Guatemalan courts and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. In 2009, the authors began working with these women in a four-year, feminist participatory action research project on gender and reparation in collaboration with UNAMG, and with continued support from ECAP and a group of feminist lawyers, Women Changing the World (MTM).

Contextualising the creative arts

The creative arts have been used by clinicians as therapeutic resources in work with survivors of violence, loss and displacement,

and, in particular, with refugee and migrant children *'on the move'* or living in camps in the wake of humanitarian disasters and armed conflict (Lopez & Saenz, 1992; Lykes & Fariña, 1992; Miller & Billings, 1994) and in receiving countries (Rousseau et al., 2005a). Rousseau and her colleagues (2005b) have sought to evaluate the effects of creative expression workshops for refugee and immigrant children in Canada, offering some of the first systematic evidence of the efficacy of such interventions using creative techniques. The approach described in this article draws on this literature, but focuses on work with women rather than children. Further, this approach is located at the intersection of feminist and participatory and action research (Bunster & Chaney 1989; McLean & Kelly, 2011; Women of Photo-voice & Lykes, 2000) and a long tradition of deploying creative approaches within Guatemala itself (Grupo de Mujeres Mayas Kaq'la, 2006; <http://www.cajaludica.org/>). Additionally, it includes healing practices within indigenous communities and First Nations in other parts of the world (Archibald & Dewar, 2010; Castellano, 2006) and in the wake of contemporary genocides and state-sponsored violence (Taylor, 2003; www.yuyachkani.org). This approach also seeks to respond to another gap in creative arts therapies, that is, the essentialist and often colour-blind statements that the arts somehow transcend differences found in much of this work, including that with refugees and immigrants (see Mayor, 2012, for a systematic critique which draws on critical race theory and performance studies).

Specifically, the approach described in this article has been developed by the first author and her Latin American colleagues (Becker et al., 1994; Lykes, 1994; Lykes, 2001) and is centred around three dimensions: *corporal expression*, including role playing or dramatic play, theatre and dramatic multiplication (Pavlovsky, Martinez Bouquet, & Moscio, 1985); *drawing*,

and other aspects of physical creativity that bring us *'outside of ourselves'*, such as models made with newspapers or collage (Becker et al., 1994; Butler-Kisber & Poldma, 2010; Lykes, 1994); and *verbal techniques*, that is, *'playing with words in ways that reveal their liberating character'* (Lykes & Crosby, 2014, p. 168; Rodari, 1996; Zipes, 1995), as well as narratives, storytelling, and careful description and analysis of previous work and photographs (see Goudvis, 1991 for a discussion of the intersection and application of all three dimensions). Thus, this approach engages creativity as a resource for documenting, engaging and recreating past experiences and the socio emotional responses to them.

Methods

From July to August 2011, the authors conducted five workshops with Mayan women protagonists from Projects One and Two. Four workshops were conducted with a total of 94 participants from Project One (one in Chajul, and three in the surrounding villages of Juil, Vipech and Chemal) who had previously participated in an earlier PhotoPAR project and in multiple workshops in the villages surrounding Chajul. The fifth workshop was with 11 women from Project Two who were invited to participate by UNAMG, due to their strong Spanish language skills, to enable communication within the broader group. They included two Mam and three Chuj women from Huehuetenango, and six Kaqchiquel women from Chimaltenango (six Q'eqchi' women from the Alta Verapaz region were also invited, but were unable to attend due to heavy rains making the roads impassable). Interpretation between Spanish and the various Mayan languages was provided in all the workshops by local Mayan women interpreters.

To the extent it was possible, the same structure was maintained across the five workshops. The format included an initial space

for an opening ritual, ceremony or prayer, inviting participants to choose which tradition they sought to invoke. This was followed by a brief introduction of the research, an explanation of informed consent and confidentiality, a request for permission to take pictures and record the workshops, and an introduction of the facilitators. In most workshops, this introduction was followed by *'warming up'* exercises that engaged the body and a sense of play. One central activity in all workshops was to invite participants to do individual or collective drawings of how they see themselves today, after their years of working together, in comparison to how they saw themselves prior to participating in Project One or Two. After making their drawings, participants posted them at the front of the room and the rest of the workshop participants were asked to talk about what they saw in the drawings with those who had created them, then the creators clarified what they had envisioned. The discussion of the drawings included descriptions as well as elaborations, that is, the drawing became an elicitation prompt. As a result, women described more details: about themselves and women's organising today, and their communities during the war. This exercise, analysed in more detail in the next section, provided a window on protagonists' self-understandings, and served as a resource for documentation and interpretation of their experiences of the creative resources. The workshops also included brainstorming activities on the creative resources that protagonists remembered having participated in, followed by small group dramatisations of favourite techniques, and discussion about why they might be performed and with what effects. A range of creative techniques came into play, including: embodied practices of dramatic play; massage; collage; and storytelling. The methods of each workshop differed slightly (for example, in the use of dramatisations or drawings) according to the participants' own preferences, or

emotional reactions to the issues under discussion.

A multi-level approach was used for data analysis. At the first level, as discussed above, workshop participants were themselves asked to analyse their own creative outputs, as well as those of their peers. The two authors documented these analyses through tape recordings, photographs, notes recorded on newsprint, and systematic note taking by research assistants. The authors then analysed workshop data collaboratively, following the first two thematic coding levels of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), which included co-constructed interpretations of the notes and drawings generated through discussion. The findings presented in this article draw on both protagonists' interpretations through their drawings and words, and those of the authors, as a means to situate protagonists' self understandings within the broader literature and theoretical framework, as discussed above.

It is important to emphasise that given the many ethical considerations inherent in working with women who have survived horrific human rights violations, and in particular the ever-present possibility of re-traumatisation, the authors were only able to conduct these workshops due to their prior relationship with participants. All of the women had participated in workshops, and other processes facilitated by the authors since 2009, thus enabling relationships of *'just enough trust'* (Maguire, 1987). During the 2011 workshops, the wellbeing of participants was kept front and centre, with exercises adapted to the group process. Participants received support and accompaniment from workshop organisers when activities brought up painful memories that provoked distress or discomfort.

Findings

Three themes emerged in relation to the role of using creative resources in enhancing Mayan women's protagonism, within

actions oriented towards individual and social transformation: firstly, the evolution of a sense of freedom, of no longer being alone and of engagement with other women who had been through similar experiences; secondly, the development of relationships with outsiders, that is, with the intermediaries who have accompanied them and introduced creative techniques; and thirdly, the articulation of affect, that is, the ability to express emotion in relation to harm suffered, through embodied performance.

A sense of freedom and engagement with others

As discussed above, individual or collective *'draw myself/ourselves'* creative techniques were used to enable participants to represent themselves, in the past and in the present. Many of the drawings of the past included graphic representations of gendered violence and the armed conflict, and the isolation engendered therein. Participants used the natural environment to depict the emotional content of suffering that had occurred as a result of war. The Ixil woman who drew the picture in Figure 1 described herself as a tree who *'was afraid, my knowledge was enclosed, listening to the . . . tears. Those were times of suffering.'* The theme

of *'being enclosed'* is echoed in many of the drawings, often described as being *'in hiding,'* being *'shut in, taking care of our houses.'* The woman who drew Figure 1, also talked about living *'closed in by barbed wire fences because of fear, violence, tears, sadness and the sorrows.'* She said that the half circle in her drawing, represented for her, the possibility of *'getting out'* despite the tears, thus suggesting survival and resistance. She added that: *'there was a little bit of clarity because the war taught us many things.'* What is perhaps unique here is the mention of the war as having *'taught us many things.'* Teaching and learning in most of the other images was linked to the present, and often associated to what one acquired through participation in workshops (for Project One) or with the accompaniment of intermediaries (for Project Two).

Participants in both projects included trees, flowers, fruit and seeds to represent their protagonism in the present. An Ixil woman from Project One described the flowers with seeds, germinating and growing, and the tree in her drawing as signifying her *'power as a woman.'* She noted that, although there are many people who might try to dominate a woman, they cannot because *'she is strong as a tree'* (Figure 2).



Figure 1: *'... a little bit of clarity... the war taught us many things...'*



Figure 2: *'A woman is as strong as a tree.'*



Figure 3: ‘... husband’s angry faces... women are sad.’

Figure 3 represents the frequently repeated gender juxtaposition heard in many of the comments from workshops with women from Project One, wherein women and men are described in relation to each other. The women in these workshops asserted their rights to participate, while also recognizing that some husbands had ‘angry faces’ and did not want their wives to attend meetings. This made the women sad. However, these women also described the sense of freedom they have gained from participating in the creative workshops, while acknowledging that not all women have been able to take advantage of this freedom. Women who are ‘with other women’ are described as ‘happy’ and ‘healthy’, because they are together, ‘learning new ideas’ and ‘participating.’

Participants in Project Two combined their present and their past onto a single drawing,

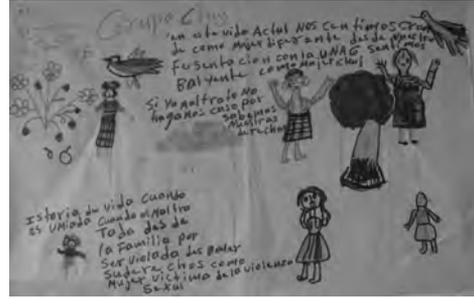


Figure 4: ‘...roots are sad’ ... but ‘branches are growing ...’

suggesting an ever-present relationship to the past. One Chuj woman, referring to the collective drawing in Figure 4, describes herself as a tree whose roots are sad because ‘I have been humiliated’, but continues, saying the ‘branches are growing.’ This reference to ‘sad roots’ testifies to the continued influence of past violence on these women’s present experiences. Others talked about ‘the sun coming out,’ of being ‘happy,’ and of enhanced protagonism: ‘I can do many things, including speak to the authorities in the community,’ ‘I can sign my name.’ One Chuj woman talked about the ‘humiliations we’ve experienced’ as ‘over’, whereas a Kaqchiquel woman spoke openly about her sexual violation, stating that ‘we lived sexual violence and the disappearances of our husbands.’ The images reflect the women’s attachment to nature, and identify them as coming from and/or living in rural communities where seeds are signs of new life and new beginnings. Further, the images of the past sit alongside those of the present, suggesting that neither are linear stories, and that the ever-presence of past violence does not erase a transformed present.

In their drawing (Figure 5), Kaqchiquel women in Project Two represented their homes in the past and present, juxtaposing a single, lonely woman in the past to a group of women in the present. In describing their drawing, they spoke of developing trust through the groups that they had participated in, because they knew that ‘what you said there stayed there.’ This reflects the

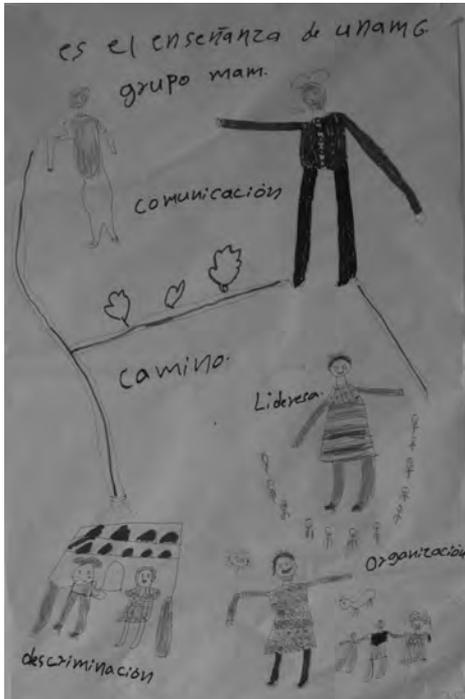


Figure 6: Intermediaries came ‘to teach us where we were going?’

organisation(s) as ‘enclosed in our houses. The men were controlling us’ (Figure 6). They noted that once they began meeting, they organised themselves, while also acknowledging that it was with the arrival of intermediaries who came to ‘teach us where we were going and to bring us help. Before we were closed in with suffering in our hearts. We didn’t go to school, so we learned through UNAMG.’ They emphasised knowledge gained through participation; ‘women who were discriminated against are now learning.’

Thus the women in Project Two seemed more conscious of, or more inclined to recognise, the role of outsiders in the processes that have contributed to the changes that they experienced in their lives. This may be, at least in part, due to the fact that these women were only able to participate in the processes described herein because of the resources provided by the intermediary organisations. This allowed them to

leave their communities and participate in the mutual support groups, and this accompaniment has been consistent over the past decade. In contrast, the work with women in Chajul and its villages took place in their local communities of origin. Although the work in Chajul (particularly the PhotoPAR project) depended on outside human and financial resources. This work, since 2001, has been carried out by local actors with very limited external financial support. One woman in Chajul, in describing the organisation they built, noted that: ‘We didn’t know how to start, but with Brinton’s help we learned and we changed some of our ideas and we looked for new directions and solutions. . . Through what we brought to the meetings we were able to overcome our situations.’ This was one of the very few references made to the role of intermediaries in Chajul. That said, the ‘outsiders’ who collaborated in the PhotoPAR process had major roles in structuring that experience, and in collaborating in the framing of the final product (see Lykes, 2010, for a discussion of this).

Embodied performance and the articulation of affect

In all workshops, protagonists linked creative resources to embodied performance that facilitated the articulation of affect. Thus, group dynamics and warming up exercises were described as ‘helping share feelings and emotions – sadness, negative memories, suffering that we have lived through;’ as ‘energisers that get rid of our pain;’ ‘we stop being shy;’ and, ‘when we play our body relaxes and goes soft. . . we are more flexible when we play.’ One woman described it this way: ‘it’s harder to put things into words. With creative methodologies, you use gesture to express yourself through your body.’ Another woman described engagement with her body as a process of becoming aware of changes in herself.

In the villages in Project One, protagonists had spoken about the creative workshops as useful spaces to learn new things, get

out of their homes, move their bodies and relax. The dramatic play and movement exercises, on the other hand, were recognised as resources for motivating them, giving them energy and exercising their imaginations. These physical relationships were also described as helpful in generating trust within the groups, and in facilitating the discussion of difficult topics. One protagonist stated that the participatory workshops *'helped us with what was in our minds. We felt that we couldn't find a solution for our lives. We felt scared all our lives. Before when we heard sounds in the streets we were scared that the war was going to start, but now we are not.'* Numbers of women in Chajul and its villages talked about embodied performance as *'fun,'* as *'making them connect to being a child'* and *'enjoying things.'*

The women in Project Two focused on techniques that engaged the body directly. Some described massage as a resource to *'rid ourselves of sorrows, fears, pain and shame'* resultant from sexual violations, and noted further that *'medicinal plants rid us of negative energy.'* Respiration was described as helping *'me to be calm'* and music was described as a resource to *'express happiness.'* One woman noted that these *'techniques not only help to rid myself of negative emotion, but also to express positive emotion and happiness.'* Another added that the *'bodily techniques helps us in healing. We identify parts of our bodies that need to be healed, for example our vaginas which were very affected.'* Thus the women in Project Two made direct connections between the pain and suffering of sexual violence, the physical and psychological effects of these violations, and embodied techniques as resources for socio emotional healing.

Conclusion

Dramatic play, drawing, massage, storytelling, theatre and photography were a few of the techniques used within Projects One and Two, as well as in the workshops facilitated by the authors to enable protagonists' exploration of the role of these resources

in their journeys in the search for truth, justice and reparations in the wake of gross violations of human rights. As argued in this article, these resources facilitated important moments of self-discovery in relation to others, and presented possibilities for individual and social transformation. However, this work is not without its limitations. The protagonists are not representative of the thousands of Mayan women survivors of the armed conflict, but were rather selected from the small number of women who participated in the feminist and psychosocial projects using creative resources described in Projects One and Two. The current study is exploratory, and draws from the women's retrospective drawings and self-analyses, as well as the authors' interpretations of their words and images as translated from their indigenous languages into Spanish. Despite these limitations, the work is suggestive of a number of policy recommendations that can serve as resources for guiding future work in this arena, and are outlined below.

The first recommendation is that interventions be consistent with the cultural and educational capacities of participants, and sufficiently flexible to allow for the transformative practices described here. This article has emphasised the important contributions of creative methodologies as a resource for *'listening'* (Fine, 1992) to indigenous meaning making, and facilitating Mayan women's protagonism. Specifically, these resources facilitated the active participation of rural, non-formally educated, Mayan women in a wide range of processes that contributed to their personal transformation. The creative resources were situated in a way to enable an interface with Mayan beliefs and practices, many of which were deployed by Mayan co-facilitators in both projects. Thereby, the resources mobilised through performances in the creative workshops resonated with knowledge rooted in local experience (Lykes, 1994), and reflect critical ways of re-theorising women's knowledge,

embodying and making earlier constructions that tended to essentialise '*women's ways of knowing*' more complex (Belenky et al., 1997). Mayan women's knowledge is performed through their imaginings of a '*new future*,' one that is rooted in the ever-present sadness attendant to the violations of the past, yet performed through embodied protagonism. Such knowledge contrasts with both an epistemological framework of post-traumatic stress disorder that dominates many psychological theories of trauma and attendant interventions, as well as gendered and racialised discourses that homogenise '*women*'.

The second recommendation is a recognition that social transformation is a long term process and requires long term commitment, from both '*insiders*' as well as '*outsiders*.' Protagonists in each project engaged in social transformation in particular ways that reflected, on the one hand, their personal experiences of transformation, and on the other hand, the particular historical moments and social spaces (within a geographic community, as in Project One, or within a community of women, as in Project Two) where they engaged in the creative workshops described. The work in both projects took place over considerable lengths of time. The Chajul relationship was initiated with the first author in 1991, and ongoing collaborations extended throughout the publication of the Photo-Voice book in 2000. The women of Chajul have extended the work into local villages and workshops in the town and surrounding villages, with women and, most recently, with youth, and continue today. Project Two was initiated in 2003 and accompanied by a range of civil society actors also continues to this day.

The role of intermediaries has been key in both projects and is not without numerous challenges. A third policy recommendation suggests that interventions in conflict and post conflict situations, characterised by

gross violations of human rights, that strive for social transformation should critically interrogate the presence and participation of intermediaries. Sally Engle Merry (2006) writes about interpreters or intermediaries who straddle international and local contexts, translating international human rights norms into local languages, and thereby disseminating these norms and practices more widely; a process of '*travelling down*.' Participatory and action research, and creative methodologies, enhance the probability for local interpretations and understandings to '*travel up*,' as well as possibilities for reflexivity, whereby these local and transnational processes and practices intersect, shape and inform one another. The significant number of Mayan, Ladina and international intermediaries in both Projects One and Two facilitated multiple participatory processes which sought to generate spaces, through which Mayan women performed their experiences and narrated their understanding of the causes and consequences of gross violations of their rights. Power circulates within and through these '*insider-outsider*' relationships (Bartunek, 2008), wherein intermediaries seek to '*work the hyphen*' (Fine, 1992), generating a hybridised '*third voice*' (Lykes, TerreBlanche, & Hamber, 2003). The latter is neither a singular, essentialised narrative of Mayan women survivors, nor the work of a ventriloquist who facilitates or manipulates their creative and performative liberatory acts as protagonists. What travels then are hybridised voices, accompanied by embodied narratives, that more easily journey beyond local communities to national and international listeners. However, despite the opportunity for critical engagement with these hybridities, intermediaries' power can be deployed in ways that negate or complicate these important efforts to disrupt interlocking gendered, racialised and class based structures, highlighting the importance of critical reflexivity throughout these collaborative processes.

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¹ The term 'protagonist' is used in this article to deconstruct dominant psychological discourses of women as 'victims,' 'survivors,' 'selves,' 'individuals' and/or 'subjects.' The term represents person-in-context, invoking the Greek chorus within theatre or the 'call-response' within African American church contexts. That is, they situate women dialectically vis-à-vis accompaniers and/or the community, wherein empathy is dialogically constitutive of them, that is, of the protagonist. Thus,

the term invokes the performative within the creative resources that are central to this analysis, representing the embodied dialogic of Mayan woman in relationships with each other, and with those who accompany them. At times, the authors also use the term 'survivor' to denote Mayan women's own naming process.

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