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## articles

# Stories in the Cloth: Art Therapy and Narrative Textiles

Lisa Raye Garlock

### Abstract

*In this article I weave together the relevance of narrative textile work in therapeutic and human rights contexts; showcase Common Threads, an international nonprofit that uses story cloths with survivors of gender-based violence; outline a master's level art therapy course in story cloths; and relate how textiles helped build a sibling relationship. Although seemingly unrelated, these elements are tied together within the context of culture, time, and purpose, shown in the article through stories and mythology, current practices, and personal experience. Art therapists and other mental health practitioners are increasingly using sewing as a medium, particularly in places where it is culturally relevant, to help people tell their stories graphically. Though art therapists may use textiles and fabric in practice, little is found in the art therapy literature that addresses textile work with trauma survivors. Similar to traditional art therapy groups and open studio, making story cloths in community provides connection with others and an opportunity to create, process, and cope with traumatic events.*

### Introduction

At first glance, the brightly colored fabric and the small, doll-like figures draw the viewer in for a closer look. Up close, it is clear that there is a story being told that belies the innocent appearance. Some of the figures are dressed in uniforms, tires are ablaze, and several figures carry sticks (See Figure 1). Stitched into this *arpillera*, or story cloth, is a grim tale of protest and disappearances, a common and terrifying occurrence during the Chilean military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet. No one, including the media, was permitted to talk about what was happening, but ordinary women—mothers, grandmothers, wives, and daughters—gathered to sew cloth into their own personal stories describing what they and their families were experiencing. Smuggled out of the country, the cloth testimonials helped spark the outcry for justice that eventually ended the state-

sponsored violence in Chile (Adams, 2014; Agosin, 1996; Moya-Raggio, 1984).

The women who made the *arpilleras* were not just telling their stories; they were stitching their lives back together, supporting each other, and healing traumas in a quiet and profound way. Women have historically gathered to sew, and in that process, alleviated personal pain by sharing their burdens and increasing their coping ability and resiliency. It can be argued that simply making an *arpillera*, particularly about a tragic or painful event, is by itself subversive; the maker is refusing to be silenced (Bacic, as cited in Agosin, 2014). Making a story cloth is giving voice to events that are unspeakable, whether on a purely personal level, or because society more broadly discourages talking about such things. Chansky (2010) wrote, “The needle is an appropriate material representation of women who are balancing both their anger over oppression and pride in their gender. The needle stabs as it creates, forcing thread or yarn into the act of creation” (p. 682). The cloth can hold strong emotions, allowing anger, sorrow, joy, and other feelings to surface in imagery; the time it takes to sew a picture gives more time to process difficult or deep emotions. Sewing in community, where everyone is encouraged to tell their stories, constitutes movement toward validation, support, and connection—antidotes to the isolation, shame, and fear that many trauma survivors experience.

In this article I describe narrative textiles as a medium that art therapists may find effective and culturally relevant when working with women who have experienced trauma. Starting with the introduction, I focus on the significance of working with textiles from a cross-cultural, historical, and human rights context to a current, personal view. I then discuss the work of Common Threads, an integrative training model for therapists; describe a master's level art therapy course focused on sewing narrative images; and relate how textile work helped build a sibling relationship in my own life. Although these four aspects of textile work may seem disparate, they are connected over time, culture, and purpose. For ages, women have used sewing and textiles for personal need and expression, and sewing in groups naturally strengthened their communities. This sets the background for me to talk about Common Threads, which brings sewing into contemporary trauma therapy. Showcasing student work gives concrete examples of the power of sewing story cloths within an art therapy educational context. Relating my personal experience with textiles as a

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Color versions of one or more of the figures in this article can be found online at [www.tandfonline.com/uart](http://www.tandfonline.com/uart).



Figure 1. Anonymous (From the collection of Marilyn Anderson, used with permission)

catalyst for building my sibling relationship illustrates the healing aspects of working with textiles. Though sewing is most often associated with women, men have also created narrative textiles; however, women will be the primary focus of this article. The terms *story cloth*, *memory cloth*, *narrative textile*, and *arpillera* are used interchangeably. Permission was granted to use the artwork, the accompanying stories, and the personal relationship story.

## Background

Fabric has been used, and continues to be used, for expression of identity, social status, secrets, and stories. Many cultures have mastered various weaving, sewing, and fiber techniques that incorporate meaningful symbols that tell about the maker and/or wearer and their origins. Perhaps the most archetypal story is of Spider Woman. According to one Navajo source, Spider Woman created the entire universe through her weaving (Teller & Thompson, n.d., para. 1). Spider Woman and Spider Man also taught humans to weave (Leach & Fried, 1972). In Greek mythology, weaving tells a different story. Arachne, a mortal woman, challenged Athena, the goddess of wisdom and a skilled weaver, boasting that she could out-weave her. They both wove elaborate story tapestries, but whereas Athena's depicted the stellar accomplishments of the gods, Arachne's showed gods changing form and raping or seducing mortal women. Although Arachne's tapestries were spectacular, her stories mocked and angered the gods, who punished her by turning her into a spider (Bulfinch, 1979).

The historical roots of textiles run deep, exist in cultures everywhere, and continue to evolve in different ways.

In the highlands of Guatemala, women from various villages have historically been identified by the distinctive patterns, colors, and techniques of their handwoven clothing; each piece of cloth told symbolic stories of the weaver, her family, and the village (Anderson & Garlock, 1988). With similar meaning, but different techniques, Bedouin women use embroidery "as a culturally embedded *speech act* of female power," and their embroidered dresses reflect social status and mourning, among other aspects of their culture (Huss, as cited in Moon, 2010, p. 215). In Palestine, embroidery is used to tell stories symbolically, with the rose used as an important symbol of hope. An example of contemporary rose embroidery that I saw at a conference featured black bars over the center that represented political oppression in that country (F. Abdulhadi, personal communication, September 13, 2014). Although this meaning may not be understood outside the culture, it's an example of expressing worry and concern, as well as subtly commenting on the country's state of turmoil. These are just a few examples of ways women express themselves through textiles, and in some cases, say things visually that cannot be said out loud.

In Durban, South Africa, at the Amazwi Abasifazane (Voices of Women Museum), there is a collection of 3,000 memory cloths. In 2012, the exhibit *Conversations We Do Not Have* was included in the annual women's festival. According to the director of the museum and curator of the exhibit, Coral Bijoux:

The memory cloths are speaking to . . . these conversations we do not have with questions like “what are these issues that are highlighted and not talked about,” what are the issues that women are facing and yet are not able to speak about. They were given a cloth, a theme—“the day I will never forget”—and some guidelines on how they could note this down (artistically) on the cloth. Although the women were not asked to remember the most painful of their stories, it is evident that the most part [sic] of their memory that stands out involved a lot of pain and suffering. They are very emotional, very powerful but they also speak of their victory in surviving the traumatic experiences they might have had. (Hlatshwayo, 2012, para. 6)

I viewed a selection of these memory cloths, which were exhibited with the story that inspired the images and photographs of the artists at the Sew to Speak conference in 2014. These memory cloths directly related to other South African story cloths that the American Visionary Art Museum (AVAM) exhibited in 2012–2013. AVAM’s collection was gathered as part of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s attempts at justice after the overthrow of apartheid. Making these story cloths enabled the women to remember loved ones who had died and process trauma in a safe way; it also connected them with others who had likewise experienced trauma and injustice under apartheid.

Quilts and blankets from around the world often tell stories and may be made from old clothing—fabric that holds the story and history of the wearer embedded in the weave of the cloth. There are stories of quilts made by slaves in which symbols were used to alert escaped slaves about where, when, and how to follow a path to freedom. According to Fry (1990), sewing together helped slaves find “support and camaraderie”; the record slaves left in quilts showed “a hidden history . . . of their humiliation and tragedy, the milestones of their times and of their own lives” (p. 83).

In 2012, I saw a United Nations–sponsored exhibit of narrative quilts made by groups of women in marginalized communities. These quilts focused on global issues of gender-based violence, women’s health, and environmental exploitation (United Nations Population Fund, 2012). Like the Chilean *arpilleras* made during the Pinochet regime, the UN story cloth quilts hold the truths of the makers, and exhibiting them advocated for awareness and solutions to their struggle. Textile story traditions are innumerable, and these traditions continue to be created by women and men in countries around the world. Skilled art therapists could help deepen the expression and communication of story cloth groups by learning more about textile work in their area and then incorporating textiles into the art therapy process.

## Textile Work in Art Therapy

Knowledge of and practice with materials is integral to being an art therapist. Moon (2010) discussed art media used in art therapy from historic to current times, and noted that the use of traditional art materials may not be the best choice

for delivering art therapy services depending on the culture, application, and accessibility to those receiving the services. In my experience accompanying students to study abroad in India, traditional Western materials were not affordable or sustainable for the schools and women’s shelters there. Fabric was readily available, and women in particular responded to textiles with excitement, knowledge, and pleasure. The women were better able to express themselves artistically using fabric and sewing. In their work with Bosnian Muslim refugee women in Slovenia, Kalmanowitz and Lloyd (1999) found that embroidery was an acceptable medium when other art materials were not. Several art therapists have used textiles and fiber arts in their practice and have found that these media can be empowering, can connect participants to previous generations, and can promote a sense of accomplishment and ability (Moon, 2010).

The act of making art, and sewing specifically, works on the brain and body in powerful ways. Perry (2006) advocates for therapy for traumatized children using a neurodevelopment model, where specific actions are critical to healing trauma. The activities must be relational, repetitive, relevant, rewarding, and rhythmic. In art therapy, many art materials are conducive to Perry’s model. In group art therapy, some of the goals are communication, expression, understanding, and building trust and relationships; the same is true in a story cloth group. When facilitating story cloth groups, I have seen participants develop trust through support, understanding, and identifying with one another. Relationships develop as stories are told, techniques and supplies are shared, and women work together to solve problems that may arise in their individual art-making processes. There is repetition in the creative process of making a story cloth, whether it’s cutting material, sewing fabric pieces, or crocheting a border. Along with repetition, sewing uses two hands simultaneously, adding an element of bilateral stimulation, used by many therapists when working with trauma survivors. The tactile nature of sewing, touching the fabric, and tracing stitches with hands and fingers is similar to the process McNamee (2005) used when she had patients use dominant and non-dominant hands to draw and trace over their art.

These actions are also rhythmic, creating vibrations in participants’ bodies as they pull thread through fabric. There is a rhythm, too, in moving around for setting up and cleaning up the space, often an important ritual that marks the beginning and closing of art therapy groups. In both art therapy and story cloth groups there is also a meta rhythm, an ebb and flow to the conversations that transpire; there are times of total silence as participants become absorbed in their process, and then there are times when questions are asked, stories are told, and people interact on various levels. Creative acts are usually rewarding, and the sensory pleasure of touching and working with fibers and fabric can be particularly soothing and nurturing (Homer, 2015). The integration of textures and colors of fabric, wool, yarn, and other materials draws on the sensory, cognitive, and emotional aspects of the maker. Relevance comes in working with materials that are developmentally and age-appropriate, and mastery of materials increases the relevance and feelings of satisfaction and accomplishment.

Working with textiles can also change a person's mood (Collier, 2011; Reynolds, 2000). Collier and von Karolyi (2014) were interested in seeing if working with textiles could be a way to alter a negative mood long-term, rather than just in the moment. They used the term *rejuvenation*, and specifically *textile rejuvenation*, to identify improved mood that continued after participation in textile work (Collier & von Karolyi, 2014, p. 1). Using the Personally Expressive Activities Questionnaire, they found that arousal and engagement in textile activities accurately predicted textile rejuvenation, or longer term improved mood. Their study may connect the varied traditions of textile work that women have participated in for ages to some of the benefits that it has inherently served. Gantt and Tinnin (2009) developed the graphic narrative for working with trauma survivors. Gantt's graphic narrative is done within an intensive trauma treatment model, with support of a treatment team. In their process, the story is told in a series of drawings, depicting images before, during, and after the trauma. They argued that:

Art therapy is effective for trauma survivors not because it bypasses defenses but because it provides a path where none existed previously. If peritraumatic dissociation disrupts the coding of experience in words, memories are still laid down but in the nonverbal part of the brain. (Gantt & Tinnin, 2009, p. 151)

When making a story cloth, the trauma narrative may be expressed visually through images on fabric, which enables the pathways to open so the stories can then be spoken. The process of sewing and working in a group allows the stories to unfold slowly, from before the trauma, during, and then afterward. Often the stories experienced by one individual resonate with others in the group, reducing the feeling of being the only one to have experienced traumatic events. Story cloth groups facilitated by art therapists can provide a culturally relevant form of trauma treatment for women who may not have access to (or benefit from) traditional mental health treatment, particularly refugees and women in developing countries. Though sewing in community is an ancient practice, art therapists as facilitators of story cloth groups can deepen the inherent healing aspects of textile narratives and work with marginalized people to develop confidence in telling their stories through sewing images. The next section presents an integrated model for training therapists in using story cloths with contemporary trauma treatment theory and techniques.

## Common Threads: A Model for Working With Survivors of Gender-Based Violence

Common Threads is an international nonprofit that provides a therapeutic training program for mental health professionals incorporating psychoeducation, sensorimotor awareness, therapeutic art, and story cloths. As an art therapist, I consulted on therapeutic art experientials that are part of the program, and I participate in trainings when

possible. This program targets women who have experienced gender-based violence, and it is designed to ease women from numbing depression, anxiety, and trauma-related stress responses to a place where they can begin to feel and function in ways that are healthy and life-affirming (R. Cohen, personal communication, September 14, 2014). An option for participants in the program is to initiate an exhibit of their story cloths, which can add to the women's feelings of empowerment and bring more community awareness to human rights issues.

The first project of Common Threads was launched in Ecuador, in the town of Lago Agrio, province of Sucumbios. Lago Agrio is an oil town, settled by men needing work. There are an estimated 13,000 refugees living in the province, people who have fled the violence in Columbia (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos, as cited in Cohen, 2013, p. 4). At least 8 out of 10 women in the province are survivors of rape, incest, domestic violence, and/or sex trafficking (Martins, 2014). Common Threads trained six facilitators—the director of a women's shelter and two staff members with counseling experience, an artist, a seamstress, and an anthropologist. In an intensive 2-week program, the trainees experienced the program themselves. They learned mind/body integration exercises, incorporated culturally relevant rituals, reviewed trauma theory and psychoeducational topics, and made *arpilleras*. The trainees then worked with two groups of women for 12 weeks, taking them through the Common Threads program (Cohen, 2013). The women continued working together after completion of the program and also chose to exhibit their work, first in the capital, Quito, and then at the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland.

Common Threads also facilitated a project in Nepal. Two of the facilitator trainees attended the Sew to Speak conference in Geneva (see below), and brought story cloths for the exhibit. They were also working with women who had experienced gender-based violence and were refugees from Bhutan. One of the groups continued to meet, although after the April, 2015, earthquake, the focus of work was on dealing with the immediate needs of its aftermath (J. Shrestha, personal communication, April 30, 2015).

The most recent Common Threads training was in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where war trauma continues to affect survivors, individually and collectively. I was able to cofacilitate the first half of this training, along with the founder of Common Threads and another psychologist. Fourteen women currently working in four different women's organizations completed the first phase of the training. Most of them were already skilled in working with trauma survivors and women dealing with domestic violence, but the narrative textile work was new to them. Having started their own story cloths, they expressed how different it made them feel—physically and emotionally—and they were eager to finish the training in order to start using this intervention with the women they serve. Though the training was intensive, many participants said they felt energized at the end of the day, and credited the sewing for making the difference.



In September of 2014, Common Threads organized the first Sew to Speak: Narrative Textiles in Human Rights and Healing Practices conference in Geneva, Switzerland. I was on the organizing committee and facilitated several workshops. Three days were spent sharing stories, sewing together, and learning about some of the story cloth work that is happening now in South Africa, Palestine, Spain, Brazil, Ireland, Canada, Kenya, Zimbabwe, England, the United States, Ecuador, and Nepal. This conference was a first small step in connecting a global community of people using textiles for healing and social justice.

## Story Cloth Class: Creating an Art Therapy Elective

As a result of my involvement with Common Threads, I designed a master's level art therapy course. It included important experiential learning, cultural and social action components of art therapy, and aimed to help students integrate narrative and images at a deeper level. The curriculum includes reading that places story cloths and *arpilleras* into a historical and cultural context, as well as articles written by art therapists who work with textiles therapeutically. Sewing is highlighted as an important medium for art therapists to use, especially when traditional Western media aren't culturally appropriate (e.g., where art materials cannot be found, or are not sustainable or familiar). Students who took the course found it particularly useful when they went to India for a study abroad program. They used sewing with the mothers of cancer patients at a hospital and at a women's shelter, finding that the women readily understood what to do with the materials. Rapport developed more quickly, and the women used fabric and stories to bond with each other and cope better with the stress of their situations.

For their assignment, students were given the option of creating a story cloth based on current events, a fairy tale or myth, a personal story, or "a day I will never forget." The stories students depicted related to grief and loss, journeys, triumphs, life metaphors, and news events that were both personal and political. Anna created the story of her friend's funeral (Figure 2). There were so many people there that the only place she could stand was midway down the center aisle. As she sobbed, people on both sides of the aisle handed her tissues. According to Anna,

At times I felt detached, like I was watching from far away. Other times I felt like I was the only person at the funeral and that the pastor was just talking to me. The moment exemplified grief. It's having so many emotions and feeling utterly alone, despite hundreds of people sharing in your grief. (A. Hicken, personal communication, June 17, 2015)

In Sone-seere's story cloth, *The Stage* (Figure 3), she related her story:

The inspiration for my story cloth derived from a painful and life-changing battle I've traversed with a rare medical condition. In the face of pain, shame, and little answers from

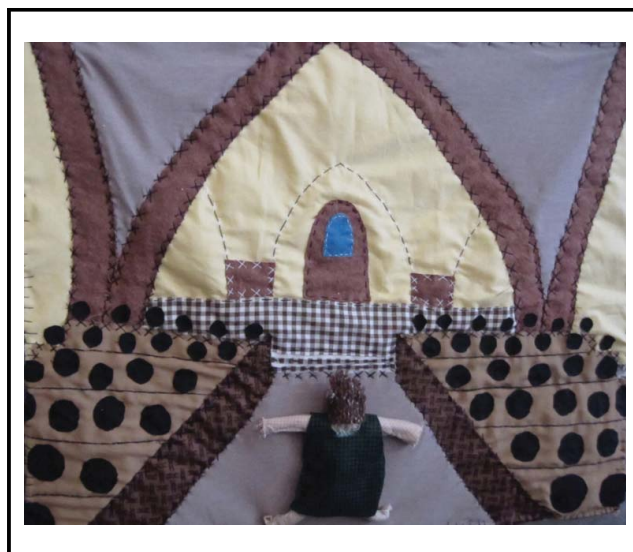


Figure 2. Anna's Arpillera: This Is a Day I'll Never Forget

medical teams, I rejected the notion that I was to live my life with this condition; so I set out on a journey to heal myself! There were times when the struggle was intense and sadness overshadowed my thoughts, but the world, along with my obligations in life, continued. I'd often wake up in pain, force a smile on my face, and jump onto the stage of life. Often during what felt like a solo mission, I juggled the difficulties I faced and continued to dance. Ultimately, with relentless determination and significant support, I was able to find peace in the dance and on the stage. I began to rejoice and could finally lift my arms in triumph, in healing, and in rebellion against shame. (S. Burrell, personal communication, August 14, 2015)

Kristine's (pseudonym) story cloth in Figure 4, *The Fable of Sport*, depicts Aesop's fable of "The Boys and the Frogs." In that fable, boys are throwing stones at frogs for entertainment. According to Kristine,

The frogs cry out "Please stop! What is sport to you is death for us!" The fable served as a metaphor for a current, larger narrative, as well as a more personal one. The frogs' plea inspired an image for reflection on the issues surrounding FIFA corruption and the use of brutal, often fatal slave labor to build stadiums in Qatar for the 2022 World Cup. It also provided a means for reflecting on many of the vicious physical and mental training tactics employed in my long career as a highly competitive soccer player. In this way, the story cloth allowed me to work with multiple narratives as I pieced together a single image with fabric, needle, and thread. (K. Jones, personal communication, August 14, 2015)

In Angelica's and Sarah's stories, they both responded to news reports that not only sparked national outrage, but also hit close to home and their hearts. Angelica's story cloth, *Woke From the American Dream* (Figure 5), is her response to "watching a teenage girl be thrown to the ground by an out-of-control police officer at a Texas pool party." In her story cloth, Angelica sees the girl as "a symbol



Figure 3. Sone-Seere's Story Cloth: *The Stage*



Figure 4. Kristine's Story Cloth: *The Fable of Sport*





Figure 5. Angelica's *Arpillera: Woke From the American Dream*

of a collective experience of what it is like to be a person of color in America . . . . It is a part of a collective trauma experienced by African Americans in this country that unifies our community." Angelica has depicted a target in her

cloth, and states, "I am a person, deserving of respect and love and nothing less, the color of my skin should not make me a target." She makes a strong visual statement, and with it the explanation that "with this story cloth, I am raising my hands in surrender of preconceived notions I can't control and simultaneously in defiance of society that oppresses me." (A. Bigsby, personal communication, August 11, 2015).

In Figure 6, *City of Flowers*, Sarah portrayed the protests in Baltimore after the death of Freddie Gray, Jr. She chose to create her image from the viewpoint of a photographer friend, whom she represented in the top right of the cloth. According to Sarah, "There are different aspects and emotions when considering how the peaceful protests of Baltimore were overcome by riots and how many people were deeply affected." She stated that she had "conflicting emotions varying from heartbreak to anger. This piece is not meant to represent one side as right and another as wrong but rather how complex cultural issues are despite the simplicity in which they can be portrayed." (S. Mann, personal communication, August 14, 2015). Her cloth raises questions about personal and collective truth and reality, and how the media can distort and sensationalize events. These are a few examples of how sewing images of stories can embody deep emotions and, during the making, help the maker process the event and make sense of it within the context of life.



Figure 6. Sarah's Story Cloth: *City of Flowers*



## Building Relationship Through Textiles

As a fine art undergraduate student, I majored in printmaking and minored in textiles and painting. My early textile work included fiber sculptures and embroideries. As an art therapist, I expanded my use of materials to other media, and did not use textiles in my art therapy practice for a number of years. My sister was partly responsible for bringing me back to working with textiles. She is highly analytical, works as a research manager, and we had little in common until about 6 years ago, a year after she became very sick with viral meningitis. Her illness, a brain infection, affected her neurologically, and using her analytical skills became incredibly difficult. However, though she had done virtually no art since high school, she experienced an explosion of creativity, which found an outlet in working with textiles. She has been incredibly prolific since her recovery making quilts (particularly comfort quilts to help others dealing with grief and loss), facilitating workshops, and showing her work in group exhibits. Her life changed from spreadsheets and research models (though she still does that for a living) to a life filled with textures, colors, fabric, and many talented artist friends. She expressed that “textile work is very healing on a conscious and unconscious

level for me” (B. K., personal communication, July 31, 2015).

We meet yearly to work on textile and fiber arts projects—experimenting, learning new techniques, and creating a story cloth about a shared memory. Figure 7 is an example of a memory cloth we created at one of these meetings. It features an event from our childhood. Our piece, *The Quest for Felix Gum: Memory of Okinawa*, tells the story of our journey to buy Felix gum. We followed a forbidden trail off the Army base, through a snake and spider infested jungle, until we came to a small creek. I remember a concrete bridge, but my sister and brother remember stepping stones. My sister stopped because she was afraid and worried that she’d fall in the water. We had to cross the stream to get to the shop and in an effort to get her moving, I shouted, “There’s a crocodile behind you!” Though I had intended to get her moving, she froze, terrified, imagining a giant crocodile behind her. I had to go back, assure her there was no crocodile, and, eventually, we all crossed the stream safely and made it to the shop where we bought Felix gum.

It is clear that textile art helped my sister cope with a serious and traumatic illness; it may well have played a major role in helping her heal. Also, through textile work



Figure 7. Lisa’s Memory Cloth: *The Quest for Felix Gum: Memory of Okinawa*

she and I have created a dynamic, close relationship where none previously existed. Working with fabric can be particularly comforting and meaningful, especially if there is a personal or cultural history and relevance; most cultures have sewing traditions, and it could be argued that it is a part of women's culture. Story cloths create lasting pictures filled with memories, connections to loved ones, and important events, and may be an integrative and effective way to work with trauma survivors.

In writing this article, I have endeavored to illustrate the diversity and richness of working with textiles from cultural and historical, human rights, contemporary practices, and personal perspectives. As art therapists continue to stretch the boundaries of art materials used in practice, moving from purely traditional Western art materials to collage, altered books, and digital media (Moon, 2010), narrative textiles can fill an important role in the fabric of the creative process and the healing power of art.

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