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# STORIES OF WOUNDS, PATHS OF HEALING

## *Theatre of Witness with Victims of the Colombian Conflict*

### ABSTRACT

The article presents the results of a theatre workshop conducted with Afro-descendant and indigenous women, victims of sexual violence in the Colombian armed conflict. The workshop is part of the on-going “Arts for Reconciliation” research project at the Institute of Fine Arts in Cali, Colombia. This experience aims to systematize creative methods to accompany reconciliation among people affected by conflicts. The workshop was based on Teya Sepinuck’s “Theatre of Witness” and constitutes the first application of this technique with populations affected by the Colombian conflict. The creation steps included the construction of ritual spaces to share autobiographical stories and their staging, where the same people who had lived the story acted them out. The result was a ritual designed and facilitated by the women and a testimonial play, where each woman embodied the story of some of her ancestors on stage, with the support of the students of the Project. This pilot experience demonstrated the capacity of Theatre of the Witness to effectively accompany the healing paths of the victims of the armed conflict, while also making their stories visible for the Colombian people who were not directly affected by the conflict. Furthermore, this experience proved effective in setting the participants’ stories within a broader narrative, where their traumatic experiences of violence and displacement could be re-signified, moving the self-perception of the participants from “vic-

tim” to “witnesses” of the armed conflict, whose testimony contributes to building coexistence and non-repetition.

## INTRODUCTION

*To talk about our wounds as part of a broader story  
gives them meaning and makes them more acceptable*

Hannah Arendt

In May 2018, the Institute of Fine Arts in Cali, Colombia, established the “Arts for Reconciliation” research project, with the aim of experimenting and systematizing creative methods to accompany reconciliation processes in populations directly affected by conflicts. The research method the project adopted is to pilot a wide range of existing participatory arts techniques with specific populations affected by conflicts, reflect from these experiences and systematize the methods that proved most effective. The theoretical assumptions and the practical background of the Project are presented in an article by the author<sup>1</sup>. In October 2018, the informal group “Mujer Violeta” of Cali, which brings together women victims of sexual violence and displacement from the Colombian departments of Cauca, Nariño and Valle del Cauca, contacted the Project to build a creative space of healing for the women of the group and to make their life experiences visible to the Colombian people. During the preliminary meetings, the members of Mujer Violeta expressed their desire to use theatre to share their wounds and seek, through art and group interaction, paths of personal and collective healing. Responding to these wishes, the Project proposed to experiment an adaptation of Teya Sepinuck’s Theatre of Witness<sup>2</sup> to this specific context.

The goal of this article is twofold. First, we intend to present and discuss a case study on the application of a specific technique to a group

1 A. Miramonti, “Healing and Transformation through Arts: Theatre for Reconciliation”, in *Educazione Aperta*, n. 6, 2019.

2 T. Sepinuck, *Theatre of Witness - Finding the Medicine in Stories of Suffering, Transformation and Peace*. Kingsley, London 2013.

of victim of sexual violence and displacement. Second, we reflect on the psychosocial impact of this experience on three groups: the victims, the university students of the Project and the audience who participated in the play.

## THE THEATRE OF THE WITNESS AND ITS APPLICATION IN ARMED CONFLICTS

Theatre of the Witness is a theatrical method systematized by the North-American director and playwright Teya Sepinuck over last thirty years in the United States, Northern Ireland and Poland. The objective of the Theatre of the Witness is to make visible stories of wounds, healing and resilience of people who personally experienced situations of violence, trauma and healing that radically transformed their lives. This technique aims to give the voice back to the protagonists of these events and inspire the public with personal testimonies of dialogue, courage and reconciliation. Sepinuck and her disciples have been applying this technique with former-combatants, relatives of murdered people, abused minors, refugees, torture survivors, prisoners in life imprisonment and relatives of audience with chronic diseases. One aspect that distinguishes Theatre of the Witness from other testimonial theatre forms is that in Theatre of the Witness it is the person who lived the experience who performs it on stage. For this reason, Theatre of the Witness almost always works with natural actors and the distance between the person who acts and the character on stage is very small. By participating in a Theatre of Witness performance, the audience can recognize in the actress on stage the witness of a story that really transformed her life. In addition, Sepinuck highlights that Theatre of Witness does not unilaterally focus on stories of pain, it is not a form of “aestheticization” of the victims’ suffering, with the purpose of provoking a reaction of indignation in the spectators, nor it is a form of dramatized “journalism of pain”. Rather, Theatre of the Witness focuses on stories of wounds, healing, and transcendence, and does not exclusively focus on the witness’s past, but also on her situation in the present, talents, and dreams for the future. The entire process of creation puts the witness, their stories, their ancestral memories, their interiority and their projection into the future at the centre. Although many productions constitute also a strong call to action against situa-

tions of injustice and discrimination, Theatre of the Witness does not primarily seek to arouse outrage in the audience, but to inspire them with stories of resilience, documenting, without any fiction or exaggeration, true stories of violation and reconciliation, embodied by the same people who lived it.

At the beginning of the process, the facilitator selects a group of people who have been directly involved in the same historical event (for example: a civil war) or who share the same situation or experience (for example: being in life imprisonment, caregivers of people with dementia, asylum seekers, etc.). Once the candidates have been identified and confirmed their interest in this process, the facilitator invites them to share their stories during individual interviews. On the basis of these preliminary meetings, the facilitator identifies a group of four to eight people who she considers ready to share their stories through theatre and invites them to participate in a theatre workshop. In her book<sup>3</sup>, Sepinuck identifies the following thirteen guiding principles to accompany the facilitator in the creative process with the witnesses.

1. You do not know;
2. Bear witness;
3. Find the medicine in the history;
4. The blessing is at the centre of the wound;
5. Deeply listen with the ears of your heart;
6. Become the vessel of the story;
7. Hold the paradox;
8. Find the gold in the story;
9. Take the problem, make it the solution;
10. Fall in love with the story;
11. Trust the process;
12. Everyone is me;
13. Express with Creativity.

Guided by these principles, the facilitator leads a creative workshop with

<sup>3</sup> T. Sepinuck T., *Theatre of Witness - Finding the Medicine in Stories of Suffering, Transformation and Peace*. Kingsley, London 2013.

the witnesses, and, based on their real life stories, prepares the script of the play and its annotations, in a constant process of listening and writing, weaving the stories and the points view of each witness. The process culminates in the presentation of a play performed by witnesses, before an audience that has often had similar experiences (relatives of chronic patients, former-combatants, etc.). Some Theatre of Witness plays have brought together violence survivors and perpetrators, to explore themes such as responsibility, guilt, restorative justice, and forgiveness. Theatre of Witness plays were presented in prisons, schools, community centres and conferences. These works created spaces for empathy and reflection that invite the audience to move from deeply rooted and polarized ideological positions to reciprocal understanding and reconciliation.

Sepinuck began to develop his methodology in 1986 in the United States, initially working with Asian refugees in a workshop that culminated in "Home", a play presenting the multiple meanings that the word "Home" had for people who had to flee their countries. In the early nineties, Sepinuck premiered the play "Living with Life" where a group of men in life imprisonment from Pennsylvania recounted the circumstances that led to their conviction and the relationships with their families. Although Sepinuck has been working with refugees affected by armed conflict since her first production, in her earliest creations she did not explicitly focus on armed conflicts. An important moment in Sepinuck's creative career is 2009, when she was awarded a European Union grant to create a piece with former combatants and victims of the armed conflict in Northern Ireland. Sepinuck left the United States and worked for five years in Derry, Northern Ireland<sup>4</sup>. In 2010, she premiered "I Once Knew a Girl", a play produced exclusively with former combatants and victims of the Northern Ireland conflict, followed by "Release" (2012), where Sepinuck stages a former British soldier, a prison director, a police investigator, two prisoners convicted for having participated in the conflict and a victim of a car bomb attack. During

<sup>4</sup> For an account of Sepinuck's experience in Northern Ireland see Grant D., Jennings M. "Processing the Peace: An Interview with Teya Sepinuck", in *Contemporary Theatre Review*, vol. 23, n. 3, 2013, pp. 314-322 and Grant D., "Shoulder to Shoulder: The Co-Existence of Truths in the Theatre of Witness", in Epinoux y Healy, *Post Celtic Tiger Ireland: Exploring New Cultural Spaces*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Cambridge 2003, p. 14-30.

the five years spent in Northern Ireland, Sepinuck mentored two disciples: Alessia Cartoni and Thomas Spiers, who facilitated two creative processes with victims of the conflict in 2012-13. In 2013 Cartoni premiered “We Carried Your Secrets”, where six relatives of the victims of the Ballymurphy massacre (Belfast, 1971) share their poetic stories of grief, loss and healing. In the same year, Spiers premiered “Unspoken Love”, where two mixed couples of Catholics and Protestants relate how the conflict affected their personal and family life.

In 2014, Sepinuck concluded her work in Northern Ireland and returned to the United States, concentrating her creative journey on the victims and perpetrators of urban violence in Philadelphia and the caregivers of people with dementia in the health system. In 2019 Sepinuck premieres “Walk in My Shoes”, where she intertwines stories of people convicted of murder on the streets of Philadelphia, police officers and mothers of murdered youth. At the end of 2019, Sepinuck premieres her latest creation: “Tangles in Time” where she presents the experiences of relatives of people living with dementia. Sepinuck’s research continues in 2020 with the preparation of a play featuring young people from a marginalized neighbourhood in Philadelphia.

## TESTIMONIAL THEATRE ON THE ARMED CONFLICT IN COLOMBIA

Colombia has a long history of testimonial theatre, which involved the actors of the armed conflict at different levels in the creation of theatrical pieces, it would be impossible to present all these experiences in this article. Just to cite a few recent examples, we can recall the work “Victus” by Alejandra Borrero (2016), where former guerrillas, former paramilitaries, victims and former members of the army intertwine their stories. Another example of theatre based on the victims’ testimonies is the play “Donde se descomponen las colas de los burros” (2015) by Carolina Vivas, based on testimonies of relatives of “false positives” (civilians who were intentionally killed by the army and presented as guerrilla fighters to receive economic benefits). Another example of testimonial theatre on the armed conflict is the autobiographical monologue “Night Wind”, by Héctor Aristizabal (2009), which recounts the experience of the author who was tortured by the Colombian Army in 1982 and his brother was

kidnapped and killed by an armed group at the end of the nineties. It is also worth mentioning the play “Antígonas Tribunal de Mujeres” by Patricia Ariza, created with women victims of different violations: some “Mothers of Soacha”, whose children were victims of extrajudicial executions, some survivors of political assassinations; some victims of the persecution of human rights leaders and some student leaders who were victims of judicial set-ups and unjust imprisonment. In this play, the victims, together with some actresses and dancers, perform on stage and present their painful stories. Two last examples that we remember are the plays “Perdon y Olvido” and “El Solar”, staged by the Teatro la Máscara in Cali, where Afro-descendant women victims of displacement from the Pacific coast act out their autobiographical stories.

The theatrical work of the “Arts for Reconciliation” research project with the group “Mujer Violeta” represents the first application of Theatre of Witness of Sepinuck in Latin America<sup>5</sup>. The importance of this pilot is also in combining Sepinuck’s experiences with victims of the armed conflict in Northern Ireland and the numerous and multiform Colombian experiences of testimonial theatre that we have just summarized.

## THE WORKSHOP

The workshop with Mujer Violeta was based on five steps. In the first, the author of this article facilitated activation and trust theatrical games<sup>6</sup>, to establish a climate of listening and not judgment in the group. The second step was the creation of ritual spaces where women could tell the story of an ancestor who inspired them. Theatre of Witness has various methods for sharing autobiographical accounts, including telling ancestral stories, writing letters, bringing significant objects and animating them, etc. Taking into account the limited time, the facilitator decided to focus only on ancestor stories as a way for women to share aspects of their lives, without going directly into their personal accounts. In this

5 A second experience of Theatre of Witness in Latin America is presented in Miramonti A., “Historias del río, relatos de ancestros: una experiencia de teatro testimonial con mujeres afrodescendientes del río Yurumanguí, in *Papel Escena*, Cali 2020 (forthcoming).

6 See A. Miramonti., *How to Use Forum Theatre for Community Dialogue. A Facilitator’s Handbook*. Lulu Press, North Carolina, 2017.

exercise, an ancestor does not necessarily mean a person older than the woman or already dead. An ancestor means a person who inspires the woman by how she is living or lived her life. This technique implies taking some distance from the pure autobiographical story, but also a reconnection with a significant person. In the three ancestor's stories that the group chose to stage, the monologues begin with the ancestor's story, but are told in connection with the role this person had for the witness, in her experience as victim of violence and displacement. The starting point of the narrative was the story of the ancestor, but the point of arrival was always the witness and how the ancestor inspired her on her path of healing in the present.



The Mujer Violeta group, the Fine Arts students and the author, during the workshop.

The creation process represented both a moment for sharing of autobiographical accounts and both an opportunity to reconnection with significant persons. This phase of oral narration did not focus exclusively on the past, but also on the present, where the person is now, on her search for healing, and on how she projects herself into the future. During this phase, the facilitator's question was not only: "I invite you to share what happened" but also: "I invite you to share how and where you are finding healing, in this moment of your life", and then: "I invite you to share your dreams, for yourself and for your loved ones, in the future".

The third step in the process was to identify three volunteers who felt ready to present their stories to an external audience and divide the par-

ticipants into three groups, to work on the staging of the three ancestral stories. The students from the Project split in the three groups and provided technical support to the performances. Each woman-witness acted the character of her ancestor and, in a few moments, the role of herself as narrator. At the end of each monologue, the witness also played the role of herself in the present moment, to connect the experience of the ancestor with her own experience of wounds and healing in the present. The fourth step in the process was the design of a reconciliation ritual that would serve as a framework within which to present the play. The ritual was designed and facilitated by the women themselves, taking into account their multiple symbolic languages (some of them were of the indigenous Nasa ethnic group and some others were Afro-descendants). The last step in the process was the presentation of the ritual and the play to an external audience.

## THE RITUAL, THE PLAY AND THE FORUM

The ritual and the play were presented in the House of Memories, Conflict and Reconciliation in Cali, on December 5, 2018, at night, in the courtyard of the Museum, in open air. The audience the women decided to invite for their premiere was restricted to eighty people: mainly other victims of displacement and sexual violence and some psychologists from the Victims Unit in Cali, who had supported many of the actresses after their arrival in Cali. Each spectator was invited to participate in the ritual wearing white robes, to signify their participation in the play as an entrance into a space separate from the ordinary: a sacred circle of memory and healing.

## THE RITUAL

The women of *Mujer Violeta* and the students of the Project jointly designed the ritual to enter the sacred space of the testimonies, where the work was to be presented. Upon arrival at the Museum, the director welcomed the spectators in a room next to the internal courtyard and invited them to remove their shoes, to form a line and to close their eyes. A student or a woman from *Mujer Violeta* accompanied by the hand

one spectator at a time to enter the ritual space, barefoot and with eyes closed. When the spectator touched the grass in the courtyard, the director asked her to open her eyes: the space before the stage had a mandala design with rose petals and lit candles on the floor and a corridor of lit candles marked a path in the dark. Then the director sprinkle the viewer with “palo santo” smoke (a natural incense) saying: “you are entering a sacred space of memory and healing. I invite you to listen with the ears of the heart and speak from your heart.” Then the director handed a candle to the spectator and asked her to light it from a bigger candle placed at the entrance to the patio, which represented the common fire of the ceremony that multiplied its light and heat in the spectators’ candles. Each spectator walked barefoot on the grass with his candle lit in his hand, walked around the mandala and arrived in the spectators’ space, in front of the stage, where he sat on a chair and left his candle lit at his feet during the entire play. When all the spectators were seated with their candle lit, the director welcomed the audience, explained that they were about to participate in a play that was staged during a workshop with victims of the conflict and that everything they were going to see was exclusively based on real events, acted and narrated by the same people who lived them. Then the electric lights that illuminated the stage faded, the public was left in the dark with the lights of the candles at their feet and the play began.

## THE PLAY

The play presents the ancestral stories of three women: Sara, Gabriela and Helena, acted by themselves, with the support of other members of *Mujer Violeta* and the students, who played secondary roles and supported the staging.

The first witness to appear on the scene was Sara (an Afro-descendant woman from the Colombian Pacific coast) who presented her mother’s story. Sara was born in a rural area and when she was a child, the mother decided to entrust her to a lady in a city. Sara was going to help with housekeeping chores in exchange for the possibility of going to school. The lady did not honour the agreement and exploited Sara, who could not attend school throughout her adolescence. Only as an adult she



Carolina Cadavid, performing arts graduate and member of the Project, inviting the three witnesses on the scene.

learned to read and write. Years later, Sara was forced to leave the house where she worked as an employee, due to threats from an armed group. She arrived in Cali, where her mother and two sisters had already been displaced. Upon arrival, Sara did not want to have any contact with her mother and had very sporadic contacts with her two sisters. Years later, her mother fell ill and died. Sara did not want to participate in the burial and withdrew from her two sisters. A few months after the funeral, the two sisters approached Sara and asked her why she had such hatred for their mother. She replied that it was because her mother “gave” her to another family, exposing her to the abuses she had to endure for years. The sisters explain that their mother had no other option, that she hoped that, by entrusting her to a family with more resources, she would be able to study and have better options in her life. Now that the mother had died, the two sisters ask Sara to let go of her resentment and reconcile herself with the spirit of the dead woman. Sara has contradictory feelings: on the one hand she hates her mother, because she considers her responsible for all the abuses that she suffered; on the other hand,

she wants to shed the weight of the past and reconnect with the person who gave her life. After a few days of uncertainty, Sara agrees to reconcile with her mother's spirit and the two sisters invite her to sing a traditional burial song for their mother together. The three sisters start singing the song together. During the song, the soul of the dead mother appears in the background, dressed completely in white. She walks slowly and approaches the backs of the three women. The mother's soul embraces her three daughters and the four women close the scene singing together.



Sara and her two sisters sing a burial song, while the spirit of the dead mother embraces them.

The second witness to appear on the scene was Gabriela (an indigenous woman) who told the story of her brother, who was assassinated some years before by an armed group. Gabriela, her two sisters Matilde and Graciela and Pedro, a brother who found the body of the other murdered brother acted on the scene. Gabriela opens the scene in the role of the narrator and tells the story of her family. A few years ago, one of her brothers who lived in a rural area disappeared and Pedro found the body in a plastic bag next to a river. At that time Gabriela and her sister Matilde lived very far from this area. The brother phoned them to inform them of the brother's murder and they had to travel for several days to get to the village where

the body was found. Upon their arrival, they had to fight to organize the burial, because in the cemetery there were no spaces and in the community there was no material to build a grave. Gabriela, Matilde, Graciela and Pedro had to fix the brother's grave with pieces of wood that they found in the place and they organized the burial simply with some flowers from the field and some lighted candles, singing and praying without anyone from the neighbours approaching, out of fear of the armed group that had murdered the brother. After the burial, Gabriela and Matilde return to the city where they lived. A few weeks later, the three sisters begin to dream of the murdered brother and share their dreams with each other. Gabriela dreams of her brother jumping into a crystal clear river and she pulls him out of the water. Matilde dreams that the dead brother calls her on the phone and tells her that he is now very well, not to worry. Graciela dreams of her brother who is sitting in a very big house and tells him that he has





Pedro and Matilde narrating the story of the murdered brother.

no clothes. At the end of the scene, the three sisters, Pedro, and the other characters meet and sing a burial song for the murdered brother.

The third witness to take the stage was Helena (an Afro-descendant woman from the Pacific coast) who began as a storyteller, telling the story of her grandmother. When she was a child, Helena lived with her grandmother on the shore of a river on the Pacific coast and her grandmother would often paddle with her along the secondary arms of the river. Helena remembers very well that her grandmother always sang while paddling.

When she was ten years old, Helena asked Grandma why she always sang and Grandma replied that she had to suffer a lot in her life and singing had always been her way of letting go of pain and moving on, with love and trust. Years later, when the grandmother had already died, Helena was the victim of sexual violence by an armed group and had to displace to Cali. She was unable to bring any luggage with her and in her first weeks in Cali she felt a deep despair. One day, suddenly Helena remembered her grandmother, her paddle, her songs, and of them two wandering in the rivers, near the coast. She found out that she *had* left everything she had, but everything that she *was* had travelled with her to Cali: she had her grandmother's inheritance in her body, her songs of mourning and rebirth have accompanied her since she was a child and will accompany her throughout her life. Helena begins to sing a song from the Pacific, thanking her grandmother for the intangible heritage of the songs which followed her during the displacement and continue to inspire her search for justice and reconciliation. During the song, the image of Helena's grandmother and the little girl Helena on the paddle appears in the background: they are traveling along the rivers singing



Gabriela acting out the scene of the brother's burial with her sister Graciela.



Helena's grandmother and Helena when she was a child sing as they travel the rivers of the Pacific coast.



Helena telling her story and Linda, a student of the project, acting in Helena's scene.

and the entire audience joins in Helena's singing, while all the actresses climb the stage and slowly dance with Helena.

## FORUM

After the play, the director invited those in the audience who wanted to get up with their candle lit in their hands and share the emotions that participating in the ritual and the play had aroused in them. Several people asked to speak. One spectator said she admired the courage of the women who took the stage for the first time in their life and told people they did not know about their most painful wounds. Some actresses from *Mujer Violeta* thanked the audience for having participated in the ritual, because in that extra-ordinary space they felt safe and listened to, while recounting their stories, and they perceived the empathy and concentration of the audience. At the conclusion of the forum, one of the three witnesses stressed that she felt that, through this process, she had been able to heal her wounds and give dignity to her person.

After the forum, the director invited the spectators and the actresses to form a single circle around the mandala of rose petals, with the candles lit in hand. He remembered that for the women it had been a ritual of reconciliation through art, but that it was not only the victims who needed to reconcile. Each person needs reconciliation in many aspects of their life. The director invited each person present, whether from *Mujer Violeta*, the Project or the audience, to think about a situation or a person with whom she needed to reconcile and when she had found it, to blow her candle and silently formulate a proposition to seek reconciliation with this person or situation. Slowly the candles in the circle went out, one by one, silently, until the circle was in darkness around the mandala of rose petals. The presentation silently ended.

## THREE STORIES, THOUSANDS OF STORIES

The three stories presented on stage have some elements in common. The first is the displacement by armed groups from rural areas to the city of Cali as a common horizon of experience for the tree witnesses. Another common theme in the stories of several women (including some who told their stories

during the workshop, but did not act it out on stage) is the search for the remains of murdered loved ones and the struggle to bury them. Gabriela told the story of her brother's body found in a plastic bag, others told about missing bodies, of clothing items as the only memories of a murdered loved one. This theme is common to many times and cultures, and resonates in



The women of “Mujer Violeta” and the students of the “Arts for Reconciliation” Research Project after the presentation, Cali, December 5, 2018.

Sophocles' tragedy “Antigone” of the 5th century BC as well as in the play “Donde se descomponen las colas de los burros” by Carolina Vivas<sup>7</sup> from the 21st century and also appears in the autobiographical monologue of Gabriela, who fights to organise the burial of her murdered brother. The issue of domestic abuse of children separated from their families at an early age, which appears in Sara's story, was also present in various stories shared by the women, stressing how the violence of the conflict often affected people who had already been made vulnerable by social structures preceding the conflict. It is also worth stressing that the three stories that the women chose do not directly touch the circumstances of sexual violence. The three witnesses chose to focus their staging on other stories of wounds and reconciliation, showing the complexity of their experience and contributing to not put themselves in the role of “victims of sexual violence” and not to reinforce this label. Although it was a process with

7 C. Vivas, *Dramaturgia y presente*, Umbral Teatro, Bogotá 2012.

people who have the legal status of “victims of the armed conflict”, according to the Colombian Victims Law 1448 of 2011, the process did not focus on a single victimizing event and each witness chose the ancestral stories they wanted to tell out of their entire life experience.

Analysing the healing paths that the women presented, the centrality of singing and music as a practice to elaborate grief and strengthen personal and community resilience is highlighted, especially in the stories of the two Afro-descendant women (Helena and Sara). Another central theme in the search for healing is the reconnection of the witness with the living and the dead members of her family of origin, through immaterial symbols such as the burial song that Sara and her sisters sing to evoke the spirit of the dead mother. Central is also the issue of the transmission of knowledge and cultural roots within the extended family, as in the case of Helena, who since her childhood learnt from her grandmother the songs that will allow her to recover her ancestral memories and re-build a sense of her identity at the time of deepest despair. During her monologue, Helena says: “When I arrived in the city, I realized that everything I had I had lost, but everything that I was I had displaced with me, I realized that I carried my grandmother’s heritage in me I had carried her songs”. In addition, singing, reconnecting Helena with the granddaughter and connecting Helena with the other Afro-descendant people displaced in the city becomes a moment of resistance and reconnection with people of the same culture. A final theme that arises in Gabriela’s story is the link between the historical world and the oneiric world: faced with the murder of the brother, the three sisters manage to reconnect with each other and with the dead person sharing the appearances of the dead brother in their dreams.

## FROM VICTIM TO WITNESS: RE-SIGNIFYING THE WOUND

Reflecting on this experience, we can highlight that this pilot Theatre of Witness workshop with victims proved effective in accompanying healing processes at three levels:

1. internal (the process favoured the elaboration of personal grief through art and the incorporation of events of loss and transformation into the scene);

2. interpersonal (the group of women victims was strengthened in its role as a psychosocial support group) and
3. social, (the work managed to open a deep dialogue between the group of victims and the Colombian and international society in general, represented by the audience and the readers of this article).

In addition, the workshop was an opportunity to re-signify the condition of “victim” and “displaced”, moving from a passive and victimizing narrative to a more active role of witness creating her own narrative, accompanying the person to move from a story focused on their past and their wounds to a story that connects the past with the present and projects both towards the future. This process of re-signification of the experiences, personal identities and time seeks healing and blessing going through the midst of the wound, transforming personal stories as tiles in a mosaic of collective memory, and communicates them through art. The stories of the women of *Mujer Violeta* speak at the same time of their victimization and their bravery, turning them into stories of heroines who had to face arduous ordeals and who, by telling these ordeals, go from identifying themselves as victims to recognizing themselves as witnesses and possible protagonists of reconciliation. The work of staging before an external audience could then be configured as a rite of passage, which accompanies women in acquiring another identity, not only as a victim, but also as a witness, as a heroine who has received a tragic call to transformation, to live in her life and her body a painful moment in the history of her country and that now, returning from her initiation, she uses art to witness how this trip transformed her forever. Her public testimony becomes part of the struggle of all the victims to regain their integrity, obtain justice and seek reconciliation.

## **CONCLUSION: A BROADER STORY**

Reflecting on the results of this process almost two years later, a more general question arises about the public witness of painful stories: why telling our stories is healing? Why acting out your own experiences of suffering is healing for the person who lived them and for her community? What is healing in telling someone's wounds to others? We could answer with the famous saying: “counting is healing because what is not hidden does

not hurt”, but we can also formulate some additional reflections. This process was not based on a victim individually recounting their wounds to another person, nor has it been solely a process of telling the story. The process has been to tell personal and painful stories in a ritual space to the entire group and to the students, and eventually act them before an external audience. It was not even just telling what happened, but expressing *the meaning* that each woman attributed to her experience, mobilizing her cultural and family resources. As Sepinuck affirms, Theatre of Witness is not only “telling someone’s story”, but “telling the story of this person being transformed by telling her story to others<sup>8</sup>”, showing the meaning that, when telling their story, the person attributes to her painful memories and the re-signification of her own identity in the process of telling her story. These reflections lead us to conclude that not only telling our stories is healing, but also that testifying in front of others and inviting them to bear witness is healing, telling the community what happened and the meaning that the witness attributes to her experience. We want to conclude this article by returning to the phrase of Hannah Arendt that opened it: “talking about our wounds as part of a broader story gives them meaning and makes them more acceptable<sup>9</sup>”. We believe that this is the essence of Theatre of the Witness. It is the search for a “broader story”, a choral story that achieves a higher level of consciousness, which gives meaning with its uniqueness to thousands of stories of suffering, weaving them together and creating a quilt of interwoven stories, a “broader story”, which encompasses all the untold stories, establishes new links between those who lived through the conflict and opens ground for reconciliation. What is healing then is to go from feeling and narrating oneself as a victim of senseless violence to presenting oneself and feeling like a witness of the conflict and protagonist of reconciliation.

Finally, it is important to highlight that this process was not only healing for the victims. Also the students went through a deep process of bearing witness and encountering the painful stories of their country. During a meeting after the ritual, one of them, Ana Maria, a visual arts graduate who accompanied this process since its inception, said:

8 Quote from the Theatre of Witness Training with Teya Sepinuck, Philadelphia, June 2018.

9 H. Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, Mariner Books, New York 1970, p. 119.

while the women of *Mujer Violeta* were telling their stories of violence, I just wanted to run out of the room, leave all this pain behind, I had to make violence to myself to continue there, listening to them. Now I feel that forcing me to stay helped them to know that we were carrying the weight of their memories together, and I feel that that was important to them.

Reflecting from this process almost two years later, another student, Carolina, a visual arts graduate and member of the research project writes:

May 24, 2020. One chair facing another, candles on top of each chair and palo santo. Ritual music. Memories of ancestors, we all breathe as one, we all exhale as one. “What does this story provoke us? Remember that this is a space to share wounds, but it is also a space for healing” says the facilitator.

Two years later, I feel that this experience was particularly special for me, since I have never experienced Colombian violence to such magnitude. My life stories do not carry blood and disappearance and, if I have moved from one place to another, it has not been by force, but by choice. I think what I’m trying to say is that I was able to get into that violence through these stories, I was able to relive it over and over again, through their memories. I was able to take the time to feel the pain inside me and even feel it overflow, having to give up the activity. Also, over time I managed to distance myself from that pain and observe it, so that I could listen to the stories from another place. At the same time, these stories gave me the opportunity to reflect on my own violent encounters, the pain of death, the meaning of life, my priorities, and to ask myself what my healing tools are.

The decision of these women caught my attention, their impetus to carry out this project. They were full of ideas, their creativity surfaced more every day in the midst of all the crude details that they revived from their past. Now I can see something that at that time was not, and that is that the *Mujer Violeta* women were already clear that they were in a healing process. Many in fact had already gone through the process and were being pillars of support for others that were just beginning. They were not there because they were summoned and they wanted to experiment, they allowed us to be co-creators of a chapter of their healing.

I think Helena is one of the people who has impacted me the most. I can still hear her voice clear, strong and at the same time I see her cadence that, without a doubt, reminds me of the sea. She told us the story of her grandmother, when she carried her on the canoe while she went fishing and her grandmother sang and sang along the way. She, three years old, asked him: “grandma, why do

you sing so much?” and the grandmother replied “because the road is very hard and very long.” After that, Helena begins to sing and we all freeze. It was no longer just her singing, it was her grandmother as well and her entire lineage. You could feel the entire history of a region through her voice, a moment that I will always treasure.

What was left of the experience was mainly strength. The force that lies and grows from the place of vulnerability, the force that authenticity has, the force of voice and sound, the force of memory. The force of resilience and expression, the force that a real story has on a stage, that force that has an experience after having been lived, felt and healed.

Ana Maria and Carolina’s words seem to complete those of Hannah Arendt: listening to the painful stories of the victims is “carrying them together”, it is “becoming the vessel” of the stories and deeply “fall in love with the stories”. We believe that it was at the same time “telling her wounds as part of a larger story” and “carrying together” the stories of each woman that, returning to Hannah Arendt’s words, “gave it meaning and made them more bearable”.

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