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THE “HERO’S JOURNEY” IN THE REINTEGRATION OF ADOLESCENT FORMER COMBATANTS

A pilot experience from Colombia

ABSTRACT

The article presents a pilot experience on the use of Joseph Campbell’s Hero’s Journey to conduct a myth creation and enactment workshop with a group of child soldiers in Colombia. This case study documents that myth creation and enactment methodologies can provide an effective metaphorical space for adolescent former combatants to mark and re-signify their transition from the armed group to civil society. We argue that myth creation and enactment workshops based on the Hero’s Journey constitute a specific pedagogical dispositif with five key characteristics: projection, distancing, embodiment, containment and mirroring. The synergic interaction of these five characteristics proved effective to accompany the delicate transition period of former combatants from the “Disarmament and Demobilisation” phase to “Re-integration”, including access to tertiary education. In particular, this dispositif produced the following psychosocial results: strengthen the empathy within the group, re-signify the adolescents’ memories of the past, enhance self-esteem and self-efficacy and reduce the anxiety of entering university life.

INTRODUCTION

The Colombian armed conflict started in the mid-60ties and generated over 250.000 casualties, out of which 81% were civilians¹. The war forced over 6 million people to displace, making Colombia the second country in the world for population of Internally Displaced People. One in three of the 7.6 million registered victims of the conflict are children and it is estimated that 45,000 children were killed during the conflict². In November 2016, following four years of negotiations, the Colombian Government signed a historical peace agreement with the biggest armed group in the country: the FARC-EP (Colombia's Revolutionary Armed Forces – People's Army). The implementation of the agreement led over 8,000 FARC-EP combatants to hand over their weapons and demobilise in 2017³. In addition, from 2001 to 2019 over 60.000 former combatants of different fighting groups individually demobilized⁴.

As part of its mandate to support the reintegration of former combatants of all armed groups, the Colombian Government's Agency for Reincorporation and Normalisation (ARN) established a national partnership with the Ministry of Education to support the return to school of demobilized former combatants. Those who did not complete secondary school have the option to join an accelerated secondary school course (*bachillerato*), while those who completed secondary school have can take the admission exam (ICFES) and enter public universities. According to the ARN, in 2019 over 10.000 former combatants of various armed groups had access to school or university⁵. As part of the national effort to support the reintegration of former combatants through education, in January 2019, the *Universidad del Valle* in Cali established a

1 A. Steele, *Democracy and Displacement in Colombia's Civil War*, Cornell University Press, Chicago 2018.

2 Registro Único de Víctimas, *Unidad para las Víctimas*, Bogotá 2016.

3 Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, *Una guerra sin edad. Informe nacional de reclutamiento y utilización de niños, niñas y adolescentes en el conflicto armado colombiano*, Biblioteca Nacional, Bogotá 2017.

4 Agencia de Reincorporación y Normalización, *Cuadro histórico de personas desmovilizadas*, 2019, url: shorturl.at/jrH03

5 Agencia de Reincorporación y Normalización, *Cerca de 10.000 personas han ingresado al sistema educativo, en el marco del proceso de reincorporación*, 2019, url: shorturl.at/mET16

4-month Pre-University Course to prepare former combatants who hold a secondary school degree to take the university admission test. This article is a reflection from the author's participation in this course in the capacity of facilitator of the psychosocial component.

THE PRE-UNIVERSITY PROGRAMME FOR FORMER COMBATANTS IN COLOMBIA

The first edition of the Pre-university course for former combatants in the *Universidad del Valle*, started in February and ended in June 2019. The aim of the course was to strengthen the academic preparation of former combatants who intended to take the university admission exam in June 2019. The course's subjects were: Mathematics, Spanish, English, Social Sciences and Biology. The participants were divided in two groups: one exclusively composed of former FARC combatants and the other composed of former combatants who individually demobilised from various groups. In this specific case, the latter group was composed only of former combatants younger than 18 at the date of their demobilization. During the design of the programme, the professors in charge of the course shared their concerns about the latter group, highlighting that, although the course focused on strengthening academic skills, their previous teaching experiences showed that the emotional fragility of some of these youths could affect their learning achievements. During a planning meeting, an English Language professor said:

We have to be aware that the traumatic experiences of these youths can jeopardize their learning achievements far beyond what we can imagine. The last time I taught English to a group of adolescent former combatants I was explaining to them the use of terms like "mother", "father", etc. and I asked one of them to practice these words by asking another student about his parents. During the exercise some students silently started weeping, because they had never known their parents, they had grown up in orphanages and the sense of uncertainty they were experiencing in the university brought them back to re-experience the anxiety and sense of unsafety they felt in the orphanage and in the armed group. Some of them dropped out from the course because they could not manage this anxiety. Even though this programme is expected to teach basics in Maths, English, etc. we have to be constantly prepared to any

aspect of our lessons that could trigger traumatic memories of these youth. We also need to set up a specific psycho-social support component for this group of students, to reduce their anxiety of entering an unknown world and ensure they can support each other as a group with similar combat experiences. (Meeting with pre university course professors, 4th February 2019)

During a bilateral conversation, another professor added:

We also need to be aware that those who were part of the FARC-EP and demobilized in the framework of the 2016's Peace Agreements are mostly adults and the majority of them are proud of their identity of former guerrilla fighters. They feel they have just left some weapons to take up others: they put guns down, but they did not abandon the fight for social justice. For them, entering university is a way to continue the same fight with other tools. The minors who join our course after individually demobilising from many different armed groups are very different. They have no pride of being former combatants, no shared identity, although they do have shared similar experiences. They feel alone in facing the uncertainty of having to redefine their identity after leaving the armed group. In addition, they face the stigma of the society and feel deeply ashamed of their past. They do not even call themselves "former combatants", they claim that there were forcibly recruited, true or not, and prefer to label themselves as "victims of the armed group". The relationship with the past is also very different between the two groups. When those who collectively demobilised like to talk about their past, they feel a certain sense of belonging: over 8.000 of them made the same choice at the same time. Those who individually demobilised rarely talk about the past, when they have to do it, they just say "it is gone, I want to move on". They just want to delete this part of their life from their own memory and from the memory of the society. They do not want to establish any continuity with their values, they do not want to keep bonds with other demobilised combatants, they often feel alone and anxious. They just want to enter university, get a job, build a family and hide this shameful chapter of their lives, even to themselves. (private conversation with Social Sciences professor, 4th of February 2019)

Based on these experiences, the professors team agreed to invite the author to design and facilitate a psychosocial support component for the pre-university course.

DESIGNING THE WORKSHOP

The key objectives of the psychosocial component were to:

1. accompany the delicate moment of transition and support the redefinition of identities implied by handing over weapons and entering university,
2. offer a space for self-discovery, where the adolescents can strengthen their self-perception and self-esteem, both as individuals and as a group.

The author proposed to identify the moment of transition of the youths as a moment of “liminality” as defined by the ethnologist von Gennep⁶ to indicate the intermediate phase of a rite of passage, when the initiates are separated from their families and taken to an unknown world (forest, desert, etc.) where they are put to test, before returning to the community with a new identity. The author proposed to present the course as a liminal space of initiation tests that prepares the following phase of reintegration, when the community acknowledges that the youth acquired a new identity and welcomes them back. The author proposed to use a myth creation and enactment structure called the “*Hero’s Journey*” as a psychosocial and creative tool to accompany the adolescents through a metaphorical rite of passage.

THE HERO’S JOURNEY AND DRAMA THERAPY

The Hero’s Journey is a comparative mythology theory elaborated by Joseph Campbell⁷. According to this theory, all human myths are different versions of one underlying narrative, that Campbell called the “Monomyth”. This narrative is the “Hero’s Journey”, the same unchanging story that is being told in myths of all ages and cultures, because it responds to a fundamental need of every human being: to recognize her own story of ordeals, self-discovery and transformation as a universal human experience and find purpose and meaning for her own existence.

6 A. van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2019.

7 J. Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Pantheon Books, New York 1949 and J. Campbell, *The Masks of God* (4 volumes), Penguin Books, London 1962-68.

In formulating the Hero's Journey, Campbell was strongly influenced by Carl Jung's theory of the collective unconscious and the Archetypes, and by Vladimir Propp's functions of the folk tales⁸. According to Campbell, the Hero's Journey is the story of a protagonist who undertakes an interior and/or external journey, following these steps:

1. The protagonist comes to life and spends her childhood in anonymity. Sometimes the coming to life of the protagonist is mysterious and surrendered by presages and mystery. The protagonist's early childhood is threatened and she survives the attack of obscure enemies.
2. During childhood, other presages appear, announcing that the protagonist is called to an extraordinary life, but they are either misunderstood or ignored by the community;
3. In a certain moment of her adolescence or adult life, the protagonist receives a "Call to Adventure", a call to undertake an interior or exterior journey of transformation. The protagonist initially refuses to go journey, either because she feels comfortable in her own world or because she does not trust herself;
4. A mentor appears and helps the protagonist to gain awareness of her skills and convinces (or forces) the protagonist to leave;
5. The protagonist crosses a physical or symbolic threshold between her Ordinary World and a Special World.
6. In the Special World, the protagonist meets helpers and enemies and faces tests and ordeals;
7. After passing the tests, the protagonist enters a symbolic or material "Inmost Cave" or dives into "the Abyss", where she meets the Antagonist: her Shadow Self. The only way to defeat the undeveloped dark sides of herself is to symbolically die and be reborn as the hero who encountered her own shadows and integrated them in herself (apotheosis);
8. The reborn hero receives a gift or a revelation, related to the initial Call to Adventure. The hero starts the journey back home;
9. The hero crosses again the threshold between worlds, she realizes she has become a "Master of two Worlds" and reaches home. At the

8 V. Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1968.

beginning, her community does not recognize her and accepts her new identity only when she tells the story of the journey that made her “ascend to a higher plane” of self-awareness.

DRAMA THERAPY AND THE HERO'S JOURNEY

Although Campbell's structure was originally conceived as a comparative mythology theory, Rebillot⁹ adopted the Hero's Journey as a projective tool to guide groups in mythopoetic retreats as a process of healing and self-discovery. The participants were invited to create their own hero and journey, to identify themselves in the protagonist and in the steps of her journey of rebirth. Through the making of the myths, Rebillot led the participants to re-signify events of their own life as tests and ordeals and to identify in their wounds the learnings that made them “Masters of two worlds”. After Rebillot's experiences, the Hero's Journey became an integral part of Drama therapy¹⁰ at the beginning of the XXI century. Nixon et al.¹¹ applied this structure to group therapy of pathological gamblers, while Robert Landy identified a strong connection between Drama therapy's approaches and the Hero's Journey¹². According to Landy, in drama therapy the hero is a character invented by the client who wants to achieve a change within and around herself. This desired change is projected in the narrative and the metaphorical space of the character's journey, and eventually taken in the client's personal life. The use of characters as metaphors to organize the participants' internal experience provides what Landy calls “aesthetic distance” between

9 P. Rebillot, M. Kay, *The Call to Adventure: Bringing the Hero's Journey to Daily Life*, Harper, San Francisco 1993.

10 Drama therapy is defined as “the intentional use of drama and/or theatre processes to achieve therapeutic goals” (NADTA, 2019). Drama therapy uses games, theatre and rituals as key components of the therapeutic process with individuals and groups.

11 G. Nixon, J. Solowoniuk, V. McGowan, *The Counterfeit Hero's Journey of the Pathological Gambler: A Phenomenological Hermeneutics Investigation*, in “International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction”, n. 3, 2006, pp. 217-232.

12 R. Landy, , *Understanding Drama Therapy in Terms of the Hero's Journey*, in “Psychology Today”, 2012, url: shorturl.at/hxJTW and M. Minerson, *Destination: Home – a conversation with Robert Landy on the current state of integration and the Hero's Journey*, in “Drama Therapy Review”, n. 1, 2017, pp. 149-153.

the client's biography and the character's story¹³. The Hero's Journey has been eventually used by Klees¹⁴ for individual drama therapy of psychiatric disorders, and by Rodriguez-Morales¹⁵ in addiction recovery, while Boklage et al.¹⁶ document the use of the Hero's Journey in pedagogy. Narrowing the focus to the use of the Hero's Journey with adolescents, Minerson¹⁷ (2017) documents a case study on the use of this process with boys and girls affected by anxiety and trauma-based disorders and Scarlet¹⁸ (2017) proposes a "super-hero therapy" (based on the Hero's Journey structure with super-hero characters) in the therapy of youth with pathological anxiety, depression, anger, and shame. To the author's knowledge, the experience documented in this article represents the first experience of using Joseph Campbell's structure in the reintegration of child soldiers.

THE WORKSHOP

The Hero's Journey workshop delivered during the pre-university course lasted 15 hours, divided in five sessions of three hours. The participants were five boys and five girls aged between 16 and 18 years. All the participants were former combatants who individually demobilised in 2017-18. The workshop was based on Campbell's structure and included both myth creation and enactment. At the beginning of each session, the author used August Boal's "games-exercises"¹⁹ to build a space of trust,

13 R. Landy, *Persona and Performance: The Meaning of Role in Drama, Therapy and Everyday Life*, The Guilford Press, New York, London 1993, p. 25.

14 S. Klees, *A Hero's Journey in a German psychiatric hospital: A case study on the use of role method in individual drama therapy*, in "Drama Therapy Review", n. 1, 2016, pp. 99-110.

15 L. Rodriguez-Morales, *A hero's journey: becoming and transcendence in addiction recovery*, in "Journal of Psychological Therapies", n. 2, 2019, pp. 155-166.

16 A. Boklage, B. Coley, N. Kellam, *Understanding engineering educators' pedagogical transformations through the Hero's Journey*, in "European Journal of Engineering Education", n. 6, 2019, pp. 923-938.

17 M. Minerson, *Destination: Home – a conversation with Robert Landy on the current state of integration and the Hero's Journey*, in "Drama Therapy Review", n. 1, 2017, pp. 149-153.

18 J. Scarlet, *Superhero Therapy: A Hero's Journey Through Acceptance and Commitment Therapy*, in "Journal of Youth and Adolescence", n. 7, 2017, pp. 1629-1632.

19 A. Boal, *Games for Actors and Non Actors*, Routledge, Abington 2002 and A. Miramonti, *How to Use Forum Theatre for Community Dialogue, a Facilitator's Handbook*, Lulu Press, Morrisville 2017.

non-judgment and listening among the students. After the warm-up, the participants were invited to split in pairs, imagine a heroine or hero that inspired them, define the hero's strengths and shadows and create the protagonist's Ordinary World. Once the hero had come to life, the participants were invited to create the journey, following the steps presented above. Each participant wrote her story, enacted each step with the pair and eventually presented a short enactment of that step to the whole group.

While the participants immediately connected with the games and quickly created a space of amusement and trust, the first difficulty they faced was connecting with their own imagination and establishing an "aesthetic distance" between their personal autobiography and their hero's experiences. The author also proposed to follow these three rules to stimulate imagination and increase the distance between mythical and autobiographical storytelling:

- At every step of the journey, the group will give to each participant a random object, a verb, a weird place or a character that somehow had to appear in the story.
- The world of the hero has to be somehow different from our ordinary world, there could be magic elements, spirits, gods, imaginary animals and plants, superpowers, witchcrafts, etc.;
- The story will be told in the third person and in the past tense and will be enacted as if it happened in a remote past;

In spite of these "distancing devices", some of the adolescents' myths strongly resonated with their autobiographies. A boy told the author: "professor, I really have no fantasy to imagine a hero, my hero is myself. All I can do is to tell you my real story". The author replied: "Fine, so tell us the story of a hero who is yourself, but show us the magic, the extra-ordinary in this story". In spite of the reduced distance some participators put between their myth and their real story, the workshop's container of non-judgment and empathy allowed the participants to share their stories without being overcome by traumatic memories and negative emotions.

THE HERO'S JOURNEYS OF ADOLESCENT FORMER COMBATANTS

Presenting and analysing in detail all the ten myths created by the students and their theatrical enactment is beyond the scope of this article. We can instead identify some key themes, when possible quoting from the participants' own myths.

The hero the students imagined is equally a female or male character, mostly human, but with some special gifts, living most of the times in nowadays' Colombia, but in natural and wild spaces like the Amazon rain forest. In the identification of the Hero's strengths and shadows, a key theme is that the hero can't accept any injustice, she is stubborn, her shadow is that she is sometimes impulsive and ruthless. Some of the hero's' shadows are rooted in childhood: "my hero was deceived by her caregivers in childhood and now, in adult life, she doesn't trust anyone". The hero is often gifted with extraordinary powers: "my hero can talk to all animals, but she is never understood by humans, so she spends all her childhood chatting with her best friends: the insects". In the hero's childhood a presage of the call to an extraordinary life is the early separation from the biological family: "my hero was abandoned when he was very small, he never really had time to play". The hero was charged with adult duties since childhood: "my heroine was too busy taking care of others when she was a child, she could not take care of herself", "my hero never met his father", "my hero's family was killed when he was a baby, he survived thanks to the spirit of the river who saved him, but he had to fight for survival since the very beginning". The Call to Adventure and the refusal of the Call both express the hero's low self-esteem and reticence to leave the protagonist's world: "My hero received the gift of making water spring from wherever part of the ground he touched. Climate change was affecting the driest regions of the world, the people living at the outskirts of the desert were about to starve, they receive a revelation from the spirits of their ancestors and decided to go find the hero in the rain forests. The hero initially does not want to go, it is too hot and too far over there, and his water springs are so great". The identity of the mentor sometimes embodies a normative stance for equality: "The spirit of the waters appeared to the hero and told him he had to

go help the desert people, the spirit would give him the power to make water spring from whatever part of the desert he would touch with his knees”.

During the journey in the Special World, the heroes face ordeals echoing combat experiences: “On his way to the dry land, my hero was attacked by the enemies who had been trying to kill him since his childhood, they bombed him with helicopters, but he survived running in the middle of narrow cliffs, where the helicopters could not follow him”. Meeting the Shadow Self in the Inmost Cave reveals the hero’s anxiety, fear, shame and weak self-efficacy: “in the cave, my heroine felt that people did not really care about her and she cared too much about what they thought about her, this was her worst trap. In the Cave, my heroine offloaded this burden”. After the rebirth, the return home of the hero shows the fear to be refused, but also awareness of the difference between who undertook the journey and who remained in the Ordinary World: “when she reached home, her family was surprised to see her back. The heroine felt much older than her family, after all she had survived in the Special World. They were scared of her, she had become expert of surviving in the Special World, they had simply no idea”. Another student wrote: “telling his story is what saved my hero from being considered mad, some people still do not want to listen, but he is telling his story to the people he trusts”.

At the end of the workshop, the participants shared that some of her myths resonated with their personal experience: what they had gone through (the tests), what they learned from it (the revelation) and also pointed out that “some aspects of the story are not about our past, they reflect our desires and fears towards the future”. One of the girls highlighted that, “whatever is the content of my story, I would have never thought of being able to write a fiction story by myself. I hope many people will read it and like it”. A boy said: “I’m always scared when I have to write an essay for the Spanish exam, I look at the empty sheet and I don’t know what to write. This workshop helped me to see I have a lot to say”. Another boy highlighted the impact of the workshop on his motivation and self-esteem: “I feel the admission exam will be my Inmost Cave, if I get a good score, I will be my hero”. Finally, a girl highlighted that: “it is true that after the journey the hero becomes the “Mas-

ter of Two Worlds” she knows how to survive in that World and can also learn to live back home”. This final statement echoes Campbell’s world: “after the journey, the hero has become able to live in both the spiritual and material world, [...] he achieved freedom to pass back and forth across the worlds [...] not contaminating the principles of the one with those of the other, yet permitting the mind to know the one by virtue of the other. This is the talent of the master”²⁰. Becoming the master of two worlds, proved to be a powerful metaphor to represent the wisdom that the adolescents received from their ordeals, if they could find a space of elaboration for these experiences.

WHEN MYTHOPOETICS MEETS AUTOBIOGRAPHY: MARIA

At the end of the workshop, the participants verbalised that the workshop had increased their self-esteem and positively marked the transition they were in. However, it is important to note that the mythopoetic structure of the workshop produced the additional effect of inviting other participants to share their own autobiographical stories. Here is an example that occurred during the workshop that we present quoting from the author’s field notes.

At the beginning of the second session of the Hero’s Journey workshop, I meet Maria²¹ a university student who volunteers to help the adolescents during the course. She comes to the workshop and sits down. As I always do, I invite her to join the students in the circle and play with us. She replies: “no, I will just watch”. I normally do not allow any spectators in my workshops, but, since she is part of the professors’ team, I accept, hoping she will feel comfortable to join us later. After the initial warm up games, I introduce the next step of the Hero’s Journey: “last time you chose a hero that inspired you, this time we will write and enact your Hero’s childhood: this child has something weird, she is different from the others, either in her personality or in her body, she may have a disability, a tendency to socialize differently. During her childhood, something unusual happens: an event that shows that the child is called to an extraordinary life, but nobody takes it seriously”. The participants split in pairs and start creating this step of the journey. Once again, I invite Maria to join a pair and

20 J. Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, cit., p. 346.

21 The name and other personal details were changed to protect the person’s privacy.

create her own myth. Once again, she politely refuses and remains seated. The participants are writing and rehearsing in pairs. I walk around the pairs: everyone has understood what they have to do and they seem focused. Then I turn to Maria. She has a piece of paper in her hands. I try again: "Maria, would you like to join a pair and create with them?" She looks at me: "no, I don't want to join a group. Can I write the story of my hero by myself?". I feel she is eager to belong to the workshop, something awoke her interest, but maybe she is concerned about keeping a certain distance from the students, so I say: "yes, and if you do not want to enact your myth, you could just read it to the others". She agrees and starts writing alone. After ten minutes, she hands me a piece of paper and says: "I don't want to read it to the others, just read it yourself". I read it: "my hero is a child who grew up in an orphanage, his strengths are solidarity, courage and that he cannot stand any injustice. His shadows are that he is very stubborn and does not listen to anyone. Since his childhood, he has been beaten and abused in the orphanage. One day, when he was eleven, the child saw a man who was mistreating a woman; the child picked up a big stone and blow the man in his face, right in the middle of the eyes. The man tried to fight, but the boy hits him again and again with the same stone, until the man ran away. The woman ran away and the boy remained alone, holding the big stone, stained with the blood of the assailant. While he was looking at the stone and realizing what he had done, that child swore on that blood-stained stone that he would have always defended the weakest". As I read it, I think "will it be her story?" Maybe he has been abused and uses the character to mirror herself?". It is a thought that goes through my mind for a moment, but I have to go see how the students in pairs are progressing, so I give Maria the hints for the following step: "Many thanks Maria. Now, in the next step, the hero receives a call. There is a problem: something is wrong in his life, something that will force him to leave on a journey of profound transformation". I look at Maria: she is holding her notebook, she looks worried and lost. I'm afraid I haven't explained myself well, I think: "maybe it's too abstract, maybe she doesn't know what to write, maybe she needs an example". She suddenly says: "Fine, let me work on it". A few minutes later, the whole group moves to an outdoor amphitheatre for rehearsing the childhood presages: the first pair presents their improvisations of the call to adventure. While I prepare the scene, I see Maria, who came outside and sat in the last row, motionless. She looks at the stage and the audience silently. The first couple of actors rehearses the childhood of their heroes: "my hero, since his early childhood had no parents", the second hero comes on stage: "my hero was abandoned when she was three years old", the third: "in his childhood, my hero was abused and had to run away from home". The students continue rehearsing the childhood of their heroes and the presages of an extraordinary future. Thirty minutes later, the

rehearsals of the pairs end, we make a quick ritual to celebrate the day. The participants hold hands in circle and they talk about how they felt during the session. “I feel happy to be with my fellow students in a different way, these lessons are not like the others, they give us a fun space to meet”, “I feel I’m working on something that is me, although I’m at the same time inventing something else”, “I feel I’m exchanging something to my fellow students beyond school, they can see something else of who I am”. We end the session breathing together three times, with closed eyes. The students put on their backpacks and leave. I collect my props and put them in my backpack. Then I turn to the amphitheatre: they are all gone, the sun is setting. Suddenly I look at the highest row and I see her: Maria is still sitting there. I ask her how she felt and what she thinks about the students’ participation. She replies: “I felt very identified”. I ask her “Identified? You? With these youths who just demobilised? She answers: “yes. Identified. Because I’m a FARC-EP defector”. I freeze. Her? A university student in charge of the students? She stares at me: “Yes, I joined the FARC at the age of fourteen, and I deserted when I was sixteen. Did you notice that many the heroes of these youths had been abandoned since early childhood, they had been abused or had no parents? My hero is me: I was abandoned before I was one year-old and I ended up in an orphanage. In that place, there were many children, their parents came to pick them up in the evening, I always stayed at night, because nobody came to pick me up. I was abused several times, I suffered violence of all kinds while I was there. At fourteen, I was full of hate. That is the moment when the guerrilla recruited me. They felt I was ready to kill and told me: “come with us if you want a different life”. They do not forcefully recruit, as the propaganda says, but they emotionally manipulate you, they saw my hatred for everyone and found ways to channel this hatred for their purposes. I joined the guerrilla on the mountains. At sixteen I was in a building and the army bombed us. Many of my comrades died. I saved myself, but I saw their bodies torn apart in the middle of the rubble, I felt frightened of ending up in the same way. For a moment I saw my body dismembered on the ground, in the midst of the concrete pieces crumbled by bombs. I decided to desert. I surrendered my weapons and managed to return to high school. In spite of many difficulties, I managed to enter university. I felt that my duty was to help those who, like me, decide to put down their weapons and want to go back to school. So I volunteered to help in the courses for former combatants. When the guerrillas laid down their weapons, many former FARC fighters started to come to my courses. These boys and girls do not know that I was an adolescent combatant, like them. Every time they do or say something about their past I feel my past is coming back on me. I was abandoned and abused, I was forcibly recruited, I deserted and joined university. Now I help those who put down their weapons”. Maria

seems happy to share her story while we sit on the highest row of the amphitheatre. I thank her for finding the strength to talk about her past: “I understand that you don’t want to participate in the staging of the stories, but would you agree if we publish something about your hero’s story and your own story, together with that of your ex-combatant students? She tells me it’s OK. Maria will continue to come to the workshop, sitting in the highest and most distant row, protected by her role of volunteer, and will continue to write the steps of her journey on a piece of paper and hand them over to me. Her heroine received a call and refuses, but a mentor, who trusts her more than she trusts herself, convinces her to leave in a journey of deep transformation... (workshop field notes, May 2019)

The story of Maria shows how powerful the identification with the hero could be and how embodied memories of wounds can resurface during the process. During the workshop, no request was made to share personal stories, but the mythopoetic process created a container where Maria felt “very identified” with the students’ heroes and decided to share part of her life, without even being an intended beneficiary of the programme. This example reminds us how the armed conflict is a collective wound for the whole Colombian society and pedagogical processes need to incorporate psychosocial and ritual spaces to collectively share and honour these otherwise untold stories from over six decades of war.

THE HERO’S JOURNEY AS A PEDAGOGICAL DISPOSITIVE

This pilot workshop showed that the Hero’s Journey could be an effective “dispositive” to accompany the reinvention of identities of youth who were engaged in violent groups of many kinds. The concept of dispositive was developed by Michel Foucault in his *Lectures on the Will to Know*²² and eventually applied to pedagogy by Riccardo Massa²³, who defined a “pedagogical dispositive” as an incorporeal system of procedures in place in an educational situation²⁴. The specific features of the system of procedures based on this pilot workshop are:

22 M. Foucault, *Lectures on the Will to Know*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2014.

23 R. Massa R., *Educare o istruire? La fine della pedagogia nella cultura contemporanea*, Unico-
pli, Napoli 1987.

24 Ivi, p. 86.

1. Projection. The protagonist project parts of their personalities, aspirations and biographies in the mythical space of a heroic journey;
2. Distancing. The participants can modulate their distance between their hero's story and their autobiography. Personal stories are partially shared, but behind the protective mask of the characters, they have autobiographical and therapeutic reality for the person who create them, but they are distanced.
3. Embodiment. The mythopoetic stories are embodied through enactment;
4. Containment. The process builds a relatively safe container of non-judgement and empathy, where autobiographical stories could be remembered and integrated in the participant's memory, without necessarily being shared;
5. Mirroring. When a student presents her myth, she mirrors herself in the audience (the other students) and the audience mirrors itself in the story enacted on stage, in a relation of reciprocal legitimation and attribution of meaning. The enactment creates an extraordinary world where the participants can see themselves reflected, they feel seen by the others and see the others as creative human beings, whose life has meaning and purpose.

The synergic interaction of these five aspect of the dispositive brought to the following results:

1. The collective sharing of stories brought to the *collective resignification of the Hero's wounds as the marks of the ordeals* and to acknowledge the braveness of the hero and the wisdom she received;
2. The setting allowed facing the anxiety of taking the university exam and increased self-esteem and self-efficacy through the metaphor of the hero as a Master of two worlds;
3. The participants redefined their identity, moving from defining themselves as "victims" to "heroines and heroes" who went through a rite of passage and received a new identity (apotheosis);
4. The participants discovered skills they had ignored: they realized they can write and enact fiction stories. Some of them reported that the workshop was useful for their Spanish and Social Sciences courses. In general, the workshop expanded the participants' self-perception as creators of beauty and meaning (the gift received in

the Inmost Cave). During the workshop, the participants acquired new *words* to express their own *world*, through the projection into *another (mythological) world*.

THE MIRROR AND THE HAMMER: MYTHOPOETIC AND PEACEBUILDING

The Hero's Journey is the story of every human being in their search for sense and purpose in life and proved particularly useful to mark special moments of transition in life. This is why all human societies have myths and continue creating new ones around the same archetypical story of ordeals, discovery and rebirth. The myth is a way to re-weave individual stories into a broader narrative on meaning and purpose. During the experience presented in this article, the participants did not passively receive myths from hegemonic social structures, but actively recreated their own heroes, inspired by characters and situations ranging from indigenous cosmogonic myths to Hollywood's super hero movies. Furthermore, this mythopoetic workshop allowed to complement two aspects of western Theatre. On the one hand, the workshop has been "to hold [...] the mirror up to nature" (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act. 3, Sc. 2), reflecting the condition of the adolescents as it is, on the other hand, the workshop was "not a mirror to reflect the reality, but a hammer to shape it" (Berthold Brecht). This work has been to hold a mirror up to five girls and five boys, where they could see themselves reflected in their own mythopoetic stories of ordeal, discovery and rebirth. By seeing themselves with new eyes, the students could shape a new interior and interpersonal reality, where former combatants can be born again as university students and their society can see them as heroines and heroes who have just returned from the Inmost Cave.

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