

Autobiographical Therapeutic Performance in Armed Conflicts: A Case Study with Western Saharan Refugees

ANGELO MIRAMONTI

Background: I explore the hypothesis that Autobiographical Therapeutic Performance (ATP) can help people traumatized by armed conflicts heal from their wounds, make their gifts visible and benefit their communities.

Methods: I analyse the case of Saleh, a 21-year-old Sahrawi refugee who survived police abuses and displacement in the Western Saharan occupied territories. I analyse the evolution of Saleh's self-image and capacity to interact with a group of peers during the creation of an autobiographical monologue he performed in front of an audience.

Results: the synergic interaction of warm-up exercises, storytelling, embodiment, public performance, and post-performance reflection supported Saleh in re-framing his painful biographic memories, enhancing his self-perception and strengthening his connections with his peers and community.

Conclusions: this case study corroborates the hypothesis that ATP could be effective in supporting people affected by traumas related to armed conflicts in creating cohesive life narrative, enhancing their self-image and involving the audience in building a sense of shared belonging to a common history. I recommend further research on ATP in war environments and the intentional and systematic use of ATP in healing traumas of persons affected by armed conflicts.

Key Words: Autobiographical Therapeutic Performance; Drama Therapy; Art Based Research-Intervention; Peacebuilding; Western Sahara.

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*Life has no meaning.
Each of us has meaning and we bring it to life.
It is a waste to be asking the question
when you are the answer.*
Joseph Campbell

Introduction

This paper presents the results of an art-based research-intervention I carried out with a research team of the University of Guadalajara (Mexico) in the Sahrawi refugee camps in the Tindouf province, Algeria, in April 2022. The purpose of the research was to:

1. pilot and investigate the impact of Autobiographical Therapeutic Performance with a group of young Western Sahahran adults affected by armed conflict;
2. document the stories of Sahrawi women who participated in the armed conflict, using theatre, photography, video and semi-structured interviews.

While this article focuses on an individual case study identified during the field work, Landeros & Miramonti (2022) is a visual and written account of the whole research¹.

¹ The persons mentioned in this article expressed their consent to the publication of their personal materials (text and photos) collected during the research mission. The name of Saleh was changed to protect his security and the one of his family in the occupied Western Saharan territories.

Autobiographical Therapeutic Performance in armed conflicts

Recent research in drama therapy has shown the healing potential of Autobiographical Therapeutic Performance (ATP) to work with traumatized individuals and communities (Emunah, 2015; Pendzik et al., 2016). ATP is a specific form of drama therapy where the creation of a performance, its presentation to an audience and the post-performance reflection constitute the therapeutic setting and the space in which healing can happen. ATP's main goal is therapeutic, not aesthetic, although the use of creativity and the production of beauty are key aspects of the therapeutic process. As Snow notes, ATP implies "the challenge of consciously working on a significant psychological issue that contemporaneously disturbs the life of the performer" (2016, p. 33).

From the methodological point of view, the key distinctive features of ATP are:

- ATP does not enact a *pre-existing dramaturgical text* or script. The ATP dramaturgy is based on personal material the participants share during the creative process;
- ATP is not exclusively based on *improvisation*. It uses collective dramaturgy, rehearsals and sometimes scripting, and involves two distinct phases: the preparation of the piece and its public presentation;
- The theatrical piece is not presented only *within the group who created it*. ATP implies the existence of *an external audience* who was not part of the creative process and is invited to engage with the performers during and after the performance.

In terms of practical facilitation, an ATP process follows five key steps:

1. *Group foundation*. The group is invited to participate in warm-up exercises and creative games to build a safe and non-judgemental

space. Although preliminary, this step is of paramount importance to build trust and ensure the group can receive narratives of painful experiences with empathy and emotional containment.

2. *Storytelling*. Transforming memories into stories has been over millennia and across many cultures an inherently human process for integrating painful life experiences and healing from trauma (Haven, 2007; Lahad, 2019). In this second step, the participants are invited to share (orally or in writing) some of their personal memories to a small group of peers. The material shared could be both memories of lived experiences or stories heard from significant others (e.g.: stories of ancestors the participant heard from family members). Turning inner memories into stories with a narrative structure communicable to others is the first step to help the subject generate coherent self-narratives, which is also a first step to integrate and cope with traumatic life events (McAdams, 2008; White and Epston, 1990).

3. *Embodiment*. The participants are invited to transform their *life narratives* into *live performances* using expressive forms coming from their culture and personal skills (installations, songs, music, dance, drawings, body painting, embroidery, cooking, rituals, etc.). This third step challenges the participant to incarnate their life narrative and transpose it in a specific symbolic time/space: the “dramatic space” (Pendzik, 2006). In this step, the textual narrative is transformed and symbolized using other creative and non-verbal languages and the dramatic space becomes the symbolic container and organizer of the performance, that often intertwines different creative languages. While creating the piece, the perceived self of the narrating subject is transformed using the “controlled dissociation” of the person into a multiplicity of *personae*: roles and characters (Thomson and Jaque, 2011, 2015). The text produced in the second step becomes the starting point for the creation of an individual performance (monologue) or a short scene. Emunah (2015) notes that these “embodied stories” have potential to generate or strengthen constructive self-narratives, while Yaviv (2014) shows that this

embodied experience gets consolidated in the long-term memory and produces a durable transformation of the subject's self-perception. In addition, Koziol et al. (2012) show that cognitive and bodily processes are fundamentally linked and this interaction can improve the intra and inter-personal abilities of the individual.

4. *Performance*. The participants are invited to perform their embodied self-narratives in front of an external audience. They initially show their creation in the group of peers and receive feedback, then they choose to perform in front of a selected audience they invite (in most cases the audience is composed of significant others of the participants) or to perform in front of a general audience (including the possibility of being featured in videos and mass media). This fourth step is a strong validation of the alternative narrative the subject and the group co-created, giving them a public recognition and inviting the audience to “bear witness” (Jacques, 2021; Miramonti, 2022; Sepinuck, 2013; Wake, 2010), express empathy, and collectively engage for social change. At this fourth stage, the performer sees themselves while they are being seen by others and this constitutes a further reaffirmation of the new self-image they are performatively shaping. At the end of the performance, the participants are invited to cross the threshold of the “dramatic space” (where they embody themselves as characters) and interact with the audience as the persons who lived the experiences they symbolized in the dramatic space. The form of engagement with the audience could take different forms. In some cases, the performers distribute paper sheets to the audience and invite them to write short letters to the performers, reacting to the performance they just witnessed. In some other cases, the audience is invited to orally share their emotions and reactions. This invitation to active participation of the audience re-signifies the “spectator” as “witness”, activating processes of identification of the audience in some characters and situations presented on stage, while also intensifying the healing potential of the public presentation for the performers (Sajnani, 2012; 2014; Emunah, 2015).

5. *Post-performance reflection.* After the presentation, the participants are invited to gather in an intimate space, join a closing ritual and share (orally or in writing) their emotions, discoveries and difficulties that emerged from the inception of the process up until then. In this phase, they can also react to the experience through drawing, dancing, singing, sharing a meal, etc. During this closing ritual, the participants can read the letters the audience wrote to them and they will keep them as a material memory and further validation of the transformation the ATP experience produced in their self-perception. After the ritual, the participants can plan further presentations of the same play, new creative processes involving other participants and envision other forms of engaging with their communities.

Summarizing the above five steps, Snow notes that in ATP healing takes place “within the special time and space of the creation of a performance which eventually has an audience and a post-performance review” (Snow, 2009, p. 117).

Both clinical and community-based ATP experiences documented that ATP is particularly effective in healing the long-term effect of traumatic stress. As Siegel (2003) points out, trauma produces toxic stress that affects the functioning of the orbitofrontal region of the brain, which plays an important role in building *a cohesive narrative* of the subject’s life, including the capacity to produce an integrated storyline of the past, present, and anticipated future. The literature has shown that the synergic interaction of the above five steps has significant therapeutic implications and can help people performatively “work through” lived experiences of trauma (Emunah, 1994; Sajnani and Johnson 2014). ATP can facilitate the integration of personal experiences in a coherent self-narrative, weave these narratives in the subject’s social fabric and support the positive *re-definition* of the subject’s boundaries (etymologically *de-finis* means “setting boundaries”). The ATP’s five steps help the subject negotiate *new boundaries* and potentially adopt new social roles and patterns of interactions.

While the literature on the use of ATP with victims and pepe-



Sabrawai refugee camp, Tindouf province, Algeria. Photo: Angelo Miramonti.

trators of trauma is growing (Daccache, 2016; Emunah, 2015; Miramonti, 2022; Sajnani and Johnson, 2014), specific research on the use of ATP with people affected by the long-term effects of armed conflicts and displacement remain limited². In addition, while the literature on the use of performative arts for peacebuilding stresses the important role played by arts in conflict transformation (Cohen, 2005; Miramonti, 2019; Premaratna, 2018; Volkas, 2009), there is limited literature documenting the use of ATP to heal war-related trauma³. This paper addresses this gap and locates itself at the intersection of these two areas of research: the specific use of autobiography in drama therapy and the use of theatre in peacebuilding. This

² A recent contribution to fill this gap is Sahki et al. (2022), that documents the use of a wide range of Drama therapy approaches as part of mental health and psychosocial support in a Syrian refugees' camp in Lebanon.

³ Theatre of Witness is a form of autobiographical performance that was used to heal the collective effects of the long-term traumas related to the armed conflict in Northern Ireland. Although this form is not intentionally therapeutic, its application proved effective in healing the collective and intergenerational traumas of the "Troubles" (Sepinuck, 2013; Grant and Jennings, 2013; Grant, 2016).



Sahrawi refugee camp, Tindouf province, Algeria. Photo: Angelo Miramonti.

research is the result of a collaborative effort between the University of Guadalajara, myself (as an independent consultant), the Sahrawi Camp Administration and the Abidin Kaid Saleh Film School in the refugee camp of Bojador (Tindouf, Algeria). The aim of this paper is to analyse how ATP can help healing traumas related to war, displacement and degrading treatments in the case of a 21 years-old Sahrawi man living in a refugee camp in the Tindouf province, in Algeria.

The context

Western Sahara is a disputed territory in the north western part of Africa, composed mainly by desert flatlands. 20% of the territory is currently under the control of the self-proclaimed Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), while the remaining 80% is occupied and administered by Morocco (Jensen, 2011). The population of Western Sahara is estimated at 629.000 (Worldometer, 2022). This territory has been a Spanish colony up until 1975, although Morocco and Mauritania have been formally claiming the territory since 1957. In 1965, the United Nations General

Assembly urged Spain to decolonize Western Sahara and organize a referendum for self-determination. In 1975, armed confrontations started between Morocco and Mauritania on one side and a Sahrawi nationalist movement (the Polisario Front) on the other. The Polisario proclaimed the SADR and formed a government in exile in Tindouf, Algeria. Mauritania withdrew its claims on Western Sahara in 1979 and handed over the territory it had occupied (composed by desert lands and few towns) to the Polisario, while Morocco currently occupies and administers 80% of the territory, including most of the Atlantic coastline, all major cities and most natural resources. The United Nations considers the Polisario Front to be the legitimate representative of the Sahrawi people and affirms that the Sahrawis have a right to self-determination (UN General Assembly Resolution 34/37). In 1991, the UN sponsored a ceasefire agreement and a referendum was scheduled for 1992. The referendum, that was going to give the local population the option of Western Sahara becoming an independent state or integrating with Morocco, was never organised, because of controversies between Morocco and the SADR on the criteria for determining who had the right to vote. International Human Rights organisations documented severe human-rights abuses occurred throughout the conflict, including the displacement of tens of thousands of Sahrawi civilians from the Western Saharan territories to refugee camps in Algeria and the expulsion (implemented by the Algerian government) of tens of thousands of Moroccan civilians from Algeria and the numerous casualties caused by combats and police repression (Amnesty International, 2007). To date, over 173,000 Sahrawi refugees are estimated to live in the five refugee camps administered by the Polisario, in the Tindouf province of Algeria.

During the war (1975–1991), both sides accused each other of targeting civilians and violating the Human Rights of the populations under their control in the Moroccan-controlled areas of Western Sahara and the refugee camps in Algeria. In particular, Morocco has been repeatedly criticized for its actions in Western Sahara by international Human Rights organizations (OHCHR, 2006; Amnesty International, 2007; Human Rights



Moments of Phase 1: Group Foundation. Photo: Angelo Miramonti.

Watch, 2005, 2011). In November 2021, the Polisario and the Moroccan army broke the ceasefire and resumed military confrontations with very limited media coverage of this ongoing 47-year-old conflict (AfricaNews, 2021).

Methods

This research is a qualitative art-based research-intervention (Kimberly and al Sayah, 2011; McIntyre, 2008; Howell, 2021) and an individual case study (Creswell and Poth, 1997). We explore the hypothesis that ATP can help heal the long-term consequences of trauma related to armed conflict analysing the case of a male Sahrawi refugee affected by police brutality and war-related displacement. During the above-mentioned art-based research-intervention in the Sahrawi refugee camps (Landeros & Miramonti 2022), I identified the case of Saleh, a 21-year-old man victim of degrading treatments and displacement and decided to investigate the impact of the ATP process I was facilitating in his specific case. The criteria for selecting this case study are the gravity of the symptoms and the very positive short-term impact of the ATP process. As a consequence, it is worth noting that this paper documents a “success story” in the use of ATP to heal trauma with a person affected by armed conflicts, therefore his generalization to other cases should be taken with caution and further research is required to validate these results.

The evidence we analyse was co-created and collected during an ATP workshop I designed and conducted in the Bojador Sahrawi refugee camp in April 2022. The workshop included 8 sessions of 3 hours during 8 consecutive days, followed by a public presentation in the evening of the eighth day. The participants were 12 self-selected Sahrawi refugees (6 female and 6 males) aged between 16 and 30. All of them were filmmaking students of the Abidin Kaid Saleh Film School in the Bojador refugee camp. The qualitative data I collected and analysed include: field notes, semi-structured interviews, photos and videos of the workshop and public performance.



A moment of Phase 2: Storytelling. Photo: Angelo Miramonti.

Results

In this paragraph I recount and reflect on how the five steps presented above impacted in Saleh's healing from trauma related to police brutality and displacement.

Group foundation. The first day of the workshop, Saleh joins the group, he is wearing a baseball cap, long-sleeved shirt and a round neck. It is the end of April; it is starting to get hot in the Sahara Desert. I notice he has a tendency to bend his back and seems to hide his head in between his shoulders. During the warm-up games, Saleh sometimes participates in the games, sometimes he leaves the circle and stands apart. I invite him to join, he looks at me from behind the baseball cap and says that he sometimes cannot do the exercises because his back and knees hurt. When he talks, his eyes sometimes wander elsewhere. During the first and second day of the workshop, he is often apart from the others, outside of the circle, standing against the wall. After the second session, the director of the Film School calls me for a meeting and tells me: "Saleh reached our camp five months ago, he came from the Western Saharan territories



Moments of Phase 3: Embodiment and rehearsals. Photo: Angelo Miramonti.
occupied by Morocco and enrolled in the Film School. We accepted him. He suffered severe beatings from the Moroccan police. He says he has constant back and knee pain, but medical doctors were unable to find any permanent physical damages in his body. In reality, we believe he may have mental disorders, we do not know the exact

traumas he has suffered. Please keep him in the group, although he does not do much; he needs to be there with the other students and we want him to be part of your process”.

Storytelling: in the first three days of the workshop, we work on the enactment of ancestral stories and Saleh participates in staging the stories of others, always moving in and out of the group. On day 4, I tell the participants: “now split in small groups of 4 people and share a story that changed your life, a mysterious moment of transformation, a moment of magic and deep not-knowing. Listen to the story of everyone in your subgroup, then choose a story that resonates the most with you and enact it”. Saleh joins a group and they start talking. I do a tour in the three sub-groups. At the end, I go back to Saleh’s group and ask them if they chose a story. They answer: “yes, we chose Saleh’s story”. I am surprised: has Saleh given his consent to stage his story? Is he going to perform himself in it? Saleh sits quietly among the others and confirms: “yes, we will stage my story”. I sit with them and Saleh starts narrating his story to me:

I was born in 2002, in the area occupied by Morocco. As a child, I was discriminated in school. Some of my school mates were children of Moroccan policemen and their parents instructed them to marginalize me. One day, when I was fifteen, in my neighbourhood there was a demonstration to support the independence of Western Sahara. When demonstrations happen, usually the police surrounds the whole neighbourhood and represses all the people who end up trapped inside. I was sitting in front of a shop and I was reading. I saw five policemen approaching in a car, they got out and surrounded me, they started beating me. They heavily hit me with their batons on the legs, they wanted to put me in their car. I managed to resist, otherwise I would be disappeared right now. They tried to kick my face with their boots, I managed to protect myself



Moments of Phase 4: Public performance. Photo: Angelo Miramonti.

with my arms. When they left, I had many wounds on my legs. A group of Sahrawi had hidden behind a car and came out as soon as the police left, they took me home, they called my mother and took me to the hospital. There is always a Moroccan policeman in the hospitals, he checks whether people injured during the demonstrations are admitted, to arrest them.



A moment of Phase 5: Post-performance reflection. Photo: Diana Salazar Barroso.

The people who helped me reach the hospital avoided the policeman and looked for a Sahrawi doctor, they said that I had been attacked by a gang of young people, who had nothing to do with the demonstration. The doctor quickly medicated me, but he could not keep me there. When I was being discharged, I saw a police car enter the hospital. My uncle had hidden his car in the hospital garage, he managed to get me into the car without being identified by the police and we went home. I could not leave the territory immediately, I had to wait a few months, because I was in the third year of secondary school and I wanted to finish the school year before leaving. I kept going to school, in spite of the wounds. When the school year ended, I discovered that I had been expelled. I asked why and they told me it was because I was involved in political activities. A few days later, I left the territory occupied by Morocco and managed to reach the Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria.

Embodiment: Saleh decided that he wants to enact this mysterious moment of his life, a moment that changed his life. He becomes

the director and protagonist of the scene, while the other three participants enact the scene under his direction. He tells me he wants to show the audience the moment he was aggressed by the police exactly as it happened. I tell him to be cautious and do it gradually, but he is determined to enact that moment of his life. After an hour of rehearsals, Saleh's group presents for the first time a short scene of Saleh's mysterious moment, in front of the other two sub-groups. At the end, the whole group of fellow students applauds him loudly. It is the first validation of his untold story: it comes from people he recognizes as peers for having fled the same situation of repression and degrading treatments that many others are suffering in the occupied territories. The school director watches the presentation and comments: "we are discovering an actor". This reminds me that Saleh is a filmmaking student and he never acted before.

Performance. On day five, during the rehearsals, a first crisis comes: Saleh's group informs me that he doesn't want to perform in front of the audience. The other group members tell me: "don't worry, one of us is going to perform his story on his behalf". I feel that this will limit Saleh's contribution to the storytelling and embodiment phases, but will not allow him to benefit from the performance phase. I ask the group to give Saleh time to feel what he wants to do and also to give me time to talk to him privately. It is not the same to tell our story without embodying it, and it is not the same to embody my story without being seen and recognized by others. I know that being seen on stage is important, it is a deep moment of healing, so I would like to gently encourage Saleh to perform in front of his community. At the end of day five, I talk to him one-on-one. He tells me he is afraid he will be filmed during the performance, the Moroccan police will recognize him and will take revenge on his family members, who are still in the occupied territories. I tell him I fully understand his concern and respect his choice; I just present some alternative options: we may not film his performance or he may perform with his face

covered. He replies that he will think about it and he will give me an answer the following day.

At the beginning of Day 6, Saleh shows up and tells me that he decided not to perform in front of the audience. We decide to use another actor and say that “it is the story of one of us, which is not only his story, it is the story of many Sahrawis forced to leave the land where they were born, due to the daily physical and verbal assaults they suffer, and flee to the refugee camps in Algeria”. In the evening, Saleh watches his story, performed by another participant.

At the beginning of Day 7, Saleh shows up wearing a T-shirt with short sleeves and his usual baseball cap. He seems more relaxed. I ask him how he feels and whether he changed his mind. He tells me that, after he saw another person performing his own story, he felt ready to perform in front of the audience, but he will perform with his face covered, to protect his family from retaliations. His sub-group agrees to have him back in the role of the protagonist, performing himself. In the night of Day 8, the 3 subgroups perform five autobiographical scenes⁴. Saleh performs his own story, with covered face and the audience warmly applauds him. After the performance, some audience members write letters to the performers, expressing how they felt inspired by the courage and creativity of the performers.

Reflection. After the performance, we gather in a quiet place for a closing ritual. We sit in darkness; I light a candle and invite the participants to share how they feel after performing their stories and receiving the audience’s feedback. After the reflection, the whole group steps on a carpet on the floor that becomes our “flying mat”, we close our eyes and we blow the candles together. Darkness falls in the room. The workshop is over.

After the ritual, we interview Saleh and other participants. Talking about the workshop, Saleh comments:

⁴ The five scenes are summarized in Landeros & Miramonti, 2022.

This workshop had a big impact on me. It helped me incorporate myself into the group. After the Moroccan police attacked me, I feel I am not as strong as I used to be. I feel that I have constant pain in my legs and back. After the attack, I felt that I couldn't do the things I used to do before. I feel that many people don't care about me, I'm just one of the many, another one who ran away, I feel I don't count. It gave me a positive feeling when the audience applauded me. Right now, I need to heal from the blows I received on my legs. I have sight problems as well. One night, when I had recently arrived in the camps, I saw the lights of a car and got dazzled, I couldn't move; some bystanders had to come and move me, otherwise the car would have killed me. No, I can't go back, it would be too dangerous for me and for the part of my family that remained there.

Finally, we have a debrief with the School's Director, who comments: "Saleh has been constantly up and down, your presence and your workshop contributed to create a strong "up" moment for him and I feel it changed his self-perception. He felt seen and appreciated by his fellow students. Now the challenge for me, for his mother, for all of us in the Film School is to sustain this momentum and turn it into a durable change in the way he deals with the symptoms of his traumas".

I believe the director is right: our workshop was a small tile in a mosaic of healing and reframing of his lived experience that Saleh is creating. Listening to the director, I feel Saleh is slowly collecting the fragments of his traumatic story and turning them into the pieces of the mosaic of a reconstructed narrative of his self. I remember that one of ATP's purposes is to help "build a more cohesive narrative of the self". Did our workshop contribute in building a more cohesive story of Saleh's wounds and gifts? I feel our work is to help trans-

form unspeakable trauma into an embodied memory of past ordeals. With our workshop, did Saleh move a step forward in transforming his trauma into an embodied memory of a painful past? The day after I leave the Sahrawi refugee camps, with the idea of writing and publishing about my encounter with Saleh. At the end of the ritual with the group, before we blew the candles, I said: “our workshop is ending now. All that is alive will die one day. All that dies is always reborn, in other forms, in the forms that we will choose to give it”. I feel this article and the interaction with the readers is a form of rebirth of my connection with Saleh and his story of dignity and resilience.

Reflections: more coherent life narratives

In this paper, I explored how the synergic interaction of the five steps of ATP could help healing the long-term effects of trauma and promote constructive narratives of the self in a person traumatized by armed conflicts. This experience showed that group foundation, storytelling, embodiment, performance and reflection can synergically create a “symbolic time-space”, where insight and therapeutic integration of trauma can happen. The qualitative evidence provided in this case study corroborates the hypothesis that even short and intensive ATP processes can be effective in healing the trauma of police brutality and displacement and supporting the integration of trauma survivors in their communities. The self-reflections of Saleh show that storytelling and embodiment were key in “reframing” his story in a narrative of bravery and resilience, while the empathy and support received from the audience further reinforced and validated the new way of “being in the world” (Csordas 1994) he had created. Moreover, our case study showed that ATP can make the interior “gifts” of the performer visible, reframing the experience of pain and loss as an ordeal that reveals unexpected resources of the subject. This allows the performer to “find

the medicine” in the story and make visible how, at the very centre of their wound, lay undiscovered blessings (Sepinuk, 2013, p. 229).

Although this paper did not analyse the impact of ATP on the other eleven participants, nor on the audience, it is worth stressing that this process had a significant impact also for the rest of the group and their community. The audience members were invited to transform themselves interacting with the performer, moving from passive spectators to a more active role of “witnesses⁵”. Saleh’s wounds became a story told with his body in action, surrounded by fellow performers who provided emotional containment, in front of an audience who felt empathic and inspired. The audience witnessed Saleh being transformed by performing his story. Saleh and the audience become mirrors reflecting new images of the self and the other, and a source of reciprocal validation of their respective roles. By telling his story, Saleh transformed his wound in a story; directing and acting as the protagonist of the scene, his story became his body in action. By performing in front of the others, his narrating body was seen by others, and his experience was validated by the community. The audience was inspired by his wound, they bore witness of his courage to become, to find the gold in the dark of his ordeals and create meaning out of meaningless violence. Saleh witnessed himself being transformed by telling his story to others. The audience witnessed Saleh’s courage to create meaning beyond victimization. Saleh and the audience became mirrors for each other and, through the performance, their identity was re-signified by the encounter of their gazes.

Conclusion: life has no meaning

I would like to conclude returning to Joseph Campbell’s quote

⁵ For an in-depth discussion of the resignification of the “spectator” as “witness” in Autobiographical Theatre see Sajnani (2012) and Wake (2010, 2013).

at the beginning: Saleh's suffering has no meaning. Saleh has meaning and he is bringing it to life, also performing his story in a public space. Telling his private truths in public spaces redefined the boundaries between public and private. Performing his unspeakable wounds, Saleh made his "private" sufferance political and weaved his story in the broader history of his people. In doing so, he avoided the danger of "de-historification" of his "private" story, which is indeed the result of specific power relations that interpret some lived experiences as "private" (etymologically "deprived", "set apart" from the collective space). With the active participation of the performer, ATP makes the personal political and the private public, helping the performer draw new boundaries of the Self and new forms of belonging. Saleh is the answer to the question about the meaningless pain he suffered. By turning his story into a collective narrative, he moved away from the privatization of his pain and the pathologization of his traumatic memories, that confine him within the categories of "victim of war trauma" and "psychiatric patient". Performing his story, Saleh became a "wounded creator" (Bolen, 2014, p. 256) and a "wounded healer" (Jung, 2003, p.181), a witness of his war, with a painful past, a courageous present and an ambitious future.

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The author

ANGELO MIRAMONTI (Ph.D.) is registered drama therapist, professor of community theatre at the Instituto Departamental de Bellas Artes in Cali (Colombia) and lecturer of Conflict Transformation

at the University of Würzburg-Schweinfur (Germany). He founded the “Arts for Reconciliation” research project, investigating the use of arts to open spaces of dialogue and healing among former combatants and victims of armed conflicts. He authored a number of academic articles and books on the use of arts for peacebuilding.