Theatre as the healing space: Ping Chong's Children of War

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Abstract

This paper examines the empowering/re-authoring function of Children of War, a play that was presented in Fairfax, Virginia in December 2002. Children of War is one of the instalments of Undesirable Elements, a community-based oral history series that is the result of a collaboration between Ping Chong and various adults and children. Undesirable Elements has been in development since 1992 in different communities around the world. In the autumn of 2002 Chong worked closely with six young refugees (from Somalia, Sierra Leone, El Salvador, Afghanistan, Kurdistan and Iran) who now live in Northern Virginia, and with a therapist (who is herself a refugee) from the Center for Multicultural Human Services (which co-produced the project). The play comments on both past and current political conflicts in the homeland of each participant, and on the effects those conflicts have on their personal lives. Through monologues and dialogues, it evolves as a woven tapestry of their family histories and of the violence, torture, mutilations and massacres they endured.

The paper examines the therapeutic effect of this project - how, for example, the participants' recollections were used to lead them into self-reflection, communication and negotiations that often resulted in insights. The goal is not, however, to evaluate the production in psychotherapeutic and medical terms. The intention, rather, is to show that the piece created a site for expressing the 'unspeakable', and, symbiotically, a kind of communal healing, a kind of understanding, that allows both participants and audiences to re-author those horrific experiences.

Many theatre practitioners and scholars have investigated the 'theatre as psychotherapy'. Such people encourage participants to recognize and re-evaluate their position and subjectivity in the full context of theatre's history, and, more importantly, to reframe their participation by describing - in their own words - their experiences. For example, together with hospitalized children who have psychiatric problems related to trauma, the Children's Therapeutic Puppet Theater project (at Children's Theater in Chicago) has co-created fantasy stories that have allowed those children to recognize and articulate deeply rooted emotions and ideas. Examining the methods and approaches that the Children's Therapeutic Puppet Theater uses, Linnea Carlson-Sabelli (a specialist in the use of action methods in psychotherapy) argues that the process of collaborating in those puppet plays helps the children 'release the power of imagination, story, and co-cre-
Most of them are between placements, such as foster families or group homes, and they are hospitalized because they have tried to injure themselves or have attempted suicide. See Carlson-Sabelli 1998: 91–2.

Foucault discusses how various forms of resistance against different forms of power are exerted in post-structuralist society. He investigates a power relation rooted deep in the social nexus and argues that to live in modern society it is imperative to maintain a ‘reciprocal appeal’ between a human and a governing institution. See his ‘The Subject and Power’ which is included in Dreyfus and Rabinow: 208–26.

...ative adventure’ (Carlson-Sabelli 1998: 93). Through the ‘activity of co-creating stories’, which involves ‘action’ (that is, energy or a forward flow in time), the children go through ‘the complexity of the process of change through experience’ (Carlson-Sabelli 1998: 95). That process generates what Peter Elssas, a chief psychologist at the Psychiatric Hospital in Aarhus, Denmark, calls a ‘good performance’ (Elssas 1992: 334). Examining similarities between psychotherapy and theatre, Elssas clarifies that both produce a ‘life and insight’ that promotes ‘effective healing’, which, in the world of theatre, is simply called a ‘good performance’. That ‘effective healing’ (in other words, that therapeutic experience) takes place in a ‘healing space’ that is not the consulting room or psychiatrist’s office (Elssas 1992: 333, 342). In a psychotherapeutic theatrical realm, that ‘healing space’ is created through the process of participating in the theatre as an active agent to speak about and share one’s experience.

The act of re-examining problems and searching for possible solutions often entails incorporating non-traditional therapeutic strategies, including ‘narrative therapy’. When considered from the perspective of post-structuralist analysis of language and its power, narrative therapy can be described as being ‘premised upon the idea that the lives and the relationships of persons are shaped by the knowledges and stories that communities of persons negotiate and engage in to give meaning to their experiences’ (Besley 2002: 127). Reshaping and reclaiming ‘knowledges’ and ‘stories’ helps to re-examine the existing views and values attached to a specific history, and then to investigate the space of, in Foucault’s terms, non-hierarchical relationships between the individual and authority. Narrative therapy challenges traditional ‘compliance’ methods in which the patient blindly follows the practitioner’s orders. Instead of constructing a traditional therapeutic dialogue where the patient is rendered as a passive recipient of caring and treatment, the therapist of narrative therapy decentres her position and encourages her client to resolve problems by questioning the ways of life that subjugate and oppress him or her. In the process, the client is able to ‘re-author’ his or her own life through conversations with the therapist, who is considered his or her collaborator (Besley 2002: 127).

Narrative therapy tactics and methods have been used by various therapy-theatre projects. One exemplary project in contemporary theatre is Children of War, co-produced by Ping Chong & Company and the Center for Multicultural Human Services (CMHS) in Falls Church, Virginia in 2002. As Elssas argues, it is a collaborative work that demonstrates new insights for effective healing by incorporating two of narrative therapy’s therapeutic processes: ‘complementarity’ (which means that participants with similar experiences are grouped together) and ‘congruency’ (which means that participants with varied experiences are grouped together and are helped to understand the differences among them) (Elssas 1992: 334).

Children of War is one of the instalments of Undesirable Elements, the community-based oral history series that is the result of collaboration between Chong and various adults and children. Undesirable Elements has been in
development since 1992 when Chong produced it while he was in residency at Artist Space in New York City. Since then, Undesirable Elements has been staged in numerous cities, among them Charleston, Cleveland, Minneapolis, Seattle, Washington DC, Chicago, Rotterdam and Tokyo. Children of War started with Chong working closely, through the autumn of 2002, with five young refugees (from Somalia, Sierra Leone, El Salvador, Afghanistan, and Kurdistan) who now live in Northern Virginia, and with a therapist (who is herself a refugee from Iran) at the Center for Multicultural Human Services (CMHS). The resulting play comments on both the past and current political conflicts in each of the participants' homelands, and on the effects such conflicts have had on their individual lives. Through monologues and dialogues, the play evolves as a woven tapestry of their family histories and of the violence, torture, mutilations, and massacres they escaped.

My aim in this essay is to examine how Children of War creates a 'healing space' (and thus a therapeutic opportunity) for the participants to reflect on their experiences, to articulate their memories, negotiate many of their unresolved feelings, and consequently to arrive at a deeper insight into the trauma in their lives. My goal is, by no means, to evaluate the production in psychotherapeutic and medical terms. Rather, I intend to show that the performance of Children of War creates a site for expressing the 'unspeakable', and for symbiotically creating a kind of communal healing, a kind of understanding, that allows for both the participants and audiences to re-author horrific experiences.

Ping Chong’s initial introduction to the CMHS dates back to 2000 when the Gala Hispanic Theater in Washington DC presented Undesirable
Elements. With various community artists and activists - from Mexico, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Vietnam, and Liberia - in the community of Columbia Heights and Mount Pleasant in DC, Chong created a piece that illustrates the history of their transnational journeys as well as the familial ‘stories’ handed down over generations. Ricarda Dowling, Director of Development at CMHS, who attended a performance at the Gala Hispanic Theatre in DC, was so intrigued that she asked the Gala to stage the play in Northern Virginia. With Rebecca Medrano, Managing Director at the Gala Hispanic Theatre, Dowling staged Undesirable Elements at the Northern Virginia Community College in December 2000, and again in Arlington, Virginia in October 2001. Dowling and CMHS invited Chong, and subsequently Dr Dennis Hunt (Executive Director of CMHS and a licensed clinical psychologist specializing in work with traumatized refugee children) asked Chong to create a new play that would focus on local refugee children and the psychological damage they have suffered.

The processes of selecting ‘actors’ and of script-making for what became Children of War were unconventional. The CMHS pre-screened more than 80 children and selected 25 (due to liability issues, the Center eliminated its own clients), out of which Chong chose 5 children - Patu Sankoh (age 15), Abdul Hakeem Paigir (age 13), Dereen Pasha (age 15), Yarvin Cuchilla (age 18), and Awa Nur (age 15). Chong interviewed each child in two-hour segments totalling six hours. All of the children were eager to talk about their stories, and Chong, who has always valued the participants’ need to express themselves, found this interview process extremely therapeutic for them and himself. He began to realize that the children were opening up often ‘with tears and smiles’, and that the process was helping them to re-see their experiences through a more detailed perspective. Chong also interviewed the children’s parents in order to get more accurate and detailed information. The original ‘script’ was revised a number of times during the rehearsal period. The CMHS staff also worked with Chong to help him understand trauma-related matters that particularly pertain to children. Although every piece of their stories was invaluable, Chong had to edit in order to make the performance just an hour and 20 minutes long.

Like many other pieces of Undesirable Elements, Children of War follows a staged reading format. Seven chairs are arranged in a semi-circle. Six participants sit on six chairs; one chair remains unoccupied throughout the performance. Certain areas of the world are projected in blue on the back wall. The projected shapes suggest the maps of different countries that are not necessarily spoken about in the piece. This visual marker of the unspecified countries symbolizes how the world can be perceived both macrocosmically and microcosmically. It also illustrates the tension and balance between generalizations and personalization - the very threads that create the fabric of this theatrical piece.

Although conventional theatricality is not a prominent part of the production, Chong accentuates the beginning, as well as the transitions, with
music, costumes, and intentionally choreographed poses. As the music plays, the performers appear and sit on their respective chairs. They wear traditional costumes, which reflect their cultural heritages and native languages, thus highlighting the individuality of each culture and specific history, and simultaneously transforming them into a vital collective, a new multicultural community. Between certain segments, the performers clap their hands ten times, which is yet another way to emphasize the collective's energy and power. Then Yarvin begins: "Let's get started, please sit. Mi nombre es Yarvin Cuchilla. Yo nací en el llano Los Patos, departamento de la union El Salvador."

By intricately embedding the personal histories of each child into the accounts of their countries' history, Chong creates a tapestry of polyphonic voices that echo both on the microcosmic and macrocosmic levels. The children trace the history of colonization and occupation from 1492 when Pedro da Sintra, a Portuguese explorer, "map[s] a mountainous peninsula and calls it Serra Lyon, or Lion Mountain" (Children of War 2002b: 6). The action is propelled by Dereen, a 15-year-old boy from Kurdistan, who defines himself as a person "without a homeland" (Children of War 2002b: 9); then the children recount representative historical events which describe the series of invasions, colonizations, corruptions and destructions that took place in their countries. The participants sweep the audience into an overview of major colonial, postcolonial, and diasporic historical events: the Ottoman Turks' systematic destruction of the Kurds in the nineteenth century, the British colonization of Sierra Leone in 1895, the division of Kurdistan by France and Britain in 1921, the inde-
dependence of Somalia in 1960, and of Sierra Leone in 1961, followed by a coup d’état in 1964, the assassination of Khala Shahab (a member of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) by the Iraqi government in 1976, the Iranian revolution in 1978, followed by the new regime of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1979, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, the outbreak of the Iraq/Iran war in 1980, the civil war in El Salvador in 1988, the Gulf War in 1991, the outbreak of the civil war in Somalia in 1991, the beginning of the civil war in Sierra Leone in 1992, and then the attacks of 11 September 2001 in the United States.

Those historical and political events and tragedies are entwined with the individual and very personal histories of each child: Awa’s grandfather takes a trip to England as one of the first Somalis to receive a Western education; Farinaz Amirsehi (the Center’s therapist and the only adult in the play) reminisces about her grandfather, Rahmat Sheybani, who, in spite of his high social status, treated everyone - including servants and their children - equally. She also remembers her father who courageously refused to cooperate with the corrupt Iranian government. Dereen’s father, Dillshad, a nephew of Khala Shahab, tells about joining the independent movement of the Kurdish people. Dillshad later fell in love with a young college girl, Shayan, and married her. Likewise, Abdul recounts how his parents met during the war in Afghanistan when he was a soldier and she a nurse.

As the play proceeds, each performer’s story becomes more personal, urgent, and dire. In 1981, Farinaz was sentenced to ten years in prison in Tehran for her involvement with the underground political movement against the Khomeini regime. In 1986, because of her fellow prisoners’ futile attempt at uprising, she was blindfolded and put in a small space, which was ‘just wide enough to sit up in’, for nine months (Children of War 2002b: 19). More than seven members of Yarvin’s mother’s family were killed in the civil war in El Salvador in 1988. In 1991 Awa’s baby sister was killed when guerrillas attacked a bus filled with refugees. When Dereen was five, he witnessed his father being shot by Iraqi soldiers. In Sierra Leone, Patu escaped killings and mutilations by covering her face with ash and wearing old clothes to look like a crazy person. Amazingly, all of the atrocities recounted by the participants are extremely specific but never gratuitously graphic or sentimental. The tone of their voices is calm, yet with so much ‘hidden’ emotion. Yarvin quietly says: ‘I dream that one day I will find a place [where] nobody will beat us again, and people will be kind to us’ (Children of War 2002b: 29). Like Yarvin, many other participants share their painful stories without tears and screams - they do so as if simply reporting ‘facts’ to the audience. Yet, all the more so, the audience is led to realize how, behind their tranquil appearances, there is an endless trail of tears and blood connecting agonizing nights and days. By their matter-of-factness, the audience is constantly reminded that the graphic images are for ever marked in each consciousness - a place the audience can never touch deeply enough to erase each of their scars.
Figure 3: Awa Nur (Somalia) recalls her grandfather.

One of the common tragedies recounted is the continual separation each participant experienced. All of them had separated from parents, siblings, relatives and/or friends. Each of their stories has at least one heartbreaking severance caused by violent and inhuman conduct. Helene Berman, a professor and career scientist in the School of Nursing at the University of Western Ontario, writes about such circumstances. Her research has found that forced and violent separations are more distressing to children than air raids and bombings. Berman writes that children of war are more likely to have enduring trauma when they are also separated from their loved ones: ‘depressive symptoms were more evident among children who had experienced separation from their parents than those who remained with their parents’ (Berman 2001: 245). She argues that one of the most important treatments for this type of suffering is the (re)building of solid family and community ties (Berman 2001: 244). Active dialogue in the family and community, she writes, helps to create and strengthen new and positive relationships. The very process of ‘voicing’ and ‘sharing’ traumatic experiences is one significant way for those relationships to be established, and yet that is often one of the most difficult things for those children to do, since the natural tendency is to suppress agonizing memories. As Berman writes, a ‘common response to a trauma is to deny and repress painful memories, rather than confront them. Although this type of response tentatively enables young people to cope with disturbing events, it does not allow them to heal’ (Berman 2001: 249). Therefore, Berman concludes, such children need to have opportunities to talk openly and safely about their
histories: they need to talk to their families and loved ones, as well as to their homes and countries.

*Children of War* functions as just such an occasion. This play provides the participants with a place and reason to name and articulate their memories, first with Chong, then with each other, and later with the audience. This developing ‘communal’ and co-participating process is reinforced in their polyphonic voicing of specific events. For example, when Fatu talks about the death of her friend, all of the participants join the telling of her story:

FATU: 1998

DEREEN: 1998

FATU: Abu is 14 years old. He has a pointed nose and *big* friendly eyes. Abu and I make a deal. If I don’t want to do my homework he does it for me, and I give him fruit.

YARVIN: Fruit for homework...

AWA: Homework for fruit.

FATU: It’s a *really* good deal.

ALL CLAP.

FATU/ABDUL: 1999

ALL: 1999

FATU: I am in my neighbor’s yard.

AWA: They had just dug a well.

FATU: I am standing next to Abu, watching.

YERVIN: All of the sudden there is a popping sound.

FATU: Everybody scatters.

FARINAZ: Abu falls.

FATU: I drag him into my neighbor’s bedroom and hide with him under the bed. When the shooting stops I pull Abu out. I am covered in blood.

FARINAZ: Abu is dead.

FATU: I am 11 years old. (*Children of War* 2002b: 52)

Following the transcultural ‘call-response’ form, this individual’s story is changed into the story of many communities. In reframing her story as part of a community, Fatu (as well as the other participants and the audience) finds solace and companionship.

The subtext in each of the children’s accounts reveals the complexity of war’s violence, abuse, and neglect. The repercussions of war echo in multiple ways. One of the participants is not only a victim of war but of domestic violence. Her grandmother and aunt beat Yarvin and her siblings. After Yarvin herself emigrates to the United States to live with her mother, the beating begins again, this time, by her own mother. Her mother eventually ‘sells’ her to a man when she is 14 years old. When she escapes that situation, she starts living with her boyfriend, and then becomes pregnant. Eventually, Yarvin ends up in a foster home, where she finally finds...
love and security. Yarvin’s story exemplifies how political and social unrest impacts on both adults and children, and how it robs individuals and communities of their ability to give and receive protection and nurturance; it also shows how the vicious cycle of violence is perpetrated — and, in Yarvin’s case, ended.

This theatre production is amazing, partly because the hope and energy that each participant generates is palpable. They exude resilience, willingness to confront any hardship, and true excitement about their new life in the United States. That is inspiring and healing for the audience as well. For example, the audience laughs uproariously at the children’s genuine enthusiasm for pizza, and it chuckles at Fatu from Sierra Leone who tries to keep snow to show it to her friends back home. Chong’s deliberate attempt to reveal the indomitable child’s spirit of each participant is successful; that provides a balance with the litany of atrocities they describe, and it creates a safe space for both the children and the audience to think about what they are experiencing. Some of the most poignant scenes centre on children who have memories of a life before the wars. Toward the end of the play they ask each other: ‘What do you think of when you hear the words “El Salvador” or “Sierra Leone?”’ Then they ask: ‘What do you think of when I say the word “War”?’ Along with gruesome memories, the children remember food and nature most vividly. Yarvin thinks of ‘carne asada’, ‘Pupusas’ (those delicious corn-flour empanadas filled with savoury meat and cheese), all of the games they used to play, and the warm weather. Fatu remembers ‘peanut-butter cake, cassava-leaf sauce, and fufu’ (a cassava porridge). Awa reminisces about ‘blue skies’, and Farinaz melancholically describes ‘climbing cherry trees in the summer and the Caspian Sea’. Abdul remembers his grandparents and the smell of roses. Deneen thinks of Alab, a valley in Kurdistan. In articulating and exchanging these memories, the participants and the audience recreate the desolation of their pasts, but they also recreate ‘imaginary homelands’, as each child hopes it can be: that in itself is a very healing process.

Having traversed multiple geographical and psychological boundaries that deprived them of so many of their loved ones, in this play the children are able to cross yet another demarcation: they are able to think deeply and self-reflexively about the role of war in their lives. For Awa war symbolizes ‘how people should want peace more than they want war’. For Fatu ‘war’ is the result of quarrels among selfish adults who do not know how to cohabit with others; she asserts that ‘whoever is fighting should put us on a plane and let us go, and when they finish fighting bring us back’. Abdul thinks of ‘wives without husbands, children without parents’. These astonishing visualizations and ‘theorizations’ also help the participants and audience to ponder on the futility of war.

Children of War was conceived with the aim to affect participants, primarily, in very positive and healing ways. And indeed, participants’ testimonies confirm that they found the project to be life-altering. Prior to participating in the play, many of the participants suffered severe symp-
toms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). That is not unusual. For instance, a study on PTSD and grief among the children of Kuwait reports that when exposed to military fighting, children consequently have nightmares, bouts of terror when confronted with reminders (e.g. planes, helicopters, soldiers, or police), reduced self-esteem, and increased depression. They often regress (e.g. start wetting their beds), become disobedient, aggressive, and have trouble falling asleep (Nader 1993a: 408). Studies on children with PTSD confirm that it is imperative for them to articulate their feelings. Researchers such as Kathi Nader and Robert Pynoos assert that teachers should ‘help to validate and normalize children’s responses as well as permit the open expression of concerns’ (Nader 1993b: 311).

Unfortunately, the reality is that usually these children do not feel safe to tell their stories. In the play, Fatu embodies that reality. She describes how, when she talked about her experience in her class at school, nobody believed her. As a result, she stopped talking about what had happened to her, her friends, and her family in Sierra Leone. That is one reason why healing spaces such as this play are very important. It was during rehearsals that Fatu finally felt affirmed enough to express herself. Faranaz Amirsehi notes that Fatu ‘totally depends on the setting and environment she is in when she talks about her experience’ (Amirsehi 2003). But that changed after participating in this play, since it provided Fatu and the other children with a safe haven for externalizing, without being judged, memories that in usual circumstances are unutterable and often, to the listener, totally incredible.

Plays like Children of War point to the power of theatre in our society. Theatre is more than mere entertainment. It is a place, an occasion, a reason, for exploring and defining our inner selves, our pasts, our future, our roles in the multiple societies and communities we inhabit across geographies and psychologies. Eugenio Barba, an internationally acclaimed theatre educator and director, and also the founder of ISTA (International School of Theatre Anthropology), attests that, ‘In theatre we have the possibility of defining ourselves in relation to others, and it is of the utmost importance to have a precise point of departure’ (Barba 1985: 44). That pertains to all of us, whatever our life circumstances. And for those who have been deprived of a trauma-free life, the place of theatre is even more crucial. When children, especially, are dispossessed of safety, family and friends, when they are uprooted from home, they lose their point of departure, the anchor in their lives. Therapeutic theatre, like that which Chong creates in Children of War, can become the catalyst for finding a new point of departure - for recognizing and rebuilding a new anchor.

The central method used in this project - telling stories - is the very core strategy that is used in narrative therapy. Farinaz Amirsehi explains that in this play ‘telling stories is very similar to narrative therapy - which is the modality of treatment’, and that is crucial in helping a child to heal, because, as research has shown, and Amirsehi contends, ‘by narrating your own stories over and over and over, you are able to desensitize the original trauma’ (Amirsehi 2003).
There are other therapeutic modalities used in *Children of War*; although it may seem paradoxical, silence is also a vital component. Traumatized children cannot be pushed to verbalize; they must be given the space and safety to do so, and until they are ready, their silence has to be respected. It is important to realize that, as political theorist Hannah Arendt observes, some experiences - especially ‘the experience of great bodily pain’ - are the most private and least communicable, and cannot ‘withstand the implacable, bright light of the constant presence of others on the public scene’ (Arendt 1958: 50–51). As in therapy, in this play Chong honours the silence of those participants who are not yet able to speak. That is evident in the symbolic empty chair on the stage, which in addition stands in for the millions of children who did not survive, or who were not participants in the play. This acknowledged and created space for ‘silence’ also functions as visible reassurance that no one is being coerced in this theatrical healing space. And hence, silence becomes part of a continuum in communication, just another step in the process of healing.\(^5\)

In this play Chong strikes a sensitive balance between the stories that are told and those that are left untold. His stand on silence echoes many therapists and theoreticians who acknowledge the need for and value of not forcing people to speak. Cultural theorist Foucault, for one, writes that ‘silence and secrecy are a shelter for power, anchoring its prohibitions’, yet loosening its hold and providing for ‘relatively obscure areas of tolerance’ (Foucault 1980: 101). Those ‘areas of tolerance’ include sites in which people can suspend their immediate reactions to others, and where they can reflect on their positions and power relations. Susan Sontag asserts
that ‘the highest good for the artist is to reach the point’ that allows him or her to be ‘satisfied by being silent’, as opposed to feeling compelled (by others and circumstances) to find ‘a voice in art’ (Sontag 1990: 364).

While Chong works actively to help each participant to articulate, he also creates a safe zone for silence and meditation. Farinaz Amirsehi embodies one of those zones. She plays dual roles in this project: she is a former ‘child of war’, and a professional therapist for ‘children of war’ - and she holds on to silence as her right. In a personal interview Amirsehi revealed that she was working in Iran as a nurses’ aide in 1981 when she became involved with the underground movement. One night, when she was delivering anti-government flyers, she was caught, tortured and put in prison. In the play she explains how she was thrown into what her captors called ‘graves’, a space that was just wide enough for her to sit up in, and where she lived for nine months. But Amirsehi remains completely silent about everything else. She does not describe the details of her torture, nor how she felt then or now. Nonetheless, her silence communicated reams to the audience, and to the other participants. At the very least, her silence communicates that what she experienced is beyond words, and that her pain is so deep, and perhaps her apprehension so intense, that she dares not share herself with strangers. Her silence is powerful: it is what caught my attention when I watched the performance. Of course, there could be other explanations for why she remains silent and why Chong did not prompt her to speak further. Perhaps Chong wants to protect participants from voyeurism, or perhaps Amirsehi has chosen to reinscribe her experiences and pains in her own terms. Whatever the reasons, she embodies a silence that communicates more than words could ever convey.

Whether or not they fully realize it, participants in the making and staging of Children of War were provided with an opportunity to re-author their memories. And in re-authoring their personal (his/her)stories, the participants created what Jean François Leotard calls ‘micro-narratives’, which convey not only ‘verifiable statements about reality but also notions of competence, images of how to do things, how to live, how to care for one another, how to be happy’ (quoted in Singh, Skerrett and Hogan 1996: 19). Those micro-narratives help ‘the process of re-visioning that is essential to gaining control over one’s life and future’ (Singh, Skerrett and Hogan 1996: 19). In retrieving whatever the participants had consciously or unconsciously transnational identities. That, in turn, as their post-production comments indicate, has become the fuel for them to continue reinscribing and negotiating their complex and muti-layered sense of self. Collaborating in this theatrical piece allowed the participants to begin re-examining, for instance, their fixed identities as ‘refugees’, and to reposition themselves as strong and determined survivors in a new adopted homeland, the United States.

One can discover his or her own identity, says Stuart Hall (a Jamaican cultural theorist), by acknowledging the ‘ruptures and discontinuities’ in
one's history, by identifying the 'unstable points of identification', and by understanding that, contrary to essentialist notions about the forming of selfhood, identities are always in 'constant transformation' (Hall 1990: 225–26). Two months after the play closed, Fatu spoke about that very phenomenon at the Grant Makers' Conference (where part of Children of War was staged again). With a broad smile, Fatu explained that after participating in Children of War she began to feel vindicated and empowered, partly because the veracity and value of her stories were recognized. She told the Grant Makers' audience that after the play was discussed in newspapers, her schoolmates were more willing to listen to her: 'the girl who had not believed my story in our geography class came up to me [and said] 'Oh, my God, I didn't know. Why didn't you tell me more?' She and I are now best friends.' Fatu's sense of empowerment and positive view of herself and her friend stem from her acknowledgement of 'ruptures and discontinuities' in her history - an acknowledgement gained by participating in the creative process of Children of War. And in this very process one witnesses the therapeutic power of a theatre that functions as a 'healing space' where identities and positions of the participants are constantly questioned and negotiated.

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