CHAPTER 1

Performance and Peacebuilding between Consensus and Agonism: *The Sejny Chronicles* and *Moush, Sweet Moush*

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Abstract

This chapter investigates memory projects that make use of oral history for the development of theatrical performances. It shows how such projects can follow both consensus-driven and agonistic approaches to historical conflict, and asks what strategic value these differing approaches may have depending on the circumstances in which individual projects are carried out. The chapter analyses performance not simply as a theatrical text or the performance of that text for an audience but as a collaborative process that can allow participants to work through historical antagonism. The authors analyse and compare two multidisciplinary projects involving theatre performances and oral histories as a means to address the complex, entangled memories and difficult histories of two borderland areas. *Moush, Sweet Moush* was a performance that emerged between 2011 and 2012 in the context of a broader, multi-phase reconciliation project between Armenia and Turkey. The performance involved young people exploring the everyday memories of two places: Moush, a town in Turkey from which Armenians fled during genocide, and villages in Armenia where those escaping genocide found refuge. The *Sejny Chronicles* is an ongoing theatre workshop and play organised by the Borderland Foundation and performed by young people; it has aimed to rediscover the rich multicultural history of Sejny located along the Polish and Lithuanian border and to use oral histories handed down by its residents. Through a series of interviews related to both cases, the authors examine the philosophy that underpins these projects in relation to memory work, highlighting how consensus or agonism may emerge in such projects in response to local conditions and the needs of participants.

Keywords

aesthetics – experimentation – oral history – performance – philosophy – theatre

1 Introduction

Recent scholarship on the role of memory in processes of peacebuilding in post-conflict scenarios has sought to complicate the so-called 'reconciliation' or 'liberal' model of peacebuilding that relies upon mutual recognition of past wrongs and the acceptance of a shared narrative about the future. In a recent contribution, for example, Yifat Gutman (2023) has pointed out that this model fails to take into account the problem of asymmetries of power in conflict, the ways in which local actors modify the reconciliation paradigm to suit the needs of their contexts and the questionable demand for consensus between different parties with different identities and historical experiences.

The academic debate on agonistic approaches to peacebuilding and to historical memory has helpfully shifted attention away from consensus, which may not be possible or desirable in many circumstances, towards a focus on building agonistic peace, in which the existence of different, conflicting and perhaps even irreconcilable perspectives on the past and the future is accommodated (Maddison 2015). In this chapter, we will explore the conditions for the potential emergence of agonism in peacebuilding projects where performance plays a major role. We will evaluate the relative merits of such agonistic moments in contrast to more consensus-driven approaches. Our argument will not be that one approach (consensus-driven or agonistic) is, fundamentally or universally, a more effective or desirable framework. Rather, we will consider how they may both prove to be useful from a strategic point of view in different contexts.

The academic discourse on agonistic peace and its relationship to memory draws on a variety of theoretical sources, from Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault to the more recent work of William Connolly and Chantal Mouffe, and there is by no means a single, widely accepted notion of what an agonistic approach to historical memory in the context of peacebuilding might look like. What we might term a minimalist approach to agonistic peace is expressed by Oliver Ramsbotham, who focuses on 'radical disagreements' between actors with fundamentally incompatible accounts of reality (Ramsbotham 2010, 122), in which the best that can be achieved is a strategic engagement with the enemy other, resulting in a settlement that 'translates radical disagreement [...] into a non-violent mode' (213). A maximalist account of agonistic memory, on the other hand, would, following Mouffe (2013), place greater emphasis on that transformation of relationships of enmity into adversarial dialogue in which groups can remain passionately committed to their identities and perspectives while acknowledging the legitimacy of other groups' participation in public debate (Schaap 2006; Cento Bull and Hansen 2016; Cento Bull, Hansen

and Colom-González 2021). Points along this continuum between a minimal and a maximal agonism include contexts in which incompatible discourses about the past exist side by side in spaces shared by different groups, without apparent dialogue between them (Björkdahl and Selimovic, 2016), or everyday public interactions between communities in conflict that bracket out contentious issues for the sake of achieving a shared purpose (Lehti and Romashov 2022). Implicit in such conceptions of agonistic practices that do not go as far as achieving a dialogue about the past is the recognition that it may not be possible in some cases (either in the short term or at any point) to move towards such a dialogue. Given the threat to the 'ontological security' of participants in such agonistic encounters, which is bound up with their commitment to their version of historical truth (Mälksoo 2015), theorists of agonistic peacebuilding have acknowledged that means must be found to stage dialogue in such a way that an identity 'backlash' is not unleashed (Rumelili and Strömbom 2022).

Against the background of the academic debate over agonistic peacebuilding and memory, this chapter focuses on the role of theatre performance in encounters between historical enemies. The performances we address do not stand alone but are deeply embedded in the practices of civil society groups who have sought local approaches to peacebuilding in two very different contexts of historical interethnic violence: first, in the multiethnic borderlands of contemporary northeast Poland; second, on the sites of the Armenian Genocide of 1915–1917. Both of these projects – *The Sejny Chronicles* (*Kroniki sejneńskie*), produced by the 'Borderland of Arts, Cultures and Nations' Centre (Ośrodek 'Pogranicze – sztuk, kultur, narodów') in Sejny, and *Moush, Sweet Moush*, produced by the German educational organisation DVV International in collaboration with Armenian and Turkish memory activists – have drawn on oral histories that seek to uncover alternative perspectives on interethnic violence and interethnic coexistence, with multimedia outputs from each project. In both, performance becomes a means for the participants to process and represent the outcomes of their memory work. Here we take 'performance' to be a broad term that encompasses not only the final work shown to an audience but also the practices fostered by the researching, preparation, rehearsal, writing and improvisation of these theatre pieces, involving as they do members of communities formerly in conflict.

In focusing on performance within a wider web of civil society practices in each case, we acknowledge the potential of the arts in peacebuilding to 'broaden peacebuilding discourses' out from top-down approaches (Premaratna and Bleiker 2016, 84). The arts have also been credited with using multiple modes of engagement (for example, imagination, emotion, sensibility, memory, understanding) to 'open up different perspectives and options',

disrupting socially dominant accounts of political situations (Bleiker 2009, 13, 28). While acknowledging that theatre as a medium has long served as a means to provide imaginary solutions to social conflict and thus support the status quo – as both Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal have argued in their critiques of Western culture's 'Aristotelian' theatre (Gray 1961, 62; Boal 2008) – it is also important to note, with Boal, that the representation of contradiction and conflict is 'a fundamental principle' of theatre (Boal 2008, 73).

Nevertheless, it must also be observed that much of the discussion of arts in peacebuilding – and, more specifically, the discussion of theatre – has broadly followed the 'reconciliation' or 'liberal' model outlined above. Commentators have identified the arts' ability to 'bear witness' to violent pasts and to evoke empathy with others, as well as their 'potential to develop and articulate people's vision of a future beyond the violent conflict in which they are caught up, a vision that, on a practical level, strengthens their resolve for peace, and for the long and difficult journey towards it' (Mitchell et al. 2020, 24–25). John Paul Lederach's account has presented the 'moral imagination' necessary for peacebuilding as facilitating a shift from enmity to an understanding of 'relationality' and 'relational webs' (Lederach 2005, 77, 84). Lederach emphasises art's role in reincorporating excluded perspectives, and also the importance of imagining new kinds of relationality by means of a 'restorying' of the past and the future (2005, 149). The perspective on theatre's potential role in peacebuilding offered by a two-volume work on 'performance and the creative transformation of conflict' (Cohen, Gutierrez Varea and Walker 2011) follows a similar triple movement, here formulated in terms of a resistance to the suppression of histories of violence and a commitment to the 'rehumanisation' of others, which makes possible the formulation of a shared vision for the future, with theatre providing a ritual space in which such shared visions can be experienced and achieve an emotional power. Similarly, in their study of grassroots theatre projects and peacebuilding, Kerstin Pfeiffer and Magdalena Weiglhofer note how the sharing of personal stories in the development of performances 'can lead to acknowledging that others have suffered, too, which may [...] result in the creation of empathy for (former) opponents' (Pfeiffer and Weiglhofer 2019, 179) and, ultimately, the redefinition of social relations between formerly opposed communities (181). Thus, although a slightly different terminological apparatus is used in each case, these approaches focus on theatre's power to uncover the experiences of others, to elicit empathy for those experiences and to re-imagine relationships in a shared future on the basis of that empathy.

In our case studies, we will examine the role of performance and assess its potential to foster agonistic encounter, defined broadly as holding open and making visible incompatibilities of historical understanding between

communities, rather than seeking to formulate a new shared consensus about the past. We will also explore the process of making performance as the creation of a 'community of practice', following Étienne Wenger's definition. Wenger describes communities of practice as emerging from joint enterprises that demand mutual engagement and the development of shared repertoires, leading to the ongoing negotiation of meanings (Wenger 1998, 72). Engagement in communities of practice has consequences for the negotiation of individual identity 'in practice' (Wenger 1998, 151), but by no means implies consensus or assimilation to a shared identity. As Wenger notes, a 'community of practice is neither a haven of togetherness nor an island of intimacy insulated from political and social relations. Disagreement, challenges, and competition can all be forms of participation' (Wenger 1998, 77). Drawing on Wenger's theoretical approach in the context of peacebuilding, Vadim Romashov, Marina Danoyan and Hamida Giyasbayli have argued that, 'though community of practice does not (and should not) represent a harmonious social environment, it potentially provides a space for enhancing trust among its members whose coexistence and cooperation is ensured by the shared repertoire and adherence to the regime of mutual accountability' (Romashov, Danoyan and Giyasbayli 2019, 177). In the following, we will explore the potential for performance-based memory work to support the development of such communities of practice in ways that facilitate agonistic dialogue.

This research draws on fieldwork in Armenia and Poland, conducted in the context of the Disputed Territories and Memory (DisTerrMem) project, during which the authors conducted interviews with five participants in *Moush, Sweet Moush* (A) and seven participants in *The Sejny Chronicles* (B). All interviews were conducted in confidentiality, and the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement. This research was supplemented with analysis of publications produced by the two projects, video recordings and scripts of the performances, and (in the case of *The Sejny Chronicles*) the live performance. We also consulted the documentary film *Beginnings* (2013), which chronicled the development of the *Moush, Sweet Moush* project.[1]

2 *The Sejny Chronicles*

The Sejny Chronicles has been performed in Sejny since 1999 by (to date) five different successive generations of 12–17-year-olds from this small Polish town

1 We are grateful to the director, Somnur Vardar, for giving us access to this film.

(and surrounding area) not far from the Lithuanian border. The play – which was initiated and is still directed by Bożena Szroeder – is at the heart of local memory work carried out by Krzysztof Czyżewski, Małgorzata Sporek-Czyżewska, Bożena Szroeder and Wojciech Szroeder: memory activists and educators with backgrounds in avant-garde theatre who arrived in Sejny in 1990 and continue to lead the Borderland Centre and Foundation. The Borderland Centre is funded by both the local government and Poland's Ministry of Culture. The Foundation is a public benefit organisation and seeks external, project-based funding. The Borderland Centre is located in what was the Jewish district of Sejny; indeed, one of the buildings it occupies is the former synagogue, which now resonates with the lively and haunting sounds of the Klezmer Orchestra, established by Wojciech Szroeder (Czyżewski 2018). The Jewish population in Poland was devastated during the Second World War. The Germans drove the Jews of Sejny eastward across the border and then murdered them following the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. Such a history is not unusual for this region, but it has only been remembered actively in recent years, particularly following the publication in 2000, by the Borderland Foundation, of the first edition of Jan Tomasz Gross's *Sąsiedzi* (*Neighbours: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* [2001]), which started the national debate on Polish–Jewish relations (Interview B5).

However, the destruction of the town's Jewish population during the German occupation is not the only instance of ethnic violence in the twentieth-century history of Sejny. With the re-establishment of Polish statehood at the end of the First World War, Polish leader Marshal Józef Piłsudski sought, as far as possible, to restore to Polish control the ethnically mixed borderland (*kresy*) territories of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth of the eighteenth century (Porter-Szücs 2014, 82), resulting in military conflict with its neighbours in the early postwar period. During the Polish-Lithuanian conflict of 1919–20, Sejny changed hands on several occasions before the Suwałki Agreement of October 1920, with local people from both groups involved in the fighting. The Lithuanian population did not leave following these conflicts between neighbours, and the memory of the events of those times remains an unhealed wound in the Sejny community even today. Once Sejny finally was captured by Poland, local Lithuanians were subject to reprisals (Holc 2018, 665).

Subsequent political regimes served to perpetuate the estrangement of the Lithuanian minority from the Polish population of the town: the 1920s and 1930s saw 'the rise of exclusionary nationalism as an ideological force' in Poland (Porter-Szücs 2014, 141), and the post–Second World War communist government subscribed to the notion of the Polish nation as founded on

an 'ethnic core' of Poles (Davies 2001, 286). The People's Republic of Poland consequently restricted cross-border communication and tended to foster an atmosphere in which ethnic minorities were marginalised (Wojakowski 2022, 26). At the same time, discussion of difficult historical experiences of ethnic conflict was suppressed and intercommunity activities in ethnically mixed regions were discouraged, in a strategy of divide and rule. As Marzena Kisielowska-Lipman argues, '[t]his incapacitated the borderland communities and deepened regional ethnic divisions, pushing ethnic minorities into cultural ghettos. This was fertile ground for an outburst of ethnic stereotypes and prejudices, which could not be confronted and therefore proved difficult to overcome' (Kisielowska-Lipman 2002, 140). Having emerged from the communist period in 'an environment of "learned separateness," in which long traditions of mutual skepticism, suspicion, and resentment dominated everyday practices and collective memory' (Holc 2018, 661), the population of Sejny had the potential to fall back into ethnic conflict, particularly in light of a post-communist revival of interest in ethnic identity in the region, which was exploited by newly emerging political forces (Kisielowska-Lipman 2002, 141–42).

For Krzysztof Czyżewski, the situation in the early 1990s in Bosnia (emblematic of the bloody disintegration of the former Yugoslavia as a multiethnic polity) was a warning of a potential 'crisis of multiculturalism', for which the borderland experience, understood as occupying a 'space of transition and coexistence', could provide a solution (Czyżewski 2022, 59). While Czyżewski's utopian conception of the borderland potentially offers a model for coexistence beyond the immediate context of Sejny, it nevertheless emerged from a set of local needs in the 1990s and found specific expression in the work of the Borderland Foundation. The main aim underpinning the work of the foundation is to remember the neglected multicultural pasts of Sejny and to put these memories and knowledge into practice with contemporary local communities so that this heritage becomes their own. Describing the distinct approach to the past in the work that takes place at the Borderland Foundation, Timothy Snyder (2022, x) observes:

> The past can neither be dispelled in the name of universalism nor remembered in the name of the nation. If you do not see the beginnings, Czyżewski says, you love illusions: of your own rationality or of your own innocence. Recalling the past has to be a joint effort, which consists in finding ways, through performance, of eliciting surprising recollections and fruitful juxtapositions. You cannot get beyond things without getting through them.

This memory work acknowledges that the shared past also contains 'unhealthy memory, misunderstood identity, false ideologies, and traditions infected with blind pain or a disastrous sense of superiority, in the primitive instinct of domination' (Czyżewski 2022, 10) – in other words, a memory of conflict ripe for contemporary exploitation by external political forces. Nevertheless, the work of the foundation seeks to set a 'good memory' (Sieroń-Galusek and Galusek 2020, 54) against memories of division, as a means to foster 'an attitude that values good neighbourhood over manifestations of a separate identity, because it is the good neighbourhood and not the enmity toward others (that is, the confrontational type of national patriotism) that is able to establish an authentic community' (Czyżewski 2022, 61). There are other civil society groups working in Poland today which started around the same time as the Borderland Foundation and engage with similar arts-based initiatives seeking to transmit and connect local history and memories with local residents: for example, the 'Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre' Centre in Lublin, the Borussia Cultural Community Association in Olsztyn, the Kana Theatre Centre in Szczecin and the Szczekociny School Complex in Szczekociny. As borders opened in Europe, this practice became emblematic 'of a generation of Polish artists who came of age in the early 1990s and embodied the Solidarity movement's vision of a pluralist and inclusive society' (Popescu 2017, 22).

Although the initiators of the Borderland Foundation arrived in Sejny with strong ties to experimental theatre practice – notably that of the Gardzienice theatre group, founded in 1977 by Włodzimierz Staniewski, who collaborated with Jerzy Grotowski (Popescu 2017, 29) – the aim was not, first and foremost, to make theatre. Their practice, which highlights the importance of process rather than finished product, instead emerged from the memory work that started when this small group arrived in Sejny and began to focus on and understand the local community by gathering the stories of older generations (Interview B3). Initially, the whole team was involved in this oral history work, and a group of young people was recruited to interview the older members of their families. Among this first generation, which included members of the Lithuanian, Polish and Russian Old Believer communities (Interview B2), was Weronika Czyżewska-Poncyljusz, a co-author of this chapter and daughter of Krzysztof and Małgorzata.

As the stories were gathered and a script emerged, Szroeder and the first generation of young performers mapped the houses and their families in Sejny. This map in turn provided the basis for a visual centrepiece in *The Sejny Chronicles*: a large, baked-clay model, placed centre stage, which represents Sejny before the Second World War. Each successive generation of young performers interacts with this same model during the play – whispering, pointing out

streets, picking up small clay houses, dancing, playing the trumpet – as they celebrate the many different stories which make up Sejny's rich and diverse multicultural past, singing songs and chanting prayers in Lithuanian, Polish and Yiddish. The stories move from Rachela, a beautiful Jewish woman who has high hopes of marrying well, to the prejudice encountered by the Romani community, from a Lithuanian wedding to the money made by cross-border goose trading – to name but a few. At the end of the play the stories overlap, as the young performers, holding candles, start speaking at once and then move towards and into the audience, each telling their story to a single audience member or small group.

The play is intimate in its setting and interactions with the audience. Initially performed in the White Synagogue, it now takes place in a small room in an adjacent building, which also houses the Documentation Centre of Borderland Cultures, offices and music practice rooms. In current performances, there are no more than 30 audience members, with, at most, 12 performers on stage. Although the performance has travelled to Denmark, Germany, the United States and, most recently, Georgia, the local community-building aspect cannot be overstated:

> It became like a local community story, a small epic poem, which had been lacking before. The situation of our society here in Sejny was one of people living together without a common story. I am not talking about history, I am talking about a story that people can understand as their local epic. As a roof over their heads. They can find themselves in a common house. (Czyżewski, Kulas and Golubiewski 2011, 23)

The idea of a shared space with a shared language is central to the philosophy of the Borderland Foundation. The stories told in *The Sejny Chronicles* demonstrate how historical place is freighted with many different histories. The process behind the performance shows how it is possible to create certain kinds of cultural practice that can bring a group of people together, and it is through that community of practice that a new space opens up for a different kind of imagining of the historical place (Aleksandravičius, Czyżewski and Kharatyan 2022). The ephemeral nature of performance and the processes behind the scenes are key when dealing with individual memories and difficult history:

> Unlike memorial monuments that become permanent markers of memory, performative actions of memorialisation need to be re-actualised, repeated and framed anew within a changing space and time. Above all, they depend upon the individuals who take part in them. They point to

> the very fragile nature of memory and of remembering, which cannot be sustained other than through participation, reiteration, interaction, reflection and action. (Popescu 2017, 34)

This emphasis on place, relations and processes is particularly important when it seems that the spaces for such discussions about shared memory are shrinking, as borders in this region (with Belarus and with Ukraine) close.

The work of the Borderland Foundation is optimistic and forward-looking, and the foundation involves young people in all its programmes for this reason. It is difficult to separate *The Sejny Chronicles* from the Foundation's other projects, the Klezmer Orchestra being a case in point, with some participants taking part in several activities at once (Interview B1). Young people's curiosity and interests are deeply respected and contribute to a future-oriented process of finding the right form of expression and language for transmitting local history and memory. This respect for the agency of young people and finding new artistic forms to communicate local history and memory can be seen in the constant formal innovation introduced with successive generations, each generation having its own educational and artistic workshops through which the young performers explore the history and heritage of Sejny (for example, by creating animation films or historical card games). With each new generation, additions are made to the play, but the words of the original stories, collected by the first generation, are never changed, out of respect for these stories and for those who told them – even though the language is, at times, dated and certain terms would no longer be regarded as acceptable. Being a witness to and taking care of these stories, which were often articulated for the first time in the oral history process, is a serious responsibility acknowledged by the team at the Borderland Foundation (Interview B3).

The Sejny Chronicles is an expression of the bottom-up approach employed by the Borderland Foundation to remember difficult and painful pasts, and it can primarily be seen as focusing on consensus building. All of the participants interviewed, from various generations of the play, understood and agreed with the forward-looking, local mission of the foundation. Many of them had been deeply influenced by their work on this project, which is unsurprising given that it took place intensively, over five to six years, at a formative stage of their lives. Several were still involved in the work of the foundation years later, and others, who had moved away, returned regularly to the area and hoped to give similar experiences to their own children (Interviews B1, B2, B4).

While the multiperspectivity represented by the different stories, forms and languages in the performance of the play might be understood as pointing towards an agonistic approach to the history of this community, the performance places these elements in the context of 'the image of the borderland

as a cultural phenomenon' that 'surpasse[s] the historically ethnic borders present in all the local communities of the area' (Wojakowski 2022, 35). The notion of a borderland culture does not seek to erase the ethnic identities of the participants in *The Sejny Chronicles*; on the contrary, it seeks to strengthen those identifications (Holc 2018, 662), for example, through deeper historical knowledge. At the same time, however, it provides the good memory of coexistence that seeks to decouple strong ethnic self-identification from antagonistic forms of memory. The result is a conception of borderland identity as 'a particular (activating) sense of belongingness (whether national, ethnic, religious or general-cultural) to one's own group located at the borderlands, in connection with a sense of separateness [...] and a dynamic relationship with respect to neighbouring groups, in circumstances of a strong, shared territorial bond and the awareness of a separate provenance from one's neighbouring groups' (Bieńkowska 2021, 519).

As the performance has to be recreated every five to six years with a new generation of performers, drawing on an ever-broader range of stories collected from the town, *The Sejny Chronicles* represents an evolving community of practice that remains, to some extent, open-ended in its negotiation of the meaning of Sejny's history. The focus is on a polyphony of voices, giving space for perspectives marginalised in the established nationalistic narratives (not only Lithuanians and Poles but also minority groups like Jews, Roma and Russian Old Believers), and hence challenging hegemonic models of remembering. Although the play has the potential, to incorporate dissensus, it currently assumes the creation of a shared sense of community in which difference can be expressed and respected but where no perspectives or interests are fundamentally incompatible with others. In agonistic conceptions of peacebuilding, by contrast, it is precisely the understanding of the claims of different identities as competing – and, therefore, in need of management in order to avoid violent confrontation – that is key (Aggestam, Cristiano and Strömbom 2015, 1740). This case study thus demonstrates that the presence of multiperspectivity does not automatically lead to the emergence of agonistic encounters, but equally that performance-based projects may strategically avoid the move towards agonism where the civil society actors involved perceive non-consensus-based approaches as too risky in their political context.

3 *Moush, Sweet Moush*

Moush, Sweet Moush provides an instructive contrast to *The Sejny Chronicles*, in that the moments of agonism in this project emerged in an unplanned way in a situation in which consensus over the meaning of the past has proved

hard to achieve. *Moush, Sweet Moush* has its origins in an initiative named 'Speaking to One Another: Adult Education and Oral History Contributing to Armenian–Turkish Reconciliation', which was carried out between August 2009 and early 2013 under the auspices of the Yerevan branch of DVV International (the Institute for International Cooperation of the Deutscher Volkshochschul-Verband e.V., the German adult education association). The project was led by Lusine Kharatyan (Kharatyan et al. 2013, 9) and was a cooperation with the Armenian NGO Hazarashen, the Armenian Centre for Ethnological Studies at the National Academy of Sciences and the Armenian Actors Union. The work was 'funded by the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs and aimed at building bridges between the people of Armenia and Turkey through adult education, intercultural exchange and oral history research' (Kharatyan et al. 2013, 9).

This project should be understood in the context of Turkish–Armenian normalisation in the period 2007–09, the era of so-called 'football diplomacy', when Turkey and Armenia were attempting to improve relations with the ultimate goal of reopening their common border. From the Armenian government's perspective, economic priorities were among the important drivers for this engagement (De Waal 2015, 216), but Turkey was keen for the Zurich Protocols (which were eventually signed but never ratified by both states) to include the creation of a historical commission to consider the dispute between the two countries over the meaning of the Armenian Genocide of 1915–1917 (De Waal 2015, 219). Under the government of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, from 2003, Turkey had moved from a straightforward, denialist position on the Genocide towards the encouragement of a narrative that sought to historicise what it called 'the events of 1915' in the context of the wider violence of the First World War and the alleged 'shared pain' of Armenians and Turks. Commenting on the Zurich Protocols, David Leupold (2020, 103) has argued that 'the path towards historical truth is for the Turkish side still mainly perceived as a pathway to rid oneself of the burdensome genocide claims, an obstacle in its foreign relations rather than an internal issue.'

Despite the short-lived nature of the diplomatic rapprochement between the Turkish and Armenian sides, Western powers continued to support a range of civil society initiatives to create dialogue between Armenian and Turkish people, as they had done since the early 2000s (Ter-Matevosyan 2021, 161). The involvement of the German government in the *Moush, Sweet Moush* project can be seen in this context, although the project team also professed themselves inspired by a specifically German model – namely, the 'history from below' approach favoured by the West German 'history workshop' movement of the 1980s, which advocated the uncovering of hidden histories of National Socialist violence at the local level (Wüstenberg 2017). Indeed, members of the

team travelled to Germany to meet with local history workshop activists and learn about their approach (Interview A4).

The thematic focus of the project was the city and region of Moush (Muş) in the southeast of present-day Turkey, an area that today has a majority Kurdish population. Most of the region's Armenian population was killed in the Genocide, but small numbers were able to flee to villages that are part of present-day Armenia, predominantly in the Talin region on the northwest border with Turkey (Kharatyan et al. 2013, 14). The project aimed to conduct oral histories both in Moush and in villages in Armenia that had become the new homes to refugees from the region. The phase of the work that we will concentrate on here (2011–2012) used the collection of such oral histories as the basis for creative work: participants worked on either a photographic exhibition or a performance.

According to Lusine Kharatyan, speaking to a stakeholder workshop for the DisTerrMem project in December 2022 (Aleksandravičius, Czyżewski and Kharatyan 2022), the overall aim of *Moush, Sweet Moush* was to use oral history as a source for mapping Moush through multiple narratives, creating new 'mental maps', based on the memories of its present and former inhabitants, which would challenge official historical accounts. Given the painful history of the Genocide, Kharatyan understood the project in terms of seeking a common language to talk about the past that would create a space for new dialogue and, potentially, mutual understanding in the present. Young volunteers from Turkey and Armenia (ten from each country) took part in a series of training events and visits, to both Moush and the relevant villages in Armenia, collecting oral history testimonies and taking photographs, which resulted in a final exhibition and performance in the village of Oshakan, as well as in Moush itself. The choice of the Armenian venue was by no means incidental: Oshakan is the site of the tomb of Armenian saint Mesrop Mashtots (362–440 CE), creator of the Armenian alphabet, who also was born in Moush and symbolically links Armenian Christianity and the Armenian language as two key building blocks of contemporary Armenian identity. Subsequently, a book of essays, reflections and photographs was published, which included a description of and script for the performance (Kharatyan et al. 2013).

The performance element of the project, which is our main focus here, was created by a smaller team within the group. The process of the creation of the play was facilitated by a director, working with the Armenian Actors Union, and two 'tutors', one from Armenia and one from Turkey. Different versions of the performance were created for presentation in Moush and in Oshakan – using predominantly either Turkish or Kurdish and Armenian language, respectively (Interview A2) – and recordings were made of these performances.

Despite some variations in content, both versions were constructed according to similar principles: individual participants identified episodes from the project research (for example, specific encounters with local people and places in Armenia and Turkey) which were then developed into scenes that incorporated speech, song, movement, video projection and recorded sound. Quotations from the oral histories of inhabitants of Moush and the villages in Armenia were interpolated between these scenes. The purpose of the performance was, therefore, not to dramatise the oral testimonies but rather to document encounters that emerged in the process of collecting that oral history.

The development of the performance happened in real time alongside the oral history fieldwork, with the events of each day in the field trips to Moush and to villages in Armenia documented through storyboards which provided the basis for discussions of scenes that featured in the later performance (Kharatyan et al. 2013, 102). While a stable team throughout the performance's development would have been ideal, two of the three original Turkish participants left part-way through the project due to safety concerns during the fieldwork in Moush, following activity by the militant Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in the area. The third Turkish participant left the project before the work was taken up again in the Armenian city of Gyumri, as did one of the Armenian participants (Kharatyan et al. 2013, 101–102). All of these participants were replaced.

According to the performance's director, the key principle for its construction, in both versions, was that the episodes introduced by each participant should not be the building blocks of a shared narrative or consensus. She stressed the importance of allowing participants to include perspectives that others might find controversial, and that it was more important to stress the differences between members of the theatre group than their similarities (Interview A2). The subjectivity of the experiences that fed into the performance was emphasised from a different angle by the Armenian theatre tutor, who encouraged the members of the group to use their bodies 'as a recorder in the field, documenting narratives, themes, sounds, colors, smells, feelings, space and time. The same recorder (the body) would then bring the experience back to the group and to the stage by performing the field in a very specific time and space' (Kharatyan et al. 2013, 100).

As the organisers acknowledged, the project was moving on very sensitive terrain. Addressing the topic of Turkish–Armenian history 'felt like opening Pandora's Box': the encounter between the 'diverse narratives' uncovered by the oral history work and the backgrounds of the participants created an 'emotional field' that left many feeling 'overwhelmed' (Kharatyan et al. 2013, 14). This 'emotional field' is central to the documentary that was made during

the project and subsequently shown at the Golden Apricot Yerevan International Film Festival (*Beginnings*, directed by Somnur Vardar, 2013). The film focuses on the many reflection sessions held between the participants during the project, in which participants from Armenia and Turkey were frequently suspicious of each other's reactions to the locations visited in the course of the project and to external events (such as the Van earthquake of October 2011), with accusations of insensitivity in both directions. Underlying this mistrust were questions of the relationship of the Turkish participants, in particular, to the Genocide and to Armenian people's pain as a consequence of the Genocide, and of (actual or perceived) demands on the part of Armenians (both within and outside the project) that Turkish citizens should adopt a specific attitude to these questions.

It has been argued that historical dialogue and reconciliation between Armenians and Turkish citizens can only take place by a recognition on the part of the latter that they occupy the 'perpetrator' position in a perpetrator–victim dyad, and that the only way forward in that relationship is not only acknowledgement of this position but also apology and restitution (Marutyan 2010). By contrast, non-recognition of the Genocide has been interpreted as central to contemporary understandings of Turkishness, both at the state and the citizen level, with the challenges to non-recognition perceived as threats to state and citizen 'ontological security'. As Ayse Zarakol has argued, for example, responsibility for the Genocide would be perceived as a threat to the Turkish self-image as a 'civilised' modern nation:

> [...] citizens and leaders of the Republic of Turkey have never stopped playing to an imaginary audience that is constantly assessing how modern Turkey is. Turks resent this intrusive gaze, but crave its approval, and suspect the approval when it is dispensed, yet sense discrimination when it is not. (Zarakol 2010, 15)

Vardar's documentary demonstrates that the *Moush, Sweet Moush* participants from Turkey adopted a range of positions in relation to the events of 1915–1917, from acceptance of the use of the term 'genocide', to a wariness of that term, to an acknowledgement of the Genocide in the context of a wider struggle for political and social reform in Turkey itself. They therefore resisted what Bahar Rumelili and Lisa Strömbom (2022, 1364) call a 'totalistic' recognition of the other's identity and perspective on the world in the agonistic encounter. For example, in Vardar's documentary, one of the participants from Turkey talks about how, for him, recognising the Genocide is bound up with the struggle for an open and democratic society in Turkey, including gay rights and workers'

rights, and therefore not so much a response to the needs of Armenians for their traumatic history to be addressed.

In preliminary discussions with anthropologists working with the project, inhabitants of the Armenian villages made it clear that they would not be willing to collaborate unless the Turkish participants acknowledged the Genocide (Interview A4). However, in practice, not all Turkish participants accepted the use of the term in these encounters; nevertheless, those who did not were able to explain why they preferred not to use it without the dialogue between the project group and the Armenian interviewees breaking down (Interview A3). Such a moment is captured in Vardar's documentary: a female interviewee who has welcomed two Turkish project participants into her home first demands to know whether they accept the Genocide; whereas one does so readily, the other states that the problem with the use of the word is that Turkish people will close themselves off from the issue out of fear that they will be 'burdened' with that responsibility in the same way that Germany has been with memory of the Holocaust.

It should be pointed out here that none of the participants from the Turkish side were hostile to exploring this difficult shared history: they had chosen to be part of the programme, indicating their openness to the proposed work, and were required to have a suitable academic background in social sciences. As Vardar's documentary shows, they generally had a critical attitude to Turkish society. The group was also ethnically diverse, with the involvement of one Turkish citizen of Armenian heritage and one Alevi participant (Interview A3), with their own historical and contemporary experience of persecution in Turkish society. Despite these factors, the ambivalence around the use of the term 'genocide', as well as the fundamentally unresolved nature of the debate brought about by the project, points to a multivocality and multiperspectivity that militated against the project's original reconciliatory framing. Instead, the work together on the project tended to create a space of agonistic dialogue, which revealed Moush to be a site of multiple discourses that did not coalesce into one historical truth about the nature of that place (Kharatyan et al. 2013, 9).

The fragmentary nature of the performance reflected the unresolved nature of many questions raised by the project. Despite the fact that scenes originated in the suggestions of individual participants, this would not necessarily have been visible to the audience, since those scenes were performed collectively. Nevertheless, the juxtaposition of elements from legend, history, oral testimony and personal experience, presented using written and spoken words (in multiple languages), video, mime, dance and song, tended to resist resolution or consensus. For example, one scene that was performed both in

Moush and in Oshakan saw the actors miming women making traditional Armenian lavash bread, a key element of the national cuisine. This action was punctuated with questions that had been posed to the Turkish participants in Armenia:

> 'Are you Turkish? If you are Turkish, I will not shake your hand!'
> 'What is your position on genocide?'
> 'I am wondering about whether you feel sorry.'
> 'Do you accept that the Genocide happened?'
> 'What do you initiate in your country to solve this issue?'
> (Kharatyan et al. 2013, 52)

This scene linked Armenian national identity with specific demands from the Armenian villagers towards the visiting Turkish citizens but did not offer any response: the questions were left open, just as they remained open for the Turkish participants and the project as a whole. While the project organisers may have hoped that some consensus between project participants (and between the participants and the communities they visited) would be possible, this was not achieved. However, the process of creating the performance did establish a 'pluralistic multilogue' (Rumelili and Strömbom 2022, 1366) with clear agonistic dimensions, even if the tensions revealed in this process at times threatened to bring the work to a halt (Interview A3).

As Wulf Kansteiner and Stefan Berger have argued, one of the key problems facing agonistic conceptions of memory, particularly those that follow Chantal Mouffe's use of the term, is that agonistic debate potentially lacks a 'moral centre of gravity': in other words, 'it is difficult to determine the limits of legitimate political speech and legitimate political action in an agonistically constituted public sphere' (Kansteiner and Berger 2021, 227). In this project, participants regularly perceived and challenged the behaviour and the statements of others (including, for example, on social media) as inadmissible and, thus, a threat to collaboration. In the performance they produced, however, the collage-like structure of the piece and the group's collective performance of it were testimony to the group's commitment to validate their experience as individuals without the imposition of artificial consensus. In doing so, they briefly constituted an agonistic 'community of practice' that was held together by their engagement with each other and the development of shared repertoires in the pursuit of a joint enterprise. The project therefore recalls elements of what Caraus (2016) has called an 'agonistic cosmopolitanism', in which the 'moral centre of gravity' demanded by Kansteiner and Berger is a product of the willingness to enter into dialogue on equal terms.

The positions occupied by participants from Turkey, in particular, were multiple: they spoke to a complex relationship to the Genocide that could not be reduced easily to a perpetrator–victim binary fitting neatly with an idealised model of the movement from recognition to apology and restitution. This 'liability model', Michael Rothberg has argued (2019, 90), becomes problematic when direct perpetrators are no longer alive to be held accountable, but this should not stand in the way of understanding oneself as being 'implicated' in that history, framed in terms of the 'societal responsibility to transform institutions and condition the after-effects of unjust histories' (Rothberg 2019, 91). The demand expressed by some of the participants from Turkey was that they should be allowed to understand the Genocide in relation to their own social activism and Turkey's future. While this did not align with the kind of response to an unjust history demanded by some Armenian participants (and, indeed, by some Armenians the group encountered in the project), the shared commitment to a dialogue about the consequences of the Genocide for the present created (temporarily) a thin consensus that allowed these differing perspectives to meet in the agonistic space of the performance.

4 Conclusions

Clearly, despite the common thread of performance, these two case studies have very different ramifications for the practice of peacebuilding through this medium. While they are linked by their common commitment to oral history as a source material for performance, their engagement with the experiences of specific historical communities and the participation of young people, one notable difference between the two cases is that they address internal and international conflicts in the cases of *The Sejny Chronicles* and *Moush, Sweet Moush* respectively. Another key difference is the varying timescales involved: the time the participants of *Moush, Sweet Moush* spent together amounted to a matter of weeks, while *The Sejny Chronicles* has been a multigenerational project, its community of practice having been allowed to evolve over many years, with consequent benefits to the sense of mutual trust experienced by the participants as they continue to develop their shared repertoires.

While the format of *The Sejny Chronicles* does not preclude the potential introduction of agonistic perspectives at some point in the future, the continuing focus on consensus and community – albeit a community that embraces multiple ethnic identities and thus preserves the 'ontological security' of participants – is arguably symptomatic of an ongoing concern about the potential for such identities to be exploited to antagonistic effect in the town and wider

region. The continued influence of illiberal, nationalistic political forces in the Polish context means that such a conceptualisation of community is by no means without challenge: indeed, the Law and Justice Party, in power nationally between 2015 and 2023 and still dominant in the region, can be classed as a party that 'places enormous emphasis on the unity of the nation and national homogeneity on an ethnic basis' (Folvarčný and Kopeček 2020, 173). Under such conditions, any shift toward understanding different ethnic groups as possessing interests that might come into conflict, even if that conflict could be managed within an agonistic frame, carries significant risks. At the same time, under these political circumstances, the consensus-driven nature of *The Sejny Chronicles* has to be acknowledged as strongly counter-hegemonic. Paradoxically, it is in the case of the more temporary and less binding community produced by the *Moush, Sweet Moush* project that a truly agonistic dialogue emerged. This dialogue was fragile, and participants could (and, in some cases, threatened to) walk away, but the shared commitment to the project of creating the performance provided a minimal point of engagement that allowed the agonistic encounter to flourish.

Although solo performances are, of course, possible, making theatre is more often than not a collaborative effort, in which individuals have to rely on the cooperation of others to achieve a common goal. Our analysis suggests that the arts, particularly performance, have the capacity to create such communities of practice (in Wenger's terms), whether temporarily or permanently, through participants' commitment to a shared enterprise by which meaning is negotiated, and that such joint enterprises can also provide a framework in which both consensus and agonistic dialogue may emerge. On the basis of our case studies, it seems clear that, for practitioners considering the value of either approach, it is important to take into account both the context of the specific conflict that is to be addressed and the contemporary political environment in which the participants interact. Perhaps counterintuitively, given that they emphasise incompatible perspectives, agonistic approaches may actually offer a way forward in situations where mistrust and polarisation dominate, provided that the work together creates a space in which a minimal consensus around shared commitment to collaboration and dialogue can be established in the process of creating performance.

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