





B

AREFOOT AND CARRYING FLOWERS, 30 women take their places on stage. Some in small groups. Others one at a time. They wear long summer dresses in shades of purple, blue, orange, red and green. Their skin tones are various shades of brown.

The sole narrator throughout the play explains to the audience that these women have been gathering together, giving each other strength, and speaking their life stories aloud.

The performers silently act out parts of the drama. One darts about, looking worried, lost and alone after having had to flee her home town for safety. When sharing

memories of happy times, they hug or dance together. When recalling traumas of beatings and rapes, one woman drops to her knees and buries her face in her hands. The narrator comes to her side, puts her arm over the victim's shoulder, and speaks of rising up. She repeats that they are speaking out so their stories will not be forgotten.

TAKING THE STAGE

Black women in Colombia are using art and theater to heal themselves.

by Lori S. Robinson

Photography by Joaquin Sarmiento

Victoria Silgado sits in the courtyard of FUNSAREP before the start of a testimonial theater workshop, her face covered to protect her identity.

This production in Cartagena, Colombia, is not ordinary community theater. Every participant is a victim of civil war. They are using art to give voice to their nation's recent history, and their own. They document and then reveal on stage their positive memories of life before violence and the horrors they've survived — atrocities experienced by millions of Black and poor women.

Through this process, known as testimonial theater, restoration happens.

"In this unique environment that they've entered, they can heal, talk, denounce and make demands, publicly," says psychologist Zandra Morales, head of women's programs at the Santa Rita Association for Education and Advancement (FUNSAREP) in Cartagena. "It's a reclaiming of the importance of these women's bodies."

HEALING ART

Morales, also Afro-Colombian, brought testimonial theater to FUNSAREP, the social services agency where she works, five



years ago. She'd realized that traditional psychology wasn't working for the women she was trying to help.

"Everything that has to do with the armed conflict—women in the situation of displacement, women that have been raped, women whose husbands, whose children, have been killed, came [to FUNSAREP]," Morales says. "I began to see myself in the midst of hopelessness."

She searched for a more holistic approach to healing and learned about testimonial theater from a friend in Medellin.

Art has been used to chronicle, educate and heal in other instances of widespread violence and human rights violations. Think, for instance, of Nina Simone's songs such as "Mississippi Goddam" and "To Be Young, Gifted and Black," Alex Haley's *Roots* and the anti-apartheid plays of Athol Fugard.

Testimonial theater is different in that professional artists are not involved. At FUNSAREP, community members of various educational levels and professional backgrounds co-write a script that's a composite of experiences they disclose to each other.

"The women can talk about, reimagine and denounce violent situations," Morales says. "In the process of the collective creation of the script, they are given an opportunity to review their pain, their strengths and their challenges in order to make progress in their healing from trauma."

TRAUMA SOURCE

JOSEFA MORELO, A 66-YEAR-OLD COMMUNITY LEADER, lives a short cab ride away from FUNSAREP. A visitor entering her humble home immediately encounters the sweet smell of incense. Just past a small kitchen on the right and a bedroom on the left is a patio filled with greenery. The plants that line gray walls are potted in containers replicating the Colombian flag — yellow

Above, Josefa Morelo is a community leader, co-founder of Mirror Women Artistic Group Association.

At right, psychologist Zandra Morales runs programs at FUNSAREP, healing initiative for Afro-Colombian women.



across the top, a blue middle row and red along the bottom.

These accents, as well as the homeowner's gentle demeanor, infuse this tiny household with tranquility. Ironically, the peaceful energy here belies the life full of violence and hardship Morelo has endured.

Even before the most recent civil war, Colombia was convulsing in a period of political unrest known as The Violence beginning in the 1940s. At least 200,000 people were killed in 18 years. It was during this period in Morelo's small hometown of San Onofre that her parents, one of her grandfathers and one of her great-grandfathers were murdered. She was 8.

"[I was] totally alone. There was an open-sided bus. It was dawn and I decided to run and climb on," recalls Morelo, unaware that she was headed to Cartagena.

"I arrived here on June 24, 1957."

Taken in by strangers, at 12 she was sexually abused by the 16-year-old boy in the house where she lived. He wanted Morelo kicked out but his mother put him out instead.

A friend of the woman got permission to take Morelo to a party in another town when she was 13. They stopped at a hotel for the night. "When I woke up, I was handcuffed. The girl had sold me at that time for 600 pesos," she says. Morelo was then taken away by a soldier to another location where she was raped again. She gave birth to a son whom she gave to a family that wanted him.

Having returned to Cartagena, she married, had five children and divorced. Three decades later her son Oscar was shot dead at age 23. "They say it was because of the

work I did on behalf of children and women," she says. And in her hometown during a surge of war-related violence from 1985 to 2009, Morelo adds, "My family has had, in this most recent armed conflict, 29 fatalities. Thirty including my son killed here."

It's not uncommon for Colombians to have lived through multiple tragedies as a result of the war. Especially Afro-Colombians like Morelo.

For several decades leading up to the conflict, Colombia's political parties regularly addressed disagreements with violence. In the first half of the 20th century, this phenomenon and significant economic inequality prompted peasant farmers to organize self-defense groups, which morphed into leftist guerrilla armies battling the government for social reforms like land redistribution. More illegal armed groups formed, and the motivations and goals of these factions transformed over five decades, as did the methods and intensity of human rights violations.

The war is coming to an end now. On Nov. 30, the Colombian Congress approved a peace accord negotiated by the government and the country's largest guerrilla organization, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).

It's not uncommon for Colombians to have lived through multiple tragedies as a result of the war Especially Afro-Colombians like Morelo.

founder of the Association of Displaced Afro-Colombians, agrees.

Brutality for Black people in Colombia is nothing new. Europeans began bringing kidnapped Africans into Colombia — through Cartagena, which became the busiest slave port in the Spanish Americas — in the 1500s. Today Colombia has the second largest African descendant population in Latin America after Brazil. The most recent census states that Afro-Colombians are 10 percent of the population, but the preceding census reported that they are 26 percent of the population, the figure used by the United Nations. That's approximately 45 million people.

"We have seen that the majority of armed confrontations, the bloodiest, the most grueling, have occurred in Black and Indigenous regions. The worst massacres, forced displacement, disappearances. More than half of the Black population has been a direct victim [of the conflict]," Córdoba said during a Washington Office on Latin America panel discussion.

Traditional Black territories, mainly along the Pacific coast, became primary sites of armed conflict in the last decades of the war because the rugged terrain and lack of development make it difficult for opponents to access and because the land is rich in natural resources. The Colombian military, guerrillas, paramilitary groups created by wealthy elites to protect their business interests and criminal gangs have all committed atrocities against the Afro-Colombian population. They have forcibly recruited Black Colombians, committed massacres while in the process of fighting enemies, kicked people off of their land to grow coca on it and tortured civilians as a means of intimidating and controlling other community members, among other crimes against humanity. Aside from the civilians, all actors in this conflict have been complicit in long, multifarious, harmful acts.

Sexual violence is used as a tool of war around the world. Colombia is no exception.

In a study by Sisma Mujer, a women's human rights organization based in Bogotá, sexual violence in Colombia has been "massively underreported." It says the most comprehensive attempt to document this gender-specific tactic covers the years 2001 to 2009, during which illegal group combatants as well as soldiers in the nation's military sexually assaulted 149 women per day, or six women per hour. The international anti-poverty organization Oxfam estimates that only 18 percent of victims during that period reported the crimes.

"In addition to factors impacting on all women, indigenous and Afro-Colombian women have to deal with a history of slavery and years of condoned violence against them. This is



Demobilizing combatants and negotiating peace with other armed groups still needs to happen for peace to become permanent. Colombia also has to deal with the impact of this catastrophe.

It has more internally displaced citizens than any other nation in the world, according to The UN Refugee Agency. Some 6.9 million people are refugees inside their own country because of the armed conflict. According to a report published last year by Colombia's National Center for Historical Memory, 220,000 people were killed. Eighty percent were unarmed civilians.

That report states that Black and Indigenous Colombians have been the most victimized groups. Marino Córdoba,

coupled with racist perceptions that include a series of stereotypes about women's bodies. This has resulted in even higher rates of violence against Afro-Colombian and Indigenous women," according to the Sisma Mujer report.

The nation is poised for disarmament and demilitarization, but the scars of trauma can't be legislated away.

CULTURE AND SOCIETY

WHEN MORELO WAS 24, she decided to tell her then-husband, father of her five children, about the victimizations of her past. He responded by kicking her out of their home.

"This is our culture. You cannot speak about what happens to you," she says.

Morales knows well this reality of men rejecting loved ones after rape, as if they're damaged goods. It's one of the emotional wounds many women have described to her at FUNSAREP. She says it's also common to not cry because family members resent survivors for expressing pain that makes them feel sad too.

When women first come to testimonial theater workshops, they often start out opting not to tell their stories because of feelings of shame or fear that their perpetrators will commit further harm. Over time they begin to share their secrets in a supportive, confidential group. They also become able to cry, guilt-free. FUNSAREP has a room just for crying.

Three identities—being a woman, being Black and being poor—are stigmatized in Colombian society in such a way that these women feel silenced and without rights. Too often, says Morales they've lost the ability to even look others in the eye, gazing down instead. "I work with women to feel empowered," she says. "We have to feel strong in front of authorities."

On a typically hot day, the women of testimonial theater have traveled from all over the department (comparable to a U.S. state) of Bolívar to the FUNSAREP facilities comprised of several buildings and a wide open green space in between. Victoria Silgado left her village, San José del Playón, at 4 a.m. by bus to participate in the day's workshop.

"What Zandra has taught us is that you have to have your self-esteem," says Silgado.

"Just because I'm Black, I'm not going to stay silent." It's training that her older sister Argelia Silgado put to good use.

In 2006, Victoria saw Argelia taken, nude, from her home by police. She had been falsely accused of membership in an illegal armed group. At the station where she was held, an officer raped her.

Argelia has participated in testimonial theater since its early days. And FUNSAREP's legal services have helped her obtain some measure of justice. According to Morales, she reported the crime and officials have ruled that she will receive financial reparations. The amount is still being decided.

INSPIRING LEGACY

WHERE HEALING RESOURCES ARE LIMITED or non-existent, Afro-Colombian women like Morales and Morelo are creating their own.

"I had to prevent my sons and daughters from having

Through the testimony theater process, survivors are reconnecting with their leadership abilities and self-identity.

happen to them, or from doing the things, that happened to me," Morelo says. "This is my motivation."

As her children grew, she observed intelligence and leadership qualities in her middle daughter, Rosiris Murillo. Together, they volunteered at FUNSAREP's health and education centers before creating their own organization, Mirror Women Artistic Group Association.

Like testimonial theater, Mirror Women uses theater, as well as other types of performing arts like mime and music, to help Black women heal and to call attention to the mistreatment they face. The two were inspired by a Brazilian organization at the 2004 Social Forum of the Americas held in Ecuador. Morelo was also spurred by memories of loved ones she knew for only a short while.

"My grandparents worked to support peasants. Many of them were jailed. They burned their houses," Morelo says of The Violence era that left her an orphan. "I began to think, 'I should do that.'"

Some of the testimonial theater participants are taking what they learn at FUNSAREP to their own communities. "Women aren't only victims. We want to remove this stigma of victimhood," says Morales, though she acknowledges the term can be necessary when seeking reparations. "Society has to recognize that these women are leaders."

Through the testimony theater process, survivors are reconnecting with their leadership abilities and identity within. They are recreating their lives. Morales gives the example of a former union leader from Chocó who was raped and whose children were killed. Because of her healing experience at FUNSAREP, like Argelia, she felt empowered to report the assault to authorities and is receiving reparations. She has also formed another testimony theater group.

Although the peace accord has been approved, Morales says uncertainty remains about safety and redress for Black women. But her group will continue creating scripts, denouncing and raising awareness about violence in public settings and encouraging participants to replicate what they've learned with other organizations. Throughout 2017, she plans for her group to do more political advocacy on behalf of survivors.

She's recently integrated another healing modality into testimonial theater. On Dec. 10, International Human Rights Day, the group gave its first dance performance. This time the participants all wore long white dresses.

She explains that some rape survivors feel rigid or disconnected from their physical selves. "The theater work permits women to tell their story and raise their voices," Morales says. "What dance does is give them movement again, give them life, joy. Especially Black bodies."

Lori S. Robinson was a Gabriel García Márquez Cultural Journalism Fellow in 2016.

