

Exploring the Role of Hope and Resilience in the Learning Self: A/R/T/ography as Living Inquiry in Kosovo

Ann Holt

Art and Design Education, Pratt Institute

Adjunct Faculty, Art and Design Education, Adelphi University

Abstract

This paper presents a narrative description of an arts-based inquiry experimenting with a/r/t/ography as a way to personally work through a challenging meaning-making process of understanding hope and resilience in the face of the unthinkable. Beginning three years ago, it evolved from my first visit to teach in Kosovo, where, since 1999, many communities are still rebuilding from the impact of a war, which included weapons of mass killing, disappearances, rape, and ethnic cleansing. This personal project parallels my involvement as an advisor and artist teacher for ArtsAction Group (AAG), an international, community-based collective committed, through sustained partnerships with local artists and teachers, to facilitating arts initiatives with children and youth in conflict-affected environments. I continue my work with AAG, visiting Kosovo every year; and as such, I see this project as a living inquiry that builds on each experience. Guiding this research is the question of hope: How does one possibly have the resilience to move forward from the trauma

of war, genocide and ethnic cleansing and have hope? How does one embody a hopeful life and envision a hopeful future? What I offer here is some beginning insight into these questions through emergent arts-based processes that are informed from journal reflections, photo documentation, conversations, and teaching experiences.

Keywords

Kosovo, arts-based inquiry, a/r/t/ography, art education, hope, resilience, genocide

Exploring the Role of Hope and Resilience in the Learning Self: A/R/T/ography as Living Inquiry in Kosovo

This paper is a narrative description of an arts-based inquiry, experimenting with *a/r/t/ography*, which came about as a way for me to personally work through questions of hope and resilience in the aftermath of the war in Kosovo in 1999, which included weapons of mass killing, disappearances, rape, and ethnic cleansing. Three years ago, I went, for my first time, to Kosovo, where many communities are still rebuilding and where families are still dealing with the permanent consequences of unthinkable trauma. This project parallels my involvement in international work as an advisor and artist teacher for ArtsAction Group (AAG). AAG is an international, community-based collective committed, through sustained partnerships with local artists and teachers, to facilitating arts initiatives with children and youth in conflict-affected environments. I continue visiting Kosovo with AAG every year to the same community, and as my experiences and relationships evolve, I allow this creative process to unfold as open-ended and intuitive. This inquiry therefore is living, without a known end point; it evolves relationally through my experiences and builds from reflections, conversations and teaching experiences.

I acknowledge the limitations of my work as I am a relative newcomer to both the methodology and subject. My first visit to Kosovo, I was unprepared both emotionally and intellectually and I needed to start from a place of intuition and inner listening. I was, and still am, very conscious of my place outside the lived experience of war. Now, writing and scholarship within these types of art education contexts and where hope is embraced as a theoretical framework (Anttila & Suominen, 2019) is within reach. Given the complexity of such engagements, finding and building communities of practice, networks, and support are crucial, especially when it seems like the forces that create such human turmoil and upheaval are growing stronger. What follows is a brief background and context of Kosovo, then a discussion of my emerging methodology and insight.

Located in the Southeastern part of Europe, Kosovo, until the early 90s, was an autonomous province within the Republic of Serbia and part of the former Yugoslavia, which was created after WWII agreements that remapped the area based on historic and ethnic differences. When Yugoslavia collapsed, ethnic tensions and devastating bloodshed ensued. As for Kosovo, although the majority of the wealth was held by Serbian Kosovars, it was predominately made up of ethnic Muslim Albanian Kosovars who had begun demanding status as their own republic in the 1980s starting with student protests against economic oppression (Malcolm, 1998). An imposed segregation in its education system was argued to be one of the main obstacles in establishing a peaceful, multiethnic society (Kostovicova, 2005).

During that time, former Serbian president, Slobodan Milosevic, had rose to power pushing a nationalist agenda which fueled ethnic tensions between Albanian and Serbian Kosovars and suppressed Albanian Kosovar resistance towards independence. He targeted Kosovo's ethnic Albanian population inside Kosovo—men, women, children, and elderly through a campaign of murder, looting, and intimidation aimed at driving them out of the territory.

In 1999, after a prolonged conflict, the United States and North Atlantic Treaty Organization

(NATO) allies finally acted to put an end to the ethnic cleansing of Kosovo's ethnic Albanian population by Milosevic's forces. The scale of atrocities leading up to NATO involvement were such that reporters called it a "full ethnic cleansing" as survivors told stories that resembled those from World War II (Tanner, 1999). Tanner reported that many survivors feared that no Albanian would be left alive in Kosovo to save without the timely help from foreign military power and humanitarian aid.

The war in Kosovo impacted hundreds of thousands of people and left the region in a state of flux, beginning during the war with Serbian crimes and human rights violations, with the influx of NATO forces there to stop the Serb forces, directly after the war with the presence of a military-humanitarian apparatus (Pandolfi, 2003). Anthropologist, Mariella Pandolfi (2003), discusses the effects of the complex military-humanitarian apparatus which, particularly since 1945, is deployed, legitimized, and imposed on people in conflict-affected regions. She describes these forces operating through a constant planetary logic of "crisis situations" by a humanitarian rule of law which runs on temporality and is legitimized simultaneously by war and compassion. Governmental and non-governmental agencies exist in a prolonged state of emergency and temporary relief. A striking visual of the humanitarian-military apparatus is the NATO brand (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2017). Aimed at being part of the visual culture of both protection and human catastrophe, it stands as a symbol of protection, but also a branding on the consciousness of those most vulnerable as other forces intervene and control local scenes of disaster.

As such, in the post conflict recovery of Kosovo, the social, psychological, cultural, political, and economic impact of war destruction on families, communities, and infrastructure has been tenuous and brought its own complexity with regards to self-determination. A decade after the war ended, Albanian Kosovars, who make up over 90% of the population of Kosovo, declared their independence in 2008 which is recognized by most EU member countries. However,

Serbia and its allies, including Russia, still do not recognize its sovereignty. According to data from the Central Intelligence Agency website's World Fact Book, specifically under Disputes: International,

Serbia with several other states protest the US and other states' recognition of Kosovo's declaration of its status as a sovereign and independent state; ethnic Serbian municipalities living in Kosovo along the northern border challenge final status of Kosovo-Serbia boundary; several thousand NATO-led Kosovo Force peacekeepers under UN Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo authority continue to keep the peace within Kosovo between the ethnic Albanian majority and the Serb minority in Kosovo; Kosovo and Macedonia completed demarcation of their boundary in September 2008. (Central Intelligence Agency, 2018).

The United Nations Development Program continues to be present in Kosovo since The United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 which passed in 1999, and they partner in collective efforts towards strengthening Kosovo institutions and creating sustainable development. Even today, protection is offered by a NATO-led peace-keeping Kosovo Force situated on the Northern border where tensions are infrequent but still evident (NATO, 2017).

Today, Kosovo is a young country with the average age of 26 years old. It is also one of the most economically at risk, with an average yearly income of 10,400 USD. Unemployment averages 33% per cent while the youth unemployment rate is close to 60%. Many Kosovars rely on remittance payments sent home by family members outside, accounting for about 17% of the country's GDP (Central Intelligence Agency, 2018).

As a newcomer in Kosovo, with some basic understanding of the complex history of conflict in that region, during my first visit I confronted a multitude of both expected and unexpected feelings. When I visit Kosovo, I stay in the area surrounding the small town of Suhareka,

where the destruction from the conflict twenty years ago is still very much evident by the silent reminders of terror in ruins and memorials left behind, as well as in the stories of survivors. During my first trip to Kosovo, I experienced and encountered stories of survival and traces of destruction everywhere and it seemed that I had a fixed lump in my throat the whole time I was there. As it was intense and unfamiliar on a variety of levels, I needed a different way to reflect and respond to what I was encountering. I needed to create a space for myself to process an encompassing impossibility of what seemed like two extremes- the unthinkable horrors of loss, simultaneously with the notion of hope and resilience. The two sensations permeated every engagement I experienced. I couldn't fathom the possibility of crawling out of what for me seemed to be the largest gaping hole I could ever imagine and still have a sense of hope and resilience. In the face of what I was hearing and seeing, I was struck by the capacity for those I met and interacted with to trust, connect, and to hope. I had so much respect and admiration for what seemed, and still does, as I write this, like a super human achievement.

Art can help one to explore big questions- including those which are hard to process in words. The problem that came to guide my research in Kosovo is located in the question of hope even amidst the evidence, I see, of resilience, renewal, growth, kindness, and love flourishing there. How does one be possibly have the resilience to move forward from the trauma of war, genocide and ethnic cleansing and have hope? How does one embody a hopeful life and envision a hopeful future? I explore these questions through arts-based research which serves as a way for me to process and share this multidimensional experience which, for me, is not fully accessible through a more traditional fieldwork approach. Keeping in mind that the choice of which research approach depends on both the question and the one questioning, (i.e. what do I want to know and, most importantly, who am I as a researcher asking this question?), my rationale for choosing this methodology was that making through my understanding would better help me express the interior dimensions of what I was encountering

in Kosovo, particularly during my first visit, and its hold on my imagination to envision an alternative, a different narrative, or even a solution. My research is open, exploratory, and reflective. It is a practice-led, arts-based research (Sullivan, 2008) using a/r/t/ography which encompasses and legitimizes the multiple and situated roles of artist/researcher/teacher within inquiry (Springgay & Irwin, 2005). My art/research/teaching and writing involves “self-study, being in community, relational and ethical inquiry” (Irwin & Springgay, 2008, p. xix). My roles are entangled and relational and as an artist, researcher, and teacher, involving processes of artmaking/photo/video/audio capture in relation to my teaching and other experiences, journal documentation, conversational interviews with Kosovars, and reflective walks. I employ intuitive, non-linear, and iterative methods to derive meaning from my experiences in relation to my environment and those with whom I engage.

The questions I am exploring may seem to be simplistic from the outset. However, with respect for those with whom I engage, and considering that I, myself, am one who never experienced war first hand; I am acutely aware that I am border-crossing this subject. As one embedded in feminist praxis, trained to acknowledge both position and bias, I know that I should define Kosovars as they may self-identify– as beings living in the present, as processes of becoming (Biehl & Locke, 2010) who are mapping their own futures– not wholly as victims, survivors, soldiers, or descendants thereof.

My art making has been a careful, quiet, and slow process with some pieces still in thought form. However, the work, I describe in this paper is the first complete piece of an ongoing process of exploration as I continue my annual visits to Kosovo. What the viewer sees is an ambiguous, layered image that, once the eye has rested on it for a while, the form of a shelled-out building appears. It is a layered image making up an amalgam of selected contrasting images I photographed around the area I visit. It is approximately 53” by 34” (inches). With an appreciation for “what art knows and to find ways to explore and represent that knowledge,

and to find personally appropriate ways to work with the arts' emancipatory potential and effect social change" I use the digital collage process, print, and re-collage as a way of thinking through the multiple and complex dimensions of my experience, physical, social, and emotional (Vaughn, 2005, p. 16).

The piece is titled, *There were Two Survivors*, which describes something simultaneously hopeful and horrifying because of the story behind it told by Refki Gollopeni, the Kosovar artist teacher and survivor; this is a story that is one of many. Refki brought us to a thick glass window front, blocking what was formerly a café in the center of Suhareka. It is where approximately fifty-four women and children were herded in by Serb forces, held captive, and then executed by a volley of grenades. A woman and her son survived and then managed to escape a refrigerator truck full of corpses on its way to a mass grave. I write about this experience of encountering this story for the first time:

I listen quietly with my nose on the glass, peering through the glass at the destruction and dusty residue still left behind from almost twenty years ago. I feel my breath as it hits the glass and fogs. The heat and moisture on my face is rising as my body reacts to what I am hearing unfold. I think about this mother who might be my age, her son who might be the same age as my son and I am trying to imagine where she stood in this space, where she fell, how she managed to keep track of her son under a pile of bloodied dead and dying. . . how was she was able to emerge from this act of violence and still muster a sense of future for herself and her son? (Personal Reflection, March 19, 2017).

Thinking about this story later, I realized that describing this event could involve multiple perspectives; to say that there were two survivors could also be explained in a way to say that there were fifty-two massacred. Is one more hopeful than the other? Does one recount history

differently? How do we have the capacity to think of life in terms of both limits and possibility—where trauma, chaos, new conditions, relations, desires, hopes, dreams, and imagination can sometimes, against all odds, propel resilience for new life and unexpected futures?

Biehl and Locke in their ethnographic work in both Bosnia-Herzegovina and Brazil, articulate a compelling use of Deleuze's notion of becoming and their work helps me to put into perspective the idea of hope and resilience in context to lives within post conflict and reconstruction. A Deleuzian idea of becoming must involve some capacity to reckon with history. Deleuze (1995) wrote, "History amounts only to the set of preconditions, however recent, that one leaves behind in order to 'become,' that is, to create something new" (p. 171).

Thinking about this mother and son, it is difficult to wrap my head around how anyone could be hopeful enough to envision a future— to create something new— after experiencing or witnessing such acts. I am aware that I am in a state of becoming within my process of understanding as it grows each year through experiences, conversations with the people I work with and encounter, those who survived the war and lost multiple family and friends; I grapple with the idea of extreme violence against others. The courage one musters to talk about their stories is a mirror to larger forces. In the case of the artist teacher who we work closely with, he continually confronts his trauma through the stories of survival because he wants the world to know what happened in Kosovo so that it will never happen again. He wants future generations he teaches to create a better story.

I think ultimately hope and resilience come together in both one's receptivity to others and the lived experiences of others— in the voices we listen to and the stories we experience and value. It is also crucial how we craft our explanations, that our analytical processes are attuned to the complexity of emotions, the unpredictability of experience and memory, openness, and the intricacy of individual and collective lives. This creative process, for me, allows for time and space to contemplate and acknowledge this complexity.

As my creative process unfolds, I have drawn at least one conclusion that I feel fairly sure about. For one in the process of becoming, to create something new, I sense that a heightened awareness and capacity to flow, to sense from the inside out and particularly within oneself might provide notions of self-purpose or a sense of purpose. Maybe this capacity is what is necessary to keep the self alive. At this point in my understanding, I feel fairly confident saying that this sense of purpose might be at least one factor that cultivates hope and resilience.

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