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Negotiating contested heritages through theatre and storytelling

Kerstin Pfeiffer and Magdalena Weiglhofer

Theatre and storytelling are two cultural practices that can be found in almost every society, and many of their traditional forms, from *Hezhen Yimakan* storytelling in China to puppetry in Slovakia, are officially recognised forms of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), that is as practices which store and transmit customs, skills, traditions and thus knowledge from generation to generation (Logan, Kockel and Nic Craith 2015). Festive events often provide fora for these living heritage practices. The Elche Mystery Play in Spain (also known as *Misteri d'Elx* or *La Festa*), for example, is a chanted drama of medieval origins and is performed by local volunteers in the Basilica Santa Maria and the streets of Elche on 14 and 15 August every year. As a celebration of the death, assumption and crowning of the Virgin Mary, it is one of the last vestiges of the once rich tradition of religious drama in Europe, but is mainly understood today as a symbol of Elche's identity and of Valencian cultural heritage. It was inscribed in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2008 (UNESCO 2018). Storytelling as a cultural practice is similarly celebrated in festivals throughout Europe, including the Alden Biesen International Storytelling Festival in Belgium or the Wales International Storytelling Festival, in which classic storytelling sessions are combined with music, poetry, theatre and circus performances, as well as workshops, movie screenings or puppet shows.

Yet both storytelling and theatre occur, of course, in many other forms and contexts. The *commedia del'arte* of sixteenth-century Italy, the musical *Cats*, and scripted scenes from the life of Saint Columba at the UK City of Culture festivities in Derry/Londonderry can all be understood as theatre. Storytelling covers everything from amateurs passing on myths or fairy tales in a private setting to performers telling traditional or cultural stories in public – sometimes combined with music and/or dance – or individuals (both professional and lay actors) relating memories of (their) lived experience in a theatrical environment.

As part of heritage festivals, theatre and storytelling can provide people with a sense of history, community, generations, and with a sensitivity to spoken language and its importance to ICH (Nic Craith 2008). As cultural practices in themselves they are a means of exploring narratives of self, of place, and of community. Thus, they offer tools for empowerment and inclusion because they can illuminate the collision of simultaneous truths and allow their participants (including audiences) to engage with their own experiences and those of others in a facilitated space (Kuftinec 2009; Snyder-Young 2013; Nicholson 2014; Thompson 2009). Both have therefore been used for peace building and reconciliation in places where cultures co-exist or collide.

In this chapter, we examine the social and cultural work that theatrical performance and storytelling can do to negotiate contested cultural heritages and memory in two specific geographical contexts: Northern Ireland, where deep-rooted divisions between Catholics and Protestants remain a fact of life, and the border region between Bavaria and Bohemia, where the historical conflict between Germans and Czechs continues to have an impact on their relationship to this day. Focusing on two specific projects, we seek to illustrate the potential

inherent in theatre and storytelling for challenging pre-conceived or deeply ingrained notions of both personal and collective identity which can prevent or hinder exchange and reconciliation. Our first case study focuses on Theatre of Witness (ToW), a performance project which brought together Northern Irish people from different cultural, socio-economic and geographical backgrounds and encouraged the telling of personal memories from experiences during the Northern Irish conflict and its aftermath, so that they could be performed as autobiographical narratives on stage. The second case study centres on the *Čojě* *Theaternetzwerk Böhmen Bayern*, a German-Czech theatre network that regularly brings together German-speaking and Czech-speaking young people aged between 14 and 26 years in theatre workshops of one to three weeks.¹ The workshops are usually led by a German-Czech tandem of facilitators and ideally involve equal numbers of Czech and German speakers. In the past decade, they have often focused on historical topics such as the expulsion of Germans from the *Sudetenland* after World War Two, which challenge the participants to engage with questions of cultural identity in the border region.

The guiding assumption behind both initiatives is that interpersonal interaction can lead to genuine relationships across societal divides and therefore constitute a steppingstone for breaking down cultural barriers. They are examples of applied theatre, an ‘ecology of practices’ (Hughes and Nicholson 2016: 3) which considers its key purpose to be socially or politically transformative (Neelands 2007; Nicholson 2014) and therefore engages directly in social praxis, whether it be in a closed group of a drug rehabilitation scheme, in a performance about oral history in an ethnically-mixed innercity community, as museum theatre or as a performance at a heritage site such as the re-enactment of the Battle of Bannockburn in 2014. Like most applied theatre initiatives, both Theatre of Witness and *Čojě* use participatory practices in order to build performances from small segments of theatre,

which are reflective of the participants' experiences, without a preconceived script. In *Čojč* workshops, the participants create improvisations based on stimuli which are then developed into scenes and sequences for performance. While they naturally gravitate towards certain roles in the creative process, ideally the work becomes the property of the whole group and everybody helps to develop it. Theatre of Witness used the process of telling life stories, first in private one-on-one interviews with the artistic director and second within the group of project participants, to structure and construct the participants' life narratives and to create a script that could be performed to a wide audience across Northern Ireland and the bordering counties of the Republic of Ireland. Whilst written by the artistic director, the script was exclusively produced from the words of the story holders and the participants had total control over the final version of it. The storytellers then learned their own script and created and rehearsed a performance to go with it.

Collaborative creation and communication are interdependent. Therefore, facilitating meaningful communication between the participants is one of the main aims of both ToW and *Čojč* theatre workshops. Or as *Kasimír*, an experienced *Čojč* workshop facilitator, remarked: 'We teach the kids to communicate and our medium is theatre' (Interview, 30/08/2017).² This is often not as straightforward as it may seem. In the bilingual (if not multi-lingual) *Čojč* rehearsal room, the participants must work out how to communicate in linguistically mixed groups in order to create and improvise a scene (Pfeiffer, Richardson and Wurm, forthcoming). Theatre of Witness placed careful and non-judgemental listening to one another's stories at the centre of its attention. The goal was to create a space for storytelling that focused on openness and learning.

Our aim in discussing two case studies is, firstly, to highlight the importance and expectations attached to social encounters and exchange, and secondly, to analyse the role that engagement with the past can play within this process. In doing so, we seek to illustrate that both Theatre of Witness and *Čojč* workshops with a historical topic focus bring the past into the present with the express intention of shaping a different future. They are dynamic tools for intervening in both self and culture that foreground the individual as a lens through which to see realities which demand reflection if the present is to change into a better future. In other words, they are each a ‘backwards and forwards looking act’ (Park-Fuller 2000: 28).

Meeting the alienated ‘Other’

The Theatre of Witness project was funded by European Union money allocated to ‘peace building’ in Northern Ireland³, as its self-defined aim was to ‘foster stability, reconciliation and peaceful human interaction in the post-conflict society of Northern Ireland’ (Derry Playhouse Theatre 2008). The overall initiative lasted two years, from January 2009 until December 2010, but was subdivided into two individual projects.⁴ Each year, a group of six people from different backgrounds, of diverse ages and from varied geographical areas performed their own stories around a dozen times across Northern Ireland and border counties of the Irish Republic. The first project included six men and one woman; the second involved exclusively women.⁵ The project was accompanied from start to finish by one of the authors in her role as a scientific production associate whilst writing her doctoral thesis (Weiglhofer 2014a).

Considering that people in (post-)conflict societies do have (sometimes well-thought through) reasons not to talk about their past, it is understandable that they would be apprehensive about speaking out within a group of people who are each conscious that they have a whole

different set of experiences, viewpoints and upbringing. Dan Baron-Cohen has spoken in this respect of a *barricade culture* (Pilkington 1994), in which internal and external voices were typically sealed by the principle “Whatever you say, say nothing” (Baron-Cohen 1999: 178). At the same time, sometimes the mere possibility of sharing a room with individuals who are or were in the past linked to a group or organisation that had inflicted harm or represented antagonistic world views to one’s own seems difficult or not feasible altogether. In order to illustrate some of the impacts and challenges of sharing stories of contested heritage within a heterogeneous group, we will focus on what happened within one specific triad of people who got to hear each others’ accounts.

Erin, Maeve and Laura participated in the second of the two projects. The artistic director had provided every participant with basic information on the other members of the group, and as a consequence, Erin, who had served in the Irish Republican Army (IRA)⁶ for a short time, was concerned to meet especially one person who she anticipated would be hostile towards her:

My biggest concern was Maeve because I would have been active [in the IRA] at the time that her husband was killed [by the IRA]. I had heard rumours that she was a tough one, she was black and white and... no bullshit and... and I was sort of thinking, ‘I walk here and this woman is gonna put me down and I’m gonna end up crying and ... I have to just stand there and take it and... whatever she has to say, I have to stand there and take it.’ [...] And then I was the first to tell my story and I was super conscious that she was sitting beside me (Interview, 09/12/2010).

Erin’s statement draws a picture of the encounter that clearly reflects the fears connected to it. It also suggests that she must not have been clear about how the narration sessions would be facilitated, since she was convinced that she had to ‘just stand there and take’ whatever

Maeve said. While the philosophy of ToW indeed supported implicit respect for each other's story, whatever it might entail, it also maintained the rule not to challenge each other.

However, Erin was highly conscious that she had been described to the others in terms of *one* element in her story – namely that of having been a member of a paramilitary organisation. Walking into a group of strangers and being the first one to tell of this contested element without knowing much of the listeners' backgrounds, demonstrates courage on her part. In fact, when speaking to other members of this group, they confirm that meeting Erin was something that caused apprehension and second thoughts on whether or not to take part in the project at all.

Laura, for instance, grew up in a tight-knit Protestant working class area that did not leave much space for world views other than its own. She remembers her reaction upon receiving the information that there would be 'a woman that had been in the Provisional IRA':

That was daunting because I had never really stepped out of my comfort zone. I was reared in a Protestant area, went to a Protestant school. It was not just meeting a Catholic, not just a Republican, but an activist. And I did struggle a bit with that. But I said to myself, 'You have to go and meet this person, meet her as a person'. I didn't have a problem with meeting the others. Just with Erin. What was gonna be said and what would come out. You just didn't know (Interview, 20/12/2010).

Meeting Erin as 'a person', not associating her with the (for her) dehumanising image of an IRA activist, presented the challenge that Laura was to take on if participating in the mutual storytelling. At the same time, this thinking process is not unproblematic as it demonstrates thinking with double standards. As a matter of fact, Erin simultaneously is both a person *and*

an activist; placing one before the other denies the reality of each. Accepting Erin as person must include the acceptance of her past self since it significantly influences her present personality. However, Laura did not seem prepared to go that far. Yet, she understood that if she wanted to ‘get [her] community’s view out there’, as she had made clear earlier, she also would need to listen to uneasy stories that, in fact, *did* make her ‘very angry’, as she admitted later. Laura herself had been in an incident where she – heavily pregnant – only narrowly escaped a bomb explosion that had been planted by female IRA combatants. Conversely, however, through the relatively long process of story sharing, Laura came to understand and to admire Erin’s courage to tell her story. Finally, she decided that Erin must have got ‘wrapped up in it’. In the same interview, Laura described how she reached that view:

Yes, there was things heart rending and ... you know... because I think of what happened to me, because it was IRA women that put the bomb in the café I was in. It could have so easily been me. And... But I thought she [Erin] was very, very honest and very, very brave. And that I admire. It’s one of those things. She got wrapped up in it. [...]. There were wee things... you were talking and you were trying to talk honestly, you didn’t want to hurt or offend any of the rest. But I think we... as a group all accepted what each other said. You mightn’t have liked it but you accepted it ‘cause [of] the person [who] was saying it (Interview, 19/12/2011).

While Laura’s upbringing and present surroundings as well as personal experiences would form her opinion about republican activism, she acknowledges a personal achievement when she says:

It’s made a change in me. It’s made me come out of my area and go to meet people that I never... dreamed I would meet, never *wanted* to meet. And now.... I’ve been down, I’ve stayed in Erin’s house! (Interview, 19/12/2011.)

By taking on the opportunity to exchange stories with people of ‘other persuasions’, as Laura calls it, she found that she was able to acknowledge how Erin could have got ‘wrapped up’ in the conflict, how she had developed her views. However, this acknowledgement seems only possible by diminishing Erin’s agency in becoming involved. She reconnects and compares Erin’s story with her own, which allows her to understand (whilst not necessarily approving of) the reasons for certain decisions and subsequent actions. Choosing to look at and make efforts to understand the individual rather than the affiliated organisation has resulted in finding connections with an alienated other.

In order to get a holistic picture of the interpersonal impact, it is interesting, at this point, to have a look at Maeve, the third in the triad presented here and the woman at the centre of Erin’s worries. This is how Maeve remembered their first meeting:

I had been told at the beginning that there was an ex-IRA woman among the cast. That didn’t bother me because I had been working with ex-paramilitaries for about fifteen years. [...] But it was prominent in my mind to meet with this ex-IRA woman. And it was very strange the way it happened. It turned out that I was anxious to meet her but I wasn’t frightened to meet her. But she was frightened to meet me because she didn’t know what kind of reaction that I would have to her. She was more nervous meeting me than I was meeting her. Ten years ago it mightn’t have been so easy (Interview, 11/12/2010).

Maeve’s attitude demonstrated above is likely to have been the reason for the way she ultimately reacted to Erin’s story, as related by Erin:

After I [Erin] got it all out, she [Maeve] just gave me a big massive hug. [...] And that acceptance was incredible! And maybe I hadn’t given her a chance. I just sort of thought, ‘Her husband was killed by the IRA. Why would she even want to sit in a

room with me?’ And at one stage she probably would have never sat in a room with me (Interview, 09/12/2010).

The apprehension of Erin as well as the illustrated response of the supposedly antagonistic counterparts highlight quite clearly the level of personal development that a majority of those involved already had achieved *before* joining the project. Their agreement to participate in this cross-community project underlines the change of mind and attitude of the individuals who had not been disinclined to use violence to achieve their goals in the past. The listeners, some of whom had been strongly affected by violence, were willing to remain non-judgemental *despite* possible connections to their own stories that could and did cause intense emotions. In both ToW projects, tears were a constant reminder of how vulnerable people chose to make themselves by sharing honest thoughts and feelings, but also of how much the opportunity to be heard seemed to be longed for and appreciated.

< FIGURE 12.1 HERE >

Telling a life story within a group of people from heterogeneous cultural identity backgrounds can lead to acknowledging that others have suffered, too, which may (and did in this case) result in the creation of empathy for (former) opponents.⁷ As some (e.g. Senehi 2002; Bar-On and Kassem 2004) have determined, storytelling can be ‘critical for bringing people together on a personal level’ (Senehi 2002: 56) when stories provide clues of personal circumstances and therefore may pave the way for understanding of how certain standpoints were reached. By transmitting knowledge from generation to generation but to a different audience such as a former opponent, storytelling as ICH contributes to negotiating contested heritages.

Our second case study illustrates that bilingual applied youth theatre workshops can similarly provide a forum for exploring how contemporary identities can be negotiated and shaped in the face of a past that is characterised by conflict. In what follows, we draw on interviews with network members and on participant observation to explore, firstly, the importance that network members attach to social encounters between Czech and German young people for fostering cohesion. Secondly, we seek to illustrate how looking back to the shared history and heritage of Germans and Czechs is considered by network members to play a crucial role for finding one's place within the social and cultural world of the border region.⁸

Meeting the historical 'Other'

German-Czech relations today are characterised by a relatively high degree of cross-border cooperation in a variety of fields from trade, to infrastructure and education (Germany Trade & Invest 2018; Černá 2009). Yet for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the two countries formed a 'community of conflict' (Křen cited in Houžvička 2015: 14) because of the tensions between Czech-and German-speaking inhabitants in the border regions, as well as the atrocities committed by the Nazi regime, and the subsequent expulsion of ethnic Germans from Bohemia following World War Two. Moreover, from 1945 to 1989/90, the two countries were further separated ideologically by the Iron Curtain. The historical conflict between Czechs and Germans, and especially the post-war mass migration out of Bohemia of the German-speaking minority, continue to influence social relations between the two countries to this day to a certain extent even if, on a political level, steps have been taken to acknowledge responsibility on both sides for causing suffering (Houžvička 2015; see also Kockel in this volume).

In the past decade, the *Čojč Theaternetzwerk* has regularly tackled these difficult aspects of borderland history and culture through projects like *Das verschwundene Dorf - Místo na dně* (The vanished village, 2011), *Začarovany - Zauberland* (Magic land, 2016) or *SchwanenMostek – LabutíBrückl: Grenzlandkultur 1938 revisited* (2018). All of these projects have proved popular with participants and are considered by network members to make a particularly pertinent contribution to fostering social cohesion between Czechs and Germans - the declared aim of the network.⁹

In Western Bohemia, it is difficult *not* to notice the cultural and linguistic remnants of the entangled past of German- and Czech-speakers under the Austro-Hungarian empire. **Kasimír** observed:

If you want to understand the culture here in Western Bohemia, you have to know German. German has deep roots here. [...] In Moravia, I feel more like a foreigner than when I go to a pub in Lower Bavaria – even though they speak the same language [in Moravia]. (Interview, 30/08/2017)

This sense of a shared past is mentioned repeatedly when network members speak about their motivation for getting involved with *Čojč*, and it is frequently coupled with a keen awareness of the cultural and social damage caused by decades of separation. Tanja, a project participant, admitted that she knew very little about life on the other side of the border until she joined *Čojč* despite growing up very close to the border and that such a lack of knowledge allowed prejudice to flourish. Thus, she admits that before she met young Czech people, who have now become firm friends, she ‘just had this image ... I don’t know... of poor, smoking prostitutes’ (Interview, 28/08/2017). The positive impact of encounters and shared experiences for redefining social relations between Germans and Czechs is something

that many *Čojč* network members and participants commented on. Some, like Tibor, even expressed a sense of responsibility for (re-)building cross border relations:

We are neighbours and it is important to get to know the Germans. Then relations can improve [...]. There was a strong historical link between [us] and Germany. But now because of the Second World War, because of Stalin, because of Hitler...so... it is a pity' (Interview, 28/08/2017).

For Jan, an assistant workshop facilitator, this sense of responsibility is not only grounded in the shared history and geographical proximity of the two countries but in the understanding that his generation, i. e. that born after the fall of the Iron Curtain, is less encumbered than previous ones by the traumatic experiences and conflicts of the past:

I always think it is down to us to normalise the relations because the generation before us didn't get the chance; and the generation before them, so that of my grandparents, had the atrocities and the invasion in '38 on the Czech side as well as the ... well... the events after '45 on the German side. Perhaps it is our duty to rebuild the contacts, and *this* I see in a larger context – that people make contacts and start friendships. Maybe it is easy to separate people, but it is perhaps harder to separate friends or lovers even. (Interview, 25/08/2017)

Interestingly, the 'duty to rebuild the contacts' seems to be linked, for him, to an implicit fear that the shadows of the past still have some power to return, even though the Czech Republic and Germany are now both members of the EU. Others do not necessarily echo this fear. For *Kasimír*, for example, the opening of the borders heralded an entirely new dawn. In the early 2000s, he says, project-related cross-border travel and exchange 'seemed so European to me and like we are really building a new Europe [...]. It was such an intercultural and amazing

experience'. For him, *Čojč* projects are not only made possible by European integration, they also contribute to 'building a new Europe' by encouraging social interaction. For him and many other network members, shining a light on the shadows of the past by giving new life to stories of places and people is an important element in the network's approach to fostering and normalising cross-border exchange.

The latest theatre project in July 2018 may serve as an example of how the *Čojč* network seeks to make the past relevant for the present and the future in a bilingual applied theatre project. *SchwanenMostek-LabutíBrückl: Grenzlandkultur 1938 revisited* was a week-long theatre workshop, which brought together 13 German- and Czech-speaking young people in Waldmünchen (Germany) to work on producing theatrical material focusing on the lost village of Schwanenbrückl – or Mostek in Czech. Only a stone-throw away from the border between Germany and the Czech Republic, Schwanenbrückl was home to Germans and Czechs, Jews and Christians before 1939. Today, all that remains of it are the overgrown ruins of houses as the village was abandoned with the migration of its German-speaking population. The aim of the project was to take the participants and the audience on a journey back in time to 1938 in order to give them an insight into life in the village (*Čojč* 2018).

There was no script to facilitate this time travel. In the course of the week, the participants built a performance from scenes and images they created in response to different stimuli, which could be visual (e.g. a photograph), aural (e.g. music), textual (e.g. a diary) or abstract (e.g. a word or a theme).¹⁰

A key starting point for *SchwanenMostek* was the book *Auf Nachricht warten* by Regina Gottschalk, a distant descendent of a Jewish family living in Schwanenbrückl in the late 1930s. Based on personal letters and historical documents, Gottschalk illustrates the family's

reaction to the annexation of the *Sudetenland*, their fears, hopes, and dreams. In the course of the week, the project participants read excerpts from the book and from diaries as part of their research; they attended a reading with Bernard Setzwein, author of *Der böhmische Samurai*, a historical novel, and visited Schloss Ronsberg, where the novel is set. In addition, they spent time in a synagogue in Kdyne and explored the forest, which now grows over the ruins of Schwanenbrückl. These engagements with stories, memories, and the topography of Schwanenbrückl and the surrounding area were transposed into images, sequences and scenes.

The public performance of *SchwanenMostek-LabutiBrückl: Grenzlandkultur 1938 revisited* was site-specific and interactive: it took the participants and their 80-strong audience from a conversation between villagers in the local pub just outside Schwanenbrückl to the site of the half-forgotten village where the spectators witnessed scenes of school life, participated in Sabbath celebrations, and watched a family photo being taken for example. The performative reanimation of Schwanenbrückl relocates the village, its people and their stories in time and space yet the strength of the historical narrative that *SchwanenMostek* presents does not rest in claims to truthfully recounting what happened in the village in 1938. Even where historical events such as a fire in a local barn, which was the talk of the village in 1938, provide the material and *dramatis personae*, the resulting scene is never a re-telling but a re-imagination because the project's exploration of spaces, objects, and ideas focused on sparking a personal connection and on the participants' creativity rather than on historical accuracy.

< FIGURE 12.2 HERE >

Čojč facilitators frequently stress the ‘very creative atmosphere’ in *Čojč* projects which gives the participants the feeling that ‘everything is possible’ (Kasimír, Interview 30/08/2017) – a clear indication that they believe in the transformative potential of applied theatre (Nicholson 2014; Thompson 2009; Snyder-Young 2013). In the case of *SchwanenMostek*, the creative process encourages the participants to interrogate the boundaries between the factual and the fictional and promotes, provokes and challenges their understanding. For example, how should we refer to the migration of the German-speaking minority out of Schwanenbrückl after 1945? German uses the word *Vertreibung* (expulsion). In Czech, it is usually referred to as *odzu* (transfer). Discussions over terminology in the rehearsal room can thus highlight larger contexts and raise questions about authority in relation to the performative construction of history. As Martin, a workshop leader with considerable experience in facilitating history projects, explained:

I made the experience that [the participants] have been socialised differently into historical culture, especially as far as the 20th century is concerned. [...] I wouldn’t expect a project to have a particular influence in terms of transmitting factual knowledge ... but it can show up the different perspectives, and that’s something that a play can also do really well. (Interview, 20/11/2017)

For Martin and Kasimír the exposure to different discourses about history and memory, the creative process, and theatre’s ability to present multiple perspectives all guard against what Baz Kershaw has criticized as the ‘performance of nostalgia’ which sanitises the struggles of the past (1999: 160).

As Astrid Erll (2011) observes, the telling of stories from the past often says less about the past as such than about our own, present needs for doing so. For the members of the *Čojč* theatre network, this present need can be described as a desire to extend people’s

understanding of their current place within their social and cultural world. As Martin explained:

There is a saying in *Čojč* that *Čojč* creates a new *Heimat*¹¹, a new dynamic understanding of *Heimat* so to say, in any case a kind of rootedness, of connection, [...] of feeling at home; [*Čojč*] offers the chance to formulate a current version of this, also for the participants. (Interview, 20/11/2017)

The bilingual *Čojč* theatre projects are performative (in two senses of the word) of a new vision of *Heimat* that is based on regional cultural identity: they show or act out the hybridity of the border region, for example by using the hybrid language *Čojč* alongside Czech and German on stage; and in doing so, they affect the real world in that they can contribute to a (re-)definition what and where *Heimat* is – and who is part of it. Through the performance, the village and its people become part of the lived experience of the participants and spectators who inhabit Schwanenbrückl in the theatrical moment. By interweaving the historical and the imaginary, the performance requires *all* to engage with constructed side of our relation to the past as much as with the individual, embodied and lived.

Conclusion

The Theatre of Witness and *Čojč* projects each provide a space to ‘reimagine community and reanimate ethical relationships’ (Kuftinec 2009: 1) in contexts where cultural heritage(s) are contested. Based on the idea that interpersonal interaction builds bridges across societal divides, both projects facilitate encounters that enable participants to access view points and narratives that they might not have heard easily otherwise. Yet the participants do not simply share a space: they engage creatively with their own personal stories and those of others through theatrical techniques that are adapted to the specific requirements of the project context. This can challenge the preconceived notions of personal and collective identity and

opens up ways of understanding a formerly alienated or historical other. The examples of Laura and Erin illustrate the personal transformations that looking back to one's own life story and sharing it may bring about. Čojč history projects like *SchwanenMostek* re-enliven the shared cultural heritage of the border region as well as the struggles of the past for new audiences. Participants and spectators alike gain access to a plurality of perspectives, which – through the act of performance – become part of their own lived experience. Looking back thus becomes an important element in interrogating and establishing the contours of a borderland identity. In other words, the creative and theatrical techniques used in both projects enable participants (and audiences) to negotiate, cross-reference, and borrow and thus to construct, and rehearse future identities among the narratives of others, past and present. Theatre and storytelling thus open up the past in the present as a resource for a contemporary formulation of a future vision that offers points for identification, which reach beyond contested heritages.

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¹ The word *Čojč* is a blend of the Czech word for the Czech language, *česky*, and the Czech spelling for the word *deutsch* (German): *dojč*. It is also used to refer to the hybrid language that the *Čojč Theaternetzwerk* in the rehearsal room as well as in performance.

² In order to maintain the anonymity of our interlocutors, we use pseudonyms throughout.

³ The Good Friday Agreement set off a proliferation of peace building initiatives at community and institutionalized level, with the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) being the biggest supplier of funds for this purpose.

⁴ Due to the project's success, it was subsequently extended for another two years (2011-12).

⁵ Both performances included a seventh character onstage that, in 2009, was intended as a (mainly) quiet embodiment of all those who cannot or do not want to speak out and, in 2010, as a representative of the performing women's youth.

⁶ The Irish Republican Army was a paramilitary movement in Northern Ireland in the 20th and 21st centuries dedicated to Irish republicanism, that is the belief that all of Ireland should be an independent republic. It was also characterised by the belief that political violence was necessary to achieve that goal.

⁷ For a more rounded discussion of impacts see Weiglhofer 2014b, Weiglhofer 2015).

⁸ The fieldwork was conducted as part of Work Package 3 of the Horizon2020-funded CoHERE project *Critical heritages: performing and representing identities in Europe* (2016-19).

⁹ The network motto is: *Mit divladem theater hýbat grenzen hranicemi bewegen* (Moving borders through theatre). *Grenzen* is a multi-faceted term in German, as it can refer to political borders, personal limits or barriers of different kinds. It is deliberately ambiguous here.

¹⁰ The project received funding from from the ‘Europeans for Peace’ programme by the Stiftung ‘Erinnerung – Verantwortung und Zukunft’ (EVZ) and the European Regional Development Fund in recognition of its aim to foster reconciliation and exchange. For further information about the pedagogical approach taken in this project see Reinert & Kopůncová (2018).

¹¹ We are leaving this notoriously troublesome, affect-laden German concept, which can encompass places, spaces, and people untranslated here as the quotation provides a reasonable gloss.