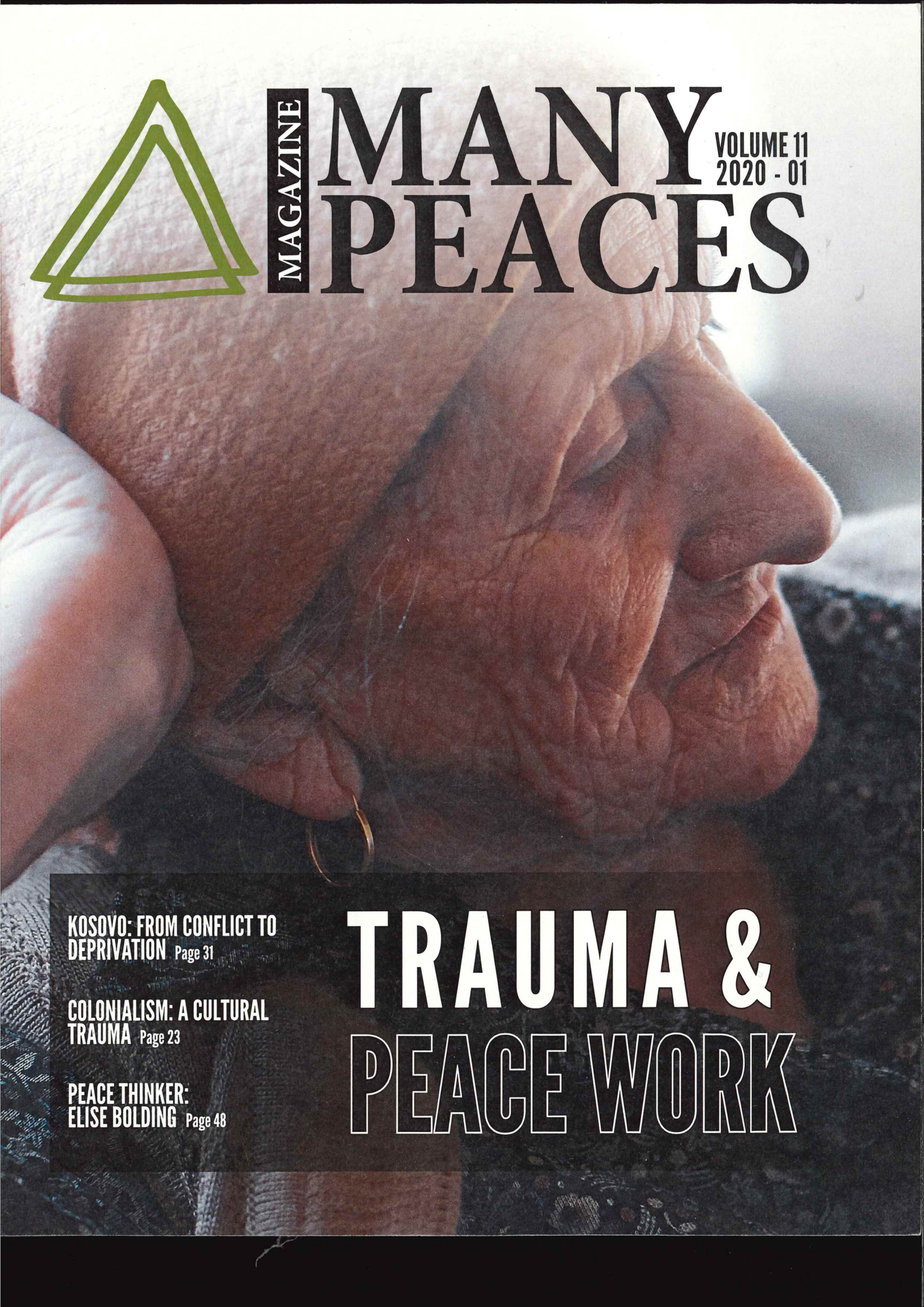


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TRAUMA & PEACE WORK

GUEST COMMENT

BY ARMIN STAFFLER

Communities have always used art such as dance, storytelling, music, and theatre to deal with and process their histories. All the world's a stage, and all men and women merely players. (W. Shakespeare: As You Like It, Act II Scene VII Line 138)

Trauma is an injury to living tissue and cannot only happen to individuals but to communities as well. Communities are living organisms, and since we know about epigenetic transmission, we should consider the effects of transgenerational traumas that have happened to us in the past as relevant for us now. Whenever I work with any kind of group, I do not consider them to be traumatised. However, they are somehow looking for healing because they are somehow injured. After I participated in a Trauma and Addiction Conference that took place in Brixen, South Tyrol/Italy in 2015 (keynote speakers: Lutz Besser und Eva Münker-Kramer), I first started to think of my work as being relevant in the context of trauma. One thing that I took from there is that not every potentially traumatic experience causes trauma. It is a very complex mechanism depending on time, intensity and abilities to deal with the situation(s).

In my work, I am mainly referring to the work of David Diamond and his Theatre for Living. I agree with him that art can be therapeutic for the collective psyche of a community. However, art is primarily a way of processing life in general, and theatre should remain theatre and not become a way of group therapy. Maybe exactly that can make it therapeutic in a sense. In order to survive as communities, we have to play and sing and dance and write ... It is a way of digesting. In his book *Theatre for Living. The art and science of community-based dialogue*, David Diamond writes: "If we don't tell our collective stories, we get sick as a community". The best way to destroy a community is to take away their dances, songs, rituals, literature and to illegalize the creation of art.

I remember vividly when I was asked to create theatre with a small Tyrolean community in the wake of three suicides by young people. Several groups were trying to deal with this unbelievable accumulation of tragedies, not only by creating theatre but also music and photography or by doing interviews. We created a play that confronted a huge audience with questions such as "how to maintain healthy relationships even in times of trouble" without giving any answers. Instead, we invited them to come on stage, to replace a character and try an idea. This process is known as Forum Theatre, first described and done by Augusto Boal (1931–2009).

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Re-traumatization does NOT happen because of an occurring trigger or experiencing a similar situation. It happens if the same emotion of help- or powerlessness occurs again. This is an insight from the conference mentioned before. Creating art – especially collectively – is always a way of taking action and therefore is a chance to experience creativity and efficacy. My preferred collective form of art is Forum Theatre. Theatre tells about and imitates human behaviour under extraordinary and extreme conditions. Otherwise it is

boring. You are never helpless, never powerless and never alone when you are creating theatre. In Forum Theatre, the audience is not expected to sit and wait passively, but they are invited to create their own versions of better ways to face the problems presented. I am applying the concept of Theatre for Living,

trying to make the best art under the given circumstances, to my work. It does not mean telling anybody's personal story but telling the collective truth via fiction. It does not mean offering solutions but having a real open dialogue about the issues on stage. It is theatre for living in a healthier community. Trauma knocks off balance. Theatre for Living can help us to find balance.

No matter how traumatic the situation might be, theatre can explore ways to deal with it. As long as we play, act, sing, dance, and write, there is no need to fear potentially traumatic experiences, because either they will not cause trauma or we have the ability to heal ourselves. As long as we try to contribute to the Many Peaces that exist in various forms, we are able to balance life that is always sailing on a rough sea. Thanks to everybody contributing (especially) to this issue of the MPM by either writing or reading it and keeping up the dialogue!



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