

Oral History and Pluralising the Past in Post-Conflict Northern Ireland

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Northern Ireland after the 1998 Good Friday or Belfast Agreement has been diagnosed with a surfeit of memory and a lack of analysis, most recently by Cillian McGrattan, who suggests that the privileging of particular memorial narratives can engrain and strengthen communal division, particularly between Protestant/Unionist and Catholic/Nationalist groupings. Although the agreement established a devolved power-sharing government in an important move towards a post-conflict state, it is clear that the violence of the preceding years continues to unsettle and disrupt the present moment. This paper draws out the methodological and ethical debate over memory and community as it relates to the practice of oral history in Northern Ireland, particularly through McGrattan's recent work on this topic. It will use as a case study the Prisons Memory Archive (PMA), a recently-launched multimedia storytelling and oral history project that collated memories from two prisons in use during the Northern Irish troubles, the Maze and Long Kesh Prison and Armagh Gaol. It will suggest that McGrattan's critique, while useful, disregards some of the formal and methodological attempts of the PMA to disrupt binary identity narratives in Northern Ireland. Before moving into that debate, however, it will attempt to provide some context, firstly for the conflict in Northern Ireland generally and secondly for the relationship between oral history, community and religious identity as it has developed in the post-conflict state.

Introduction

The short story *Funes, the Memorious* by Jorge Luis Borges recounts an unnamed narrator's encounter with Ireneo Funes, a Uruguayan peasant who develops the double-edged gift of a prodigious and lossless memory.¹ The narrator doubts Ireneo's capacity for abstract thought. "To think is to forget a difference, to generalise, to abstract. In the overly replete world of Funes there were nothing but details, almost contiguous details."² Northern Ireland has similarly been diagnosed with a surfeit of memory and a lack of analysis, most

¹ Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1964), 148-154.

² *Ibid.*, 154.

recently by Cillian McGrattan, who suggests that the privileging of particular memorial narratives can engrain and strengthen communal division, particularly between Protestant/Unionist and Catholic/Nationalist groupings.³ Critiques of memorial culture in the province abound. Edna Longley pithily describes the deployment of memory in ethnic conflict and identity formation as the always-prepositioned act of ‘remembering at’, or remembering with a particular target in mind – remembering in public, with a consciously divisive intention.⁴ This paper draws out the methodological and ethical debate over memory and community as it relates to the practice of oral history in Northern Ireland. It will use as a case study the Prisons Memory Archive (PMA), a recently-launched multimedia storytelling and oral history project that collated memories from two prisons in use during the Northern Irish troubles, the Maze and Long Kesh Prison and Armagh Gaol. Before moving into that debate, however, it will provide some context, firstly for the conflict in Northern Ireland generally and secondly for the relationship between oral history, community and religious identity as it has developed in the post-conflict state.

Post-conflict is used here to refer to the period following the 1998 Good Friday or Belfast Agreement, which led to the establishment of a devolved, power-sharing government in Northern Ireland. This agreement’s consociational framework was intended to prevent either the Protestant/Unionist or Catholic/Nationalist blocs from dominating the political apparatus of the new state. In doing so, however, it also demarcated those blocs as distinct. Religion as a marker of identity remains a powerful discursive force in Northern Irish society, as well as a crucial factor in the construction of opposing and legitimising narratives. One element of that demarcation remains the continued dispute over memories of the conflict, a dispute in which oral history and oral historians are inevitably involved in. Given that the Stormont House Agreement of December 2014 reiterated the

³ Cillian McGrattan, “Historians in Post Conflict Societies: Northern Ireland After the Troubles,” *History and Policy* (2011): accessed 20 March 2017, <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/historians-in-post-conflict-societies-northern-ireland-after-the-troubles>; Cillian McGrattan, “The Stormont House Agreement and the New Politics of Storytelling in Northern Ireland,” *Parliamentary Affairs* (2015); Cillian McGrattan, *The Politics of Trauma and Peacebuilding: Lessons From Northern Ireland* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

⁴ Edna Longley, “Commemoration, Elegy, Forgetting,” in *History and Memory in Modern Ireland*, edited by Ian McBride (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 231. For a recent overview of physical memorial practice in post-conflict Belfast see Elizabeth Viggiani, *Talking Stones: The Politics of Memorialization in Post-Conflict Northern Ireland* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2015); for a description of the role of parades and public events as forms of memorial practice see Neil Jarman, *Material Conflicts: Parades and Visual Displays in Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Berg, 1997).

devolved state's commitment to the creation of an oral history archive that will provide space for stories from people from a diverse range of backgrounds, there is an urgent need to contextualise and reflect upon the relationship between collective memories, power and history in post-conflict Northern Ireland. If McGrattan's call to produce anti-hegemonic counter-memories is to be taken up, this article argues, it is important to avoid depoliticising the process of collecting, archiving and publicising oral histories. The alternative, is an historic practice that recreates rather than challenges hegemonic narratives of religious and social experience in Northern Ireland.

Developing a frame for oral histories of the conflict

Between 1968 and 1995, nearly 3,700 people were killed in the violent conflict that is glossed colloquially as the Troubles. The generally accepted starting-point as given here is the civil unrest of 1968, driven by the then-minority Catholic population's demand for an end to a skewed state system that – through gerrymandering and discriminatory labour and housing practices – worked to maintain Protestant dominance of the elected government and of institutional power.⁵ The pre-history of this conflict is complex and it is beyond the scope of this paper to periodize and analyze it in great detail, but it is important to bear several facts in mind, particularly when considering the relationship between oral history and the state that will be touched upon below. Following partition in 1921, the British government devolved power to the new Northern Irish state, creating a government dominated by the Ulster Unionist Party.⁶ Overt discrimination as well as Protestant domination of state institutions created and maintained inequality between Catholics and Protestants. Historians differ on the degree and form of this discrimination, and it is now widely agreed that regional variations need to be taken into account when analyzing discrimination. It is sufficient to say, firstly, the claim “that discrimination existed at some levels and in some regions against Catholics does seem beyond dispute,” and secondly that perceived levels of

⁵ Protestant is generally used in the literature on Northern Ireland as synonymous with unionist, and Catholic for nationalist; I am following that naming convention here, although it is important to note that these categories do not coalesce perfectly and especially that they do not imply homogeneity of opinion within a particular ethno-religious-political category.

⁶ Although it is important not to overstate the homogeneity of unionist politics, particularly in the inter-war period – see Colin Reid, “Protestant Challenges to the ‘Protestant State’: Ulster Unionism and Independent Unionism in Northern Ireland, 1921–1939,” *20th Century British History*, 19/4 (January 2008): 419–445.

discrimination were an animating factor in the creation of the Northern Irish Civil Rights Association (NICRA).⁷

Formed in 1967, NICRA was an umbrella organisation that lobbied for the reform of the state, most notably by calling for electoral reform. Although animated by discrimination against the Catholic minority population it was not explicitly nationalist, and the mass demonstrations it undertook from 1967 onwards featured both Catholic and Protestant demonstrators. A first major march in August 1968 passed off without incident, but a second in October 1968 was halted by the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), and led to rioting in Derry/Londonderry. This was followed by a proposed reform package by Prime Minister Terence O'Neill, intended to assuage some of the grievances around discriminatory practices by the Northern Irish state. These reforms did not prevent increasing unrest, and precipitated a split within Unionist opinion that led to O'Neill's resignation in April 1969. In August 1969, the RUC entered the working-class Catholic Bogside area of Derry to resistance from local residents, in an event later known as the 'Battle of the Bogside' – when these riots began to spread across the province the British government deployed army troops in what was initially claimed to be a 'limited' attempt to maintain order. Initially, the army's role in protecting the minority Catholic population from Unionist and RUC violence meant the minority community welcomed them. But by 1971 conditions worsened, and "the conflict changed from one of ethnic conflict policed by the British troops, to one of confrontation between Republicans and the British Army."⁸

The British army maintained a presence on the island from 1969 through to 2007 under the aegis of Operation Banner. Direct rule (which suspended the Northern Irish legislative assembly) was introduced in 1972. Security and legislative responsibilities were transferred to the British parliament and a secretary of state, William Whitelaw, was chosen to manage Northern Irish affairs. This situation continued until 1999 and the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, which established a consociational power-sharing executive intended to prevent either community from dominating state institutions or decision-making processes. Direct rule was re-imposed between 2002 and 2007 following issues with the decommissioning of arms from

⁷ Caroline Kennedy-Pipe, *The Origins of the Present Troubles in Northern Ireland* (London: Routledge, 2013), 42; for an extended consideration of the level of discrimination within the state see John Whyte, "How much discrimination was there under the Unionist regime, 1921-1968", in *Contemporary Irish Studies*, Tom Gallagher and James O'Connell, eds., (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983).

⁸ Caroline Kennedy Pipe and Colin McInnes, "The British Army and the Peace Process in Ireland," in *The Journal of Conflict Studies*, 21/1 (Spring 2001): 21-46.

former combatants, but since then the Northern Ireland Assembly has maintained its devolved powers from Stormont.⁹

This necessarily broad-bush account provides some context for the discussion below. It is intended, in part, to indicate the complexity of identity in Northern Ireland. There is a diversity of opinion within the two broad categories delineated here by ‘Protestant’ and ‘Catholic.’ Class and location are important factors in this diversity. Furthermore, following the peace process there has been a shift in some community discourses around identity and pluralism, although this shift should not be overstated. The latest Peace Monitoring Report from the Community Relations Council suggested that despite ongoing problems, “reconciliation continues to be stronger at the grass roots than at the top of society,” citing the Shankhill Women’s Centre and the Skainos Centre as factors in and drivers of this reconciliatory mood.¹⁰ The existence of this diversity of opinion, and of what the Community Relations Council describes as a desire for reconciliation within elements of both communities, is important to bear in mind when thinking about storytelling and oral history projects hoping to create a more pluralist narrative of the past.

The chronology above allows a fuller consideration of the role history and narrative play in the formation and maintenance of identity. Recent research on the beginning of the conflict has emphasised the role of historically informed community narratives in helping create the conditions for violence – this is one way to link memorial culture and popular history with lived experience. Prince and Warner identify constitutional nationalism, republicanism, socialism and unionism as the four community narratives in situ in 1968, arguing that “like a shard from a broken mirror, a group narrative puts into the hand both a distorted reflection and a potential weapon.”¹¹ In this sense, then, the ways in which history can be instrumentalized within the political moment is relevant long before the beginning of the peace process in 1995. It has continued to be so following the Belfast / Good Friday Agreement, signed on April 1998.

⁹ David McKittrick and David McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles: A History of the Northern Ireland Conflict* (London: Penguin, 2012).

¹⁰ The Community Relations Council, *Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report No 3* (The Community Relations Council, March 2014).

¹¹ Simon Prince and Geoffrey Warner, *Belfast and Derry in Revolt: A New History of the Start of the Troubles* (Kildare: Irish Academic Press, 2011), 175-175.

Storytelling and peacebuilding

The importance of history as narrative in Northern Ireland is illustrated by considering the development of storytelling as a particular form of peacebuilding in Northern Ireland. In 1994 (in the wake of initial paramilitary ceasefires and at the beginning of the peace negotiations that led to the Belfast / Good Friday Agreement), poet and playwright Damian Gorman founded an organisation called An Crann / The Tree. Its mission statement proposed the creation of a 'living museum' for memories of the conflict in Northern Ireland. A leaflet advertising the newly-minted group declared: "It is important for us to know what has been happening to people here, because we are people. It is our hope that the stories we gather will resonate across divisions."¹² Similar organisations proliferated in the following years. Some, like the Ardoyne Community Project or the Falls Community Council, emerged from a particular location in the hope of telling the stories of particular parts of Northern Ireland – both of the examples cited here are focused on predominantly nationalist/Catholic parts of Belfast. Others, like An Crann / The Tree, took an explicitly cross-community approach, as indicated by the use of both Irish and English in the organisation's name and made explicit in its literature mentioned above. An immediate blurring of boundaries between oral history, therapeutic storytelling mechanisms and community advocacy is evident in these projects. This polysemic blurring of position and affect is carried through to later oral history projects about the conflict and will be discussed at greater length below.

A definitional blurriness was also noted in a 2005 audit of storytelling initiatives and projects undertaken by the storytelling group Healing through Remembering (HtR). HtR established a working definition of storytelling as "a project or process which allows reflection, expression, listening and possible collection of personal, communal and institutional stories related to the conflict in Northern Ireland," a definition which reads as an attempt to embrace blurred definitions as a strength rather than a weakness.¹³ Both university-driven research projects and community-driven 'listening' projects shelter under this canopy, as indeed can much of the conflict-based work

¹² Anonymous, An Crann, 1994, Accounts of the Conflict: accessed 20 March 2017, <http://accounts.ulster.ac.uk/repo24/items/show/2101>.

¹³ Grainne Kelly, "Storytelling Audit: An audit of personal story, narrative and testimony initiatives related to the conflict in and about Northern Ireland," *Healing Through Remembering* (2005): accessed 20 March 2017, http://web-previews.com/healingthroughremembering/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Storytelling-Audit_2005.pdf.

carried out in the arts world.¹⁴ It includes ephemeral forms of oral storytelling, psychotherapy and therapeutic group work, as well as evidence given in official tribunals and hearings. As mentioned above, this paper focuses on oral history projects as such. In my definition these are projects conceived of primarily as an addition to the historical record of the period between 1968 and 1995. However, it is evident that a clear distinction between the therapeutic and the historical does not hold for many of the projects audited by HtR in 2005, or for many of those that have taken place in the following decade. Storytelling projects that also embed a desire to record and archive memories in their initial approach, for instance – such as the PMA – combine a historical and a therapeutic methodology.

The most notable developments in Northern Irish oral history and storytelling projects in the decade since HtR's comprehensive 2005 audit relate to access and archiving. In terms of access the International Conflict Research Institute (INCORE) at the University of Ulster launched its Accounts of the Conflict site on November 2014, an online resource that “contains collections of personal accounts, the vast majority of which have been collected by a wide range of community-based organisations and projects across Northern Ireland and beyond.”¹⁵ Funded by the European Union's PEACE III programme, the archive has an explicit commitment to peace-building through making material relating to Northern Ireland's recent past as accessible as possible. In terms of archiving, by attempting to collate information that was otherwise spread across different sites, it tangibly brings together different accounts of this past that might appear to sit uneasily aside one another – those of British soldiers and residents of nationalist west Belfast, for instance. However, the notion that access to these accounts contributes to peace-building (by unravelling or challenging community narratives, or by advocating for a socio-political discourse of pluralism and multiplicity) is a complicated one that may remain somewhat under-scrutinised. In examining a similar precept within the field of storytelling specifically, Hackett and Rolston warn, “at worst, an official process [of storytelling] could attempt to draw a line under the past and thus close down spaces for [unofficial] storytelling.”¹⁶ In attempting to emphasise a conciliatory narrative as part of

¹⁴ For a discussion of this kind of work in the arena of theatre and performance see Thomas Maguire, *Making Theatre in Northern Ireland: Through and Beyond the Troubles* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2006).

¹⁵ Anonymous, International Conflict Research Institute, 2014: accessed 20 March 2017, <http://accounts.ulster.ac.uk/repo24/about>.

¹⁶ Claire Hackett and Bill Rolston, “The Burden of Memory: Victims, Storytelling and Resistance in Northern Ireland,” *Memory Studies* 2/3 (1 September 2009): 355–76.

the archival process, memories that refuse to be conciliatory may be neglected or edited in order to fit the space provided them within the archive.

Internationally, similar concerns have been expressed about the possibility for an uncritical storytelling practice to align with “a practice that is caught up in the state and private economy’s apparatuses of surveillance, control, and the regulation of the self.”¹⁷ The dynamic relationship between the official and the unofficial, and between resistance and hegemonic forms of knowledge, is equally pertinent when considering the relationship between oral history and the state.

Bearing that multifocal relationship in mind, this section will conclude by noting that the Stormont House Agreement (SHA) of December 2014, a framework for political developments in Northern Ireland drawn up by all of the major political parties as well as their partners in the British and Irish government, committed to the production by 2016 of an oral history archive containing experiences and narratives related to the troubles. The archive is mooted as being independent of any political interference and shaped by as-yet unspecified academics. It has been conceived of as part of a constellation of measures for ‘dealing with the past’ – that is, as part of the continued work of the Historical Investigations Unit into unsolved crimes related to the Troubles, and as part of the formal work carried out by the Commission for Victims and Survivors on compensation, pensions and trauma. As it stands, the proposal raises more questions than it answers. It does not appear to be connected to the INCORE archival project mentioned briefly above. This raises questions about how this state-sponsored archive would relate to existing oral histories of the conflict and ongoing academic work in this field. To what extent could a state-sponsored and state-driven archival process truly be independent of political interference, particularly following the case of the Belfast Project and the Boston College tapes?¹⁸ Further questions to be asked of this archival process

¹⁷ Alexander Freund, “‘Confessing Animals’: Toward a Longue Durée History of the Oral History Interview,” *Oral History Review* 41/2 (April 2014): 314-324.

¹⁸ The Belfast Project was a collaboration between academics and librarians at Boston College and the journalist Ed Moloney. It involved the collection of 50 oral history interviews from former paramilitaries. Participants were assured that the tapes would not be released until after their deaths, despite the university having warned Moloney that they might be unable to maintain this confidentiality clause in the event of a legal challenge or court order.

In 2011, federal prosecutors issued subpoenas for interviews with former IRA combatants Brendan Hughes, who died in 2008, and Dolours Price, who died in 2013. The subpoena was issued on behalf of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) as part of its investigation into the 1972 abduction and murder of Jean McConville. Both recordings were eventually turned over to the police, and led to the interview of Sinn Féin president Gerry Adams about his supposed role in the murder, although he has not been charged with any wrongdoing. In June 2015, the PSNI

lie in the realm of epistemology. How might the interpretative act of generating and presenting an oral history archive be shaped by its genesis as one of several ways of dealing with the past at a national, state-driven level? Is it possible that a state-driven commitment to this project could run coeval with a desire to silence the past, or to instrumentalize it as part of a neoliberal reimagining of the state in Northern Ireland? Do we have too much memory, or too little? An attempt to engage with these questions will be found in the analysis of the PMA below, but first some of the more general literature on the question of memory and post-conflict society will be considered.

Oral history in post-conflict societies

Many of the questions mentioned above have been dealt with to some degree in recent work on the role of oral history in post-conflict societies.¹⁹ This section will address some of this literature before moving on to consider the work of one historian in particular, Cillian McGrattan, who has written extensively on the development of storytelling projects and oral history in Northern Ireland.

Central to the relationship between memory and history in post-conflict societies is the understanding that “public acts of remembrance are as much about shaping the future as recollecting the past.”²⁰ That is, the collection of memories about conflict is often not an end in and of itself; instead, it is linked with a nexus of practices that represent an official or unofficial working

were granted judicial permission to access the project tapes relating to Winston Rea, a former loyalist combatant. Most recently, in April 2016, a further subpoena request was made for the interview materials of Anthony McIntyre, a former IRA member who also worked as a researcher on the Belfast Project. (See Travis Anderson, “BC receives new subpoena for Belfast Project tapes,” *The Boston Globe*, 26 April 2016, and Simon Coll, “The Belfast Project: Oral History’s Chance to Grow Up,” *History to the Public*, 29 October 2015.)

Coll points out that many of the problems surrounding the project’s inception (and particularly around the development of robust and legally-binding consent and confidentiality forms) are indicative of oral history’s ambivalent disciplinary position. The debate should be seen as “the latest manifestation of the discipline’s difficult, but by no means terminal, growing pains”. (Coll, 2015, *The Belfast Project*...) This is a fair assessment, but it is also important to see the debate as one that foregrounds the possible role of particular kinds of oral history as evidence, highlighting one important distinction between oral history and storytelling projects.

¹⁹ An overview of this work is provided by Elazar Barkan, “Engaging History: Managing Conflict and Reconciliation,” *History Workshop Journal* 59/1 (20 March 2005): 229–36; for a recent examination of the problem from a Northern Irish perspective see Brandon Hamber and Grainne Kelly, “Practice, Power and Inertia: Personal Narrative, Archives and Dealing with the Past in Northern Ireland,” *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, 8/1 (2016): 25–44.

²⁰ Ann Rigney, “Reconciliation and Remembering: (how) Does It Work?,” *Memory Studies* 5/3 (1 July 2012): 251–58.

through of that violence, a working through that has a telos of some sort even if that point is not immediately clear to participants.²¹ This is true of official commissions intended to reveal ‘the truth’ about the past by distilling a violent past into a manageable story, by identifying and narrativizing victims and perpetrators.²² It is also true of unofficial or apparently anti-hegemonic acts of commemoration, as adumbrated in Stephen Hopkins’ examination of the highly politicised, malleable and contested memory of the 1981 hunger strike within the Irish republican movement and its relationship to schisms between the grassroots and its putative political leadership.²³ Oral history is not the only historical methodology roped into these debates, of course. However, if we take seriously the seminal insight that there exists a “dimension of memory, ideology and subconscious desires” that can be drawn out from oral narratives as a cultural production, it is clear that oral history occupies a unique position within these debates.²⁴ If the production of oral history narratives opens up a space for subjectivity within the historical narrative, this subjectivity is expressed within a hegemonic memorial culture that may privilege certain forms of memory above others. Academic or community historians not working within the boundaries of a truth recovery project may be able to attend more closely to the interplay of subjectivity and objectivity entailed in the recounting of an oral narrative, given the absence of a legal framework surrounding their approach. They do not, generally, work towards reparations or convictions (notwithstanding the counter-example of the Boston College tapes discussed above). But there is still a jostling for position involved in this interplay. If what is at stake in the post-conflict oral historian’s work is a form of recognition, this jostling gets to the heart of the problem;

²¹ Although it is not always explicitly connected to Adorno, the idea of working through a difficult past on a national level comes from his 1959 essay notable in the context of this paper because of the sceptical attitude it adopts towards the ‘subjective enlightenment’ this working through entails. Adorno suggests that the objective causes of prior events are a necessary corollary to this subjective shift. (Theodore Adorno, “The Meaning of Working through the Past,” 1959, in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 89-102.

²² Greg Grandin, “The Instruction of Great Catastrophe: Truth Commissions, National History, and State Formation in Argentina, Chile, and Guatemala,” *The American Historical Review* 110/1 (February 2005): 46–67; Onur Bakiner, “One Truth among Others?: Truth Commissions’ Struggle for Truth and Memory,” *Memory Studies* 8/3 (2 February 2015): 345-360.

²³ Stephen Hopkins, “‘Our Whole History Has Been Ruined!’ The 1981 Hunger Strike and the Politics of Republican Commemoration and Memory,” *Irish Political Studies* 31/1 (January 2016): 44–62; for an extended consideration of the interaction between public and private memories in the context of the Northern Irish troubles see Graham Dawson, *Making Peace With the Past? Memory, trauma and the Irish troubles* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

²⁴ Luisa Passerini, “Work Ideology and Consensus under Italian Fascism,” *History Workshop Journal* 8/1 (September 1979): 82-108.

does oral history, in this position, seek to deconstruct identity or to recognise it? Jelin's insight that post-conflict memory work entails "understanding memories as subjective processes anchored in experiences and in material and symbolic markers" points towards this difficulty, particularly as it relates to the relationship between state and non-state actors.²⁵

This is a concern central to the recent work carried out by McGrattan on history and memory in post-conflict societies. In a 2011 essay for *History and Policy* he challenged the idea, fundamental to the kind of reconciliatory oral history practiced by groups such as HtR, that it is possible to work through a collective past effectively. Starting from the position that historical narratives have contributed to the maintenance of ethno-religious identities in Northern Ireland, he lucidly describes how post-conflict societies produce fragmented narratives, identities and constructions of 'others' based on ethno-religious markers. In his view, then, "it is the task of historians to analyze, through the archival evidence and through contextualised oral history, how those identities are constructed, when they become important, and how they change across time."²⁶

This form of evidence-based scrutiny, in McGrattan's schema, works towards a more pluralistic discourse of community by challenging the politicisation of memory, making room in the sphere of public memories for "marginalised voices, such as those of victims, the elderly, or women."²⁷ In other words, projects driven by a peace-building agenda may actually work counter to their own stated aims by erasing difference and materiality, and by reifying communal identities and narratives that should instead be challenged and unsettled. Historians can work counter to this process either by exploding traditional narratives of causality or (in an arena particularly attractive to the oral historian) by creating or co-creating histories of those who do not fit so easily into the traditional two-community model of Northern Irish society. The relevance of this methodological debate is heightened following the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, which – by setting in stone a consociational paradigm in which both communities are recognised and institutionalised on a political level – has been seen in some quarters as reifying division rather than challenging it.²⁸

²⁵ Elizabeth Jelin, "Public Memorialization in Perspective: Truth, Justice and Memory of Past Repression in the Southern Cone of South America," *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 1/1 (March 2007): 138–56.

²⁶ McGrattan, "Historians in Post-Conflict Societies."

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ See Robert Higson, "Anti-consociationalism and the Good Friday Agreement: A Rejoinder," *Journal of Peace, Conflict and Development*, 12 (May 2008): 1-17 for an overview of this debate.

While recognising the objective validity of an historical narrative that shows how “the British state was responsible for sickening outrages, and [that] more often than not, working-class Catholics bore the brunt of its ill-advised adventures,”²⁹ McGrattan claims that the adoption and reframing of this narrative by republican memory entrepreneurs propagates two falsehoods. Firstly, it indicates that the violence of the 1970s and onwards was inevitable rather than driven by contingent political concerns and the actions of specific political and infrapolitical actors. Secondly, it buttresses “the surrogate falsehood that everyone bears responsibility for what occurred” by asserting the validity of subjective memory rather than the validity of objective record.³⁰

Latterly, this theme has been developed in McGrattan’s writing through further attacks on the logic of peace-building and the ways in which history has been positioned within the peace-building discourse. This marks a move within his work towards a more pessimistic conception of the possibilities for ‘alternative solidarities,’ possibly in light of the developing relationship between storytelling methodologies and the legislative apparatus of post-conflict Northern Ireland. He suggests that the consensus on narrative oral history as a device for post-conflict state-building is “based around a chimerical new politics of storytelling that sees substantive issues displaced into testimony-work.”³¹ His critique here has two strands. The way in which the storytelling model has bled into public policy could lead to a drive for stories to replace due process, that is, to replace a legally-grounded examination of culpability during the troubles; on the other hand, there is insufficient evidence to suggest that this form of narrative-based testimonial approach to peace and reconciliation actually works towards an effective reconciliation process, at least beyond the individual level, where it can plausibly affect participants in a positive way. At the core of the proposed creation of an oral history archive put forward by the Stormont House Agreement lies a debate over whether the conflict “was primarily structural in cause (that is, it was to do with colliding identities and ideologies and involved dynamics of repression-mobilization) or whether it was inspired primarily by individuals and groups of individuals who utilised those ideas to justify acts of violence.”³² Storytelling (alongside uncritical oral history or oral history

Consociationalism is a term coined by Arend Lijphart to describe a political system that allows for power-sharing between minority groups while maintaining governmental and political stability.

²⁹ Cillian McGrattan, *Memory, Politics and Identity: Haunted by History* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 118.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ McGrattan, “The Stormont House Agreement.”

³² Ibid.

focused on understanding rather than critiquing communal identities founded on mnemonic narratives) supports the former understanding of Northern Ireland's recent history, thus allowing justificatory narratives to remain firmly in place within political discourse. An alternative, McGrattan suggests, would entail moving towards an approach that is more like Spain's *pacto del olvido* than South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Committee – a gentleman's agreement to draw a line under the past and avoid using it for political capital.³³

As previously indicated, oral history, storytelling, and state-driven reconciliation projects are ostensibly discrete if sometimes inter-related categories. But it is worth considering what McGrattan's argument suggests when brought into conversation with ongoing debates within memory studies as well as with the interpretative oral history model mentioned above. This may be particularly fruitful as a counter-weight to the elision of the variegated possibilities of oral history into an exclusively political narrative. By emphasising how "stories are inextricably linked, in a mutually reinforcing way, to politico-juridical institutions," his analysis offers a critical counterpoint to an uncritical narrative of peace-building that valorises memory and memory-work as inherently positive and inherently reconciliatory.³⁴ But his pessimism as regards the possibilities generated by ambiguously-situated, non-state-driven archives such as the PMA, for instance, suggest an over-valuing of institutional power and a too-quick dismissal of the resistance entailed in the creation of counter-hegemonic memories. If the alternative to this melding of oral history and storytelling is considered to be a state-imposed mandate of forgetting whereby popular memory is purged of its political content, then it may be worth attempting to salvage something from the storytelling model, its flaws or blind spots notwithstanding. Andreas Huyssen argues that "without memory ... there can be no recognition of difference ... no tolerance for the rich complexities and instabilities of personal, cultural, political and national identities."³⁵ If this attitude can be squared with McGrattan's critique of storytelling in Northern Ireland, it might suggest that oral historians need to commit to focusing on identities that have been constructed outside of or against the Catholic-nationalist or Protestant-unionist paradigms – the LGBT community, perhaps, which occupied an unusually

³³ For a comparative analysis of the TRC and the situation in Northern Ireland see Brandon Hamber, "Rights and Reasons: Challenges for Truth Recovery in South Africa and Northern Ireland," *Fordham International Law Journal*, 26/4 (2002): 1074-94.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 252.

liminal position throughout the conflict.³⁶ But does this also entail a rejection of identities that adhere to these paradigms, or adhere to them while criticising elements of their composition? At risk is the primacy of a “politics where those with the loudest voices are the only ones heard”, McGrattan’s critique warns – but if the only solution to this risk is silencing some voices in order to elevate others there exists a malign possibility of simply establishing a new normative framework in which particular stories are still more valid than others.³⁷

Not only does this risk simply replacing one ethical regime with another, it also seems impractical in Northern Ireland, where unofficial memorial practices are so embedded in the maintenance of physical boundaries and in infrapolitical culture across the country.³⁸ More useful might be a commitment to a form of oral history practice that recognises the validity of multifarious interpretations of the past and which embeds this commitment within its methodology. A form that this methodology might take can be drawn out by an examination of the strength and weaknesses of the PMA’s approach compared to other Northern Irish oral history projects.

These precursors came out of various different contexts, with a broad split between victims’ groups and survivor organisations, and organisations such as An Crann interested in demonstrating the diversity and range of experiences of the conflict. Some of these groups use oral history to argue for justice, as with the Pat Finucane Centre’s Recovery of Living Memory Archive, which has also been funded through the European Peace III fund. This project is intended to combine elements of storytelling and oral history with official and forensic details, to promote reconciliation through truth-recovery and the creation of a tangible legacy.³⁹ The complexity of using oral histories in this context has been noted recently by McEvoy and Bryson, who suggest that “truth recovery” has become an ideological battleground for

³⁶ Marian Duggan, *Queering Conflict: Examining Lesbian and Gay Experiences of Homophobia in Northern Ireland* (London: Ashgate, 2013).

³⁷ McGrattan, *Memory, Politics and Identity*, 115.

³⁸ I take the term infrapolitics here from James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987); my use of it is also informed by Robin DG Kelley’s useful interpretation of the idea in *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics and the Black Working Class*, (New York: Free Press, 1994). For Kelley the concept allows for an understanding of politics that incorporates “the many battles to roll back constraints, to exercise power over, or create space within, the institutions and social relationships that dominated [their] lives” (Ibid., 78).

³⁹ The Pat Finucane Centre: accessed: 20 March 2017, <https://www.patfinucanecentre.org/projects>

Unionist and Nationalist politicians.⁴⁰ The PMA's adoption of a storytelling model allows it to circumvent this difficult and politically-inflected debate and allows for a different kind of archival practice; this also means its aims and its possible impact are more modest than that of the Pat Finucane Centre.

The Prisons Memory Archive

The PMA is a collection of 175 filmed interviews with people involved in the Maze and Long Kesh Prison and the Armagh Gaol during the conflict in Northern Ireland. As well as involving republican and loyalist prisoners, prison guards, volunteers, advocates and visitors to the sites are included. The recordings themselves were made in 2006 and 2007, although the online archive did not go live until 2015. The project was underpinned by three core ethical concerns – a commitment to a life storytelling oral history methodology, a commitment to co-ownership of the project between participants and researchers, and a commitment to inclusivity. This inclusivity led to the collection of “stories from as wide a range of constituencies as was possible during filming” as part of an approach that “offers [the] validation of each story and participant, at the same time [as challenging] our assumptions about the past.”⁴¹ We can recognise here a recasting of the faith in pluralistic memory posited by Huyssen, Jelin and others – by bringing together a diverse range of memories, centred in this case around a particular site and a particular spatial configuration, the project hopes to avoid a partisan process of community reification while still attempting to reassert the agency of participants and their desire to make particular truth-claims, even if those claims are partial and positional.⁴²

Cahal McLaughlin, the directory of the project, makes this approach explicit in confirming his feeling that “the role of story-telling in the context of a contested past offers opportunities to engage with conflicting interpretations

⁴⁰ Kieran McEvoy and Anna Bryson, “Justice, Truth and Oral History: Legislating the Past 'from Below' in Northern Ireland,” *Northern Ireland Legal Quarterly* 67/1 (2016): 67-90, 2016.

⁴¹ Prisons Memory Archive: accessed 20 March 2017, <http://prisonsmemoryarchive.com/about-us/>.

⁴² Patricia Lundy and Mark McGovern, “The Ethics of Silence: Action Research, Community “truth-Telling” and Post-Conflict Transition in the North of Ireland,” *Action Research* 4/1 (1 March 2006): 49–64; Elizabeth Jelin, “Public Memorialization in Perspective: Truth, Justice and Memory of Past Repression in the Southern Cone of South America,” *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 1/1 (March 2007): 138–56; Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

of that past that inevitably continue in present narratives.”⁴³ Describing a smaller-scale precursor to the archive in which he interviewed Billy Hutchinson, Gerry Kelly and Desi Waterworth at the Maze and Long Kesh Prison (a loyalist prisoner, a republican prisoner and a prison guard, respectively), he suggests that bringing these memories together in the form of a film can help unsettle the othering process involved in identity formation in Northern Ireland. McLaughlin recognises a potential weakness of this approach – that many ex-combatants tend to tell their stories within a prepared and settled collective perspective, in part because this reflects the solidarity and communality that helped them deal with their previous experiences.⁴⁴ However, the more substantive effect of this juxtaposition, in his view, is that it provides a polyvocal narrative in which the other is fluid rather than fixed. Waterworth provides a rarely-heard narrative by speaking from the perspective of a prison guard, for instance, while as a prominent republican Kelly has been consistently ‘othered’ in the British and Northern Irish media during the conflict and in the post-conflict period.

To return briefly to McGrattan’s assertion that de-historicised storytelling “works to substitute the very real divisions that characterise Northern Irish society and move them into another form,” it seems clear that the PMA is an attempt to avoid this substitution. It does not deny the divisions that helped form the conflict; however, it also avoids reifying them or treating them as self-fulfilling or rigid.⁴⁵ This attempt to unsettle fixed narratives of the past, and thus fixed identities related to those narratives, can be seen more clearly through a consideration of three of its formal aspects. These are firstly its emphasis on the interaction between memory and place, and secondly, its particular focus on collating the stories of women confined in Armagh Gaol, whose narratives have been relatively occluded in much of the work on prisoners and the conflict, and who were certainly considerably less visible during the conflict itself. Thirdly, the paper will examine the project’s online archive, and the attempt within this archive to remove conventional markers of identity in the context of Northern Ireland. These facets will be considered in more detail below.

⁴³ Cahal McLaughlin, *Recording Memories from Political Violence: A Filmmaker's Journey* (Bristol: Intellect, 2010), 38.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁴⁵ McGrattan, “The Stormont House Agreement.”

Place, gender, archive

An immediately striking feature of the interviews contained within the PMA is that they were all carried out on site. This suggests a number of interesting theoretical diversions connected to remembering and place, but especially in the context of the Maze and Long Kesh Prison, it speaks to an intervention into the spatial politics of Northern Ireland. The dual identity of the prison is indicated by its double-barrelled appellation – republican prisoners tend to refer to the site as Long Kesh, with the Maze considered its official name by the state and the Unionist population.⁴⁶ A potential peace centre proposed for the site has been dogged by controversy and looks unlikely to go ahead despite funding from the EU. According to a 2014 poll in the *Belfast Telegraph*, 28.4 per cent of respondents feel that no development should take place, while only 32.4 per cent support the project as it is currently conceived. First Minister and Democratic Unionist Party leader Peter Robinson has expressed concerns that the site, where ten republican hunger strikers died in 1981, could become a “terrorist shrine” in the event of the peace centre being built.⁴⁷ In this context, the material positioning of the interviews is interesting. Recording in the location where many of the subjects under discussion in the interview took place allows for an emphasis on how “the materiality of the place, its layout, its architecture, its spatial relationships can trigger recognition and memory in a way that not occur if the participant was in another setting”.⁴⁸

Over the course of the Troubles, the prison held roughly 15,000 republican prisoners and between 5,000 and 10,000 loyalist prisoners. Incarceration is often figured as a pivotal moment in the biographies of many of the key figures in both loyalist and republican politics.⁴⁹ An illustrative example is given by former UVF member David Ervine, who later founded the Progressive Unionist Party and played a role in the peace process of the 1990s. Describing his encounter with Gusty Spence, another UVF member who took on an unofficial leading role among the loyalist prisoners in the Maze and Long Kesh prison, Ervine recounts how Spence questioned him about why he

⁴⁶ Jonathan Stevenson, *We Wrecked the Place: Contemplating the end to the Northern Irish troubles* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 38.

⁴⁷ Liam Clarke, “Opinion Remains Divided on Peace Centre at the Maze,” *Belfast Telegraph*, 30 September 2014; accessed: 20 March 2017, <http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/opinion-remains-divided-on-peace-centre-at-the-maze-30625001.html>.

⁴⁸ Cahal McLaughlin, 2010, quoted in Laura Aguiar, “Back to Those Walls: The Women’s Memory of the Maze and Long Kesh Prison in Northern Ireland,” *Memory Studies* 8/2 (August 2014): 227-241.

⁴⁹ Stephen Hopkins, *The Politics of Memoir and the Northern Ireland Conflict* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013).

was in prison, urging him to move beyond the contingent cause (possession of explosives) and consider his position and role in Northern Irish society. He explained: “I would say that question was a beginning for me on a road that was about analysis and about trying to understand not only what was happening to me as a person but what’s happening to our society, generation after generation after generation. Gusty unlocked the door, pushed it slightly ajar and gave me the offer to walk through it or not as was my choice.”⁵⁰ The emergence of a group of disciplined and politicised republican prisoners from the Maze and Long Kesh prison is extensively detailed elsewhere.⁵¹ In this sense the prison is an ambivalent and multi-faceted site, and PMA participants describe vividly the experience of encountering left-wing ideas and intense political discussion for the first time as well as the experience of confinement and deprivation.

This materiality and the prompting or shaping of the oral history it generates should be understood in a broader reading of the carceral architecture of the Maze and Long Kesh Prison; David Lloyd has argued that attempts to form communities within the Maze and Long Kesh create “scarcely audible echoes that speak forward to us on unfamiliar frequencies, conjoining discontinuous times in momentary and often dissonant configurations, shaping possibility out of violence and privation.”⁵² Given the role of the prison in attempting to silence its inhabitants as well as in constraining their mobility, the act of allowing former prisoners to express their narratives in the space where they were incarcerated suggests an expressive potential beyond the purely instrumental understanding of memory described above. The development of a physical monument celebrating reconciliation in Northern Ireland on the former prison site remains mired in realpolitik and uncertainty, but the act of archiving a series of differing responses to the prison indicates the way in which oral history can produce plural and affective geographies of subjective experience. For Aguiar, the act of physically bringing participants back to the site allows for a making visible of the pull between past and present involved in oral history, revealing “how events of the past – whether traumatic or not – have left marks and how repercussions still persist in the present.”⁵³ Potentially, this increased visibility ensures that the PMA does not simply reproduce narratives of community

⁵⁰ Peter Taylor, *Loyalists* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014).

⁵¹ For an overview see Kacper Rekawek, *Irish Republican Terrorism and Politics: A comparative study of the Official and the Provisional IRA* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011).

⁵² David Lloyd, *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity 1800-2000: The Transformation of Oral Space* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 165.

⁵³ Aguiar, “Back to These Walls,” 12.

division but instead speaks to the ability of actors within those communities to reflect creatively and critically on their memories of the conflict.

Gender is a second, extremely important facet of the PMAs approach, and one that speaks directly to the call for alternative solidarities previously alluded to by McGrattan. Begona Aretxaga's invaluable work on women in Northern Ireland highlights their relatively unheralded position in literature on the conflict, although moves have been made to redress this balance in recent years.⁵⁴ Considering the role of republican women in prison protests, Aretxaga describes the 'dirty protest' undertaken by these women in support of their male counterparts in 1980, suggesting that if the male dirty protest was incomprehensible to many observers, "the women's was unthinkable, generating in many men, even among the ranks of supporting republicans, reactions of denial."⁵⁵ Paradoxically, the women's attempts to erase gender difference by protesting alongside male prisoners also symbolically reiterated that difference, with menstrual blood acting as an unfixed and moveable symbol that worked to reveal "the gender organisation of power" as well as the brutality and violence of the prison regime.⁵⁶

Unseen Women: Stories from Armagh Gaol is a 2013 documentary based on recordings from the PMA and produced by Jolene Mairs. Mairs' stated intention is twofold: to draw attention to female experiences of the prison environment during the troubles, experiences often overlooked because of the emphasis placed on male experiences, and to break down the I/other dichotomy of community identification in Northern Ireland. "I sought to avoid and even reduce this process [of othering] by choosing clips which humanised and personalised each woman," she explains.⁵⁷ The documentary includes narratives from a republican prisoner, a loyalist prisoner, two female tutors who taught gender studies courses to prisoners and a prison officer, but avoids interpellating these individuals by identifying their position when they appear on screen; this position is instead revealed gradually by the stories they choose to tell. "This was intended to make audiences aware if they were trying to contextualise the woman in terms of her role in the prison as staff or political

⁵⁴ Begoña Aretxaga, "Dirty Protest: Symbolic Overdetermination and Gender in Northern Ireland Ethnic Violence," *Ethos* 23/2 (1995): 123-48; Begoña Aretxaga, *Shattering Silence: Women, Nationalism and Political Subjectivity in Northern Ireland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

⁵⁵ Aretxaga, "Dirty Protest," 129.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁵⁷ Jolene Mairs, *Unseen Women: Stories from Armagh Gaol*, 2013; accessed 20 March 2017 <https://vimeo.com/57889260>.

prisoner whilst watching her story.”⁵⁸ Again, this is suggestive of the ways in which the PMAs methodology can serve to challenge rather than recreate community boundaries, by engaging audiences in a creative process of empathy in which they are encouraged to respond to stories they might otherwise ignore or dismiss. While it is important not to overstate the ability of any form of editing or mediating process to shape this response and render it constructive rather than antagonistic, it is clear that the PMA has attempted to embed in its form and in its methodology the possibility for alternative solidarities within the Northern Irish context, in this case an alternative solidarity of gender politics.

From a slightly different perspective, the PMA also attempted to unsettle historical understandings of the Maze and Long Kesh Prison as an exclusively male domain. Although the prison held male prisoners exclusively (with female prisoners in Armagh Gaol, as indicated above), women were also connected to the Maze and Long Kesh either through visiting imprisoned family members, as volunteer tutors or as prison workers. The PMA includes interviews with members of all of these constituencies, from both republican and unionist or loyalist community backgrounds. Aguiar perceives the value of these interviews to be their ability to challenge the idea of women as having a secondary role within the prison’s history; this point could be extended to suggest that by foregrounding the position of women as political actors during the conflict they also challenge top-down political narratives of the conflict that occlude or diminish the community and advocacy work carried out by women from both communities.⁵⁹ It is important to note, however, that the inherently non-analytic nature of the project can be a weakness as well as a strength when it comes to understanding the role of gender in the Northern Irish conflict. For Morgan, the too-easy reduction of women to ‘peace-makers’ is a failure of comprehension that relies on a clichéd view of the feminine. She argues: “It would be more accurate to say that women have been both peace makers and peace preventers and that the range of their attitudes and responses has been as wide and varied as that of men.”⁶⁰ The necessarily partial nature of the interviews collated by the PMA needs to be foregrounded in order to emphasise the impossibility of providing a comprehensive history of gendered experiences of the prison or of the conflict as a whole.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Aguiar, “Back to These Walls,” 13.

⁶⁰ Valerie Morgan, “Peacemakers? Peacekeepers? Women in Northern Ireland 1969-1995,” INCORE, 1996.

This partiality is also a factor in the third and final element of the PMA to be discussed here, its archival and dissemination practice.⁶¹ At the time of writing only a small selection of the interviews carried out as part of the project are available online, but the intention is to make all of the filmed material accessible over the coming years. As with the INCORE project mentioned briefly above, one notable aspect of this accessibility is its public, web-based availability – rather than being stored in a repository intended for specialist access, it is a few clicks away for anyone with an internet connection, signalling the possibility for greater engagement with a non-academic audience. The second interesting aspect of the PMA’s archiving practice is the decision to avoid identifying participants other than by their name. This works towards a kind of ethical encounter between viewer and participant, one that could unsettle assumptions or encourage a more focused engagement with the narratives of participants from different sections of the community. Structurally, the archive encourages browsers to search thematically for clips from each interview, an attempt to “encourage lateral and more intuitive approaches to the material”. McLaughlin further explains: “Our intention is to encourage users not to rush to judgment with their inevitable, and understandable, prior holding of moral or political viewpoints. We hope that users get to know a little of the person before deducting what position they might have held in the prison and their response to that.”⁶²

Approaching these decisions from the perspective that archives are not passive repositories but rather sites where inclusion and exclusion, public and private memories, and hegemonic or counter-hegemonic narratives are contested, it is apparent that the PMA represents an attempt to unsettle rather than reify community identity in post-conflict Northern Ireland.⁶³ The ultimate efficacy of this approach is far from certain, of course. Archives are both “processes and products, and the narratives that they are conduits for can be both politicised and depoliticised.”⁶⁴ McGrattan warns presciently about the possibility for “a Google-ization of memory – namely, a keyword search through archives of testimonies to validate a communal myth as a possible flipside to the more utopian understanding of plural archives posited above,

⁶¹ For an interesting consideration of how archives can be understood through their affective qualities see Hariz Halilovic, “Re-Imaging and Re-Imagining the Past after “memoricide”: Intimate Archives as Inscribed Memories of the Missing,” *Archival Science* 16/1 (2016): 77-92.

⁶² Cahal McLaughlin, “Who tells what and to whom: the Prisons Memory Archive,” *P-E-R-F-O-R-M-A-N-C-E*, 1/1 (2014): accessed 20 March 2017, <http://www.p-e-r-f-o-r-m-a-n-c-e.org/?p=139>.

⁶³ Sara Dybris McQuaid, “Passive Archives or Storages for Action? Storytelling Projects in Northern Ireland,” *Irish Political Studies* 31/1 (2 January 2016): 63-85.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

and this is certainly a possibility, particularly for storytelling projects that deliberately concentrate on supporting individuals in recounting their narratives and avoid contextualising or critiquing these narratives with documentary or historical evidence.⁶⁵ The PMA's rich tapestry of stories creates a virtual space for bringing together different accounts of the prison experience from both sides of the community, and incorporates a desire to move beyond two-community understandings of Northern Irish history within its format, but this approach can only suggest rather than hardwire the empathetic and engaged response of its putative audience.

Conclusion: Oral history and identity

This analysis of the PMA's approach has shown the ways in which particular ethical and methodological approaches to oral history projects can work against rather than support the pushing of ethno-religious agendas baulked at by McGrattan in his analysis of the oral history archive proposed by the SHA.⁶⁶ One challenge for oral historians working in this context is connected to their reading of and analysis of their interviews. This process requires an engagement not just with the historical record but also with form, style and emotion – with subjectivity. As famously expressed by Portelli, “what informants believe is indeed a historical fact (that is, the fact that they believe it), as much as what really happened.”⁶⁷ Where this formulation becomes more complicated is in a post-conflict situation like Northern Ireland, where exculpatory community narratives may offer an emotional insight into the subjectivity of the individual being interviewed but also serve to propagate an inherently divisive reading of the country's recent history. If “collective myths provide the link between memory and conflict, [and] define inclusion and exclusion in a community, as well as the relationship of that community to others,” should oral history act as a kind of scalpel to dissect these collective myths for closer examination, and is it possible to carry out this kind of procedure while respecting the appeal to individual experience and subjectivity entailed by an interpretive oral history methodology?⁶⁸

⁶⁵ McGrattan, “The Stormont House Agreement.”

⁶⁶ Ibid

⁶⁷ Alessandro Portelli, “What makes oral history different,” in *The Oral History Reader*, Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds. (London: Routledge, 2006), 36.

⁶⁸ Jasna Dragovic-Soso, “Conflict, Memory, Accountability: What does coming to terms with the past mean?,” in *Conflict and Memory: Bridging Past and Future in [South East] Europe*, Wolfgang Petritsch and Vedran Dzihic eds., (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2010), 29-45.

While recognising the dangers of an uncritical oral history practice – particularly an uncritical oral history practice that operates under the aegis of the state – it is still possible to work towards an approach that incorporates subjective narratives of victimisation and blame. “Construction of joint narratives requires patience and readiness to examine and engage the other side’s perspective,” rather than a jettisoning of particular narratives in favour of more objective or conciliatory alternatives.⁶⁹ This paper has considered how a commitment to the uncovering of alternative solidarities can be reconciled with an approach that concedes to the lived reality of particular and community-driven narratives, narratives that may work against attempts to settle or leave behind Northern Ireland’s recent past. Cillian McGrattan’s sustained and complex engagement with the emergence of a storytelling discourse in the post-conflict state is an important critique, particularly when considering the SHA’s proposal for an oral history archive and the possibility that this archive could further consolidate community division rather than work to move beyond it. One of the most forceful points to come through in McGrattan’s analysis is that this kind of working through may not be possible, at least not through testimony, storytelling or oral history projects. A further substantive point to emerge from his analysis is the valid contention that what could be described as the counter-memories recorded by organisations such as the Ardoyne Community Project or by the PMA in its work with prisoners – ‘counter’ in the sense that they run against ‘official’ or elite historiography – are not inherently and unchangeably subaltern. As individual memories are subsumed into collective community mythologies and instrumentalised for political ends, their status changes, and oral historians need to be aware of the political and social context of their work because of this. My own argument, however, does not entirely align with McGrattan’s statement that “the assumption that the recording, archiving and publication of experience is key to dealing with the past” will create “very limited, subjective and potentially ethnicised histories”.⁷⁰

In considering three facets of the PMA’s approach to collating, archiving and disseminating stories from various individuals connected in some way with the Maze and Long Kesh Prison and Armagh Gaol, it becomes apparent that particular forms of historical practice – and the PMA, despite its imbrication in the therapeutic discourse of storytelling, is undeniably a form of historical practice – can work to unsettle traditional, community-based narratives of division in Northern Ireland without denying the subjective force

⁶⁹ Barkan, “Engaging History.”

⁷⁰ McGrattan, “The Stormont House Agreement.”

of that division upon participants in the project. As Paul Ricouer declares: “History can expand, complete, correct, even refute the testimony of memory regarding the past: it cannot abolish it. [History’s privilege] consists not only in expanding collective memory beyond any actual memory but in correcting, criticising even refuting the memory of a determined community, when it folds back upon itself and encloses itself within its own sufferings to the point of rendering itself blind and deaf to the suffering of other communities.”⁷¹ The final suggestion here is that the PMA’s optimistic gesture and McGrattan’s critical gesture can be read together to point towards a form of post-conflict oral history that respects the role of memory in maintaining community division while looking towards ways in which alternative solidarities can be discovered within the interstices of that division.

⁷¹ Paul Ricouer, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 500.