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# MEMORY STUDIES

## *The burden of memory: Victims, storytelling and resistance in Northern Ireland*

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### Abstract

The article examines the potential and limitations of storytelling for victims of political violence. It rejects the view that storytelling is unproblematic, a way for victims to 'get things off their chest'. It examines a wide range of literature on storytelling and testimony, from the Holocaust through to contemporary transitional societies. In particular, attention is focused on the experience of victims and survivors telling their stories in formal settings such as truth commissions and trials in South Africa and the former Yugoslavia, as well as at unofficial storytelling processes in Northern Ireland. The authors look at the potential of storytelling as resistance to injustice and conclude that while unofficial processes of storytelling present opportunities for collective solidarity, the stories often go unacknowledged by the wider society. Conversely, they also conclude that, while official mechanisms of truth recovery can ensure wide legitimacy for the stories of victims, this is often at the cost of marginalizing the storyteller and the story.

### Key words

Ireland, memory, resistance, storytelling, truth recovery

## INTRODUCTION

Victims of war, genocide, torture and political violence in general have experienced horrific things. As such, they have stories to tell that range from accounts of pain and trauma on the one hand to narratives of survival and resistance on the other. Many victims have regarded the telling of such stories as essential, either in terms of their recovery and healing or in terms of bearing witness to atrocity so that future atrocities can be avoided. The first approach figures centrally in the concerns of psychologists, counsellors and others to allow victims catharsis through storytelling (Cienfuegos and Monelli, 1983; Curling, 2005); the second is more closely aligned to Latin American

experience, which links testimony to the struggle for justice and human rights. The story of injustice is told so that injustice may not re-occur (Archdiocese of São Paulo, 1998; Argentina Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, 1986). In this sense, justice is a necessary part of catharsis. Women's stories predominate in this literature of testimony (Benjamin, 1989; Gugelberger and Kearney, 1991; Menchu, 1984; Tula, 1999; Wilkinson, 2004).

The advantages of storytelling by victims are thus apparent whether in terms of the re-humanization of people humiliated by violence or the establishment of a culture of respect for human rights throughout society. Both approaches are effective and practical ways of dealing with the horror of the past. At the same time, there are many obstacles in the path of storytelling. At the individual level, trauma and fear may lead to silence rather than speech, while at the social level there may not be spaces in which stories can be told and listened to sympathetically. That victims should be able to testify and be heard is a simple truth, but the reality of establishing mechanisms to enable that to happen is difficult and complex.

Nowhere is this more obvious than in those transitional societies emerging haltingly from protracted periods of political violence. To begin with, the very concept of victimhood can prove an obstacle to dialogue (Christie, 1986; Del Zotto, 2002). The passivity apparently inherent in the role leads to social expectations that are derailed when survivors reveal a strong sense of agency. To put it baldly, victims seeking compensation are less threatening to fragile societies than survivors demanding justice. Should the telling of stories be about victims being helped to heal or survivors exercising agency? Is the goal justice, therefore raising the possibility of political confrontation? Or is it reconciliation, in which case the desire for justice may have to take second place? Is reconciliation a necessary outcome of storytelling? And is reconciliation the same as forgiveness? Do the stories of perpetrators have any part in this process? What of the stories of perpetrators who were also victims? And victims who were also perpetrators? In addition, storytelling does not stand alone as a mechanism for dealing with the past in transitional societies. Many such societies have established truth commissions, for example. How is storytelling linked to truth recovery? Is storytelling a necessary part of a truth commission, or should a truth commission take the harder route of establishing culpability, which may require harder evidence? Is storytelling a substitute for truth?

One article cannot answer all these questions, and this article is no exception. In particular, we shall not attempt to examine in depth the complicated concepts of 'truth', 'reconciliation' and 'justice' (Hamber and Van Der Merwe, 1998; Hayner, 2001: 72–85; Teitel, 2000). In addition, while it is now accepted wisdom that the distinction between 'victim' and 'perpetrator' is not always clear cut, especially when it comes to children as soldiers (Worden, 2008: 6–7), we are opting for a straightforward definition of a victim as 'someone who is or has been physically or psychologically injured as a result of or in consequence of a conflict-related incident'.<sup>1</sup> In short, our aims are modest: to look at the complexity of the concept of storytelling both in the international context and in one current transitional society, Northern Ireland. A particular focus will be on the issue of victims' agency through storytelling. The argument is built around two premises: that storytelling is both an individual and collective process in which,

consequently, a transformative potential exists for both the individual and society; and that it is a complicated process and interaction. The view that storytelling is an individualized process does disservice in particular to those storytellers who are acting consciously as agents of change, whose stories have an intentionally counter-hegemonic purpose, challenging official wisdom, and in particular official representations of the storytellers and their community. The focus on the individual storyteller places the whole responsibility for change on them rather than framing this as a collective responsibility in which they are agents. Moreover, it is in the negotiation of memory and counter-memory with an audience and the creation of shared narratives that the complexity of storytelling resides.

Storytelling is not apolitical. It needs the right political context in which to operate; a period of transition out of violent conflict can provide the space and opportunity for effective storytelling. But, while transitions can create the context in which the opportunity for storytelling is enhanced, the telling of stories requires the commitment and determination of victims and survivors to be heard; even in a time of transition, the receptive audience is not guaranteed. Such victims and survivors have often told their stories prior to transition, frequently only in confined spaces, given the power of the state and other dominant societal institutions to determine what can and cannot be said. Often post-conflict community-based and contextualized processes of storytelling have their roots in self-help processes prior to transition. One question considered below is what happens in the encounter between these communal efforts and the space for storytelling provided by transition.

## THE DOMINANT VIEW: STORYTELLING AS EASY AND NON-CONTENTIOUS

In 2001, during the heady days of the transition to peace in Northern Ireland, a locally-based non-governmental organization (NGO), Healing Through Remembering, carried out a public consultation, focusing on the question of how people should remember the conflict of the previous three decades. Along with a number of other suggestions – such as a truth commission, memorialization, days of remembrance – the most commonly suggested option was storytelling (Healing Through Remembering, 2002: 24).

A similar consensus is apparent in the submissions made to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee when they examined the issue of dealing with the past conflict (Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, 2005).<sup>2</sup> Thus, the Disabled Police Officers' Association, the Pat Finucane Centre, the Ardoyne Commemoration Project, Healing Through Remembering, the One Small Step Campaign, Sinn Féin and the Falls Community Council – representing a range of disparate, perhaps even contradictory political interests – were united to the extent of seeing the value of storytelling for individual and societal healing. The level of relative consensus on storytelling allows some commentators to conclude that, in a situation where every other avenue to dealing with the past is seen as highly divisive, storytelling is an easy option. Thus Trevor Ringland, Chair of the One Small Step Campaign, an organization seeking cross-community

reconciliation, stated: 'A storytelling forum is a *simple* concept providing an opportunity for people to tell their story. It is their story, their perception of what happened and nothing more' (Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, House of Commons, 2005: 118). A spokesperson for the Disabled Police Officers' Association put it more emphatically: 'We believe that storytelling and not a truth commission is a way for all victims to have their say, carried out without fear of recrimination or retribution' (Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, House of Commons, 2005: 127).

To first appearances, such widespread support for a mechanism for dealing with the past in a society where the wounds of the past are still raw is impressive. But the conclusion is less comforting. Some of the submissions to Healing Through Remembering noted the potential for storytelling to reopen old wounds. Moreover, a range of expectations was apparent among those who suggested storytelling as the way forward: from establishing and preserving a historical record, providing society with the chance to learn lessons from the past, preventing the emergence of a single narrative of the past wherein some groups would inevitably be marginalized, to providing healing for the individual storyteller. The different expectations revealed have the potential to contradict each other; society, for example, may not be willing or ready to hear all the stories, thereby ensuring that some individuals may not receive the empathetic hearing they need to allow for healing. Four years after the initial consultation, the Storytelling Subgroup of Healing Through Remembering touched on the tension beneath the surface of the apparent unanimity: 'Some people emphasise healing and acceptance, while others focus on explanation' (Heatherington and Hackett, 2005: 4). The former would seem to have a distinct focus on the individual and on reconciliation, while the latter, carried through to its strongest political conclusion, might require a more combative and confrontational style: telling the story of injustice and pain even in the face of a societal reluctance to listen.

The very imprecision of the concept of storytelling seems to be its strength. It offers the possibility of wide social acceptance, with each advocate defining it in their own way. But a closer view reveals that the unanswered questions raised by this imprecision make fertile ground for conflict if and when transitional societies seek to actualize the aspiration to storytelling.

## MEMORY, STORYTELLING AND INDIVIDUAL TRANSFORMATION

Evidence from the experience of survivors of the Holocaust and of political violence in Latin America raises a number of important points in assessing the complexity of storytelling. One such point relates to the unspeakability of suffering.

There are many reasons why victims of political violence might have difficulty articulating their story. They can fear the consequences of speaking out while the conflict still rages. There can be a sense of shame, humiliation, that they have 'allowed' themselves to sink so low as to beg for mercy, or name the names, or simply be less than heroic and courageous in the face of suffering. Alternatively, they can feel guilty

that they have survived while others have not. In addition, the victim or survivor may seek to protect others, especially their children, from the horrors they have experienced (Nutmickiewicz, 2003: 15). In relation to the Holocaust, for example, it has been noted that 'Parents did not talk about their wartime experiences, and their children did not ask ...' (Albeck et al., 2002: 305).

An even more fundamental problem is that the victim or survivor struggles for the words to tell the story to themselves. The violence experienced or witnessed is so far beyond one's expectations of human decency that it has the potential to be beyond human assimilation (Strejilevich, 2006: 798) and this realization can be catastrophic in its consequences; 'massive trauma precludes its registration; the observing and recording mechanisms of the human mind are temporarily knocked out – malfunction' (Laub, 2002: 57). Traumatic memory is thus substantially different from normal, everyday memory, to the point that it cannot fairly be called memory at all. 'The person who experiences a traumatic event is still inside the event, present at it ... The original traumatic event has not yet been transformed into a mediated, distanced account ... Trauma is failed experience' (Van Alphen, 2002: 210–11).<sup>3</sup> It is not just that the past is ever present, but that its very vividness prevents the present being real. It is as if the past and present are inverted in terms of their immediacy.

The testimonies of Holocaust survivors reveal the difficulties involved in speaking of that past, as Langer's powerful analysis of hundreds of hours of tapes reveals. What was done to them was brutal and unpredictable to the point where they often no longer knew how to act rationally. But their problem in recounting the humiliations they experienced is not merely that they are difficult to describe. More fundamentally, their experience was one of disillusion, a realization that it was not only their Nazi guards who acted inhumanly; they too were reduced to uncivilized and inhuman behaviour. They were constantly presented with 'choiceless choices', situations where severe suffering resulted equally from acting or not acting. Survivors report watching a parent being kicked to death, or a baby smashed against a wall without intervening. As one put it: 'The survival will was so big that nobody was sacrificing himself for anybody else' (Langer, 1991: 126). The end result was a profound pessimism about notions of civilization, goodness, humanity and decency, a conviction 'of really knowing the truth about people, human nature, about death, of really knowing the truth in a way that other people don't know it' (Langer, 1991: 59). The agony is that they can never return to the 'illusions' of decency and normality that the majority of people around them still share.

Survival in such circumstances becomes a form of curse. In the abstract it may be possible to accept that 'once the impulse to stay alive begins to operate, the luxury of moral constraint temporarily disappears' (Langer, 1991: 150). But that is little consolation for those who have lived that experience. They look back on their activities and inactivity then with a moral judgment that was unavailable to them then. 'They inhabit two worlds simultaneously: the one of "choiceless choice" *then*; the other of moral evaluation *now*' (Langer, 1991: 83). The end result is unspeakability, 'the difficulty of narrating, from the context of normality *now*, the nature of the abnormality *then*' (Langer, 1991: 22).

Is there any way out of such silencing? The problem is that the apparently obvious solution – letting victims tell their stories – is highly difficult if not impossible in a situation of unspeakability. Storytelling can become for survivors one more ‘choice-less choice’.

This reveals a problem at the heart of the emphasis in psychological literature that for victims testimony is therapeutic. An inherent assumption in this approach is that the victim has a story to tell, however suppressed, that there is a memory to be uncovered. But a more sophisticated approach holds that it is the very act of attempting to tell the story that leads to the emergence of the story, perhaps for the first time (Strejelivich, 2006: 708). Telling is the re-booting of the humanity lost in the trauma, the correcting of the malfunctioning that set in. Testimony is not just a simple exercise, ‘allowing victims to get things off their chests’. It is at the core of constructing interpretation and memory. When testimony takes place in the face of official denial another aspect of storytelling comes to the fore. Victims telling stories in the pursuit of justice and social transformation expose the structural forces at work in storytelling.

## STORYTELLING, AGENCY AND RESISTANCE

The process through which a wider audience becomes involved with the storyteller is part of the complexity of storytelling. This is most apparent when the narrator sees her-/himself as an agent for change and attempts to consciously engage with an audience in order to effect change. Herman speaks about the capacity and resolve of some victims and survivors of trauma to create change through public truth-telling. In the public storytelling about their experience they are drawing other people into the wider campaign for change. They understand that ‘when others bear witness to the testimony of a crime, others share the responsibility for restoring justice’ (Herman, 1992: 210).

An interview with Terry McGovern, whose mother was killed in the 9/11 attacks in New York, describes this process as victim-led resistance. She also describes the blockages encountered by those who want to speak not only as witnesses but within the broader context of justice. She criticizes the powerful forces that confine victims, and particularly women, to the role of narrator of pain and suffering. McGovern’s account of the difficulty she encountered in explaining the concept of victim-led resistance is revealing:

*I had all of this experience with Foundations where I felt like the minute I said victims, I was reduced again to being the narrator of pain and people responded to my proposal as if I was suggesting we bring together a therapy group instead of a group for strategic analysis (Gokal, 2006).*

This illustrates how deeply engrained is the association between victims, therapy and storytelling. Of course it needs to be recognized that these are legitimate associations, that therapy is itself a process to enable individual change and transformation. However, when the storyteller is consciously acting as an agent of change the assumptions about

the purpose of testimony are challenged. In this context, testimony is not only about individual healing; it is also about shared responsibility for societal change.

Interviews with victims of state violence in Northern Ireland reveal what is involved when people become active campaigners for truth and justice. Being a relative of an unarmed man, woman or child killed by state forces was to belong to what one of them termed an 'unenviable club' (Michael English, cited in Rolston with Gilmartin, 2000: 59). Jim McCabe very succinctly describes what it means to become a victim of state violence in a way that shows the structural forces involved. 'When you become a victim of the state, you became an enemy of the state and you are treated in that way whether or not you wanted to be' (cited in Rolston with Gilmartin, 2000: 84). For these victims, the whole system was against them and therefore the very act of telling their story became inevitably a challenge to the system in the pursuit of truth and justice. Michael Donegan describes this as: 'The one over-arching motive for everybody here in our family ... is to get truth and justice. This basically was a good man and nobody should ever get away with scandalizing his good name' (Rolston with Gilmartin, 2000: 54).

Jim McCabe also articulates his sense that for him simply telling his story is telling the truth in the face of public denial and impunity:

*At the same time, I had confidence in myself in that I didn't have to remember or read from a script; all I had to do was tell the truth. I did not need to prove what I said was true because it was. I did not need to cover up or worry that at the next meeting I might say something different because it was always the same, it was always true. This gave me the confidence and it wasn't as if I was going to forget my lines or be contradicted because it was fact. (Rolston and Gilmartin, 2000: 82)*

The sense of the 'choiceless choice' referred to in the previous section, is strongly present for many of the campaigners. Margaret Caraher speaks forcefully about this aspect of telling her story, but the way in which she frames the imperative to speak is very significant. The reason she needs to speak out is not because of the therapeutic benefit this might bring – in fact the opposite is implied. She must speak because the system that should redress the wrong is complicit in her brother's death:

*In many ways it was the only road. I deeply resent having ever to go on that road. I deeply resent that as a family we could not have handed that over to proper authorities and been assured that every resource possible would have been used. And I deeply resent the really difficult things I had to do personally – how difficult I found it to speak publicly, how difficult I found it at certain times, especially very soon after Fergal's death, at a time when I couldn't even say his name, that I had to – I chose to because I felt I had no choice – it was difficult and it's totally not on for families to have to put themselves in that position. It was a positive way to channel anger, but I certainly never grieved properly because I was out there being busy and I never stopped to actually grieve (Rolston with Gilmartin, 2000: 325).*

In this understanding of storytelling the need for truth and justice is paramount and transcends other needs. The achievement of truth and justice is part of a wider



societal undertaking. Margaret Caraher's words also imply that other processes of coming to terms with loss are denied until this happens.

Michael English conveys his understanding of the link between the story of his son's death and the story of a wider societal corruption:

*At the end of the day, I'm probably not going to get anything except self-satisfaction that I have let people who didn't know my son, who didn't know the circumstances under which he died, how he died, who he was, and the kind of state that we live in that would corrupt itself ... how this state corrupts everybody (Rolston with Gilmartin, 2000: 64).*

This makes explicit the connection between telling the story and exposing the societal structures involved in the killing of his son. In this formulation the story is about the truth and the truth is about the exposure of injustice and requires societal transformation. What is also clear from all the accounts is that in order to tell the story of what happened to their loved ones, victims of state violence had also to tell a much broader story about a system of injustice. It is a heavy burden for one person's story to carry, but there is no simple way to alleviate this burden as is evident when we turn to examine the involvement of victims in storytelling as part of official processes in transitional societies for dealing with past injustices.

## POLITICAL SPACE – OFFICIAL PROCESSES

For many victims and survivors, testimony is ultimately a 'struggle against oblivion' (Jelin, 2003: xviii), the witness of 'the saved' on behalf of 'the drowned' (Levi, 1989). However, not everyone wants to hear this testimony. There are different interpretations competing in the marketplace of memory. Some seek to have their interpretation immortalized as the official version and are often helped not just by their powerful position in society, but by the continuation of that power from the previous period of political conflict. Relatively powerless victims face an uphill struggle in relation to recognition.

That said, in time of transition the space for testimony can open up, often suddenly and unexpectedly, as a result of political change 'so that previously censored narratives and stories can be incorporated and new ones can be generated' (Jelin, 2003: 29). But the success of testimony is not guaranteed even in these circumstances. The victim is not guaranteed a sympathetic hearing; it is still a matter of struggle. In fact, the structures of political transition or settlement can lead to an official story or memory that erases, downplays, marginalizes or formalizes and institutionalizes the stories of some or all victims.

For example, recent transitional justice arrangements have seen the rise of truth commissions and criminal courts. Both of these have provided space for victims' testimony that was not available before. But there is no necessary link between the provision of such space and the hegemony of the victims' interpretations. Thus in the International Criminal Court for the former Yugoslavia, victim-witnesses were called to

provide a general picture of what happened into which the specifics of the criminal trial were to mesh. One of the promises was that victims would benefit from participation. But there was an obvious tension between the requirements of a formal legal process and the needs of victims:

*the where, when, who and how of events. These are the questions that lawyers have been trained to ask and are used to hear being asked ... Emotions, impressions, general reminiscences, renditions of atmosphere, interrogations of a philosophical or ethical nature carry little authority in the courtroom (Dembour and Haslam, 2004: 163).*

Thus lawyers quizzed victims as to whether the window they escaped through was on the first or second floor, or whether the vehicle on which they saw the dead bodies was a digger or a tractor. In emotional terms, the answer to such questions may be irrelevant, but in forensic terms these are potentially important questions, imprecise answers to which lessen the witness' credibility. Luebben (2003: 399) notes the complaint of one witness that in effect forensics trumped emotion:

*They only tape-recorded what they thought they could use. They kept on interrupting me. I couldn't tell them the whole story in detail because they more or less forced me by their questioning to jump from one subject to another. I couldn't tell them about the time in the camp, for example, or about how I fled from Bosnia.*

In this confrontation, the law predominates, the victims are seen to stray from the agenda and are hustled off-stage sooner than they would wish with no satisfaction other than the generalized wish of the court that things will go better for them in future.

In South Africa, the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act (1995), which established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), envisaged that victims' testimony would 'restore the human and civil dignity of victims by granting them an opportunity to relate their own accounts of the violations of which they are the victims'. In addition, these testimonies were seen as one of the mechanisms that would help forge national unity through reconciliation. The TRC thus held out great promise for victims: 'the exceptional character of the hearings is due to the fact that a format of power and prestige is offered to the powerless, and that in this "high" format "low" discourse modes are allowed, even invited and elicited' (Blommaert and Bock, 2002: 5).

Delivering on that promise was problematic. To begin with, the proceedings took place 'under the umbrella of inequality' in which individuals have more or less 'communicative competence' (Blommaert and Bock, 2002: 6). Consequently, the commissioners often intervened, ostensibly to help the witnesses. Despite the good intentions, such interventions 'inevitably resulted in their assuming to different degrees co-authorship of the narratives ... What the officials do, in sum, is to align witnesses' narratives with a particular order of discourse' (Blommaert and Bock, 2002: 9). Blommaert and Bock (2002: 20) give the example of one witness: there were 1664 words in testimony overall, but only 657 were spoken by the witness; the other 1023 were spoken by the chairperson who was 'helping' the witness to complete the testimony.

In addition, victims had to learn the 'script' expected of the proceedings – 'a coherent chronology, a clear relation between component parts, a climax phrased in terms of the experience of "gross violation of human rights"' (Ross, 2003: 328). It was difficult to incorporate the testimony of those who did not follow the script. Take the case of Colin de Souza, a former African National Congress (ANC) activist who had been tortured. The commissioners were at pains to have him recount his suffering, but he kept reverting to stirring tales of gun battles and escapes. His 'adventure story' narrative did not match the 'victim' narrative expectations:

*He was not one who suffered, but one who struggled. The history of unspeakability of suffering was a theme in many of the hearings, victims often referring to the silencing performed by the system on them ... the TRC hearings often used this motif as a crucial ingredient of the performances: for the first time, victims could tell their stories and receive legitimacy for their expressions of pain and anger. Colin de Souza, however, did not 'open up', he stuck to the codes of the hidden transcript of his subculture, a community of people in the Military Wing in which sacrifice was a central value, and for which beating the system was the most important claim to glory. In his hearing, a hidden transcript is brought to the surface, full of codes of expression that do not match the new public transcript. (Blommaert and Bock, 2002: 21)*

Krog provides a distinctly different example, but one that also reveals the limitations of the TRC format. Mrs Konile is a mother of an ANC activist killed in an ambush. Unlike other mothers of activists killed in the same ambush, she did not tell a coherent story of how she came to hear of the event and the pain that it caused her. Instead:

*Her testimony seemed to drift from one surrealist scenario to the next; most of her testimony had nothing to do with her son but was describing her own personal suffering in a highly confused way – leaving the impression that her son's main value to her was monetary and that she was never really aware who or what he was fighting for or what was happening around her. She also seemed to have no idea what to ask of the perpetrators or the Commission. (Krog, 2008: 233)*

For Krog, reporting the hearings for radio, Mrs Konile's testimony presented a real dilemma: 'I remember thinking that if I did a normal reporting job on Mrs Konile's narrative on radio, it would only strengthen racist views' (Krog, 2008: 231) – such as: that black people cannot see or think three-dimensionally, that they were not unhappy with apartheid but were incited by communists, and that they did not really care about their children and their welfare. In the end, Krog and her colleagues were able to bring inter-disciplinary insights to bear on painstakingly unravelling and interpreting Mrs Konile's testimony, but this was a task beyond the scope and skill of the TRC (Ratele et al., 2007).

Blommaert and Bock (2002: 26) conclude:

*The TRC hearings are celebrations of precisely this phenomenon: hidden transcripts are explicitly elicited and offered to the nation as healing, cathartic narratives.*

*The important point is to realize that offering such spaces does not in itself create more equality; it may accentuate past inequalities.*

Henri (2003), a former ANC activist, found this out to his cost. His expectations from testifying to the TRC involved recognition of the role he had played in the struggle and how his family had also become victims as a result. He found that:

*Instead of clearing my name, as I had asked, the TRC entrapped me in a cycle of victimhood that has been almost impossible to break. I went to the hearings with a broken body and fractured mind. I left those confines with my body more broken and my mind more fractured. (2003: 264–5)*

One further disappointment for many victims testifying to the TRC was the discovery that their stories often became in effect commodities, paraded in news broadcasts, on CDs, etc. One victim, Yvonne Khutwane, complained that her wide-ranging story of various forms of violation was reduced in a number of publications solely to her account of rape (Ross, 2003: 335).

Finally, it is clear in both the case of the Tribunal on former Yugoslavia and the operations of the South African TRC that there was an overriding official concern to see reconciliation as the outcome of testimony. This was most apparent in the case of the TRC where the official motto of the human rights abuse hearings was 'Truth – the road to reconciliation'. In the Tribunal for former Yugoslavia the connection was less formal, but it is clear from an examination of many of the encounters between victim-witnesses and judges that the latter expected the former to forgive, even if the victims were not ready to do so and had given the court no reason to believe that they were (Dembour and Haslam, 2004: 175).

In short, official processes that involve storytelling often end up frustrating victims' expectations. The question to be considered now in the specific circumstances of transition in Northern Ireland is whether unofficial processes are more rewarding for victims and can address the issues of truth, acknowledgement and justice that they raise.

## POLITICAL SPACE: UNOFFICIAL PROCESSES

Relatively early in the peace process in Northern Ireland a government-appointed Victims' Commissioner issued a report (Bloomfield, 1998). Just over a decade later, another government-appointed group, the Consultative Group on the Past (2009) also produced a report, which in turn recommended the establishment of a Legacy Commission to deal once and for all with issues arising from the past political violence. These reports stand like two bookends of the peace process, with their concern to highlight the needs of victims and their recommendations for the future. In between, there have been other official events and developments. These fall into two broad categories. On the one hand are the legally based initiatives such as the Bloody Sunday Inquiry, also known as the Saville Inquiry, established in 1998 to look afresh at the killing of 14 Civil Rights marchers in Derry in 1972 (Bloody Sunday Inquiry, n.d.). In addition, as a result

of a report by former Canadian Judge Peter Cory, four inquiries into disputed killings allegedly resulting from collusion between state security forces and paramilitaries were recommended, three of which have begun.<sup>4</sup> There have also been a number of successful cases brought to the European Court of Human Rights under Article 2 of the Human Rights Act (Campbell et al., 2003). In addition, in 2005, the Historical Enquiries Team, a unit within the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), was established 'to re-examine all deaths attributable to the security situation here between 1968 and 1998' and thereby 'help bring a measure of resolution' to the families of the dead (Police Service of Northern Ireland, 2008). And finally, the Police Ombudsman's office has also taken up a number of cases of past killings.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, there has been a range of state policies directed towards victims and victims' groups. These include: the appointment of an Interim Victims' Commissioner (McDougall, 2007) and later of four Victims' Commissioners, and the establishment of the Victims' Unit at the heart of the devolved administration of Northern Ireland (Victims' Unit, 2002). The unit has the task of coordinating government services and support for the voluntary and community sector in delivering services to victims.

Below the radar of these official developments, there has been a range of storytelling projects carried out through civil society and community initiatives. These reveal levels of pain and poignancy that cross barriers of creed, class, gender and ethnicity (An Crann, 2000; Cost of the Troubles Survey, 1998; Dawson, 2007; Lindsay, 1998; McDaniel, 1997; McKay, 2008; Simpson, 2008; Smyth and Fay, 2000; Smyth et al., 2004; Snodden, 2005; Spence, 2002; Spencer, 2005; WAVE, 2003; WAVE, 2006; Wilson, 2005). Victims cope with their suffering through mechanisms ranging from despair, through resignation, to anger. At this level of abstraction, victimhood is shared. Yet there are very real differences when one considers political identity. How one relates to suffering – and perhaps more importantly, how one can come to some sense of agency – is greatly determined by one's relationship to the state. Because of this relationship, victims can have very different stories to tell and indeed different social spaces in which to tell them.

For unionists, the explanation of the war was as a terrorist onslaught on democratic society. In this view they were backed by a state that they regarded as representative of and representing their interests. Their response to terrorist attack was to demand greater state action against the terrorists. Yet in the end they were to witness the state negotiating with terrorists and eventually bringing them into government. The stories unionist victims have to tell are full of pain compounded by disappointment and a fear that the world as they once knew it has been turned upside down. Moreover, state dependence has helped foster a culture of reticence in relation to storytelling; as a member of the victims' support group WAVE put it: 'Part of our problem is that we have been brought up in a culture where we did not tell our stories. When my father was shot in 1969 you did not tell your story; you kept it in-house, you dealt with it' (Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, House of Commons, 2005: 77).

In the case of members of local state forces, the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR) and the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), the sense of betrayal is even deeper. They put their lives on the line for a government that, in their view, ended up rewarding terrorism.

As victims, their stories reveal great pain and disappointment, and their demands for the most part relate to the failure of the state to provide the counselling and financial support that they need as victims. Some fear that their contribution will be forgotten and that they will not get the place they deserve in the history books. At the same time, the macho culture of the security forces places an obstacle in the way of testimony. One former UDR soldier put it like this: 'Oh yes, definitely the story should be told', and continues:

*I find that once you actually come out of the UDR it's very hard to talk to somebody the same way as you could talk to somebody you have served with. Most UDR guys think of themselves as big strong soldiers. They don't want to make themselves appear weak by talking to strangers. (Snodden, 2005: 22)*

As traditional political underdogs, nationalist and republican victims have had to organize to fight for everything that they obtained from the state. As victims, they tell stories of marginalization, but also of a determination to be recognized and to make demands of the state at every turn. One obstacle in their path has been the existence of a de facto hierarchy of victims whereby victims of state violence, especially if they were combatants, were at the bottom. The thrust of official discourse was to ensure that victims of state violence had difficulty being acknowledged officially as victims at all. They and their supporters had to contend with the unquestioned belief that the state does not kill without reason or justification and that their protestations of innocence were probably a politically motivated ruse. Relatives of victims of state violence often found it difficult to receive a sympathetic hearing outside their own community.

Given this division of labour among victims' groups, it is not surprising that when the question of collective agency is raised the focus is skewed towards groups from a nationalist or republican background. They were the ones whose storytelling had a counter-hegemonic purpose. The complexity of storytelling in such a situation becomes clear in an examination of the Ardoyne Commemoration Project (ACP). The ACP is an oral history project commemorating the 99 people from Ardoyne – a small nationalist working-class area of North Belfast – who died as a result of the conflict. The resulting book contains a discussion on the motivations for the project that emphasizes the importance of creating the space for people to tell their story in an overall context of silencing. There is also a focus on the connection to a wider transformation in society:

*It is clear from our own discussions with victims' relatives that it was important for them to be given the opportunity to 'tell their story', in their own words without constraints or censorship. What is more, to document such experiences prevents history from being lost, rewritten or misrepresented. It opens the possibility for a society to learn from its past. (Ardoyne Commemoration Project, 2002: 1)*

The book contains over 300 interviews with the family and friends of those who died. The testimonies describe each person as well as the circumstances and impact of their deaths. The reason for this approach is made explicit in the introduction:

*This was so that their lives, as well as their deaths, could be described. By seeing those who had been killed through the eyes of those who knew them best, the aim*

*was to reveal the human face so often lost amid the welter of statistics, supposedly 'objective' historical accounts and media representations. (Ardoyne Commemoration Project, 2002: 4)*

In the process of describing the circumstances surrounding each death, the book compellingly presents a catalogue of unresolved issues. This foregrounds truth and justice, as the preface by Seamus Deane states: 'What this book does is to increase the pressure for further enquiry, to ask the state, before the world to justify its behaviour in Ardoyne. Or even simply to tell the truth' (Ardoyne Commemoration Project, 2002: xv). The book achieves a collective demand around unresolved issues but also recognizes the human need to restore the person who was lost. As we have seen, this frequently has no place in official processes.

A detailed evaluation of the work of the ACP was carried out after the production of the book by two of its authors, one of the very few studies that have been conducted on the impact of storytelling (Lundy and McGovern, 2005). This described a further unanticipated benefit that came from the project: the resolution of some issues related to intra-community violence. For example, a number of the deaths were of local young men accused by the IRA of being informers and consequently shot. For the relatives of these men there was a further level of silence and taboo beyond the general marginalization of the area by state forces. The publication of the book led to an unprecedented debate in the local area. The truth being demanded was not merely of state forces and loyalists, but, as one of the ACP members, Tom Holland, put it:

*the IRA in particular have a moral responsibility to ensure that all unresolved issues aired by the families of their victims are tackled. It is important the IRA and all other republican groupings are open to the same truth and justice demands as the British Government and loyalist paramilitaries. (Holland, 2002)*

Eventually the IRA apologized in relation to the death of local man Anthony Braniff, in 1981, publicly acknowledging that he had not been an informer (Cusack, 2003). The Project thus worked at two levels of counter-hegemony; it produced a narrative that was resistant to dominant representations of the area and its people, while at the same time allowing for silenced voices within the community to be heard and acknowledged.

Such an inclusive outcome to collective storytelling is not inevitable. It is the product of the rigorous method adopted by the ACP that defined the boundaries of the research and followed through its implications to include the stories of all those killed. It is this attention to the process that enables the emergence of both individual stories and a collective voice. A similar commitment to process is evident in the collection of stories from victims of state violence cited earlier and in the case of the Falls Community Council's oral history archive *Dúchas*, which also exemplifies the potential of bottom-up storytelling to include various stories from within the community.

The *Dúchas* archive is based in a mainly nationalist working class community in West Belfast that was heavily affected by the conflict. The interviews, many of which

are from people bereaved and injured in the conflict, are collected in an onsite digital archive that contains both the voice recordings and the interview transcripts. Like the ACP, the Dúchas oral history makes an explicit connection to structural change and therefore has a counter-hegemonic purpose. Descriptions of the archive also, however, refer to the possibilities of conflictual accounts within the community. In an article that draws on the archive material to illustrate women's experiences of the conflict, it is acknowledged that the Dúchas oral history process 'involves looking at the conflict within the community not just between the community and the state. This is of course a risky enterprise for a community accustomed to self reliance and solidarity for survival during the conflict' (Hackett, 2004: 146). The article goes on to describe women's accounts of resistance to state repression, but also includes stories of challenge to patriarchal structures within the community. The growing awareness of domestic violence and the difficulty of breaking silence on this issue is strongly conveyed.

While the ACP focused on those who had died and the impact of that loss on the narrator, the Dúchas archive concentrates on the narrator. This was a developing process within the project as is described in an article about the archive:

*Originally we began the interview collection by interviewing people affected by defining events of the conflict such as the attacks on Catholic homes in August 1969, the introduction of internment in 1971, the hunger strikes of 1980 and 81 and so on. However as the project progressed we began to adopt a life history approach to the interviews, asking people about their early years and moving the interview through their life ... (Hackett, 2003: 14).*

One of the benefits of this development, it is argued, is that it allows more room for the narrator's interpretation of his/her experience. For example, one criticism frequently made of the South African TRC is that it reinforced the marginalization of women who testified about the loss of their husbands, fathers and sons but did not enable their own stories of victimization and struggle (Goldblatt and Meintjes, 1996). Those behind Dúchas argue that, in contrast, community-based processes can enable a deeper recognition of victims.

*It is this anonymity or obscurity that is broken through in Dúchas and other oral history and memory processes which bring the contributor into the centre of the story being told. This is an approach which restores agency to the bereaved and victims of human rights abuse. (Hackett, 2006).*

One of the achievements of the Dúchas archive therefore is that the storytellers are not reduced to their experience of loss and trauma but are the subjects of their own story.

The authors of the ACP report note astutely that 'The rootedness of the ACP was, in other words, both a prerequisite for the project and an important factor in defining its inevitable limits' (Ardoyne Commemoration Project, 2002: 5). The same is true of Dúchas. The limitation is not just in the size of the potential audience compared to official processes but also the nature of that audience; it is difficult for the story to break free from the community that produced it. There is a ghettoization of memory,



such that even the most poignant stories lose their power when presented to those outside of or antagonistic to the community. As Jelin puts it, the storyteller needs not merely an:

*'internal' audience, comprised of those who share a community or comprise a collective 'we'. In those inward-oriented spaces, testimonial narrative can at times become ritualized repetition ... What is needed are 'others' with the ability to ask, to express curiosity for a painful past, as well as to have compassion and empathy. (Jelin, 2003: 65)*

In Northern Ireland, where in many ways present disputes revisit the divisions of the previous conflict, many people do not get the opportunity to hear stories from other groups or reject out of hand the validity of those stories.

## CONCLUSION

Unofficial storytelling mechanisms have a number of strengths: victims get to tell their story in its own right, in a sympathetic atmosphere, where they can gain confidence and receive acknowledgement and validation. In these settings, also, the story can be very powerfully and fully communicated and can collectively articulate the need for a societal response while also producing complex and multi-layered accounts. At the same time, unofficial storytelling mechanisms reveal weaknesses. Acknowledgement is frequently confined to one's community and can only have a limited effect on the structures of silence and lies often experienced by victims.

For their part, storytelling mechanisms within official bodies dealing with the past have a number of strengths: these bodies have an authority that means that the narrative they produce (for example, in truth commissions) or the verdict they reach (for example, in court proceedings) potentially lend a wide legitimacy to the stories of victims. They can achieve a level of acknowledgement far beyond the confines of the victim's own group or community, and ultimately can reduce the extent of 'permissible lies' (Ignatieff, 1996: 113) in a society. At the same time, official mechanisms for dealing with the past do not always offer the most welcoming terrain for victims' stories: they often have their own agenda, such as reconciliation (in the case of many truth commissions) or judicial punishment (as in the case of courts) within which the stories of victims can often be merely a means to those ends, not fully acknowledged in their own right. Victims' testimony can be forced into an official narrative, adding colour but not substance to the formal deliberations.

Unofficial mechanisms can facilitate a real sense of empowerment for the individual storyteller, most notably when the story is an expression of agency not just of the individual but also of the collective seeking justice. For example, in the evaluation of the ACP, the benefits of participation, ownership and control that were achieved by giving editorial control over their own narrative to the participants were reported to be the most positive aspect of the project (Lundy and McGovern, 2005). The narrators also had editorial control in the Dúchas archive and in the stories reproduced by Rolston with

Gilmartin (2000). As we have seen, such positive impacts are much more difficult to achieve in formal mechanisms; as the evidence shows, victims often end up frustrated, feeling further marginalized by the remoteness of formal proceedings wherein they can lose any sense of agency. Official mechanisms can, however, bring a gravitas to the story that is not otherwise available, because the whole weight of the official body and possibly the state behind it confirms the validity of the story. Such gravitas is less likely in informal mechanisms where storytelling can be ignored or dismissed by those outside the immediate circle of support and empathy. Moreover, unofficial mechanisms usually lack the power and resources to achieve the wide audience that an official mechanism commands.

At one level it can be said that storytelling through official and unofficial routes are mirror images of each other. The main shortcoming of unofficial mechanisms is precisely that they are not official.

Given that, there is no holy grail to be found in the uncritical acceptance of official storytelling mechanisms over unofficial ones, or vice versa. The ability of official mechanisms to break out of the confines of the group or community in which the victim exists to come up with a narrative that has a wider legitimacy is a benefit that should not be rejected out of hand. None of this is to suggest that the interface between official mechanisms for dealing with the past and unofficial mechanisms of storytelling is simple or easy, but it is to recognize that there is a dynamic and relationship between them.

Official processes rarely happen without some pressure from below and many unofficial storytelling processes contribute to this demand, even if, as Albeck et al. (2002: 319) note, official mechanisms do not acknowledge this foundation: 'peace builders who work bottom-up are dependent on the outcomes of the work of peacemakers who work top-down, but the peacemakers who work top-down often have the illusion that they are not dependent on bottom-up processes'. When official processes are established, they frequently draw on the content, expertise and local knowledge of unofficial processes. There is a strong case for arguing that official processes benefit from strengthening such links. Equally, the outcomes of an official process could increase the impact of unofficial processes. The production of a narrative from the official examination of underlying causes of the conflict could open up new spaces for storytelling. Whether this is conceived as the ambitious aim of producing a shared narrative of the past or the more modest goal of reducing permissible lies, a new terrain can be created by this account. This is not to suggest that the past would become resolved or uncontested. The official narrative, however, has the potential to generate and stimulate a wider curiosity about the 'painful past'. We can speculate that at best an official process in Northern Ireland would open up new audiences for the work of unofficial projects and enable a deeper engagement with those stories. In that way, other constituencies who have not yet told their stories or who find storytelling difficult – Unionists, security force personnel, young people – may be encouraged to do so. At worst, an official process could attempt to draw a line under the past and thus close down spaces for storytelling.

All of which brings us back to the beginning. There are many who argue for storytelling as a simple solution to dealing with the violent past in Northern Ireland. But it is clear that storytelling is far from simple, uncomplicated and non-contentious. Above all, there is no easily available blueprint that can indicate the best way in which to realize the potential benefits of storytelling in transitional societies. The task facing society in Northern Ireland, as indeed other societies coming out of conflict, is to find ways to encourage storytelling so that those who tell the stories can do so in safety and those who listen are mobilized into dealing with the legacy of past violence and working together to prevent future violence.

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## Notes

- 1 Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006, Article 3, paragraph 1.
- 2 The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee is a parliamentary committee of the British House of Commons. It is composed of MPs drawn from all the main parties in Britain and Northern Ireland and can initiate its own investigations into issues in Northern Ireland. There is a detailed analysis of all the submissions to the Committee in Breen Smyth (2007).
- 3 For a detailed analysis of the concept of trauma in the context of the conflict in Northern Ireland, see Dawson (2007).
- 4 The Billy Wright Inquiry (2005); Rosemary Nelson Inquiry (2009); Robert Hamill Inquiry (2009) (Pat Finucane Centre) (2009).
- 5 See, for example, the Ombudsman's controversial report into the killing by a UVF squad of one of their own members, Raymond McCord (Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland, 2007).

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