



## Giving Voice to Silences: Harnessing the Performative in Two Memory Projects in Northern Ireland

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Elizabeth Crooke

***Giving voice to silences: harnessing the performative in two memory projects in Northern Ireland***

Northern Ireland is in a transitional phase between violence and established peace and still dealing with the heavy legacy of 40 years of conflict, expressed as sometimes violent division between unionist and nationalist communities concerning the governance and status of Northern Ireland. Finding a means to move forward and still remember the deaths of more than 3,600 people<sup>1</sup> continues to dominate political, social and cultural debates. For some, the legacy of the Troubles is a private journey concerned with coming to terms with the past. Others find solace in public and shared processes of national recognition and commemoration. There are groups and individuals whose continuing concern is acknowledgement for the wrongdoing: the perpetrators taking responsibility and the pursuit of compensation with a rationale focusing on human rights and transitional justice (Aiken 2010). The legacy of the period is also a concern for individual and societal deprivation, wellbeing and mental health (Kelleher 2003). Furthermore, the political instability evident across Europe is also to be found in Northern Ireland. Local political difficulties, which have continued since the beginning of the peace process, are now exacerbated by the uncertainty associated with Brexit and its implications for the Belfast Agreement (Northern Ireland Office 1998). Signed on Good Friday 1998 by political leaders in Northern Ireland, Republic of Ireland and the UK, and known locally as the Good Friday Agreement (GFA), it was the peace settlement that confirmed the end of the Troubles and, subsequently, the beginning of the rise of the commemoration industry. Included in the GFA was a statement on the ‘right to remember’ the suffering of victims of violence – and discussions have continued in various state arenas about how to collectively remember this past. Despite a political rhetoric that has espoused the creation of national initiatives associated with collecting and representing the Troubles period, an agreed approach has remained elusive. While political leaders test their powers of debate, those engaged in the community, cultural and art spheres are developing alternative locally based and sometimes grassroots memory projects (Crooke 2010). These projects are satisfying a need, identified by those driving them, and, for the moment, substitute for a national shared strategy of remembrance.

This chapter provides an analysis of the methods adopted in two of these alternative projects that are a representation of the consequence and aftermath of the Troubles. Both projects are deliberately performative, in the sense that the visitor is to be more than a mere spectator of the Troubles experiences. The aspiration is that each visitor should be a responsive participant and should listen, learn and have a greater empathy towards the Troubles victim. Each project has interpretive characteristics that foster and emotional and imaginative response, which the creators hope will stay with and influence the visitor long after the encounter. By exploring these methods, this chapter is an examination of the purposefulness of a past remade through contemporary reinterpretation. The two projects are *Stories from Silence*, a testimony project based around short filmed interviews with people who lost family members and available online, and *Silent Testimony* an exhibition of 18 large-scale portraits (10 women and 8 men) by the renowned artist Colin Davidson hosted at the Ulster Museum (part of National Museums Northern Ireland, NMNI) from June 2015 to January 2016. In the case of both projects the person giving testimony and the sitter in the portraits lost family members during the Troubles. The projects were supported by WAVE Trauma Centre, a grassroots charity focussing on aiding people bereaved, injured or traumatised by the Troubles. The people profiled were actively involved in the creative process: in *Stories from Silence* the contributors collaborated with the WAVE team providing interviews that were later edited; for *Silent Testimony* the sitters met and spoke with the artist Colin Davidson and he later produced the paintings in his studio. At the Ulster Museum *Silent Testimony* was viewed by over 60,000 people and was consequently described by NMNI as ‘one of the most powerful, affecting and important exhibitions we’ve ever staged’ (@visitnmni 10 December 2015). The exhibition

continues to tour – it was displayed in Centre Culturel Irlandais Paris (January 2016- March 2016) and Dublin Castle (July 2017 – September 2017).

*Silent Testimony* and *Stories from Silence* are an articulation and representation of the experience of living with loss. As evident in the titles, both projects focused upon reversing silences. In Northern Ireland silences exist for complex reasons, it can range from ‘the silence of fear and intimidation, to the silence of stoic suffering, and the guilty silence of those who did not wish to incriminate themselves’ (Donnan and Simpson 2007: 15). As well as the silence amongst the individuals, who had maybe not spoken publicly before, the projects address a perception of a prevailing silence in society which, it could be argued, does little to engage with the living experiences of the Troubles victim or survivor. Each project is about empowerment of the subjects, conveyed through narratives of resilience and responsibility. Coming out of silence, the victims and survivors are presented as people of moral strength (resilience) who, through these public projects, are asking others to consider the responsibility of witnessing their traumas. Both initiatives are storytelling performance (as described by Maguire 2015), adopting a narrative and documentary form presented by an authentic witness. In *Stories from Silence* Troubles victims perform autobiography as recorded testimony, the memory of a past event recalled and retold. In *Silent Testimony* the visitor is a spectator in a storytelling performance mediated by the artist and museum. In each project the subject shares their experience of loss, giving authenticity to the performance. By giving voice to the victims the project creators are challenging the silences they perceive in Northern Ireland. evident in a lack of political acknowledgement and accountability. It is however, the performative aspects that are vital to the realisation of the purposes of each initiative. It is crucial that the viewer is moved to greater insight and awareness. Ultimately these projects bare the hallmarks of an attempt to foster collective action focussed on greater acknowledgement of Troubles related losses.

### **Public memory and the Performative Past**

Violent murder during the Troubles period in Northern Ireland, frequently in open spaces such as on rural roads, urban streets, or in pubs and other meeting places, were public events from the moment the harm was done. With coverage in the print and television media, very quickly people in every home in the region were aware of the event. In such circumstances, it follows that the remembrance and commemoration of the events should include a public act. Going beyond sharing memories within the privacy and intimacy of the home, the public act of memorialisation of Troubles related deaths speaks both to the people who are deeply associated and to those who may have no connection to the deceased or the violent events. In the public process of remembering we are made to think of why the living remembers – be it the cathartic process of sharing, the desire to never forget, remembrance as resistance, or the pursuit of truth and justice (Lundy and McGovern 2001; 2008). The public commemoration of the past in Northern Ireland is ‘highly complex and deeply contested’ (Braniff et.al. 2016:1). In 2006 the *Consultative Group on the Past in Northern Ireland* was established by the Secretary of State as an independent body that sought ‘views across the community in Northern Ireland on the best way to deal with the legacy of the past’ (Northern Ireland Affairs Committee 2009:3). In the decade since the region have seen proposals and failed attemptsssh to create new museums, archives or installations that document and marks the Troubles period. Perhaps the highest profile being the failure to establish a Peace building and Conflict Resolution Centre at a former prison site outside Belfast, which was agreed by the political parties in 2010 and was to include an archive and exhibition centre (Flynn 2016). The many stalled and sometimes failed projects demonstrate that although there is some agreement that we need to create a national location of remembrance in the form of an oral history archive or memorial museum, we can’t yet realise it. Instead of a permanent and national initiative, what we have is a collection of diverse projects, many of which are based around storytelling, art and drama. Dominating these are single identity truth and social justice projects associated with nationalist/republican and unionist/loyalist communities (Crooke 2016, 2017). Emerging more recently are a range of projects, like the two discussed in

this chapter, with a reach beyond these communities that are not only bringing new voices to and new understandings of the Troubles story, but also a fresh agenda to the memory process. Some of these projects, such as *Accounts of the Conflict* based at Ulster University, take the form of the creation of new collections of oral histories. Other projects explore the impact of the Troubles through creative arts, and generate new material such as the drama *Those You Pass on the Street*, produced by Kabosh Theatre Company and commissioned by Healing Through Remembering. Another significant project is the Dúchas Oral History Archive, which was established to record the experience of conflict in nationalist West Belfast and is now collecting stories from people in other communities (Dúchas 2014). Although those mentioned are well documented, many others are more fleeting. Hackett and Rolston refer to these momentary projects as ‘below the radar’ of official developments (Hackett and Rolston 2009: 366). These can also be powerful projects with emotional affect enabling people to explore traumatic pasts in shared, creative and often safe means. A notable example is the collaborative peace project *The Temple* - a wooden structure built and then erected for one week in 2014 in Derry/Londonderry. 60,000 people walked to the hill site to enter the Temple, adding inscriptions about personal loss to the structure. At the end of the week many watched as the structure was burnt. The liminality of this project enabled established methods of memorialisation to be expressed in new and alternative ways and those experiencing the Temple seeing that as transformative (see McDowell and Crooke forthcoming). The transitory nature of these projects may enable greater creativity – allowing people to challenge themselves and test new ideas. A further consequence of their ephemeral nature means they are easily missed, knowledge of them remaining localised, they can also be hard to document and tricky to account for their impact. However, these are recurring and highly valued projects with repeated themes that collectively demonstrate an energy and persistence amongst communities that is sometimes thought to be absent within the political elite.

Acts of public interpretation and display assume an audience, an imagined community (Anderson 1991), created through physical and intellectual encounter and exchange. In the establishment of a memorial space we are both exposed to and invited to participate in the act of remembering. We are not only made aware of the deceased, we are also reminded of the living, those persons who have made this public intervention and have invited us to participate. The performative aspects of such projects are evident in the use of interpretive methods enticing a response or action that intends to produce change. Costello (2013), for instance, argues this is evident in the Jewish Museum in Berlin where choices made in the architectural design, text, artefacts and images leads to a visceral experience that has the ‘potential to transform the bystander into an active witness’ (2013:18). Such initiatives, she argues has significant potential to shape public memory and can be understood as a social and political intervention. In Northern Ireland in the public displays created by the *In their Footsteps* campaign, which is seeking justice for deaths caused by the British Army or Loyalist paramilitaries, the choice of artefacts, text, labelling, photographs, display and location was a political intervention in a campaign for recognition (Crooke 2016). These memorial initiatives, with their choice of highly evocative triggers, are consciously performative with the desired outcome increased momentum for the social and political campaign.

### **The Past Omnipresent: *Stories from Silence and Silent Testimony***

In mid-2016 WAVE Trauma Centre launched Phase Three of *Stories from Silence*, a storytelling project that is gathering testimonies from people affected by the Troubles (testimonies available at <https://soundcloud.com/user-808685535>). WAVE is an established community organisation working with victims and survivors of the Troubles and this continuing project shares testimony, never heard in public before, of living without a loved one because of a Troubles-related death. The project is described as providing ‘a moving sense of the enormous loss that haunts the lives of those bereaved’ (WAVE 2016). Announcing the launch of 18 new stories, the project leader presented the increasing dissatisfaction amongst

some communities that the traumas they experienced during the Troubles period, which many are still living with, are not publicly recognised:

Victims and survivors are told by politicians almost on a daily basis that their needs must be at the center of any attempt to take us forward. But the reality is that they have seen precious little acknowledgement or recognition of what happened to them and the effect it had. These powerful testimonies literally give victims and survivors a voice to reaffirm their humanity. (WAVE 2016)

This statement captures the variation of attitudes to this type of memory work. With the signing of the Good Friday Agreement there was an attitude amongst some that the difficult past is now behind us and with that, any idea of further acknowledgement or reparation should also be at an end. Susan McKay, who undertook interviews for *Stories from Silence*, came up against attitudes that ‘people should just get over it’ (Jankowitz 2014: 14). The rejection of this idea amongst individuals, and grassroots community action groups, has led to the proliferation of memory and heritage projects that are telling their stories in the hope that this will raise awareness and stimulate a campaign for change. WAVE is currently campaigning for the families of the disappeared (people who were ‘abducted, murdered and secretly buried’ and are still missing); and the injured, looking for justice and financial compensation. *Stories from Silence*, is not only about the healing process associated with telling a story, it also draws our attention to these other campaigns, which they feel has had ‘precious little acknowledgement’ (WAVE 2016).

Available online we can listen to *Stories from Silence* anywhere – in my case that was in the kitchen when the children were in bed and again in my office with the window open and the rest of the world busy at their everyday. This was an encounter in a private space, one between the speaker, sharing innermost thoughts on the experience of loss, and the person listening. We can listen to the accounts again and again, and go back and hear the other contributions from previous phases of the project. While online the digital archive of oral testimonies accounts available to those who are either made aware of them by using the services of WAVE or come across them by other means. The connectivity of the web allows a certain amount of fluidity: the users, should they wish to, can navigate between testimonies collected in different phases and even move to other digital testimony projects created by other agencies. WAVE described giving testimony as asserting humanity - the focus on individuals, peopling speaking to the camera, makes the Troubles a real, current and living experience, rather than a historical statistic. Maguire (2008) exposes the devices used to foster authenticity and authority in Troubles theatre, in *Stories from Silence* with the speaker being the victim, communication of authority is a key aspect of the project.

The portraits displayed as *Silent Testimony* in the Ulster Museum were viewed in the physical space of a public gallery with others around you – moving around and negotiating the space with them. Each of the sitters, who were initially approached by WAVE to participate, lost a family member during the Troubles. The portraits are striking – not only for their size (each painting is 127cm x 117cm) but also because of Davidson’s technique. The painting of the face and shoulders is vibrant and loose, but the eyes are finely executed and expressive (all can be viewed at <http://www.troublesarchive.com/artists/colin-davidson/work>). Davidson presents his method in terms that are performative – in creating his work Davidson meets and talks with sitters, later when painting he moves in and out of the studio to establish if he has captured the ‘spirit of the person’:

I’m not sure a picture is ever finished. I stop when the spirit of the person seems to be there. I leave room for that to happen, and when it does I am really reluctant to do anything more, for you can paint the life out of a picture. (Culture NI. n.d.)

A short label that documented the sitter's loss accompanied each painting. Between 40-80 words the visitor is told of the name and age of the person who died, the relationship between the deceased and the sitter, whether the deceased had family and where the killing took place:

Fiona Kelly's father, Gerry Dalrymple (58), was killed on 25th March 1993, when gunmen opened fire on the van in which he and his colleagues were travelling in Castlerock. The workmen had been carrying out building and renovation work for some months in the seaside town. Three other men died in the attack. Gerry Dalrymple lived in Rasharkin and was the father of six children. (NMNI 2015)

Virtue Dixon's daughter, Ruth (24), died in a bomb attack in Ballykelly on 6th December 1982. Ruth was celebrating her birthday in the Droppin Well public house when there was an explosion, causing the roof to collapse. Sixteen other people lost their lives in the attack. A witness tells of hearing the DJ play 'Happy Birthday' for Ruth at the moment the bomb exploded. Ruth's son, who was six at the time of her death, died suddenly when he was aged thirty. (NMNI 2015)

Each label gives some personal background on the victims – facts that viewers might connect with, for instance John Gallagher 'was married with three young children' (NMNI 2015: 18). In addition, the horrific nature of the deaths was not avoided: Sean O'Riordan 'received a gunshot wound to the back of his head...he was 13' (NMNI 2015: 20). The senseless and random nature of deaths was also documented, for instance four members of Thomas O'Brien's family were killed when a 'no warning car bomb exploded' as the 'young family' walked past' (NMNI 2015: 24). Within the brief text there was a deliberate decision to give little to suggest the religious or political background of the victim. Much has been written about the Northern Ireland Troubles and, in this case, the brevity of the labels had significant impact on those who read them.

#### *Art's Effectualness: the visitor response*

At a level not previously witnessed by the museum, visitors to the exhibition were compelled to leave written comments with the museum (in the evaluation sheets provided) and online. Amongst the hundreds of comments shared online on the National Museum Northern Ireland (@visitNMNI) and Ulster Museum (@UlsterMuseum) Facebook pages there is collective sense of the impact of the visit. Repeatedly the visitors referred to the exhibition as emotional, poignant, haunting, memorable and evocative. This sentiment is captured by the visitor who wrote: 'incredibly poignant, compassionate. Moved beyond words. Superb and painful reminder of the horrors and the depth and breadth of grief the Troubles caused'. The visitor continues: 'so appropriate and moving to focus on individuals - the pain was, and is, so personal and real' (@visitnmni 17 January 2016). Continually visitors commented on how 'the pain, emotions and physical toll' was captured by Davidson (@visitnmni 17 January 2016); 'the pain and loss is palpable' (@visitnmni 20 September 2015). One commentator welcomed the focus on the victim and their families, rather than on the perpetrator: 'the simple narrative on each is masterful – perfect match to paintings which are hugely evocative whilst avoiding judgment and blame' (@visitnmni 17 January 2016). For another it was 'a powerful tribute to victims and their friends and families on both sides of the community' (@visitnmni 17 January 2016). There was also a sense of a collective and shared experience, another visitor described the gallery as 'brimming with emotion' (@visitnmni 17 August 2015). Displayed together in one gallery the experience was as much about the visitor reaction as it was of the offering made by the artist. The visceral response of visitors was also documented in the visitor feedback gathered by the museum (NMNI 2016). Visitors wrote 'huge impact...tears flowed' (NMNI 2016:9); 'I had chills and shed tears the entire time' (NMNI 2016: 10); 'gut wrenching' (NMNI 2016:11); 'the personal stories left me speechless and silent' (NMNI 2016:11). Motivations for sharing experiences via social media will vary (Whiting and Williams 2013), the online social interaction evident here is a desire to be part of a collective that acknowledges the emotional experience of the exhibition.

Displayed in the Ulster Museum *Silent Testimony* benefitted from the profile and reach of a national institution. The location and added gravitas of a national museum shapes the experience of the exhibition. A national museum gallery is already a place apart from the everyday experience, where we perform differently and often with great awareness of our surroundings (see for instance chapters in Murawska Muthesius and Piotrowski 2015; Marstine 2006). The agency of the museum space, combined with the method of communicating the Troubles story, gives the encounter even greater impact. Journalists Brian Rowan and Eamon Maillie described the layers of the experience: that of being in a museum; experiencing fine art; and encountering this emotive representation of living with the impact of the Troubles. Rowan referred to himself as a person who knew little of art yet, in *Silent Testimony*, 'I immediately realised I was in a special place, a sacred space' (Rowan 2017). Here the location of the exhibition, the situation where the stories are told, added to the experience of the portraits and intensified the visitor response.

### *Narrative of Resilience and Recovery*

Through both projects a narrative emerges of the ordinary person who has experienced a life-changing tragedy and dealt with it in a way that should inspire us. Laura Haydon, one of the interviewees with *Stories from Silences*, describes the collection as a 'monument to heroism'. She writes of how her encounter with the victims overturned her naïve understanding of the impact of the Troubles, and describes 'as I listened to each of my 25 interviewees tell their story, the scales fell from my eyes. Under the seemingly 'normal' surface of life here, a stratum of pain, sorrow and loss lies only partially buried' (Haydon 2013:2). Embedded in the project are lessons for the spectator, the performance presented as a tool of transformation (Maguire 2015: 133-135). Haydon describes: 'despite suffering unimaginable trauma, they were remarkably free of bitterness or sectarianism'. Haydon also refers to the common experience of loss and suffering. 'Listened to anonymously', Haydon writes, 'it would be all but impossible to identify the religious or political allegiances of the people...such was the commonality of their experience' (Haydon 2012: 19). In *Silent Testimony* the Colin Davidson also refers to the 'common humanity' of his participants. There is no hierarchy here, the artist adds, 'in scale, intensity and intention the sitters are treated as equals' (Davidson 2015:13): each painting is the same size, painted in a consistent style, with a similar pose. This approach rejects any notion of the hierarchy of victimhood that has become established in Northern Ireland, arising from distinctions between 'innocent' and 'non-innocent victims' and the highly partisan nature of commemoration dominated by paramilitary organisations (Graham and Whelan 2007). Instead the intervention of an artist, who has some distance from established politicised commemoration communities, begins to strip away these associations. Furthermore, the region has been described as 'a patchwork of sectarian places' (Graham and Whelan 2007: 489) reflected and reinforced by commemorative sites. By bringing the intervention into the relative (although not absolute) neutrality of the white walls of the gallery space, impartiality is suggested.

Visitors to *Silent Testimony* commented on the apparent lack of bias: 'I like that no blame is apportioned for any of the murders'; 'art can be used as an unbiased medium of storytelling'; 'it was great that no nationality or religion was given in the bio'; and, 'effective ...without being political' (NMNI 2016: 16). However, in these two examples past experiences are being mined for contemporary purpose. Although *Silent Testimony* is first and foremost the product of an artist at work, Davidson presents it as an intervention in the political process in the region. Introducing the exhibition he writes of 'the hope for justice, the hope for answers' and that with the 'rhetoric of blame, histrionic and procrastination', the call for healing has not been heard. There is an agenda built into the projects, focusing around mediating peace building, and for both Davidson and WAVE, supporting families seeking greater acknowledgement. Reflecting on *Stories from Silence*, McKay suggests that a lot of hard lessons can be learnt from the accounts shared by individuals: 'lies told about victims, lack of accountability, issues of collusion, sectarianism and the social and psychological effects of trauma' (McKay 2014: 15). For Davidson, the artist, *Silent Testimony* grew out of the signing of the Good

Friday Agreement. Despite the many years since the atrocities, and the beginning of the peace process, it was the lack of healing that inspired his work. He writes ‘time doesn’t always heal’, people want more, the ‘noise of the peace process has swept us all along’ and still there are people looking for acknowledgement, ‘a hope for justice, hope for answers’ (NMNI 2015: 13).

Shared by the Ulster Museum, comments from visitors included those who said: ‘It’s hard to think art can affect someone so much, but it is truly touching. Art like this can help open eyes’. This commentator is suggesting that the artist, in their interpretation of the sitter, is enabling others to see the individuals presented in a new way. The interaction between the viewer and the painting is creating an opportunity for self-exploration. For another visitor to the exhibition the result was transformative, the visitor wrote: ‘Thank you for a profound and moving experience. Thank you for helping me to claim a little more of my humanity and compassion’ (@visitnmni 30 June 2015). Is it difficult to know exactly what a commentator might mean by a statement like this; however, it is clear they are willing to share, in a public forum, the need to establish greater understanding of what it is to live with traumatic bereavement. For some, remembrance was a concern with duty. A visitor commented: ‘I think it’s important for us all to reflect on the stories behind these tragic faces. We owe it to the next generation to never [again] have stories and victims like these’ (@visitnmni 24 January 2016).

Reflecting on the nature of encounter between the outsider (the interviewer, the artist and the viewer) and that of the victim or survivor of conflict, Haydon described herself as ‘an archaeologist of emotion’ (Haydon 2012:19). Meeting the individuals gives her an awareness of how they live with their losses: ‘under the seemingly “normal” surface of life, a stratum of pain, sorrow and loss lies only partially buried’ (Haydon 2012:19). The individual’s pain can be heard in the recordings collected and then produced for the online audience; we get the story of their loss. Although it is clearly not the case, the two projects discussed appear unmediated: the words come directly from the parent or a child of the deceased and in the paintings the indirect gaze of the sitter evokes authenticity and the simple labelling, with a few statements of fact, barely seem to involve a curator. The filmed witness testimonies, means the viewer can see and hear an account direct from the individual. The moving image gives the facial expressions that emphasize the pauses and pace of the spoken word. Maguire refers to ‘performing autobiography’ as one with challenges: the challenge of recalling painful events; the challenge of making those experiences tellable (selected and edited so that it becomes ‘a good story’); and the challenge of modulation, meaning the story becoming about contemporary conditions (Maguire 2015: 67-70). For the visitor this is overcome and the impact is maintained when ‘there is a materially present performer speaking the words, embodying the narrative voice’ (Maguire 2015: 72).

In *Stories from Silence* we are listening without the contributor knowing who is hearing their stories and how we might be reacting. In the *Silent Testimony* the thoughts and emotions of the sitters are imagined by the visitor viewing the work; we respond by concocting in our minds how we think the people may feel – a visitor to the Ulster Museum described the encounter as one of ‘seeing the mental damage made manifest’ (NMNI 2016: 9). When viewing any portrait Declan Long of the National College of Art and Design Dublin, says ‘we must respond to an implicit *demand* that arises in the encounter with others’ (Long 2015: 15). In *Silent Testimony* the demand is the remembrance campaign we are being invited to participate in. Colin Davidson, reflecting on his work, says he is presenting them in a ‘spirit of advocacy’ and makes a demand for ‘a space to be made in the public a sphere’ that will ‘accommodate narratives, facts and memories that have yet to receive due consideration’. Laura Haydon from *Stories from Silence* alludes to the divergence of opinion about recovering these stories. Some, she says, consider that such memories ‘should be covered over and allowed to fade away’; whereas, ‘others see it as a seam of something precious to be mined and then cherished’ (2013). Hackett and Rolston, in their analysis of storytelling projects in Northern Ireland, reflect on the agency of the storytelling in drawing the audience into their campaign for change. Citing Judith Herman’s work on



recovering from violence, they make the point that when we bear witness we ‘share the responsibility for restoring justice’ (Herman cited in Hackett and Rolston 2009: 360). However, despite the value of storytelling to the individuals as ‘opportunities for collective solidarity’, ‘the stories often go unacknowledged by the wider society’ (2009:355).

As we enter other people’s lives – listening to their tragedies or viewing their image represented by the artist we must negotiate the responsibility of that encounter; we must think as we consume the experience. WAVE Trauma Centre, the initiative that produced *Stories from Silence* and made the introductions between the sitters and Davidson for *Silent Testimony*, is campaigning for greater acknowledgement of living with the effects of the Troubles. The two projects discussed in this chapter demonstrate that despite such life changing losses, the bereaved needs to give, must perform their loss, in order to get the attention of the public. With each project the participants have transferred their life story from one context to another, ‘from the private experience into a public realm’ (Maguire 2015: 59). As observed by Maguire in relation to theatre, there is evidence in the public response of a form of intimacy arising ‘between the teller and the addressee’ (2015:60). Alongside this there is a risk with this exposure ‘the teller makes herself vulnerable to their incomprehension’ (Maguire 2015:60). In her analysis of how her literature students responded to reading works that provide accounts of the Holocaust, Megan Boler argues that although we engage in a process that enables us to imaginatively enter the lives of others the empathic response can be passive. Boler refers to literature that provides an ‘easy reading’ as an ‘abdication of responsibility’ leading to a ‘voyeuristic pleasure of listening and judging the other from a position of power/safe distance’ (Boler 1997:260). Boler favours self-reflective participation, or active empathy, which she presents as a commitment to a consideration of the relative position of power we are in and using that participation to challenge ourselves.

It is clear from the feedback that many visitors to *Silent Testimony* were emotionally moved and that included self-reflection. One visitor wrote ‘I was very moved to see their faces and read their stories. I was sorry for my own bigotry in the past. I hope for a better future’ (NMNI 2016: 10); and another, regarding how we might move on and forget what others suffer, ‘I feel ashamed’ (NMNI 2016:12). For these visitors, the exhibition overcomes the dehumanisation that is so common at times of conflict: ‘*us* and *them* mentality; the systematic cultivation of hatred’ (Zemblylas 2007: 207). Visitors to the Ulster Museum relished the representation of ‘ordinary people’ and ‘real stories real people’ (NMNI 2016: 19). In seeing the victims as a child, sibling or parent, those with less of a link with the Troubles made a connection. The distance between the Troubles victim, and the exhibition visitor is, momentarily at least, reduced. The projects aren’t just telling us what it means to live with the consequences of the Troubles, by the participation of the individuals the projects are *showing* us. In *Stories from Silence* see the filmed person carefully and painfully describing their experiences and the visitor to *Silent Testimony* extracts the pain from the portraits created by Davidson.

### **Some Conclusions and Reflections**

*Silent Testimony* is a portrait in oils painted by an artist who observes, interprets and comments through his work. While the work is being produced the story is the interaction between the subject and artist; later, when on display in the public gallery, it becomes that of the interactions between the subject, artist, viewer and the museum. *Stories from Silence* is a portrait in words: testimony spoken by the victim shared online. Both initiatives focus on bringing untold stories of the Troubles into the public domain – one the shared physical space of a national gallery and the other the virtual space of the web. In both cases the initiatives add value to the individual experience, by bringing the 18 faces together and now 64 stories in *Silent Testimony* – the collective story placed is forged and made a combination that is potentially more powerful than the individual record.

Northern Ireland doesn't have an agreed national process for remembering the victims and survivors of the Troubles. The two initiatives discussed in this chapter have consequence for how we however move forward in remembering the past. Firstly, this chapter demonstrates that memory projects focussing on the painful and lasting experiences during the Troubles can take place in a way that is both meaningful to victims and does not exacerbate division. Clearly there is a desire amongst survivors to tell their story – a wish to be heard. Furthermore, there is a public appetite for acknowledging this period as pivotal for understanding contemporary life in the region. Reflecting on the results of their evaluation NMNI concluded that they underestimated the 'scale and intensity of the response' to the exhibition and found that people are seeking 'an outlet to express their own feelings about the Troubles' (NMNI 2016:26). Secondly, given the complexity of the violence during the Troubles period, and the vexed issue of culpability, the adoption of a central, shared, and state-led project of remembrance and commemoration seems a long way off. That is not, however, a reason to avoid public remembrance entirely. The projects discussed in this chapter have pitched memory work in a way that people responded positively to. In response to Brian Rowan's online essay on *Silent Testimony*, a commentator focused upon art-based interventions as a positive approach to remembrance and as a means of recovery. Describing her visit, she explained 'what struck me was the restorative power of art', which is carefully undertaken. She compares the thoughtful processes of this form of acknowledgement, making and displaying art, as a stark contrast to the circumstances of their death:

The gunmen and bombers were random, callous, dismissive of the lives they shattered and glib with some of their apologies. The artist here was careful in his choice of victims, empathetic and willing to spend time and listen to the stories. Then he recaptured in his studio, lost humanity with such gentility and grace. I found it extremely moving, the best testimony in art to the tragedy of lost lives.<sup>2</sup>

For many visitors *Silent Testimony*, and this is echoed in *Stories from Silence*, avoided the trappings of sectarianism that have shaped the key features of dominant forms of memorialisation, which arguably, has resulted in people disengaging from commemorative practices. Instead the two projects considered in this chapter provide an alternative approach that participants and visitors find both moving and meaningful.

Through the formation of a memorial collection or archive, cultural memory is expressed, organised and mediated. These projects, engaging the visual arts and creative arts, are temporary interventions in spaces that seem more inclusive (a museum and online). On the surface at least, they appear relatively unmediated and free of the alienating sectarian associations of some other memory projects. However, as a third point, these projects are highly mediated and deliberately framed projects. Central to the agency and effect of the messages embedded in *Silent Testimony* and *Stories from Silence* is the suggestion of authenticity. In the expansive white space of the art gallery the beautifully produced portraits, accompanied by a simple label with bare facts and witness account, give an appearance of being unmediated. The impartiality of each of the projects is, of course, a fabrication – those who put the projects together were motivated by a desire to comment on the lack of acknowledgement of the Troubles victim. In his exploration of the formation of oral history archives in South Africa, Rassool presented 'the recovery of ordinary voices', and argues for the investigation of 'the sociology of their production, the politics of the research process, and the multiple layers of narration' (Rassool 2010: 83). Whether collecting and recording of the Troubles is undertaken by the 'official' channels of State or State-funded institutions, in the 'academy', or in community-based grass roots initiatives, the process is one of making history and the shaping, controlling and dissemination of knowledge.

Finally, there are different ways of evaluating the encounter established within each project. For both *Stories from Silence* and *Silent Testimony* the individuals were sharing their stories and placing themselves on public view for the first time. WAVE, a key party in both projects discussed in this chapter, identifies some potential risks to the individuals – reinforcing victimhood, that the art might be 'misused', the project might 'blur the

lines between myth and reality’ or perpetuating romanticised notions of the conflict (Jankowitz 2014: 17-18). While the individual profiled in the projects is potentially, once again, vulnerable, the viewer needs address their contribution to this encounter. In Northern Ireland there has been a suggestion ‘that bringing together individuals, from opposing groups, can reduce intergroup conflict’ (Hewstone et.al. 2006). If certain conditions are in place when that intergroup contact takes place, it is felt that positive effects emerge. By listening to the voices, and invading on their grief, we must address the consequences of our participation. WAVE sees storytelling as an important means of addressing the legacy of the past; however, in their words, ‘it is not a standalone mechanism’. As well as the role of storytelling as personal healing, Alan McBride has argued that perhaps even greater importance is the ‘impact of those who hear’ – making people aware of the ‘devastation violence causes’ (McBride 2014). For such proponents, the memory project is an opportunity to experience the lives of other people, and it is also an opportunity to foster new understanding.

The success of the exhibition shows that National Museums Northern Ireland pitched *Silent Testimony* in a way that was welcomed by many. It is clear from the visitor feedback gathered that the exhibition had a deeply moving impact on many people – and there does seem to be a desire for thoughtful remembrance and acknowledgement. It demonstrates a willingness in the cultural, arts and heritage sectors to explore these difficult histories in the galleries. Given the rise of a social justice agenda in museum studies, is there scope to bring more debate into the galleries? It has been argued that ‘museums should not avoid controversies but rather make them explicit’ (Lorente 2015: 119) – and arguably there is scope in an exhibition like *Silent Testimony* to encourage visitors to more actively address the consequences of their encounter – leading to a perceptible outcome of what is experienced in the galleries. However, *Stories from Silence* is a relatively low-profile project; and *Silent Testimony*, although an important exhibition, was a temporary intervention in the memorial landscape. These momentary opportunities for encounter and engagement are valuable but are not a substitute for sustained and much more revealing critical engagement with the Troubles at a national level.

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<sup>1</sup> The exact number depends on the period covered and how people count. For further information on this see the databases provided by CAIN <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/violence/deaths.htm>