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How to cite this publication

Please cite the final published version:

McQuaid, S.D. (2016). "Passive Archives or Storages for Action? Storytelling Projects in Northern Ireland." *Irish Political Studies*. Vol 31(1) pp. 63-85

Publication metadata

Title: *[Passive Archives or Storages for Action? Storytelling Projects in Northern Ireland]*
Author(s): *[Sara Dybris McQuaid]*
Journal: *[Irish Political Studies]*
DOI/Link: *[<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/07907184.2015.1126929>]*
Document version: Accepted manuscript [post-print]
Accepted date *[02.12.2015]*

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Passive Archives or Storages for Action? Storytelling Projects in Northern Ireland

Sara Dybris McQuaid¹

Abstract

In the absence of a political agreement on an overall mechanism for dealing with the past in Northern Ireland, storytelling has become a prevalent mode of addressing the legacy of violent conflict. Adopting a historiographic approach, this paper opens up two related tracks of examination: one exploring the (ideally) more comprehensive and egalitarian approach to accessing the past found in storytelling projects, understood as forms of oral history; and the other considering the process of those stories being made into records, and the dynamics of the archive. Drawing on a qualitative study of two story-telling projects in Northern Ireland, the paper argues that the stories produced there are not only subjective accounts of the past and thus sources for studies of life during conflict, but are also significantly informed by contemporary policy and funding frameworks and thus are sources for the study of the present peace process. The contested realm in which both storytelling projects and archives operate condition how they are funded, assembled, described, opened and maintained in the process of which some stories may be privileged and others marginalised or subsumed (Brown 2013). Adopting the idea that storytelling as a form of ‘witnessing’ is also an ethico-political act (Kurasawa 2009), the paper discusses what kind of discourses may be empowered by the online maintenance, and instant accessibility of memory in oral history archives. Crucially, the paper considers storytelling as a conduit for remembering, which is at once shaped by the absence of policies and legal frameworks, but also shapes subsequent policies to deal with the past as can be seen in the latest political accord, which includes it as a key approach.

Keywords: Northern Ireland, Storytelling, Oral History, Peace Process

Introduction:

Storytelling has emerged as one of the main forms of dealing with the violent past in Northern Ireland. There are multiple and intertwined explanations for why this is the case: at the level of individual security, the reduction of violence has made it more possible to speak out; at the level of policy, the very absence of an overarching agreement

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on how to deal with the past, means that local level initiatives on telling, listening to and sharing stories from the conflict have acted to fill this policy gap; in technological terms, it is ever more easy to record, store and disseminate stories; and in monetary terms, funding for this particular approach to negotiating the legacy of conflict increased in the years 2007-2013 through EU funding. In broader peace-building terms, storytelling seems to combine an acceptable form of dealing with the past with the new and popular paradigm of conflict resolution that is the local turn (HTR 2006, MacGinty 2011, MacGinty & Richmond, 2013). From the outset, then, the stories collected and archived are sources for understanding both the past in the shape of individual accounts of life during conflict and the present in the shape of the peace process itself.

The practice of storytelling as a form of peace-building has taken many different shapes and been motivated in various ways. For some projects the main objective is to facilitate processes of catharsis and healing for individuals and communities, for others it is about establishing, sharing and restoring lines of communication across existing divides. Some include efforts to document events and experiences for the rectification or amplification of the historical record, while others try to integrate the storytelling practices with efforts to achieve forms of legal justice (Kelly, 2005). While all these projects are arguably response sites to the same overall conflict in and over Northern Ireland, they have been driven by very different actors, been spoken from very different localities and to very different concerns. Methodologically, they have organised the telling of stories in diverse ways, both in terms of the context of articulation (i.e. individually or in groups as well as at different temporal distances), and in establishing narrative frames (i.e. as individual life stories or as ‘themed’ memories in relation to

periods, places, peoples or events). However, in the fluid, yet inflexible landscape of ‘post-conflict Northern Ireland’, all these projects are at once processes and products, and the narratives that they are conduits for can be both politicised and depoliticised.

In this paper I reflect on the potentials and pitfalls of storytelling and the archives produced by storytelling projects, in relation to peacebuilding in Northern Ireland.

Empirically, I draw on two projects that are similar in the sense that they are both funded by the Special EU Programmes Body/PEACE III² and explicitly try to transcend a geographical boundary, whilst at the same time also very different in their methodology, final products and narrative templates. I juxtapose these projects with Kurusawa’s notion of “bearing witness” (2009) to examine the dynamics of processes and products arising from storytelling as devices for dealing with the past, the forms of witnessing enabled by storytelling and the potential of the archives built through these processes in providing storages for action.

The article now turns to a consideration of the use of storytelling in coming to terms with the past both in more general terms and in the specific context of Northern Ireland. In this, it argues that the dynamics of storytelling are characterized both by negotiating the lack of a political and policy framework for dealing with the past and the overwhelming focus on reconciliation inherent in the funding opportunities for the projects. The article then introduces Kurusawa’s notion of “bearing witness” (2009) as a framework for analysing two concrete storytelling projects, namely the ‘5 decades’ and

² The SEUPB is the Special EU Programmes Body managing the programmes PEACE I, II, III, VI. These are part-funded by the European Union with further national contributions through its Structural Funds programme. The full title of PEACE III is ‘EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border Region of Ireland.’ It covered the period 2007-2013.

‘Border Lives’ projects. These projects are analysed both as processes (i.e. how are the individual stories elicited and shared?) and as products (i.e. what sorts of narratives of the past are presented and how are they made accessible?). Returning to Kurusawa, the article then uses his witnessing framework to structure a discussion of some wider implications of the projects, before presenting a brief conclusion.

Storytelling archives: Recording stories for peace

In 2002, the organisation ‘Healing Through Remembering’ conducted a study, which found that the option of using storytelling and oral history as conduits for handling the legacy of conflict received widespread popular support. Storytelling was conceived to offer the dual benefits of working as a vehicle for catharsis for individuals, as well as function to establish a record of individual stories. This record would in turn enable society to examine ‘the wealth of meanings and learning connected to the conflict’ (HTR, 2002). Crucially, preserving a myriad of narratives would ensure that dominant narratives emerging over time, could be continuously challenged. HTR defined storytelling initiatives as: ‘A project or process which allows reflection, expression, listening, and possible collection of personal, communal and institutional stories related to the conflict in and over Northern Ireland’. Over 70 storytelling projects matching this definition have been launched and recorded (Kelly, forthcoming).

There is an extensive and diverse transnational literature on storytelling as a device for meaning-making, identity construction, and the politics of recognition. Concentrating on storytelling in relation to conflict and conflict transformation, we may observe how it is celebrated for ‘its authenticity, its passion, and its capacity to inspire

not just empathy but action' (Polletta 2006); how people communicate, confess, forgive and reconcile in the form of stories (Botman & Peterson 1996: 37); and at the same time how storytelling is a form of cultural production, where individual meaning-making can become conflated with 'constructive storytelling' in which ideals of mutual recognition and dialogue are guiding principles (cf. Senehi, 2002). Further, as the anthropologist Michael Jackson observes, 'storytelling events offer insights into the ways that people evaluate, discuss and negotiate social and ethical strategies for making communal life viable in war as well as in peace' (2005: 355). In the context of Northern Ireland, there has been important reflection on storytelling as a process of healing and coming to terms with the past, including the processes of community engagement, empowerment and authorship in oral history as 'action research' (Lundy & McGovern, 2006, Hackett & Rolston, 2009), and in more general terms oral history is increasingly used in transitional justice (Thomson, 2007, Gready, 2011). What is missing, in the context of Northern Ireland, is perhaps more explicitly critical analyses of the processes of making these stories into records and dynamic consideration of their archives (and archivists) both in the context of particular practical, economic, social, cultural and political constraints. (Brown 2013) but also in terms of the subsequent distribution of stories emanating from such projects.

Concerted efforts are now made to preserve the disparate contributions of oral history and storytelling projects, in comprehensive archives such as the 'Accounts of the Conflict' at the University of Ulster. Indeed, the latest political agreement (which has yet to be implemented) on how to negotiate the legacy of conflict includes the setting up of an oral history archive 'to provide a central place to share experiences and narratives

related to the Troubles' (Stormont House Agreement 2014). Even if this latest agreement does not include any specific considerations about the role of historians in relation to such archives, as historians we need to reflect further on historical methodologies and critical source analysis in this context. And we must reflect on this both in relation to the sourcing of stories and the creation and dynamics of archives, as stories become records. This is particularly relevant in thinking about how to extract, critically evaluate, contextualise and interpret memories and histories as part of peace-building processes, including how to move from the micro level of stories to the macro level of histories.

Archives of this kind are never just passive storages of individual narratives, but crucially also sites where the politics of inclusion and exclusion in public remembrance and official narrative are made and negotiated (Cook 1997 cited in Jacobson , Punzalan, Hedstrøm, 2013:221).

Any archive expands the temporal and spatial range of communication (Foote 1990), but openly accessible online archives widen this scope further still. Such 'online lives' further blur the distinction between communicative and cultural memory (J. Assman 2011), between private and public, as well as questions of authorship.

As the projects under consideration here are not related to an official process of truth recovery the archives that they form part of are inherently different from those established in other, more official 'post-conflict' processes. It has been argued that archiving is a third space between forgetting and remembering, and this indeterminate status allows for a fluid negotiation between function and storage memory (A. Assman 2011). The archives under consideration here are decisively not only for future use but

also for immediate use as they are shared publicly and published online. In this unprotected space, there are obvious limits to the stories that may be told and deposited.

The politics of storytelling in Northern Ireland

Personal narratives are often considered private ‘micro-truths’ that may stand in opposition to broader historical and social ‘macro-truths’ (Chapman & Ball 2001). This particular quality goes some way in explaining why storytelling projects have been the least contentious approach to dealing with the past in Northern Ireland (HTR 2006). Short of broad public and political agreement on causes and consequences of the conflict, plural individual life stories can be told, heard and indeed encouraged, as long as these processes are not tied directly to legal actions or official accounts of conflict. On the one hand, such individualising of accounts is perhaps a positive in group conflicts, where individuals are all too often collapsed into communities with singular narratives. In Northern Ireland, the political dimension of communal memories is compounded by the fact that collective identities are also institutionalised in the consociational design of political structures that posit communities rather than individuals as the fundamental political units in society (Taylor, 2009).

The fact that many of the storytelling projects are concerned with engaging, restoring and hosting voices that have been silent and silenced during the conflict and the peace process, means that the dominant narratives of political and paramilitary elites are tentatively challenged by other voices raised and organised according to alternative principles: gender, age, class, occupation, race, location. In this, the projects have the

potential of fostering what Arendt calls a form of 'subjective-in-between' that may reconcile fields of experience belonging to us and others (Arendt 1958).

In Northern Ireland, many storytelling projects were not least conceived to build positive relations at the local level and reconcile communities. This is perhaps particularly true of projects that are funded through Peace III. In Peace III there was a renewed emphasis on reconciliation as defined by Hamber and Kelly (2004) and projects were selected on the basis of meeting criteria set out in that definition as well as measured according to a new impact framework called Aid for Peace (SEUPB 2013). Significantly, the Northern Ireland Government itself did not begin to conceptualise strategies of reconciliation until they launched 'Together: Building a United Community Strategy' (OFMDFM, 2013), leaving work on reconciliation up until that point largely without political leadership.

By the same token, storytelling projects have also had to navigate in the absence of overarching frameworks on the legal status of the past, including different forms of recording and documenting it.

While it is evidently true that such frameworks, even when they exist to begin with, are always subject to change (as happened in the case of the Stasi archives that were opened after the fall of the Berlin wall), the fact that this is an ongoing political and public negotiation in Northern Ireland means that the scope of stories and storages is severely circumscribed. Already, the fate of the Belfast Project at Boston College (THE 2014) has impacted the narrative mode of storytelling in terms of individualising, anonymising, and depoliticising accounts of conflict instead of allowing for the formation and deposit of potential 'counter memories', challenging official scripts. (cf. Hackett and

Rolston 2009) This may well have decisive consequences for the kinds of narrative truths people want to share in such projects and so for the kinds of justice (historical or otherwise) they can aspire to as a result. In this respect the firm focus on ‘reconciling communities’ and ‘build[ing] positive relations at the local level’ in the SEUPB PEACE III call, stipulates another significant boundary to be negotiated in terms of what should be remembered and how micro-narratives can be articulated and weave their way into official macro-discourses.

Individualising and depoliticising narratives obviously seals off critique, not just of the individual account but of the broader structures in which they are embedded and held erect. However, the personal is of course also political, and as Hannah Arendt argues storytelling can be a channel through which private impressions and emotions are transformed, deprivatised and deindividualised (1958:50). This transformation, however, relies on others ‘who see what we see, and hear what we hear’ (ibid) – a public realm, in which the story can appear.

Thus in bridging the private-public divide we can see that storytelling projects in Northern Ireland encounter at least three problems: 1) In order to be intelligible, stories may on the one hand have to align to, reinforce and entrench dominant narratives rather than challenge and resist them, and on the other they may have to conform to ‘constructive storytelling’ to align with paradigms of reconciliation; 2) Nobody may listen to or activate the stories, in which case the dignity of recognition and the capacity to act and impact can appear elusive; 3) In the absence of a settled legal framework, there are limits to what can be publicly shared as people are literally worried that stories might be held up in court. This clearly has fundamental implications for the possibilities of

constructing a historical account by preserving a plurality of voices from the past.

Methodologically, it also has serious implications for present and future historians, who are trying to find ways in which to critically evaluate and corroborate the source material emerging from these projects.

Crucially, leveraging an understanding of the interpellation between transnational, national and local contexts and discourses must be part of investigating the dynamics of storytelling projects and evaluating the stories in Northern Ireland. Testimonial discourses are by no means singularly driven by individuals or local communities, but also form part of a transnational and externally-driven circuit of actors. This is true in terms of ‘best practice’ where inspiration is sought from international projects and archives, but also in terms of funding and policy contexts as described above, as well as cosmopolitan languages of ‘coming to terms with’ and ‘reconciliation’.

Storytelling as “bearing witness”

When storytelling is recorded and collected, it is not simply for negotiating the past in the present, but also for negotiating the past in the future. As a mechanism for conflict resolution, storytelling importantly functions as a conduit between the private and the public and may be considered not just as a practice that bestows order and coherence on events for the individual, but also as a form of ‘bearing witness’ (Kurasawa 2009) contributing to the thick description of significant events affecting communities and societies.

As soon as stories are documented and thus made into records, we may conceive of them as a form of bearing witness. In his article ‘Message in a bottle: Bearing Witness

as a Transnational Practice' Akira Kurusawa sets out to theorize the socio-cultural practices that are constitutive of 'bearing witness' in the aftermath of mass atrocities (2009: 94). His concern is to investigate the dialectics between obstacles that must be navigated in order to bear witness, and the tasks that must be performed for witnessing to succeed. Whilst his study is at a different scale to this study, the basic problems and solutions that he identifies, resonate at many levels: How to give voice to suffering against silence; how to enable interpretation against incomprehensibility; how to cultivate empathy against indifference; how to remember against forgetting; how to prevent against repetition (2009:95).

In this dialectical framework, we may conceive of remembering, narrating, recording and archiving stories in Northern Ireland as ethico-political acts of witnessing life during conflict. Whilst Kurusawa is chiefly interested in the act of bearing witness as a transnational form of ethico-political labour, this article is particularly interested in scenarios where others (to be moved by narratives) are not exactly outsiders and where policy frameworks are in flux. Kurusawa's framework thus provides a useful perspective on storytelling in Northern Ireland, but his approach also highlights the ways in which any process of bearing witness is at once aimed at the past, the present and the future.

So, the questions that may be drawn from Kurusawa's work, in an analysis of storytelling projects in Northern Ireland may at a very basic level be: how do storytelling projects and subsequent archives amount to a form of bearing witness? What forms of witnessing can they offer? Can storytelling can inculcate empathy? Whether stories together amount to a thick description of what life was like, in order to make it comprehensible – also for spatial, temporal and politico-cultural others? And further,

whether the projects provide spaces of ‘in-betweenness’, in the sense that we can confront experiential alterity in stories?

In less insular terms, we may ask: What are the transnational dimensions to the projects, both as processes and products? These questions are of course entwined with the processes and contexts in which stories have been enabled as well as the results they have produced. I use them to guide my readings of the two empirical cases, I discuss presently.

Storytelling as processes and products:

Turning to the two storytelling cases, I want to engage with them as both processes and products. In each case, the introductions to the projects, describing their rationale, methodology and experiences in creating a space for telling and listening, will be followed by a sample analysis of the narratives they give rise to in terms of characters, chronology and plot. These are of course informed by the rationale and methodology deployed, but are also constitutive of the final products and outputs. Subsequently, I discuss these outputs in the broader context of the archives of conflict and peace-building they now form part of.

The 5 Decades Project⁴

Forthspring is an inter-community group, situated in the Springfield/Woodvale area, literally part of a so-called ‘peace-line’. Perched between the Shankill and the Falls and, as such, part of a boundary marker, the community group is well placed to both breach

⁴ This description and analysis is based on interviews with the project management, project reports for the funding body, SEUPB, the Forthspring Website, the booklet produced and the six interviews that have been made public in their entirety on the ‘Accounts of the Conflict’ website.

and bridge social and physical boundaries. Originally a Methodist church, Forthspring has, as expressed on their website ‘worked since 1997 to build relationships between the neighbouring Protestant and Catholic communities.’ (website). Under Peace III Forthspring applied for funding for the dual purposes of gathering the stories of people who lived through the conflict from the 1960s onwards and to create a space where such stories could be shared, if not agreed. In this the project was at once about product and process. Assuming that a key driver of continued animosities were exclusive versions of conflict and aggression, the sharing of stories was thought to challenge and maybe even transform singular interpretations. The rationale of the storytelling project was thus to ‘set out with the objective of acting as a conduit for the narration and hearing of stories’, concluding ‘that the humanity can be found in the detail of individual stories’ (Forthspring 2014:4). I will return to the implications of this statement, both in terms of the dynamics between micro- and macro-level narratives and interpellations of individual and collective memory.

Initially, Forthspring ran pilots to gauge local interest and engagement. Once it had been established that there was sufficient willingness and confidence in the storytelling approach, funding was secured, and posters and pamphlets were produced and distributed to local libraries, community groups, churches, and residential homes to encourage participation. Through this outreach and word of mouth, close to 150 people took part in the project. A number of part-time ‘facilitators’ received initial training in guiding the storytelling sessions, drawing in part on theories and practices from oral history and counselling.

Situated on an interface, a key consideration for the project managers was to make people feel safe enough to talk. This often meant gathering people in existing, and mostly single-identity groups for collective sessions. These group conversations would then be followed by sessions in larger and mixed groups and by individual recordings, if people felt comfortable doing that. The group sessions were all facilitated, and the individual recordings were carried out on a one-to-one basis. Transcriptions of the interviews were subject to approval from each interviewee and anonymised before they were used in the main outcomes of the project: a touring exhibition which worked as an ‘inter-generational roadshow’ and a publication (‘Talking about the Troubles: the 5 Decades Project’), which grouped excerpts of interviews together in chapters of decades. Six of the interviews have since been made part of the Accounts of the Conflict digital archive, where longer audio files are available as well as accompanying transcripts.

Narrative templates: Chronologies, characters and plots

Rather than adopting a ‘life story’ approach where individuals relay the subjective essence of their entire life in chronological fashion, the project used a more episodic approach, organising and prompting memories according to the associative power of decades. In many ways this offers a potential multidirectional engagement with life during conflict, as decades conjure up their own transnational memories signposted by global upheaval and cultural products, as well as their more local manifestations. In this context, the ‘summer of 69’ can be about more than the outbreak of conflict and the arrival of British Troops: It can also be about a far-reaching cultural revolution and the concomitant changes to everyday life, and perhaps most interestingly, about the dynamics

between these local and transnational courses of events and experiences - of the everyday and the extraordinary.

While there was a conscious choice in organising accounts according to decades rather than the usual pivotal turning points of conflict, these still proved instrumental in guiding the sessions. When interviewees needed prompting or their memories jogged, facilitators would often turn to the 'CAIN Chronology of the Conflict'. This chronology comprises the 'major security incidents', 'political developments', 'policy initiatives', and 'economic matters'⁵

In this respect, narratives could remain path-dependent in memorializing or crystallising around the same events. Clearly, a project that engages directly with memories of conflict also needs to address those events without which a history of the conflict would be incomplete, but in reflecting memories through iconic events like soldiers coming onto the streets of Belfast, it risks repeating and reifying these events as paramount not just in sequencing history, but also in scaffolding autobiographical memory.

However, even if the chronology sometimes echoed established orderings of events, new characters and plots emerged between the usual dividing lines: More women than men participated in the project. This opened up to stories otherwise marginalised by the firm focus on paramilitary and political actors in public and official discourses, where women are often (made) inconspicuous. Less established plots appeared in the relative back-grounding of conflict, as many accounts told of the acts of "everyday peace" during conflict (cf MacGinty 2014).

⁵ The chronology can be accessed here: <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/othelem/chron.htm>

The sectarian geography of Belfast, particularly, has made mobility an object of severe constriction. Nowhere is this more axiomatic than along the interface. Accordingly, mobility emerges as a topic in many of the interviews (giving rides, sharing rides, fear of being taken for a terminal ride). One interviewee recalls how a friend was helped cross the line:

She was working in the Royal. When she got up to the gates then, they would have been closed – she never knew if they were going to be closed or not, so she just always had to assume that they'd be closed. So she had to get the bus down into town and then a bus up the Shankill Road. So it put an hour on her working day really, you know? Whereas if she'd been able to go through the gate, you know, ten minutes it would have taken to walk up the road here. And I happened to say to her that I knew Paddy and May who lived in the house there, you know, they lived in the house beside Forthspring and I took her round one night and introduced her to them. [Xxxxx.] But the back of their house was on the other side of the peace line, so they had an entrance that took you out into Workman Avenue, so they said to Sandra, "Certainly, no problem", so she used to walk up, if the gate was locked, wrapped Paddy and May's door and they took her through the house and through the back door and out into Workman Avenue [Laughter] It's amazing, like, you know. It's a bit like Forthspring itself; you know the front of it is on one side of the peace line and the back of it on the other. It literally straddles the peace line.

In this anecdote, the interface appears as an important contact zone, and not just of the violent kind. Furthermore, the workplace is presented as a space where connections could be mixed and exchanged. Importantly, women appeared to be at work and not just at home during conflict. The conventional storyline of conflict and employment often

engages heavy industry and religious discrimination in a predominantly male workforce, frequently in the shipyards. However, 'Decades' also elicits stories about what it was like for women working in the mills during the conflict. One of these stories particularly complicates received narratives about how Northern Ireland was brought to a complete standstill during the Ulster Worker's Council strike in 1974. A woman from a protestant background recounts:

That's right. I worked through the strike because we needed the money. I'm just the type of person that nobody tells me what to do and my husband was the same – he went to work too. We both went to work and I think somebody said something in the strike* - a fellow that was in it. I wasn't worried about what they said. I was going to my work and a lot of people did – not just me. There was a lot of people who went to the Blackstaff at that time and they had to go through Blackmountain* estate and they all came to work. But nobody ever did anything to the house because of us going.

The Blackstaff Mill, where she worked, also appears in the interview as a mixed space where different experiences of conflict could be shared as '[W]e all had to work for a living so anybody's problems was everybody's problem [...]'.

These stories not only nuance discussions about singular interpretations of historical events or the blurring of boundaries, they also inform ongoing discussions in human geography about gender, politics and mobility.

Doing a storytelling project on an interface is to capture a particularly fraught experience of conflict. Even if people are not always direct victims of violence they are

enveloped in, and permanently anticipating violence. The 'decades' project certainly augments our understanding of how such boundaries are perceived, negotiated and navigated as part of everyday lives during extraordinary circumstances. It also reminds us that space is not just constructed as sectarian, but also fundamentally gendered. It has been argued that women's greater mobility in the conflict (and West Belfast in particular) has flown from their identities being depoliticised as they were defined by, and relegated to the home. Indeed, that women may move more freely than men because they do not pose a threat in the public space (i.e. Dowler 2001). However, depoliticisation extends far beyond housewives, as women who work seemingly enjoy the same 'freedom' of being incognito. Traditional distinctions between private and public spheres are in this respect fortified around the conception of the public sphere always as the political (and perhaps paramilitary) sphere and women somehow stuck in a pre-political space. (cf Butler, 2011)

In the above, I have already touched on the constraints on memory in a fluid policy context. I have also briefly alluded to the tensions between individual and collective memory immanent in storytelling projects. Furthermore, as opposed to ordinary documents that are produced organically in connection with the actions and transactions that gave rise to them, oral histories and storytelling projects are (to an extent) solicited from the outside, constructed explicitly to inform a third party or for posterity. As such they are not contemporary with the events that they relate to (Wallot & Fortier, 1998: 365-66).

Rather than worry at the reliability memory as a source for history, I here follow oral historians, who argue that it is precisely the so-called unreliability of memory that is its strength, in that 'the subjectivity of memory provides clues not only about the

meanings of historical experience, but also about the relationships between past and present, [...] and between individual and collective memory.’ (Thomson 2006: 54). As such the stories that emerge are at once about past subjective experience as well as contemporary cognitive and practical templates. However, this also prompts us to recognise that storytelling projects are much more than conduits for individual accounts of life during conflict as these accounts are themselves shaped by the context and (not least) the company of articulation. Considering how much of the conflict has been mythologised, how strong community and communal memory is in constructing identities and how evocative the urban landscape (here in the shape of the interface) is in bringing levels of remembering together to material effect, it is fair to wonder whether the relationship between autobiographical, embodied memory and external material signs is so closely entwined that the boundary between individual and collective memory is difficult to draw (cf. Assman 2008: 50)? Indeed, Maurice Halbwachs, the sociologist who first coined the term ‘collective memory,’ discussed how much memory relies on existing groups of various kinds (families, religious communities, regions, professions) for providing the framework or language through which subjects recall their past (1992 [1925]).

In practical terms, Decades often brought participants in as existing groups and social networks, carrying with them an already demarcated relevant realm of remembrance and available languages for the individual narratives. This procedure of reaching out to groups was crucially about making people feel comfortable and safe enough to tell their stories under the circumstances, but arguably also worked in structuring the content.

Facilitators as editors

In oral history, the role of the interviewer is of pivotal importance. This is obviously the case in terms of professional guidelines pertaining to ethics, principles and standards, but it is also an important role to consider in relation to the co-construction of accounts. Oral historian Valerie Yow writes about how certain themes and critical accounts might be downplayed or even omitted in the shape of ‘good-will advocacy’ on the part of the oral historian (1995), and how important it is for the oral historian to have a reflective practice which is alert to her own subjectivity in framing interviews and interpreting their meaning (1997). When projects are established with specific objectives tied to their funding, we should of course also be alert to this dynamic and its power in propelling some accounts to the top.

In Forthspring, the people conducting the interviews, did not consider themselves oral history interviewers as much as storytelling facilitators. This makes sense in so far as they were not historians trying to corroborate the stories told or weave together plural memories into singular accounts. The project did not aim to add the stories up to a larger structural analysis, narrative nor critique of the overall conflict. However, it is clear from the interviews available in the Accounts of the Conflict archive, that facilitating is also an intervention that must be accounted for. The method of having people telling and retelling their stories (first in single identity groups, then possibly in mixed groups and in individual interviews) makes it possible for facilitators to seek and single out stories of particular interest to be repeated, recorded and archived. I have already touched upon the practice of facilitators using chronologies and other materials to prompt the participants’

memories, but it is worth further noting how certain stories are encouraged in the recorded interviews as in the instance of ‘Pam’s story’ where the interviewer says:

Interviewer: You told me that you... you actually told a number of people at that talking of the troubles meeting, that you had what you considered to be a very cross-community childhood – the Shankill, Kashmir street...

Interviewee: That’s right.

Interviewer: The interesting thing, I think the contrast for you was that your husband didn’t really grow up in any Catholic premise at all, actually.

The interviewee then goes on to reiterate the story along the lines drawn up. The crucial point here is, of course, that a specific relevant realm of remembrance is pointed out. A narrative on the one hand of cross-community interaction and shared space and on the other a much more segregated existence literally just streets away. Remembering that the ‘5 Decades’ project is funded with a view to ‘Reconciling Communities,’ it stands to reason that the stories elicited centre more firmly around cross community engagement than just the individual contributor. In this sense, we may think of the facilitators as editors of the narratives gathered within the ‘5 decades’ framework, guiding, prompting and framing the stories told by the participants. This in turn foregrounds the ways in which the stories are not simple accounts of the past, but also speak directly to the issues of interest for the contemporary peace process and imaginings of a shared society.

Border Lives project⁶

Border Lives is a storytelling project delivered by the organization Tyrone Donegal Partnership (TDP). Established in 1996 TDP describes itself as a ‘cross-border, not-for-profit organisation which aims to contribute to the improvement of the social and economic conditions, primarily in the counties of Tyrone and Donegal but also in adjacent Fermanagh, Sligo and Leitrim.’ TDP is deeply embedded in the economic support structures of the peace process, particularly those endowed to repair, restore and regenerate border areas. Indeed, TDP commenced as an Integrated Partnership to deliver the International Fund for Ireland⁷ Wider Horizons Programmes and has further engaged with a wide range of EU-funded programmes, from the Special European Union Programmes Body for Peace and Reconciliation to the EU Interreg II and III programmes.

In 2014, the organisation produced six short films of each 30 mins, ‘capturing people’s life and experience along the border region between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland during the years of “The Troubles” and right up to the present day.’ This particular project was funded by the European Union’s Peace III programme (2007-2013). The ambition was to tell ‘the ‘everyday’ stories of how people adapted their daily lives and routine amidst the violence, fear, isolation, and uncertainty of the conflict but also show the humour, friendships, and community spirit that existed.’ The project is

⁶ Whereas the analysis of the ‘5 Decades’ project is based on a wider range of ‘back office’ materials concerning the process of the project as well as the products themselves, this description and analysis is based exclusively on a ‘closed circuit’ reading of the information and materials that are made available on the ‘Border Lives’ website. www.borderlives.eu

⁷ ‘The International Fund for Ireland was established as an independent international organisation by the British and Irish Governments in 1986. With contributions from the United States of America, the European Union, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, the total resources committed to the Fund to date amount to £713m / €895m, funding over 5,800 projects across the island of Ireland.’ <http://www.internationalfundforireland.com/about-the-fund>

inherently about both preservation and outreach as it further aims ‘to ensure that the stories and experiences of those living in the border region during conflict, are captured, replicated and shared in innovative ways and accessible to both new and wider audiences locally, regionally and internationally.’ Each of the films deal with a particular border area: ‘The Forgotten Hills’ (South Armagh), ‘The Fews’ (Armagh), ‘Completely isolated’ (Monaghan), ‘The Far West’ (Fermanagh), ‘The Derg, The Finn and The Mourne’ (Tyrone), ‘The other Laggan’ (LondonDerry). In total, 90 people are featured in the six films, out of these around 25 people are interviewed at length. On the website, 18 of these interviews are made available as extended clips directly below the respective films they appear in. Going only by the information available on the website, we know very little of how people were selected and engaged to take part in the interviews and the films, making it difficult to gauge the level of ‘editing’ involved in producing these accounts.

However, in addition to the films themselves, there is a separate eLearning component to the project called ‘Border Lives Rethink’. The purpose of ‘Border Lives Rethink is:

‘[T]o demonstrate and underline the importance of narrative and storytelling as a tool for peace-building after conflict. It is designed to encourage people to actively listen and respond to the stories of people who lived on or near the Irish border between 1969 and 1998 and to consider the importance of sharing this both with people who lived through the events and those who have been born since.’

The eLearning project consists of four modules: ‘Restart’, ‘Remembering’, ‘Renewal’ and ‘Reconstruction’. Using excerpts from the films, the modules facilitate discussions on the

role of narrative in conflict and conflict resolution, the significance of borders, and the construction and reconstruction of identities on the border. In the case of *Border Lives*, the emphasis is arguably on the product produced by storytelling, rather than the process of storytelling itself. This is delivered through a very particular vision for how to engage the product, (the website, the films, the eLearning modules) in processes of understanding (border) lives in conflict. This again suggests that the stories have been explicitly framed to fit the mode of the contemporary peace process.

Narrative templates

Like the '5 Decades' project, 'Border Lives' grapples with the interactions of geographical and cognitive boundaries as well as with activities that seal off or permeate these boundaries. However, where '5 Decades' articulates stories around an imaginary and physical boundary, 'Border Lives' is also negotiating a boundary in the legal sense of bridging two separate jurisdictions. The break up of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and the subsequent partition of Ireland during the period 1920-22 mean that the experience of conflict has been particularly fractured in what became the border areas, complicated by multidirectional shifts in belonging. On the website, 'Border Lives' offers a timeline, or in our terms, a chronology, which is conceptualized around the border, starting with partition. This chronology inspires focal points such as opening and closing of border roads and the crumbling of the railway network; customs posts, trade wars and smuggling; IRA border campaigns and security policies. It may be argued that new chronologies – in selecting alternative focal points – allow for new periodizations of histories where things end up standing differently in relation to each other. In this respect,

'Border Lives' is at once old school and new school. Old school in the sense of configuring the dynamics of conflict around partition, and new school in the sense of approaching this history from below – with the potential of offering more of a social history and less of a political history. However, the chronology is largely overwritten by the site-specific approach of the films, where people speak first and foremost to a sense of place, rather than a sense of time. In general, transformative narratives emerge in the context of the landscape itself, with several interviewees expressing hopes that it can now be perceived for its natural beauty rather than the violence inscribed on it. To the extent that there is a before and an after, it is mostly situated in relation to the usual markers of time in the conflict, where a number of people speak to the impact of violence on life in general and community relationships in particular.

Giving voice to people in the border areas serves to publicize mundane rural themes but in a specific context of defending, contesting and transcending a boundary. In 1983, John Whyte wrote about 'the Permeability of the United Kingdom-Irish Border' suggesting that the border was ignored by a number of civil society organisations, particularly by churches and church-related organizations as well as associations established before partition. This transcending dynamic of civil society also comes across in the six films with a strong emphasis on currently active community groups. In more visceral narratives, the 'rural war' between the IRA and the British crown forces are borne out in stories about militarization, harassment, executed victims dumped on border roads, rural interfaces, deteriorating relationships between neighbours and communities and heightened fear and insecurity among those living on isolated farms. In this, the figure of a Protestant population in decline looms large. In numerical terms this is

perhaps most vividly demonstrated in South Armagh, where the population identifying as Protestant fell from 19% to only 1% in the period 1971-1991 (Murtagh 1999).

The border areas are fertile soil for expanding our understanding of site specific memories of the conflict that have hitherto been privatized and invisible in broader historical discourses. For instance, Graham Dawson suggests that although the ‘fate of Southern Unionists’ is a central theme in ‘Orange’ cultural memory, the history of the Protestant population in the ‘lost counties’ of Ulster (Monaghan, Donegal and Cavan) is still to be written (Dawson 2007: 213). Some of the films do engage the Protestant experience of living in the border counties, - this is particularly true of ‘The Few’s’ (Armagh), where a number of people active in the Loyal Orders describe their sense of community and belonging, but also their sense of being at the edge of the union. Here, demographic changes during the troubles (often moving from a Protestant majority to a Catholic majority in the towns of Armagh) are described in combative metaphors. Towns are described as the ‘next to fall’ and the need to ‘draw the line’ and ‘hold our ground’ are expressed (David Alexander/ The Few’s). In the film ‘Completely Isolated’, the migration of Protestants from Monaghan to Fermanagh after partition is dealt with. However, this experience is articulated by local Monaghan historian Brian Mac Domhnaill, rather than by people with embodied, or even social or cultural memory of the experience. As such, the films do not fully capture the voices and stories that might fill the gap Dawson has pointed to. I will return to this point below.

The relatively low numbers of Protestants obviously have consequences for the breadth of stories about shared space. Many stories resemble the study Rosemary Harris did in the early 1950s where – in a period of relative peace – contacts between

neighbours were frequent and positive (Harris 1971). Often these stories echo as nostalgia for lost relations and shared spaces. One example from the films, which is at once relevant to the past and the present, is about live stock sales in Markethill, where a lot of interaction between the communities take place:

Live stock sales would have been one area of the so-called neutral space, it didn't matter which community you were from, it was attended by both communities [...] whenever an animal went into the ring, nobody asked who owned it [...] they didn't care whether it was Protestant animal or a Catholic animal, and that today is still very much the case. (David McMullen/ The Fews).

Another interesting story about shared space emerges in the film 'The Fews' in the context of commemoration outside Northern Ireland. The retired Royal Ulster Constabulary officer, Billy Moorcroft, recounts how he in 2012 attended a commemoration ceremony at Glasnevin Cemetery for Irish soldiers who fought for Britain in the World Wars. In this, the most republican of spaces, he laid down a poppy wreath on behalf of the Royal Ulster Constabulary at the memorial to Irish soldiers. Such 'commemorative commiseration' – in making Glasnevin a shared commemorative space - stands in stark contrast to the more competitive commemoration of Northern Ireland, and Billy Moorcroft remarks that the 'The people of Dublin want to move on more so than the people of South Armagh'. Interestingly, this particular story opens up to a wider narrative about the reframing of remembrance, which has seen the Republic of Ireland begin to harness the heritage of Irish Protestants as well as the more nationalist touchstones in the country's history. In this story, it may be argued that a subtle traditional republican narrative is at play. The future co-existence of 'Protestant, Catholic

and Dissenter' is exemplified in the cultural recognition of Protestant heritage in the Republic of Ireland but is not accompanied by the story of overarching rapprochement between the UK and Republic of Ireland States, or indeed any emotional belonging to the UK in the future.

The films do engage a wide range of voices, but there still appears to be some significant gaps. It is often men of a certain age 'telling it like is,' who speak in professional capacities and from public positions, whereas women speak mainly as spouses, daughters, and sometimes community workers. Women are often featured in bit roles (making only brief comments), or sat next to their husbands, who then do most of the talking. Indeed out of the 18 substantial interviews that are made available full length, only 3 are with women. Two of these three interviews last only 3 and 4 minutes respectively, compared to the average 23 mins of the interviews with men.

In historical terms, Protestants also figure as a 'present absence' in many of the films. Often they have instead what we might call 'a narrative presence': for example one interviewee says 'I don't think there are any Protestants around now – but in my youth there was a lot of Protestants' ('The Far West'/ Joel Smith). This 'speaking to, or for' a historical position is also borne out in the example from 'Completely Isolated' above. Because of demographic shifts, it might not -any longer- be possible, to capture local history locally in the shape of life stories of the conflict. In the film 'The Forgotten Hills,' this dilemma is partially solved by bringing back an RUC soldier posted in Bessbrook at the age of 18 to reflect on his time there.

Had this method been employed more systematically, it could have been used to interrogate the tension between physical presence and emotional attachment to the same

place, so important for the ongoing politico-cultural conflicts in post-agreement Northern Ireland.

Witnessing life in conflict or peace-building?

In the following section, I turn to a wider discussion of the two storytelling projects, using a framework derived from Kurusawa's work on witnessing. I use this framework in order to foreground the ways in which the aims of these concrete peace-building projects interact with their conditions of practice. Keeping in mind that these storytelling projects are created in a context of 'politics without policy' and with funding, which is tied to 'reconciliation', there are multiple enablers, constrainers and circumscriptions to what is witnessed, what counts as witnessing and who is doing the witnessing. In turn, these processes of recording, preserving and archiving will ultimately influence social and cultural memory and possible interpretations of the past.

Kurusawa's idea of witnessing is embodied in the image of a message in a bottle. This image resonates firmly with some of the express intentions behind storytelling projects and oral history archives, which aim at capturing, replicating and sharing stories and experiences, preserving a myriad of voices and creating a reservoir to challenge dominant narratives emerging over time. Storytelling projects clearly document knowledge that is absent in written documents and can help create social agency for vulnerable or marginalised groups in offering alternatives to dominant narratives. Here then, the bottle stands for the archives established by the projects and the message is the everyday experience of life in conflict, held and protected by the archives. An important consideration in this respect is whether the archives then hold the potential to be sources

of future discovery and/or recovery of memories that would have otherwise been lost. However, as I shall discuss in the following, the fit between Kurusawa's notion of bearing witness is far from perfect with the practices of the two storytelling projects, I have examined above. I have grouped these discussions in relation to four of Kurusawa's ambitions: 1) giving voice to suffering against silence; 2) enabling interpretation against incomprehensibility; 3) cultivating empathy against indifference; and 4) encouraging remembering against forgetting.

Giving voice to suffering against silence

Staying with Kurusawa's image of the message in a bottle, the challenge of giving voice to suffering against silence is that the message might never be written, and even if it is written, the bottle might never reach land. In the storytelling projects I have dealt with in this article, suffering is implicit rather than explicit. The people engaged are what we might call 'collateral actors' neither cast as perpetrators or victims. In this respect giving voice to people who were often at the centre of violence, but not always central to the conflict certainly adds new layers of understanding to the usual ethno-national scripts. Making space for personal, individual accounts in this vein can work in restoring dignity to voices that have been silenced or marginalised. Particularly, in the case of '5 Decades', this extends to mobilising more women's voices. 'Border Lives' mainly mobilises familiar representatives for societal organisations and positions, but still manages to rally these around entry points that sometimes lead to new narratives. In this respect, the lack of a policy framework for dealing with the past, which in many ways is otherwise counterproductive, actually works to bring new voices and narratives to the fore in a

process that has often been dominated by paramilitary and political elites and/or ethno-national and politico-constitutional scripts.

The suffering that is aired is about fractured relationships between communities, between communities and state(s) and within communities and families. However, considering the micro-level at which much of the storytelling takes place, it is surprising that the stories do not bring out more of what is called 'secondary suffering' from people doing what might be termed 'invisible emotional labour'. That is persons (often women) keeping families together in the face of conflict, trauma, death or bereavement. In '5 Decades' there is some talk about the fear of letting one's kids out onto the streets of Belfast, but not much about what goes on inside the house. While stories emanate from individual experiences, it is a particular form of the private that emerges, figured around life led in public, in conflict.

Nor is there much that speaks to the continuity of suffering in communities not necessarily benefitting from the fruits of the peace process. Although '5 Decades' records some disillusionment with the current state of affairs and continued discord around issues like parading, this is mostly done *sotto voce* and as a marginal theme. Suffering is often generalised and narrated as a common experience. Violence is generally construed as perpetrated by paramilitaries and security forces, not as men perpetrating against women or adults perpetrating against children. In many ways the past is spoken of as if not a foreign country then at least a very different place. Again, it is difficult not to interpret this in both the context of a policy gap and peace and reconciliation funding, where certain ways of standing in relation to the past are obviously less incriminating and more relevant and constructive than others, resulting in significant omissions and continued

silences. Or to return to the guiding image here: the bottle holds some messages better than others.

Enabling interpretation against incomprehensibility

In terms of making the incomprehensible, comprehensible an obstacle might be that the message is written in a particular language. In both projects, there is a sense that people are 'sticking to the code' and speaking in conflict languages and analyses that have accumulated broad resonance during the peace process. What transpires is decisively not the antagonistic mode of sectarianism and confrontations, as much as a code shaped by discourses of parity of esteem, equality of recognition and mutual respect. That is, the incomprehensible is made comprehensible in peace process terms. The oft repeated phrases of 'people getting on with their lives', 'we all bleed, we all hurt, we all suffer' or 'being caught up in violence' work in equalising conflict, but do not really offer many systemic or agentic explanations and interpretations of what happened, but instead describes how (some) people lived and coped with circumstances beyond their control. As such, the usable, comprehensible past is one that is at once about the recognisable conflict, one that is over, one we have moved on from, one that has no future hook in people. What is brought along from the past in both projects is overwhelmingly the defiance of people over circumstances, resilience, forgiveness and future orientation. It is thus worth asking what can be made comprehensible in this language? And what sorts of historiographical questions arise, when experiences of sectarian conflict are rearticulated in peace process terms?

For temporal others trying to decipher these plural individual life stories and put them into singular historical accounts of conflict, it is necessary to situate the texts (stories) within their contemporary socio-political context and frameworks of discourses to see how they negotiate and contribute to the orders of discourse. Of particular importance here are the prevailing languages of the peace process, mentioned above. Central ideas flowing through the peace process give shape to individual narratives but are also in turn shaped by them.

Cultivating empathy against indifference

In terms of cultivating empathy against indifference, the central question is what consequences the messages have - after being read, is the message discarded? Since this paper has not conducted a reception study, it is impossible for me to evaluate to what extent it works in inculcating empathy in audiences. Indeed, part of the intended audience exists in the future, complicating a full reception study in any case. However, the immediate empathy that the storytelling projects are trying to evoke, is not that of temporal others, but contemporary others. This is a major challenge in divided societies, where the past is often invoked in antagonistic terms and people are remembering 'against' each other and rejecting each other's past. In divided societies the worst that might happen is not just indifference as opposed to empathy, but rather active hostility.

Presumably, the process of sharing stories in the case of '5 Decades' has established a shared space for growing mutual empathy between participants (beyond the mutual recognition of communities), and the 'Border Lives' eLearning project has worked as a conduit for reflecting on different narratives and experiences through online

users. In the conflict resolution literature, depth of reconciliation is often measured by the extent to which accounts of conflict are correlated (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse and Miall, 2011). However, composite accounts (in which conflicting accounts are recognised and structured alongside each other) are often a more attainable and even desirable goal. In this the storytelling projects work as a format in which differences can be articulated and exist, whilst recognizing and respecting ‘others’.

However, the question remains whether storytelling projects work in substantiating the Arendtsian subjective-in between, that can act as a conduit between the private and the public as well as establish positions in *between* or *beyond* the two communities?

For Kurusawa, empathy is conceptualized as a call to mobilization and action by fostering the moral imagination of different audiences (2009: 101-102). “Action” in the context of ‘5 Decades’ and ‘Border Lives’ does not involve putting a stop to an intolerable situation (which was effectively stopped with the peace agreement in 1998), but as maintaining and building the peace. Both projects draw heavily on the participation of community workers, who are telling stories about how they have done and continue to do that job.

In this respect the projects are not essentially about preserving or understanding lives in conflict in historical terms but about reconciliation as continuing processes and products preparing the ground for empathy, but not necessarily with people in the past. In this context, circumnavigating the more distressing aspects of conflict, might also be a way of ‘letting go’ of past experiences – consciously editing them out – to make room for the flow of social life in the past and in the future (cf. Meinert, Obika, and Whyte 2014).

Encouraging remembering against forgetting

In terms of encouraging remembering against forgetting, Kurusawa argues that ‘Since collective memory is a dynamic and shifting socio-political construct that eyewitnesses and audiences produce and maintain dialogically, the two parties must perpetually rekindle it for each generation [...] (2009: 104). As such, history and memory is always emergent and in the making. Thus, we must consider both how storytelling projects constitute witnessing in and of themselves (in the case of ‘5 Decades’ by sharing one’s own eye-witness accounts with other eye-witnesses) and to what extent they enable witnessing to begin (for off- and online audiences to engage with).

And this is where we return to the archive. This paper is chiefly concerned with storytelling projects that not only take memory out of mental storage, but record it, archive it and make it publicly accessible. So, the concern extends from both the processes and products of storytelling, to the ways in which these products of storytelling enter or are entered into new processes. When stories become records, narratives can be re-worked, re-authored and retold to different audiences and as such wrested away from the original author (Gilsenan cited in Jackson 23).

Crucially, the archives that I am dealing with here are not official or national archives that keep public records and governmental documents. That is not to say that they are not part of institutional or bureaucratic processes, but that they are contingent in different ways and stand differently in relation to governmental power. Archives are created in a complex dynamic of the ethics of memory construction, and archivists operate in profoundly political processes of constructing particular versions of the past

(Wallace 2011). In the Northern Ireland context, as I have argued, this context is characterized by a) the absence of a political framework on dealing with the past, and b) the fact that funding is firmly tied to the reconciliation agenda. While storytelling is often thought of as a bottom-up process, it is easy to see how it is also structured from the top-down, and part of local, national and transnational networks.

Conclusion: Bearing witness to life in conflict and peacebuilding?

This article has begun to consider the role of storytelling projects both as processes of dealing with the past and as archival sources to interpret the past in the future.

I have shown that these storytelling archives are constructed in profoundly political processes and as such give rise to particular versions of the past, but also that these circumscriptions have enabled new and imaginative ways of engaging with the past in terms of different chronologies, characters and plots.

Crucially, we should consider these conduits for remembering, as at once shaped by the absence of policies and legal frameworks, but also as shaping subsequent policies to deal with the past as can be seen in the latest political accord (Stormont House Agreement 2014), which includes an oral history archive as a key approach to dealing with the past.

However, as historical sources we may argue that they are best suited to understand the moment of their articulation, a particular moment in the peace process. It follows that the history we can study through these archives is as much a study of the peace process as it is a study of life during conflict.

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