

Memory, Place and Gender: *Armagh Stories: Voices from the Gaol*
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Abstract

The film *Armagh Stories: Voices from the Gaol* (2015)¹ is a documentary film edited from the Prisons Memory Archive² and offers perspectives from those who passed through Armagh Gaol, which housed mostly female prisoners during the political conflict in and about Northern Ireland, known as the Troubles. *Armagh Stories* is an attempt to represent the experiences of prison staff, prisoners, tutors, a solicitor, chaplain and doctor in ways that are ethically inclusive and aesthetically relevant. By reflecting on the practice of participatory storytelling and its reception in a society transitioning out of violence, I investigate how memory, place and gender combine to suggest ways of addressing the legacy of a conflicted past in a contested present.

Keywords

documentary film, female, performing memory, prison, Troubles

Introduction

The Prisons Memory Archive (PMA) is a collection of 175 filmed interviews recorded inside Armagh Gaol in 2006 and the Maze and Long Kesh Prison in 2007 (Figures 1 and 2). The protocols³ of co-ownership, inclusivity and life storytelling underpinned both the original recordings and subsequent film outputs that include Jolene Mairs Dyer's (2011)⁴ *Unseen Women* and Laura Aguiar's *We Were There* (2014).⁵ Funding was secured from the Community Relations Council's Media Fund in 2015 to edit a 1-hour documentary on Armagh Gaol, and two editors were employed over a 6-month period to work with me acting as director. Among the possible themes that can be excavated from the PMA's 300 hours of audiovisual material, it was felt that since the representation of women in the Troubles has been particularly downplayed, foregrounding their experiences could help rebalance what is publicly available. The film has been screened locally and internationally, and post-screening discussions have produced responses that both validate and question the way that the past has been, and continues to be, represented.

Memory, storytelling and place

Storytelling, as a form of memory work that attempts to engage with the conflicted past in order to manage the contested present, has been recognised as an important process in aiding the transition from violence to peace by three Northern Ireland government reports, although none of their recommendations have yet been taken up:⁶



Figure 1. Wire separating floors, 'Armagh Gaol'.
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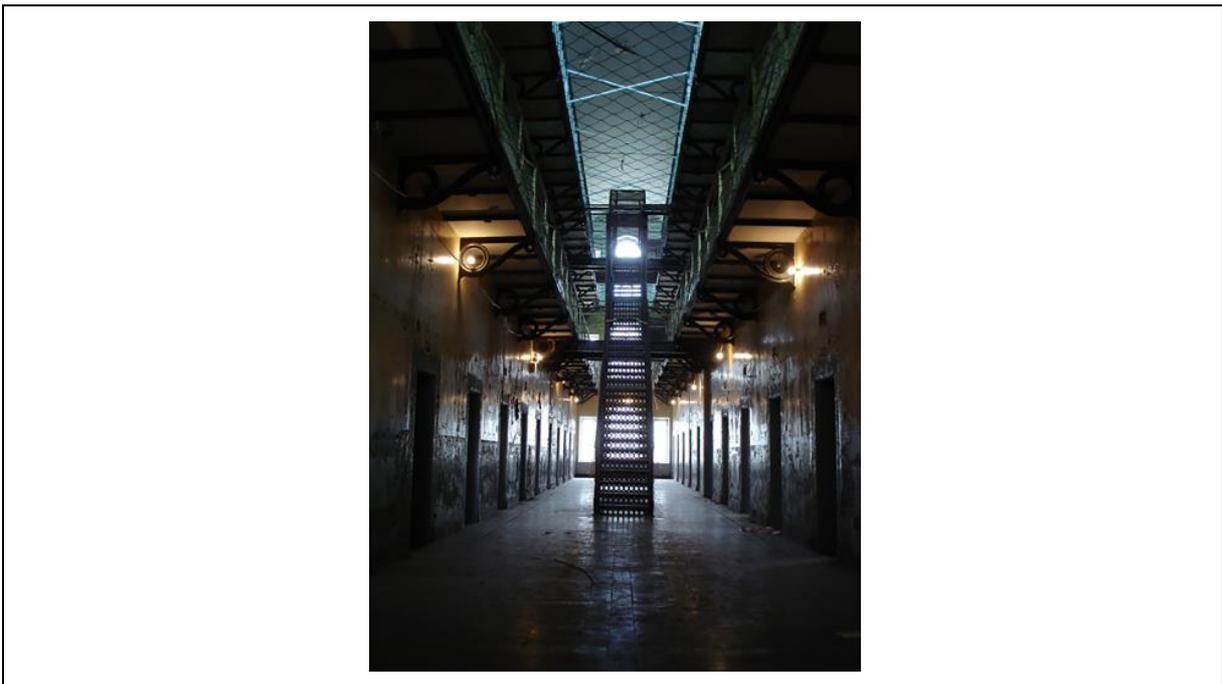


Figure 2. Three-storey wing, 'Armagh Gaol'.
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Storytelling has emerged as one of the main forms of dealing with the violent past in Northern Ireland. There are multiple and intertwined explanations for why this is the case: at the level of individual 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 on how to deal with the past, means that local initiatives on telling, listening to and sharing stories from the conflict have acted to fill this policy gap. (Dybris McQuaid, 2016: 63)

The usefulness to the present of such memory work is highlighted by Michael Jackson:

As stories, the past is not imposed on the present, but offers itself up, so to speak, to the living as a basis for creatively comprehending their present situation and making informed *choices* (original italics) about how it is to be addressed and lived.

He suggests that these choices are between retaliation and reconciliation:

For though the past contains the germ of antipathy, defensiveness, and violence, it also contains the possibilities of trust, openness and reconciliation... it is for those in the present to decide which option will be preferred and how the past will be interpreted. (Jackson, 2005: 357)

A John Berger fictional character observes, 'The past is the one thing we are not prisoners of. We can do with the past exactly as we wish. What we can't do is change its consequences. Let's make the past together' (Berger, 2009: 21). The aim of the PMA and *Armagh Stories* includes Jackson's possibilities and risks since the stories range across a spectrum of experiences and their competing interpretations, emanating from situations of enduring conflict and tension, and also Berger's instruction to collaborate in the making and viewing of representations of the past. Our aim is not just to produce the work but to have it used – directly and indirectly – as starting points for the sharing of experiences and ideas and the questioning of normative narratives by communities most affected by the violence.

The rationale for returning to the sites of experience was informed by the attempt to allow the participants to be re-stimulated by the materiality of the place; to be able to perform their memory, for example, by showing as well as telling; and to allow the physical place itself to inform the viewer. An earlier research project, 'Inside stories: Memories from the Maze and Long Kesh Prison' (2004) which motivated the larger PMA project, confirmed the observation of Charles Fernyhough (2012):

It is a well established finding that we are better at remembering events and information when we are asked to recall them in the same context in which we laid the memories down ... this is because the cues that are around at the moment of encoding (the laying down of the memory trace) are stored along with that remembered material. Consequently, the reappearance of those cues can make the memory bloom into consciousness again. (p. 106)

The prisons became not only characters in themselves, offering the viewers a strong sense of being-there, but also prompted one participant to remark, 'Its amazing what you remember when you come back in here'.

Background

The Good Friday Agreement of 1998 is regarded as a major turning point for Northern Irish society as it emerged out of three decades of political violence, and as a result, prisoners who were convicted of political offences were released on licence in 2000. Armagh Gaol, which housed primarily female prisoners throughout its history, was built in the 1870s and was closed in 1986, due to its age, with its occupants moved to the newly built Maghaberry Prison in County Antrim. From the outbreak of the violence, known as the Troubles, the prison was used to house increasing numbers of those who were interned or convicted. The Stormont Government had introduced internment without trial, and after Stormont was prorogued in

1972 by the British Government because of escalating violence and political impasse, the Northern Ireland Office replaced internment with the no-jury Diplock Court system. Although primarily used to house female prisoners, Armagh Gaol was also used to house male prisoners because of overcrowding in the prison system in the early period of the Troubles. Most of the prison population was made up of remand and convicted female prisoners.⁷

The majority of the female prisoners during the prison's busiest period, 1971–1986, belonged to political groups, republican and loyalist, although most were associated with the Irish Republican Army (IRA), an imbalance that led to isolation for loyalist prisoners, as Jacqui Upton, a loyalist ex-prisoner explains. The reason for this uneven ratio can be explained by the fact that the IRA was the largest republican armed group and also that loyalist women were not encouraged to join armed groups; Melanie McFadyean quotes Andy Tyrie, Supreme Commander of the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), the largest loyalist paramilitary group: 'He was terribly sorry but no, he couldn't put me in touch with the women's UDA because there isn't any such thing' (Fairweather et al., 1984: 283).

In early 2006, the PMA was granted access to the prison by Armagh Urban and District Council and funding was secured from the Heritage Lottery Fund to film in the prison for 2 weeks. We invited ex-users to return to the empty site and remember their experiences for our cameras and microphones. Our research involved contacting representatives of constituencies, such as Coiste and Charter, respectively the republican and loyalist ex-prisoner groups; and the Northern Ireland Prison Officers' Association. There was mixed response, with many of those we approached hesitant to re-engage with the rawness of personal and political feelings about a period that was still fresh in the memory. However, we managed to secure the participation of 35 people representing a sufficient range of constituencies, which included prison staff, prisoners, chaplains, lawyers, social workers, tutors and visitors.

Filming

The key protocols of co-ownership, inclusivity and life storytelling underpinned the filming process. Each participant decided whether to be filmed alone or with a friend or relative, and we took 15 minutes before and after the filming to brief and de-brief on our methodology and the risks of re-traumatisation. With the two camera operators, Deirdre Noonan and Mick Doyle, each taking one or more participant on to the site with radio microphones, we tried to establish an atmosphere of conversation and listening on a one-to-one basis. Both camera operators were briefed on the need for 'deep listening', which is described by Jill Strauss:

From peace and conflict theory and practice we know that active listening engenders empathy, trust and humanizes 'the other' at the same time as being heard makes the speaker feel validated and therefore more willing to listen to other perspectives.⁸

For many of the participants, this was the first time that their experience was provided with the potential for a public presence; Stefanie [Lehner \(2014\)](#) notes, '(e)mpathetic witnessing ... allows for a listening and response to the pain and suffering of others in a way that previously was denied or seemed impossible' (p. 285).

The participants were free to walk and talk their way around the site or at least those places that we had access to – some areas had roof collapses or missing floors. Some participants chose one spot to stand in and remember their experiences, while others moved around reminiscing about their experiences – some took half an hour, while others spent up to

4 hours on the site. On at least two occasions, participants had so much memory to recover that they returned for a second recording. We decided to record for an archive, and not for a linear, intercut film, that is, we tended to eschew the usual seeking out of 'moments' that might be useful for editing, such as entering and leaving the screen, and of asking questions that might lead to concise responses.⁹

Editing

Because of the difficulty in accessing funding for the archive after the original location recordings, we later made a decision to seek smaller funds for film outputs, as a way of at least making some of the material available to the public in the interim. This has resulted in films supported by scholarships from the Northern Irish Department of Employment and Learning and from the Community Relations Council. *Armagh Stories* is the latest of these iterations and attempts to address the same issue of offering multivocal stories that the archive was intended to offer. While archiving minimises the mediation between producers and participants, editing a linear intercut film demands more intervention, for example, by choosing the length, structure, participants, and interview excerpts. At each decision, we tried to include material that held its own ground, that is, required little contextualisation and/or that complemented/contrasted with others' contributions. Our decisions were taken with the knowledge that some of what we edited had the potential to upset viewers, given the contested nature of addressing the legacy of the past, particularly on the prison issue that has proved so politically contentious.¹⁰ This linear intercut approach differed from the approach adopted by Jolene Mairs Dyer for her output from the PMA. *Unseen Women* was first exhibited as a multi-screen installation at Belfast Exposed Gallery, with six full interviews available separately on six computer screens, as well as a selection from each edited discreetly together on a large screen as a means of introduction and summary, totally 30 minutes. The separation of computer screens and discreet edits on the large screen allowed each 'story' to be told distinctly, unlike intercutting where participants are edited next to each other in a section, in order to compare or contrast, and are returned to for later sections.

Our first task was to prepare a rough draft that represented key themes and was as representative as possible of the range of participants who had taken part. Key constituencies to cover were prison staff, whose voices have rarely been heard,¹¹ and loyalist and republican ex-prisoners, who made up the majority of the prison population.¹² The political role of the prison, for which it is best known, such as the introduction of strip-searching and the 1980 hunger strike, was addressed, but another key theme for us was the everyday experience of the participants since such experiences are often left out of public discourse. The first editor, Amy, prepared an assembly edit, which progressed to a finer cut, with a decision to reduce the time given to the republican narrative and increasing the time given to the prison staff and loyalist prisoner experience. This raised challenges of how to compromise conflicting needs, such as reflecting the constituencies that had volunteered to take part and the actual ratios of constituencies involved, addressing the public history of the prison as a mainly republican site of struggle, covering as wide a range of experiences as possible and not just the majority one, and minimising the editorial input, for example, our decision to use limited text instead of voice-over.¹³ Given that the material was originally recorded for an archive and not a linear, intercut film, the structure needed to offer an overall sense of story, which Amy created by linking themes, such as work and education in the prison laundry, in order to progress the narrative. She also created the introduction and ending to the film using the

visual movement of participants entering and leaving the prison as a repetitive motif, something that works against the archive aesthetic but, in a linear film, suggests the collective experience of the individual participants. Glenn provided a fine cut and inserted at intervals montages of the prison visuals, accompanied by a minimalist soundtrack composed by Gerard Gormley, in order to provide spaces for viewers to extend their imagination of what it might be like to be inside the prison and also as spaces for reflection on what had just been viewed and heard.

At each editing stage, we sent rough-cut versions to the participants, either as links or DVDs according to their wishes, for their consideration and agreement before proceeding to the next stage. Very few adjustments were made during this process, the only significant ones being the removal of names of third parties referred to unless permission had been granted, because not everyone wishes to have been associated with either being a prisoner or prison officer during the Troubles.¹⁴ Some participants were more pro-active than others in communicating with us during post-production, which reflects different priorities in engaging with the memories of the past while balancing the demands of contemporary everyday life. Another response was that there was sufficient trust established during the initial filming period for the editing decisions to be respected without too much negotiation.

Males were selected for inclusion in the film because some issues that they alone addressed added significance to the history of the prison, for example, Mgr Raymond Murray, who had served as the Catholic Chaplain, describes the injuries to men who had been interrogated by the British Army in the early 1970s, and Dr Oliver Woods, a local general practitioner (GP) who was invited to inspect the prisoners, provides supporting evidence about examining them and the subsequent court case taken by the Irish Government against the British Government in the European Court, which found Britain guilty of 'inhuman and degrading treatment'. While Oliver stays in the same spot during his speaking to camera, Raymond uses his hands to help describe the interrogations, which included cattle prods and beatings, or moves along the landing, remembering how he avoided the urine and sanitary towels during the no-wash protest. William Smith,¹⁵ a loyalist ex-prisoner, recounts an attack by republican prisoners and re-enacts his and others' escape, aided by prison officers, behind gates between the wing and the Circle.

Memory, place and gender

As can be seen from the above, one of the key factors in how we might read the material is the way in which participants perform their memories based on their relationship to the surroundings they find themselves in. During their previous time in the prison, both staff and prisoners were restricted to where and when they could move around. Despite the limitations on where the filming could take place, the PMA's participants had free movement in the areas we had access to. I will take seven brief examples to illustrate the relationship between memory, place and gender.

When ex-prisoner Jacqui Upton first comes across her cell, she steps in and then back out to the landing with her hand up to her mouth, exclaiming, 'My God, it's small'. The camera then follows her into the cell and she repeats, 'I hadn't realised it was so small'. Such jolting of memory, of what was and what is, is not uncommon in memory recollection. Some of the participants were confused by what they came across, the actuality of the now not corresponding to their memory of what was. Ex-prison officer Marie Smith seems perplexed by the way the main entrance for transport for the prisoners did not look at all like what she had experienced; 'This isn't how I remember it'. Similarly, ex-prison officer Daphne Scroggy

seems to be unsure where an outer wall led to. There are two possible reasons for such confusion. First, memory, as we know, is fragile, and current thinking is that we do not retrieve the information as a computer does, but rather we reconstruct the past that our brain offers clues to. Charles [Fernihough \(2012\)](#) argues, 'Memory is as much an artist as a scientist' (p. 7). He also comments on the impact of the present on the past:

Asking people about their memories is fraught with difficulties. Memories are changed by the very process of reconstructing them, and every memory that an experimental participant reports is likely to have been contaminated by previous acts of remembering. (Fernihough, 2012: 13)

Participants in the film were particularly sensitive to such present circumstances, which, as I have noted, were (are still are) fraught with political tension and occasional violence.¹⁶ This rebuilding from clues inevitably means that accuracy loses out to narrative – we need to make sense of the bits of information by creating a narrative, which will approximate the past, but can never fully detail it. Imagined links may be used to cover gaps. As [Fernihough \(2012\)](#) claims, 'In memory, more than any other aspect of human experience, narrative seems to be the appropriate medium. We need the science, but we also need the close attention to messy acts of meaning-making' (p. 270). Second, it was not only Marie who was challenged by the changes brought about by dilapidation of the prison. Much of the site had been changed by deterioration, roofs had fallen in, walls had collapsed and some had been removed, and temporary buildings had been removed.

When spaces were recognisable, they considerably aided the memory work, including the performing of those memories ([Aguilar, 2015a](#): 238). When Daphne, ex-prison officer, enters the area known as the Circle, which acted as the key surveillance point for the three wings of the prison, she places her hands by her side, stands erect, and says, 'This is where we drilled each morning', adding, 'We were given orders as to where to go, A Wing, B Wing or C Wing', pointing to each wing in turn. When ex-prisoner Josie Dowds is looking for the cell where she looked after her baby, she first identified where two sisters, Dolores and Marian Price, had been held within a sectioned-off partition that had since been removed. When Marie Smith and ex-prisoner Jennifer McCann enter the chapel on different occasions, it leads to clear recollections of how this space was used for prisoners to congregate, communicate and even smuggle items. Daphne even informs us that 'we didn't pass any remarks' when such smuggling took place, if it was inoffensive; 'you could have caused more problems than it was worth'. Just after this remark, Daphne pauses for a moment and scans the top landing of one of the wings, which the camera gives us a view of. She suddenly remembers, 'This here would have been full when I came here in 1978, full to bursting, yes; in fact they would have been doubled up'.

Another example of where a specific place informs memory concerns the attempts by republican prisoners to oppose forced integration and campaign for segregation. It is usual for prison systems to impose segregation and isolation, but the protest for political status¹⁷ by both republican and loyalist prisoners aimed for segregation from each group, and from so-called Ordinary Decent Criminals, and challenged the prison authorities' attempts to force the prisoners to be housed in mixed wings. This issue is taken up by Jacqui Upton, a loyalist ex-prisoner, and Patricia Moore, a republican ex-prisoner. Jacqui tells us how she was intimidated by republican prisoners who deliberately rested their legs against the railings in an attempt to prevent her from passing along the corridor; she leans against the wall and lifts her legs up to the same railings to demonstrate and adds, 'women can be more bitchy than

men', a reference to the isolation and threat which she felt was as damaging as physical violence might have been. Patricia explains how the policy of forced strip-searching led to republican prisoners being sent to isolation punishment cells, and therefore, 'we risked losing control of the wing'. This led to the decision not to resist strip-searching, which Patricia describes as initially one of relief, but soon turned to violence or the threat of it; 'what was happening to you, I felt like punching one of them'. While holding out her arms in a repetition of the search position, and pointing to imagined menstrual blood on the floor, Patricia concludes, 'no-one can tell me it was a security measure. It was intended to humiliate and degrade political prisoners'. In both cases, the sense that the prison was as threatening as the violence on the streets outside confirms Jenny Edkins' (2003) observation that '(w)hat we call trauma takes place when the very powers that we are convinced will protect us and give us security become our tormentors' (p. 4).

The prisoners' campaign for recognition as political led to a no-wash protest and later hunger strike in 1980, which Mary Doyle, one of the three hunger strikers, describes. In this remembering, she stands on the balcony and points towards the ground floor, where the 'screws, mostly male, came charging along'. The prison officers stripped their cells, looking for black clothing that the women dressed in when commemorating volunteers who had been killed. Marie, an ex-prison officer, later says that cell searches were 'the thing the prisoners disliked the most'. When the toilets were locked as a result of the searches and protests, the women had to spread their urine, excrement and sanitary towels on the floor – 'the no-wash protest was forced on us, we didn't choose it', says Mary; the prisoners were then moved to another wing. Mary later points to the hospital where she and the two other hunger strikers were taken, but adds, 'we can't go there, because it is inaccessible now' (the hospital had deteriorated and was unsafe). This may be a case of the memory not containing as much detail as others, because the place of the recollection was not available to stimulate the memory. Mary describes the ending of the first hunger strike in December 1980 and their decision not to begin a second hunger strike in March 1981 along with the men in the Maze and Long Kesh Prison, because the number of female prisoners would not support the new tactic of incrementally increasing the number of strikers over a period of time.

The movement in and out of space, from collective space to isolation, from being inside to outside the prison cell, was constantly referred to; paradoxically, sometimes, the space inside was a protection and the space outside a punishment. Both the chapel and exercise yard were referred to as places of collective events, and also entered and moved about in, as the participants performed their memory. In one sensitive section of the film, Daphne remembers the death of a young prison officer who was killed in a grenade attack just outside the prison. Daphne had reached the victim's coat to her just before she left. As Daphne recalls the cheering from prisoners in the exercise yard and the fact that the officer was 'a young mother of four children', she moves back and forth on the landing, occasionally leaning on the railings and crossing her arms; it is clearly a painful memory as her body searches to find a settled position. This is the second time that Daphne refers to motherhood and complements how Josie had described her feelings about having her baby son in her cell during the first year of his life. This is one of the few themes that overlap with some of the females in the prison, that, whatever their role in the prison – prisoner or prison officer – they were able to share a status, motherhood, with each other.

Two Open University teachers are in the prison laundry when one, Jenny Meegan, remembers having taught feminist theory using children's books, one of which was called *The Laundry Women*, which she takes out of her bag to show the camera operator. Jenny recalls

the book's narrative about gender roles and marriage, and she goes on to explain that the book was passed between prisoners who worked in the laundry. Jenny taught in both the male prison and the female prison and contrasts the way that the female students responded more favourably to gender studies. Elizabeth Woodcraft, who was on a delegation from the National Council for Civil Liberties in the 1980s and conducting research into the use of strip-searching, is clearly affected by re-entering the prison after some 20 years and wrestles with the memory of her received view that 'Ireland was this big thing, this terrible, terrible problem that, it seemed to me, to have a simple solution, a united Ireland', but was confronted by the unionist view:

They felt very strongly and emotionally so; perhaps when you come here things are not as straight forward as perhaps you thought they were. It was quite scary too; its one thing to know about the Troubles, its another to be in the middle of it, or so you think anyway.

Elizabeth's thoughtful articulation is a good example of Nick Couldry's (2010) comment on how we negotiate between the past and the present, between ourselves and others: '(v)oice necessarily involves us in an ongoing process of reflection, exchanging narratives back and forth between our past and present selves, and between us and others' (p. 8). It is precisely such negotiations that the film and the PMA aim at – to reveal experiences of the 'other', to question assumptions and to minimise editorial intervention so that audiences can assume more agency in interpretation.

Towards the end of the film, Jennifer McCann reminds us that the female prisoners were very young; 'at twenty ... I was probably one of the older ones. There were women in there from when they were seventeen'. This may help explain the clarity of some of the memories since Fernyhough (2012) claims, '(m)emory researchers teach us that events from our late teens and early adulthood have a particular hold on our memoires ... Researchers refer to this peak as the reminiscence bump' (p. 27). Jennifer goes on to explain that although much of what happened may now be lost, the year when 10 men died on hunger strike at the Maze and Long Kesh Prison stands out; '1981 was probably the longest year I spent in jail'. Fernyhough (2012) comments, 'It is a basic fact of remembering that emotional events are remembered more clearly and in greater detail than neutral ones. They may also stick in our minds for longer' (p. 201). At the time of writing, Jennifer stepped down as an elected Member of the Legislative Assembly (Northern Ireland), and her memories are clearly marked by her sense of a sacrifice that produced positive outcomes, a trend noted in a study of the contrasting memory values in South Africa and Czechoslovakia (Coetzee and Hulec, 2004: 92).

Exhibition

As filmmakers, we often neglect the impact our work has on others, indeed leaving such consideration to others, but since impact on how to address the past was one of the early expectations of the PMA project, it seems important to consider the context of filmmaking/storytelling in societies emerging out of violence. Sara Dybris McQuaid (2016) suggests, 'The personal is also political, and as Hannah Arendt argues, storytelling can be a channel through which private impressions and emotions are transformed, deprivatised and deindividualised' (p. 68). It is this turn from private to public that the PMA engages with, in order to allow space for questioning, sharing and debating how we and the 'other' experience the past in the present.

Jackson has warned us that such storytelling can be used for either retaliation or reconciliation. Referring to fieldwork that had been conducted in Sierra Leone in 1970 as it emerged out of years of conflict, he notes,

For many people, vengeance was not an option. Reconciliation was the only reasonable choice. But it was less a choice grounded in moral or intellectual *belief*, than a pragmatic assessment of what was most expedient if one was to salvage one's life and livelihood – a matter of what one could or could not do'. (Jackson, 2005: 368)

Such pragmatism may be the preference for many after the Troubles, but continuing political contestation over how to deal with the past and ongoing legal investigations into past crimes pushes storytelling and memory work to the fore of public debate and political negotiation.¹⁸ In the following examples, I will address how the impulse to reconcile or retaliate arises at the point of reception of the representation of memories.

Armagh Stories was premiered in Queens Film Theatre, Belfast, in December 2015 and was moved to a bigger theatre just before screening because of public demand, thus showing the appetite for stories that address the legacy of the past and particularly from the perspective of women, whose contribution to our recent history has often been either stereotyped or downplayed; [Aguiar \(2015b\)](#) argues, 'Women from all sides also share the marginalisation of the peace-process which has been mostly "all-male"' (p. 37).¹⁹ [Aguiar \(2015b\)](#) concludes, 'women have been widely under-represented within much of the Troubles cinema and it has been mostly up to filmmakers such as Pat Murphy, Orla Walsh, and Margo Harkin to address this imbalance' (p. 51). While there is a raft of documentary films that predominantly feature male experiences during the Troubles,²⁰ those which privilege the female perspective are much fewer in number (Ging, 2012: 137).

In 2016, the film was screened in local community centres and internationally, always accompanied by an introduction and Q&A. These events have ranged from inter and intra community groups to academic conferences, and it is the former that I focus on here, using verbal, evaluation sheet and letter response as references. Three women's groups and three mixed gender groups have requested screenings as part of their own ongoing projects, which allows the film's themes to fit into an already planned series of events. Such continuity means that the viewers already know each other and are comfortable in each other's company. The request by mostly women's groups to view the film is itself a recognition of, and a counter to, the abundance of films on the male experience. Rather than identify groups or individuals, I will divide the responses into a spectrum of negative and positive categories, accepting, of course, that this simple binary does not preclude overlaps and contradictions. Addressing the very different theme of gender fluidity, Jacqueline Rose (2016) quotes Jayne County, a transgender person, on the tensions between empathy and animosity when telling one's story:

I know people have to know about other people's lives in order to become more tolerant ... sometimes that makes bigotry worse. The more straight people know about us, the more they have to hate. (p. 5)

Beginning with this idea of animosity, at one post-screening discussion, the response told us more of the pain and anger of the viewers and their current situation of frustration than of what the participants had said: 'They are terrorists, murderers. What about their victims', demanded one person, referring to the ex-prisoners. Many in this group clearly felt that the

peace process had not delivered peace, had put ‘terrorists’²¹ in government and has marginalised those who had risked their lives to maintain law and order during the Troubles. It should be noted that the stories of those with whom we disagree can sometimes become more pronounced in our imagination than the stories of those we have empathy for – at the above meeting, there was no response to the contributions of the prison officers, who had, indeed, risked their lives doing their job. In another response, there was a critique of Mgr Murray’s description of what he had called ‘torture’; this was challenged as hear-say, as not his own experience but as conveying what someone else had said to him. This opens up the question of how oral history is to deal with such ‘second-hand’ memories, that is, memories passed on by others.²² While Murray could see the injuries, he was reliant on the testimony of others to explain the causes. These responses confirm not only County’s concerns about exposing oneself to criticism but also the courage of those who contributed to the PMA, and other storytelling projects, and have agreed to their contribution in the film.

A criticism at another event was that there is little sense of what the prisoners were convicted of: ‘A pity no questions (were) asked regarding what their crime was and no mention of victims’. Such a critique highlights a limitation of the project, that is, by relying on the prisons as both physical and thematic frame, what occurred outside the prison boundaries was not our concern; furthermore, life storytelling precluded direct questions beyond what the participants wished to convey; therefore, the court sentences, and the effect on any victims was rarely referred to by participants and never raised by the production team. While a valid critique, this limitation could not have been directly addressed using the project’s methodology, which was adopted to ensure as full and wide a range of participation as possible.

When empathy from viewers was forthcoming, it was often tangentially. One of the most common responses highlighted the re-stimulation of memories of the viewers. Several women were reminded of their own communities’ experiences during the Troubles; one person wrote on an evaluation sheet, ‘I was tense throughout because of the memories it evoked, but I am so grateful to hear these stories and to have this record’. Others remembered their own experiences of having relatives or friends imprisoned. A community worker, Joanna Felo, who facilitated a screening for an inter-community women’s group, wrote to us afterwards: ‘the subject of conflict-related imprisonment was a shared one, as most participants from both communities had experienced imprisonment of a family member’ (Letter, 3 May 2016). A local history group had recently visited Armagh Gaol, where one wing remains accessible and remarked how vivid the film was in helping to populate the empty prison with human experiences. Another group of viewers remarked how the prison officers’ stories had revealed lives that were hitherto kept behind closed (locked) doors. The story of women’s experiences was frequently mentioned in responses; Joanna wrote, ‘the film focused specifically on women’s articulation of their own experiences, and the participants connected with interviewees in the film and appreciated the creation of a creative space focused on women’s perspectives’.

A common theme running through the events, whether in empathetic or antagonistic mood, was the need, and the difficulty, of finding a ‘safe space’ to share memories, to tell one’s story and to be acknowledged publicly.²³ Joanna commented,

The film screening and facilitated workshop created a structure within which the participants felt safe to discuss and explore contentious issues and begin a constructive

dialogue on areas in which there is currently much disagreement amongst the participants.
(Letter, 3 May 2016)

Many people have not had this opportunity, and at each event, we encouraged those present to consider the government's proposed Oral History Archive, which constitutes one of the Stormont House Agreement's three strands in addressing the legacy of the past²⁴ and to plan for the how, what and where to tell their stories, if indeed they wished to. This raised the issue of resistance to storytelling, which was expressed by a security force person at one event, who explained that the Troubles were not over for him and that he risked his life by identifying what his occupation was. The possibility of considering non-audiovisual methods of storytelling, such as verbatim theatre, art and textiles was discussed as possible alternatives. There is, of course, the issue of some people not yet ready to tell their story, for a variety of reasons, including self-confidence, fear and shame. We have liaised with local community organisers in advance of screenings to ensure that the groups are ready to hear these, sometimes difficult, stories. Since there is no guarantee that everyone is 'ready', because there is always the risk that such stories re-stimulate trauma in viewers, cooperation with organisers is essential to at least minimise potential harm in not only the re-stimulation of pain but also the re-stimulation of anger, although both frequently go together.

An important contrast should be noted for reception to the film *We Were There*, about the role of women in the male prison the Maze and Long Kesh, and *Armagh Stories*. At the premiere of the former, all 12 of the female participants attended a post-screening discussion, and the chair was insightful in her drawing out what the participants shared in their experiences and reflection of the role of women in the male prison. At the premier of the latter, only the Open University tutors and the male loyalist ex-prisoner turned up. This may be explained partly that the timing was inconvenient, but, for most, the unspoken and obvious issue was the change of tone of the film. While *We Were There* was edited by Aguiar to consciously draw out parallels between various experiences, *Armagh Stories* inevitably drew upon contrasting and competing narratives of what was experienced in the prison. A prison officer remembered the killing of a colleague outside the main gate; a solicitor described the experience of strip-searching as humiliating and degrading; a doctor confirmed that violence had been used against prisoners. It seems too early in the process of peace-making in Northern Ireland to expect such divisions and wounds to be healed. While the abundance of bottom-up storytelling projects offers hope, the government's lack of initiative in addressing the legacy of the past confirms the tensions and difficulties on the road ahead.

Conclusion

While the editing of linear, intercut films was not intended during the recording period in 2006, funding opportunities and limitations meant we had to consider this option, and *Armagh Stories: Voices from the Gaol* is one iteration. The film engages with the memories of those who passed through the gates of the mainly female prison during the Troubles and reveals how returning to the site of the experiences has influenced what memories are recalled and how they are performed. The issue of structuring the stories, so that the protocols of inclusivity and co-ownership are respected while a narrative is constructed, was addressed with full consent from the participants. Not only did they sign a co-ownership agreement at the time of recording, but the participants were consulted during the film's post-production, with rough cuts sent and commented on before proceeding to the next stage of editing.

The tensions in juxtaposing stories that challenge each other asks questions of audiences whose tasks include hearing the story of 'the other' in a society emerging out of violence and where the peace process remains fragile, and government policy about the past remains hesitant. To date, the screenings have been viewed and discussed in local centres to inter and intra community groups, where the responses have been varied, which, in turn, has led to the necessity of considering when groups/individuals are ready for such sensitive and, at times, difficult-to-hear content and to share difficult-to-hear responses. Overall, the value of storytelling as a method of addressing a violent past has been validated by the participants' continued consent for their contributions to be seen publicly and by audiences' receptions which have been overwhelmingly appreciative while highlighting the risks to be considered in use of such material.

At the time of writing, a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund has been awarded to have the archive hosted in the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland. When ready for public access in 2018, the archive will offer 300 hours of audiovisual material, plus paper and digital materials that complement and contextualise the archive's production processes. Further research into its uses and potential will be possible then.

Notes

1. The film is available free on the Prisons Memory Archive website www.prisonsmemoryarchive.com.
2. www.prisonsmemoryarchive.com, of which I am the director.
3. For more information on these protocols, see <http://www.p-e-r-f-o-r-m-a-n-c-e.org/?p=139>
4. Mairs Dyer (2014) has written primarily about the reception of her installation, although she also provides background to the filming process.
5. In her film and writing, Aguiar addresses the role of women in the male Maze and Long Kesh Prison.
6. The Bloomfield (1998), Eames-Bradley (2009) and Hass-O'Sullivan (2014) reports.
7. For more on the history of the prison, see [Brady \(2011\)](#) and [Murray \(1998\)](#).
8. For more on the role of oral history on peace-building, see <https://www.brown.edu/academics/public-humanities/events/what-more-happening-interview-potential-oral-history-peaceful-resolution-conflict>
9. More on the recording process can be found at [McLaughlin \(2010\)](#).
10. See this overview of attempts at utilising the Maze and Long Kesh Prison site for a reconciliation centre: <http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/maze-the-twists-and-turns-of-a-tortuous-saga-29504728.html>
11. I am not aware of any other documentary filmic representations of female prison staff during the Troubles.
12. Other films, such as *A Kind of Sisterhood*, focus primarily on the experience of the republican prisoners.
13. Text was used in preference to voice-over in order to ensure the primacy of the voices of the participants.
14. While the Troubles officially ended in 1998 at the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, which resulted from permanent ceasefires by the main armed groups, dissident groups continue sporadic attacks, including the killing of serving prison officer Adrian Ismay in March 2016: <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-nireland-blast-idUKKCN0WH1KR?feedType=RSS&feedName=domesticNews>

15. William, also known as Plum, died shortly after the completion of this film and was present at its premiere in Belfast, where he spoke eloquently about the need to address the past in ways that are inclusive and ethical.
16. Aside from the occasional violence, the peace process has been subject to periodic political crises, for example, see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-34176740>
17. The campaign for political status had been won in the early 1970s, when Special Category Status was introduced, but withdrawn in 1976 by the Labour Government.
18. The Police Ombudsman recently found evidence of state collusion with the loyalist paramilitary killings of six civilians; see <https://www.policeombudsman.org/Media-Releases/2012/Police-Ombudsman-statement-on-Loughinisland-invest>
19. An example of such marginalisation arises with the recently released documentary film on the prison hunger strike of 1981, when 10 prisoners died, *Bobby Sands: 66 Days*; apart from an archive interview with Bernadette McAliskey, the film contained no interviews of females.
20. While there have been multiple broadcast television programmes about the 1981 hunger strikes and the escape from the Maze and Long Kesh Prison in 1983, there has been a very limited number of documentary films on the experiences of female prisoners; these include *Unseen Women* (2012), *A Kind of Sisterhood* (2015) and *Armagh Stories* (2015).
21. Sinn Fein, the largest nationalist party in Stormont, was allied to the Irish Republican Army, which was responsible for most deaths during the Troubles.
22. I use the term 'second-hand memory' rather than post-memory, which Marianne Hirsch (1997) describes as 'the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth' (p. 22). Murray witnessed the physical injuries of the men he examined and who described to him what had occurred only days prior to their meeting.
23. Psychoanalyst Renos Papadopolous (1998) suggests, 'The healing effect of storytelling, in its multiple variations, has always been a well-known phenomena' (p. 472).
24. For more information, see <http://www.wavetraumacentre.org.uk/news/outline-of-stormont-house-agreement>

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