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Troubled Generations? (De)constructing Narratives of Youth Experience in the Northern Ireland Conflict

Abstract

This article explores the ways in which youth experiences of the Northern Ireland 'Troubles' have been dominantly imagined within post-conflict memory culture. Tracing the development of dominant representations of the young as either innocent targets or destabilized combatants in popular memory, the article begins by concentrating specifically on the dominance of those imaginaries which characterise individuals who grew up in the Northern Ireland conflict as the members of 'troubled generations.' Drawing on a series of oral history interviews with those who grew up in Belfast during the 1970s and 1980s, it goes on to address the ways in which such representations may tend to obscure the broader 'messiness' of everyday youth experience in popular memory. Specifically, it suggests that this contributes to a hierarchy of the 'speakable' and the 'hearable', impacting the articulation of personal memories of youth experience which fail to fit with the existing cultural circuit. The article concludes by suggesting scholars pay closer attention both to the ways in which dominant memory discourses tend to de-limit the complexities of lived experiences of violence, but also the (de)constructive potential of personal narratives spoken alongside, through, and in excess of dominant historical imaginaries.

KEYWORDS*: Youth, children, conflict, oral history, Northern Ireland, the Troubles.*

Introduction[i]

Personal memory narratives, as Penny Summerfield (2004) notes, are always articulated in relation to broader cultural circuits.[ii] These cultural circuits do not only offer a set of languages or frames of reference which an individual may draw upon (or intervene in) when articulating their personal experiences and subjectivities. They also present a dynamics of power in which

some narratives of past and present become more 'speakable' and 'hearable' than others.[iii] The dominant imaginaries of the child that circulate in post-conflict memory culture in Northern Ireland offer an excellent example of a cultural circuit which invokes and reproduces such an unequal narrative hierarchy. As I argue in this article, depictions of the younger 'troubled generations' have become so emblematic in representations of the conflicted past, that they have come to generate a series of silences and erasures amidst the loudness of dominant representations.

I concentrate here specifically on the emergence of those representations which tend to characterise individuals who grew up in the Northern Ireland conflict as either traumatized victims or destabilized combatants. As Bill Rolston (2011, 9) notes, personal memory narratives of the members of these generations remain towards 'the bottom of the narrative ladder' in post-conflict memory cultures in Northern Ireland. This exists in strange tension with the relative loudness of specific representations of the young within the cultural circuit. In the context of the present, imaginaries of the 'troubled generations' can offer placeholders for collective narratives concerning the history of violent division in the north, as well as hopes and anxieties about the state of society in the present and future. My aim here is not to suggest that children and teenagers were not 'troubled' by conflict during the years of the Northern Ireland 'Troubles.' Indeed, after young adults aged 20–30, those under the age of 18 were the second most heavily affected civilian group in terms of wartime violence (see Rolston 2011; Smyth 1998). Rather, I seek to address how such representations, while they may be both affectively and politically resonant within the post-conflict era, work to obscure the broader 'messiness' of everyday youthful experience in popular memory—creating powerful and pervasive cultural imaginaries of the child-in-conflict that have consequences for the articulation of memories, attitudes and experiences at a personal level.

My argument in this article is not only concerned with the de-limiting potential of the cultural circuit as it relates to popular memory of conflict-related youth experience. It is with the corresponding (de)constructive capacities of oral history narratives as 'complex texts mediated [both] by collective ideologies and diverse conditions of cultural production' and the imaginative impulses and complexities of subjective recollection (Dawson 2007, 27). As I will address in my discussion, to recognize that such narratives contain within them the potential to unsettle restrictive imaginaries of youth experience is not to fetishize their position as capable of 'directly accessing' the truth of past events. It is to acknowledge that as *mediated but*

meaningful accounts of lived experience, these texts can, if given closer critical attention, illuminate the broader heterogeneity of youth experiences within the situation of violent division and, in doing so, trouble and contest the one-dimensional representation of these experiences at a cultural level.

In the first section of the article I explore how particular cultural imaginaries of the child-in-conflict initially came to circulate in popular memory in Northern Ireland. I offer an overview of how, in contemporary Northern Irish memory culture, the 'troubled generations' have been commonly represented within broader narratives of violent division and its legacies in the present. In the second, I draw upon a range of oral history interviews with those who grew up during the conflict in Belfast.[iv] I explore how these personal memories of youth experience may be less hearable within the context of the cultural circuit, but also how in turn they mobilize acts of narrative defiance, troubling and contesting the loudness of the dominant representations that circulate in memory culture. This is not an exhaustive analysis of the position of the young within post-conflict Northern Irish memory culture, but one with important implications for how, as scholars, we approach, analyse and 'hear' the lived experiences of those who grew up in the time of conflict.

The Decontextualization of the Child in Conflict

Children and young people are both symbolically mobile and specifically potent in communicating the horrors and tragedies of war.[v] 'Children's faces demand responses', Helen Brocklehurst (2006, 26) argues, 'positioned alone and out of place in a situation that is not of their making, they are a compelling illustration of wrongdoing.' At an international level, images of the young are frequently used in media reporting to express outrage at the violation of the innocent, to castigate aggressors for their interventions, or to express fears over the potentially corruptive nature of violence in future (see Brocklehurst 2006, ch. 1). These symbolic uses of the child-in-conflict are in some cases powerful because of the particular stories attached to them—the affecting nature of young individuals themselves. But they are also powerful even (or perhaps especially) where the specific circumstances of young lives are decontextualized. More often than not, the young are included in conflict reporting with very little accompanying information—their images anonymized or abstracted in order that they can be inscribed with a broader series of narratives regarding the nature and reach of wartime violence. The every-child-in-conflict thus emerges as a passive placeholder for an array of

political and emotional narratives in contemporary conflict and 'disaster aesthetics' (Brocklehurst 2006, 26), offering a means of signifying trauma, articulating potential endangerment, or capturing moments of violent escalation.

This symbolic usage of the young is tied up very closely with a broader set of qualities bestowed upon children and adolescents within the popular imagination. Young individuals are commonly understood to be in possession of a set of peculiar and shifting qualities within the western social imagination—viewed on the one hand as a passive, innocent, or radically vulnerable category of persons, and on the other as a potentially disruptive, irrational, or transgressive social force (see Lanclos 2003; Oswell 2016). Conceptualized by adult onlookers as properly located within the un-knowing world of the child (James and Prout 1997), the young may become emblematic as victims where they are degraded through acts of conflict violence, but they can also become specifically threatening as a result of their imagined fall from innocence (see also Martins 2001)—embodying a concomitant potential to reproduce such violence in future. These imagined qualities, and the reductions attendant to them, are still very much a presence within post-conflict Northern Irish memory culture. In this context, they tend to underpin a series of affective and personally meaningful narratives about the nature and meanings of past violence, but in doing so, obscure those narratives that fail to fit with dominant representations.

Though the historical contours of the Troubles cannot here be explored at length, it is important to note that children and young people as a social group were certainly amongst those most adversely and disproportionally affected by conflict-related violence (see Cairns 1987; Muldoon 2004; Smyth 1998). Young individuals were by no means always passive onlookers to the conflict's antagonisms during the period 1969–1998, but their relative vulnerabilities were in many cases consistently overlooked or exploited by adult combatants. In thousands of cases, the young were personally subject to violent interference from security and paramilitary forces, physical injury and displacement, and the loss of parents, siblings, and friends to violence or imprisonment (see Muldoon 2004). Teenagers in particular were problematized in ways that increased their precarity as social actors in public spaces and became the targets of violence or efforts at recruitment into paramilitary organisations (See Smyth 1998; Kennedy 2001; Spence 2002; Brocklehurst 2006). Contemporary claims to 'innocent victimhood' or 'adolescent destabilization' should thus be understood in relation to these material realities. They are meaningful in part simply because they provide those affected by forms of conflict-

related violence with a means of acknowledging aspects of the lived realities of their experiences in the context of the present.

In media reports, books, films, and other cultural texts concerning the Northern Ireland conflict, however, representations of the young tend to appear within heavily restrictive terms. One symbolic figure that features prominently in this cultural domain is the innocent child victim— signifying the excesses of conflict violence and aggression and its most shocking impacts on the civilian population. In local instances, the usage of this representation is of course frequently attached to individual stories. It commemorates the violence committed against specific loved young individuals or seeks, in the name of historical justice, to contest the erasure of violence committed against children by state and paramilitary forces.[vi] However, the image of the innocent child victim is, as discussed, powerful even where the specific circumstances of young lives are progressively decontextualized within the cultural circuit— becoming instead a placeholder for more abstract collective narratives of traumatization. The latter dynamic is perhaps even more visible with regard to the image of the teenage paramilitary, which remains in Northern Ireland a threatening reminder of the capacity of conflict to erupt once again in future—for the cyclical nature of violence to re-emerge in full force.

These two figures, the innocent child victim and the menacing young paramilitary, are amongst the most dominant cultural signifiers within cultural representations of youth experience. As the work of Ed Cairns has shown, they have their roots in the time of conflict itself and, from the outset, reflected both material realities but also the tendency to reduce the experiences of the child within the popular imagination. Writing in 1987, Cairns (1987, 11) referred to the 'glare of the world's media' upon children and young people in Northern Ireland, noting the 'natural curiosity' of onlookers 'as to how the children of Ulster have coped' with the presence of violence. Depictions of child bombing and shooting victims showed the young as traumatized and irrevocably harmed by large-scale acts of violence, and photographs of adolescent 'stone-throwers' in Belfast and Derry became a staple for newspaper reports discussing potential violent escalation (Cairns 1987, 11). Moreover, Cairns observed that media commentators were overwhelmingly concerned with speculating on the destabilizing impacts of political violence at a generational level, tending to frame their questions in relation to a series of sensationalized narratives: 'Has growing up against a backdrop of bombs, explosions, assassinations and riots produced a totally amoral generation of potential

psychopaths, a shell shocked generation of neurotics, or has it had any effect at all?' (Cairns 1987, 11) Although the peace agreement brought an end to active hostilities in 1998, these reductive images of the 'troubled generations' continue to have a firm hold in contemporary cultural representations in Northern Ireland. In particular, they have taken on new meanings and importance as the cultural circuit has adapted to conditions of peace. I will now offer a brief description of each of these figures as they appear in present-day Northern Irish memory culture.

The Figure of the Child Victim

As noted, many decontextualized depictions of the young exist at the level of popular culture, where images of the 'troubled generations' are used to articulate the past horrors of violence, or its unsettling place within the present. A particularly potent vehicle for such narratives is film, and cinematic depictions of the Troubles often feature young characters whose tragic or threatening presence amidst conflict violence functions as a narratological statement about the nature of violent traumatization itself. In Yann Demange's 2014 blockbuster film *'71* (Demange 2014), for instance, the image of the child victim is used to articulate a narrative concerning the collectively traumatizing nature of wartime violence (see Newby & Roulston 2019). One of the film's characters stands out in particular in this regard. In the course of the film, a young protestant boy, whose name (unlike most other significant characters) we never learn, is violently killed as a result of a paramilitary bomb explosion. His scarred remains and lifeless body function as a potent signifier of the conflict's brutal reality, even as the boy himself remains anonymous—detached from everyday realities. This trope contains the echoes of a similar narrative from the 1995 film *Nothing Personal*, directed by Thaddeus O'Sullivan (1995), in which the killing of Kathleen, a young girl from west Belfast, offers the climax of a narrative focused on the universally traumatizing nature of conflict violence. The young characters of both films are presented as universally relevant signifiers for the most brutalizing impacts of violence upon the civilian population—rather than as more developed protagonists who possess lives outside, or in excess of, this context.

Traces of this imaginary similarly surface in non-fictional texts about the conflict. Just as in other international circuits, images of children have long been central to media reporting on the Northern Ireland Troubles, and in the present images of the innocent young routinely accompany articles or blogs about the conflict's present and future legacies. In July 2018, for

example, *IrishCentral*, a North American news website about the island of Ireland, ran a piece entitled 'Heartbreaking images from Northern Ireland remind us why we can never return to the Troubles.' Focusing especially on photographs of children, the authors stated that images of 'crying children walking to school and young boys meeting with fully armed soldiers as they run to meet their friends show the worst of the Northern Ireland Troubles' (IrishCentral 2018). Closer to home, the *Belfast Telegraph* published a photographic archive later that year memorializing 40 years of conflict in Northern Ireland. Using as the cover photo an image of children walking down the street as a masked paramilitary takes aim around the corner, they construed the conflict's unsettling and emotional nature in the present through a symbolic focus on young innocents in danger (Belfast Telegraph 2018).

These representations of the innocent young offer placeholders upon which to stage a series of broader narratives regarding the impacts of violent division within Northern Ireland at large. In some cases, they signal the worst excesses of conflict violence during the years 1969–1998. In others, they provide an emotional means of referencing its legacies for the population as a whole. In achieving such centrality, however, these narratives tend to entrap the young in restrictive imaginaries within the context of popular memory, amplifying those experiences which can be mobilized as emblematic for collective narratives of trauma, whilst doing little to examine the more complex and ambiguous impacts of violence on young individuals themselves.

The Figure of the Menacing Youth

A similar process is at work in cultural representations of the adolescent paramilitary. As Catarina Martins has argued, depictions of child combatants offer a particularly unsettling presence within the popular imagination. Innocence, Martins (2011, 435) argues, 'as one of the main synonyms of childhood becomes paradoxical when children are integrated into armies', or in other cases demonstrate a willingness and capacity to engage in political violence. As young individuals transgress the boundaries of their 'un-knowing' worlds, they risk becoming identified within the popular imagination in relation to new and liminal identities. What emerges is something akin to the 'un-child'—the good child *made* bad—an inversion of their former innocent self (see Brocklehurst 2006). The young combatant thus becomes associated with the 'construct of monstrousness' identified by anthropologist Donna Lanclos (2003, 149), still unthinking, but newly aggressive as their transgression between the unknowing and

passive world of the child and the agentic and morally ambiguous world of the adult is framed as a result of moral corruption. This depiction is already at work in dominant understandings of adolescents as prone to being disruptive or rebellious, but in situations of warfare it may be elevated to the level of moral panic, as concerns over the internal character of the civilian population play upon already existing fears regarding the corruptibility of the young and their potentially destabilizing role in future.

Even today, such fears remain an underlying presence both in those depictions of Northern Ireland's violent past that look back upon its impacts on civilians, as well as in more present-focused narratives which express anxieties about the current state of society and a potential resurgence of conflict violence in future. An article revealingly entitled 'Belfast Riots: Dismissed as Yobs, the Rioters in Northern Ireland Could Be Terrorism's Next Generation' appeared in *The Guardian* in 2010, accompanied by an image of an adolescent protester. The author, Henry McDonald, argues 'that recent history teaches us that from out of this mass of the disaffected and the seemingly nihilistic will come the foot soldiers of the next generation of republican terrorism' (McDonald 2010). Here, the trope of the destabilized youngster is reinforced as it is mobilized to predict the resurgence of conflict at the hands of the post-conflict generation.

In the cultural sphere, the figure of the menacing youth comes in a variety of different guises. One of its most common instances can be found in representations of the conflict in popular culture, which often feature young individuals whose engagement in political violence has degraded them in moral terms. In Lisa Barros D'Sa and Glenn Leyburn's 2013 film *Good Vibrations*, an otherwise relatively upbeat depiction of teenage punks in Belfast, a group of adult members of the Provisional IRA discuss their fears of the extreme potential for violence held by the next generation. 'It's not us you should be afraid of', they explain to the film's protagonist, 'it's the ones coming up behind' (Barros D'Sa & Leyburn 2013). The young paramilitaries depicted in the film are, overwhelmingly, embodiments of extremity and irrational hatred: as characters, they are only minimally fleshed out, noting only that they want to 'destroy everything' before going on to beat up the owner of a local record shop for no clear purpose. Cinematic interpretations of the destabilized adolescent combatant are of course only fictionalized, but they continue to shape and inform the cultural circuit in important ways, adding to the loudness of representations that construct the young as threatening or destabilizing within the context of conflict.

The point, it should be emphasized, is not that the two figures discussed here exhaust the contemporary imaginary of the-child-in-conflict within popular memory.[vii] Rather, it is that as hegemonic discursive constructions or prominent cultural imaginaries, they tend to generate a hierarchy of 'speakability' and 'hearability' in which certain expected and normalized narratives about growing up in times of conflict are more likely to be publicly recognized than are more 'messy' alternative ones. In the following section I thus wish to explore an alternative set of narratives. Drawing on a series of oral history interviews with those who grew up in Belfast during the years of conflict, I discuss how individual narratives negotiate the dominant imaginaries of the innocent child and the youthful combatant, asking in particular what the deconstructive potential is of oral history testimonies as regards the dominant imaginaries of the cultural circuit.

The Messiness of Youth Experience: Reading Oral History Testimonies

The cultural imaginary of the 'troubled generations' rests in large part on the assumption that the world of the child is, in some senses, separate from the world of the adult. Whereas, in this imaginary, the adult world is ambiguous, complex, and conflicted, children live comparatively simple lives, largely ignorant of the complexities of their social environment. In reality, of course, young individuals' lives in conflict were much more complicated. Indeed, though the young certainly were victimized and destabilized by the formations of violence that existed during the years of armed struggle in Northern Ireland, they often found highly agentic and sometimes surprising ways to mediate its social, political, and structural pressures. The young continued to grow, play, laugh, socialize, rebel and engage in romance even as they actively mediated the conflict's pressures. Many of the oral testimonies I collected in the course of my research in Belfast from 2016 to 2018 in some way or another explore the theme of youthful 'separateness' from the world of the adult during the years of the conflict. Crucially, however, interviewees tended to frame this separateness in far more complex terms, exploring their generational position of growing up in conflict as subject to certain specific pressures but also to various contingent possibilities.

The Conflicted Landscape as Playground

This was the case in my interview with David, for example, who grew up in the community of the Shankill, west Belfast, during the 1970s. He describes his early experiences as complex and ambiguous, centring the telling of his memories often on the conflict's potential affordance for youthful exploration, play and teenage rebellion. In the passage below he is describing the arrival of conflict:

> DAVID: In 1969 I was nine, and I remember the night the houses were getting burnt out and some of my friends were Catholics. Us kids, well I was getting took out of my house at eleven o'clock that night—my Catholic friends' houses were all in flames. All getting burnt out. So we didn't know what was going on because we were a young age.
> But we were excited the next day when all the commotion was going on. When you seen houses burnt out and pubs burnt out and there was barricades going up and men running about with masks on and, you know, just patrolling the area? And the buildings and all, you were allowed to go into the buildings? We were stealing the lead and anything we could get our hands on. (Interview November 2016, David)

Like many interviewees, David initially drew upon a dominant discourse of childish innocence to communicate his response to the arrival of conflict (and perhaps also to negotiate the difficulty of articulating his feelings about the sectarian violence taking place against his Catholic friends). However, whilst such a discourse appears at first to render him non-agentic by locating his youthful self within the unknowing world of the child, he quickly re-orientates his recollections to bring into view his active engagements with the boundaries and features of the newly conflicted space. He describes entering those buildings destroyed by violence, for example, and engaging in acts of looting, play and adventure with his friends.

David's active engagement with his material environment often took centre stage in the course of our interview. Indeed, shortly after our initial exchange on the onset of violence, I asked him if he had enjoyed growing up in the Shankill itself. This led to several avenues of discussion, but in particular to the following statement on the subject of his youthful enjoyment at exploring the socially and materially disrupted environment:

> DAVID: Oh I loved it, oh I loved it down here. As I say, it was excitement, everything was going on, there was riots, there was gun battles, there was

> everything you can imagine, plus, and then there was bombs going off all over Belfast and we only, kids, it was exciting to us, we didn't really know what was going on. (Interview November 2016, David)

The sense of excitement at the disruptions of conflict David expresses here is a narrative thread that runs throughout the interview. It is not, I should emphasise, that David simply wished to displace or erase an awareness of the painful or traumatizing qualities of conflict altogether. Indeed, during our conversation he often recounted the more painful and frightening aspects of violent division—explaining that he had witnessed another young person being killed, for example, and reflecting on his own sense of having been one of the 'lucky ones' (Interview November 2016, David). But he also sought to make space for memories of youthful joy alongside such more painful memories. He described playing in the empty buildings of the interface, for example, and running away to spend nights with his friends in 'empty factories', saying 'we used to stay out in them, sometimes for two weeks!' (Interview November 2016, David). Moreover, he highlighted the possibilities this engendered for avoiding forms of adult surveillance. In the passage below, he conveys his love of playing in the derelict buildings of the local area, which is something he connects both to a sense of recreation and exploration, and at times to a need for occasional retreat:

> INTERVIEWER: Were there a lot of empty buildings?
> DAVID: Oh aye, oh they were burnt out you see, they were now, the empty houses we used to play in them every—used to dig holes in the wall, you know, in an empty house? And you'd have dug a hole in the wall up the stairs to the next house, and then you dig a hole in another wall to the next house, so you had big holes the whole way up, up the houses, so when people were chasing you went into one house into another, into another, you know? (Interview November 2016, David)

Gabriel Moshenska (2014, 230), in his discussion of young people's activities and spatial practices during the London Blitz, comments upon their often 'anarchic, joyous and sensory engagements with bombsites' as sites marked out from the regulatory orders of the everyday landscape, which offer a materiality that allows for forms of particularly creative play. There is certainly something to be found of this here in David's recollection, where he recounts a will to engage in sometimes destructive playful practices which might be subject to censure in everyday spaces. But there is also a reference to the potential dangers surrounding his early

experiences. Indeed, though at this point it is unclear whether the individuals chasing him are friends at play or more dangerous figures, he again references the possibility of hiding within or running away to the destroyed buildings, distancing himself from the pressures surrounding everyday life.

I am certainly not claiming that David's narrative should be interpreted uncritically as offering an unmediated 'truth' about the experience of growing up in the conflict. Indeed, in focusing predominantly on moments of childhood joy, David does often construct a highly particular version of his younger self. Yet it is the case that he reflects in far more complex terms on the generational practices of the 'younger Troubles generations' than is dominantly captured in representations of the young as merely 'troubled' by violence. Just as the disruptions of conflict did restrict many of the possibilities associated with youthful existence, so too, David suggests, did their presence sometimes produce unexpected affordances. In bringing into view his own positive experiences of youthful exploration, pleasure-seeking and rebellion, his narrative functions as a critique of the heavily de-limited field of dominant representations of youth experiences of the conflict—a field which continues to rely upon common depictions of the wartime child as a tragic or traumatised figure, and which eschews the broader messiness and heterogeneity of youthful life.

Violence as Everyday Reality

David's critique of the dominant representations of youthful conflict experience was far from unique, and similar critiques were developed, either implicitly or explicitly, across the fifteen interviews I conducted in Belfast in the course of my research. This was the case with individuals who had joined paramilitary organizations as teenagers, who had experienced forms of state and paramilitary violence as children and young people, or who felt that the intrusions of conflict within their lives were merely incidental. To the latter group belonged a number of people who were born into the active period of armed struggle and who experienced the arrival of violence not as transformative or crisis-inducing, but simply as a background to their everyday lives.

In their joint interview, for example, Claire and Jane explored the theme of the normalization or 'expectedness' of violence, which for them was a reality of life from the outset, having been born into the conflict during the early 1970s. Both women grew up in heavily affected regions

to the north and west of Belfast, one in a 'mixed community' and the other in a loyalist area. As can be seen in the opening comments of their conversation, they understand and recollect the conflict and its impacts in early childhood as being simply a fact of life:

> JANE: Cos people just got on with everyday life no matter…
>
> CLAIRE: Yeah what's going on round them yeah, yeah.
>
> JANE: I think that was just, obviously I was born the year before and knew no different, I mean, that's just the way it was! (Interview November 2016, Claire and Jane)

As the interview progressed, the two women continued to explore the 'normalcy' of conflict, in the first instance by relating a number of anecdotes. One such anecdote revolved around a bomb scare in Belfast's town centre, recalled by Jane in the following way:

> JANE: But it's just wee memories like that—I remember being in town one time, and there was a bomb scare. I can't remember what we were in. But everybody then, had to go, they were told to evacuate the building and go out the front and, cos I remember running down the stairs, people were nearly tripping over my mummy was there with three wee coats, cos like, I mean there's only a year and a half between each of us. […] Trying to get us down the stairs, and then when we got to the front door they said there was car bomb out the front! [Beginning to laugh] so everybody had to go to the back, so everybody was rushing to the back of the shop, and then there, apparently there was a bomb scare out the back of the shop and we were stuck in it! [more laughter]. Now I can't remember a bomb going off or anything like that but I *do* remember being afraid trying to get down the stairs because they were saying you had to get out of the shop! [we all laugh] (Interview November 2016, Claire and Jane)

The darkly comic way in which Jane recounts this memory of the bomb scare is characteristic of her emotional performance throughout the course of the interview. Indeed, though she mentions that she was frightened by the threat of imminent violence as she tried to escape the shop with her siblings and mother—'I do remember being afraid'—she focuses very quickly upon the humorous nature of the incident, laughing at the image of her 'mummy standing there with three wee coats', and the farcical nature of the threats the family faced at each different

exit—'we were stuck in it! [more laughter].' In performing her narrative in this way, Jane begins to elaborate a little on the multifaceted way in which she feels she personally experienced intrusions of conflict in her early life. She suggests here that the presence of background violence could at once appear as unsettling or fear-inducing from the perspective of childhood, but also as a more common nuisance or humorous event.

Claire echoed this performative aspect of Jane's narrative, similarly recounting through the use of dark humour memories that revealed, on the one hand, that the conflict impacted her everyday life in sometimes relatively intrusive ways and, on the other, that in the context of the present these memories are *ordinary,* even where they highlight the exceptional nature of conflict itself. This came to the fore particularly clearly in a section of the interview that dealt with how she experienced ethno-sectarian division, with Claire relating a narrative of her own about the sometimes-hard limits of interpersonal boundaries in the context of her teenage years:

> CLAIRE: I remember doing cross-community from the age of twelve, um, with the community centre […] and we went camping. […] I remember being fourteen and going and meeting a boy [laughing] from Ardoyne, he was fourteen. Petey you called him, and he was, again, he was just drop dead gorgeous! And I remember the two of us exchanging bracelets [we all laugh]. Bangles. Do you remember the wee silver bangles? And I remember giving him my bangles and having a wee kiss and all, and going, and, you know like your first boyfriend? I was like oh my goodness, like he's lovely. He's *lovely!* But you knew it could never be, you knew it could never be, and I remember leaving camp and crying my eyes out because he'd to go to his bus and I'd to go on mine, and I was sobbing and I was like, so upset! But again, we never ever seen each other again! (Interview November 2016, Claire and Jane)

Here, Claire highlights a moment at which the impacts of violent division did have a direct bearing on her life as a young person, recalling the loss of a teenage romance because it transgressed the boundaries of ethno-sectarian division. This is not a romanticized or trope-ish narrative, however, in the manner mobilized by cultural representations of young love across the barricades like Joan Lingard's *Kevin and Sadie* series of young adult fiction (e.g. Lingard 1970). Rather, it is a complicated emotional insight into having to negotiate the ethno-political divisions of everyday life during the already tumultuous process of coming of age. Though Claire laughs about her own distress as a young person, she does not seek here to de-centre the

pain experienced by her teenage self in the telling of the story. Rather, she allows both the tragic and comically absurd emotional frequencies of the memory to emerge within the present.

Like David's, Claire and Jane's narratives thus begin to unsettle those dominant and expected modes of telling about the violent past and its relationship to the post-conflict present, at times implicitly and others explicitly defying an easily identifiable relationship between the presence of violence and its impacts upon young lives. For them, the intrusions of conflict were not so much singularly traumatizing or destabilizing as irritating, intrusive, and disruptive of their everyday spaces and relationships as young people. What they bring into view is a set of experiences that are currently less hearable within popular memory, offering an account of childhoods lived through a range of modalities, even as they were prone to violent disruption

Memories of Violence

It is true that the interviewees discussed so far possess a relatively similar positionality in relation to the conflict, having been very young children when the conflict began, not having been recurrently targeted by direct physical violence, and not having been involved in confrontations as organised combatants. It would be tempting at this point to question whether the relative potential of the interview space in making room for the articulation of experiences that lie outside of dominant representations appeared only (or at least in large part) because the experiences being articulated were not particularly upsetting. This, however, was not the pattern that emerged as I spoke to those whose lives were marked by closer interactions with the conflict's physical antagonisms. Indeed, even those individuals who were heavily involved in conflict confrontations, or whose narratives could more easily be composed along the perpetrator/victim dynamic, often expressed frustration with some of the ways in which these experiences are usually imagined in the present.

James, for example, joined a loyalist paramilitary organisation in west Belfast as a young teenager, and offered a complex and often conflicting depiction of himself as a young person. At points, to be sure, he drew upon the dominant imaginary of the young destabilized combatant in constructing his narrative, drifting in and out of dominant representations to narrativize himself as a corrupted and unstable adolescent. He invoked, for example, a sense of the unavoidable nature of his own militarization, saying that 'in a sense it, if you grow up in violence, then you'll be violent. It's as simple as that. Because you can't, it can't not affect

you, do you know what I mean?' (Interview November 2016, James). But he also gave other reasons for his decision to participate in an organisation, explaining for instance that he was seeking a structure of care, having lost his father to imprisonment at a young age:

> JAMES: [T]he paramilitaries in them days—because, it actually made you, you wanted to belong to the paramilitaries cos it was like a family, it was like big family, everybody looked after each other and so, so to be in that, that's what you were becoming a part of and it was as if you—it created unity, do you understand me? (Interview November 2016, James)

Whilst James mobilizes a sense of himself as destabilized by violence, here he simultaneously complicates the representation of his character in the latter section of his narrative, exploring the various complexities that led to his eventual engagement in violence as a teenage paramilitary. In doing so he emphasizes his vulnerability, as well as the importance of the organisation as a network of care in negotiating the precarity of growing up in proximity to physical violence. This, I think, offers an implicit critique of the tendency to render young paramilitaries one-dimensional in post-conflict memory culture, contesting representations of youthful combatants as unthinking or motivated only by a will to aggression.

A similarly complex negotiation of the imaginary of the teenage paramilitary was articulated by Sean, who grew up in a republican community of west Belfast in the early 1970s. Like James, Sean joined a paramilitary organisation during his teenage years and also initially described his alignment to the republican struggle as a result of his proximity to violence:

> SEAN: Childhood, yeah. A traumatic experience, very much so. Growing up listening to the sound of gunfire. Looking at people burning buses, barricades, come up through what they called internment. Curfewed in our homes for three days and […] for an eleven-year-old it was a very traumatic experience, and uh, it kind of set me on my journey, in my life, in my, what I would call my republican values. (Interview November 2016, Sean)

As Sean explains, the presence of violence within his local community is something he did find traumatizing as a young child, and which he understands as, from the outset, setting him 'on a particular journey'. Whilst he asserts that his own life was set on a specific political course by

the proximity of violence in early childhood, however, Sean complicates the depiction of his progressive engagement in paramilitarism later in the narrative. Indeed, in the following extracts, he is discussing where he learned of the aims of republican paramilitary organisations, exploring the complex and shifting ways through which his political consciousness was formed:

> SEAN: I, quite early in life actually learned to form my own opinions on things, but that didn't stop me from being influence by other people. I'd love to say that I wasn't, but I was. […]
>
> You learned it from history in school first and foremost. You learned about the rising in 1916, about the, about partition in 1921 and, uh… You learned it on the street. You learned it from people who, who influenced you. And more times than enough manipulated you to their way of thinking. But you know, it *was* a learning process, like. (Interview November 2016, Sean)

Sean's understanding of how he came to be part of the republican struggle is clearly multifaceted, aligned here at once to a sense of his innocence, vulnerability, and potential for 'destabilization.' He presents himself as a young person who could be influenced and manipulated by adult combatants but also refers to his own agentic capacity to form political opinions, and to actively engage with the formations of violence surrounding him in school and on the street as a 'learning process'. As such, he brings into view an array of ways in which he feels he became aware of the meanings of the violence within his lived environment, reflecting both on the de-limiting of his agency in structural and relational terms, and his efforts to mobilize this agency within the confines offered. The point is not to detach Sean's personal narrative from his own sense of having been 'troubled' by the conflict as a young person. Rather, it is to indicate that even in drawing upon dominant imaginaries of the teenage paramilitary as vulnerable and easily destabilized, he complicates this depiction in personal and political terms—balancing it against his own recollection of agency and political consciousness.

Narrating Trauma

The final interview I want to explore here is in some ways similar to James's and Sean's, in that it is constructed around a set of publicly recognizable modes of telling, which bear relation

to existing representations of the young within the cultural circuit. Ben grew up in a heavily affected community to the west of Belfast, experiencing recurrent physical and structural violence as a result of material pressures and targeting by state and paramilitary forces. His father and brother were imprisoned by the time he had reached his early teenage years, and he felt caught up in a conflict in which he did not want to participate. Whilst Ben's narrative frequently draws upon the discourse of trauma and victimization to make sense of this relative saturation of violence in his life as a child, however, this does not result in a one-dimensional depiction of himself as a member of the 'troubled generations.' Indeed, when I asked him how he felt generally about having grown up in the conflict in Belfast, he replied with an effort to reflect on the emotional character of his memories, touching on the difficulty of constructing an uncomplicated narrative of youth experience as such:

> BEN: Um, see, it's difficult now. If you'd have asked me a few years, I'd have said yeah, I enjoyed growing up, I *really,* really—okay, we might've been out rioting, we might've been out doing different things, we might've been getting away with things I shouldn't have been getting away with, you know what I mean, I'd have said yeah, I'd have enjoyed that, but there's other things.
>
> You know what I mean cos, cos there's some bad things—here's me, you see, cos the way I look at it is, you try to hide things, know what I mean? You, you don't, you, I, the way I look at it, I've seen people shot, I've seen people blew up, I've seen people, you know what I mean? Whatever you want to call it. [Pause] But, you tend to bury those things, you know what I mean, you just, you don't want to remember those things, you try to remember, sometimes the good things […].
> (Interview November 2016, Ben)

In this exchange, which took place near the end of our interview, Ben seeks to make sense of the range of emotional states that his experiences of the conflict have produced in him throughout his life. Whilst the rhythm of his speech seems, at first glance, to suggest that he is struggling to compose these memories, I think it is better understood as a reflection of the complexity of the emotions he is attempting to narrate. Indeed, in trying to account for the way his feelings have shifted over time, Ben is grappling with what Graham Dawson (2016, 274) has called 'the complex "afterlife" of emotion' in post-conflict Northern Ireland. For Dawson, feelings about events that occurred in the past tend to shift and change over time, and as a result

'there is always scope for the making of new meanings, namings and interpretations of experience, including states of feeling, that are produced in retrospect, even many years afterwards' (2016, 274-275).

Certainly, Ben suggests here that his perspective on his early memories has shifted over the course of his life. He notes that, as an adult, he often attempted to 'bury' those childhood memories that remain painful in the present (and implicitly speculates that some others may do so as well). However, he does not seek to place a restrictive imaginary of youth conflict experience either on his own memories or those of the generation within which he locates himself, and he emphasises that his own memories of traumatic experiences sit alongside memories of joy and youthful freedom. What he brings into view, then, is a will to acknowledge both the 'good' and 'bad' aspects of growing up within situations of violence, the complexity and multiplicity of a youthful life amidst the relative chaos and saturation of violence which was messy in nature, and not easily narrated in the present. In this sense, Ben's testimony echoes many of the others discussed here, even as it dwells on the theme of traumatization. Whilst for Ben, this relates to the painful nature of his memories as a child, for some of the others, it relates to a sense of the conflict having not been universally 'tragic' or its having simply existed as part of everyday life.

Concluding Remarks

In this article I have explored how dominant representations of children in conflict tend to generate a dynamics of hearability and speakability, which renders certain narratives of the past more easily recognizable within post-conflict memory culture than others. I have argued that in contemporary Northern Irish memory culture, two particular symbolic figures are hegemonic: the innocent child victim and the destabilized combatant. Whilst these imaginaries can be meaningful on a personal and a collective level, they also risk obscuring the broader messiness of youth experience of the conflict, their loudness making it more difficult for alternative or dissenting narratives to be heard.

I have argued that oral narratives help us identify the dynamics of the speakable and the hearable as they relate to individual memories and experience, offering a sense of what remains subject to erasure in popular memory, even as they make room for individuals to reflect critically on or contest dominant discourses. As even the very short extracts that I have included

here suggest, the oral history interview is capable of providing a space where the restrictive categories of identity and experience in popular memory of the conflict can be troubled and contested. In some cases, this means that interviewees refuse dominant representations altogether, as happened, in a variety of different ways, in David's, Claire's and Jane's narratives. Indeed, each of their testimonies refused, to a greater or lesser extent, the category of the 'troubled generations,' speaking instead of the humorous, intriguing, exciting, or boring qualities of youthful life during the conflict. In other cases, dominant imaginaries may offer individuals some means of narrative composure, helping them to make sense of important events in their lives or providing meaningful ways of talking about their legacies in the present. Critically, however, even in such instances the reductive nature of hegemonic discourses may be subjected to critique, as happened in James's, Sean's and Ben's narratives, which highlight the inadequacies of those discourses which de-limit the categories of youthful combatancy or victimization by casting them in one-dimensional terms.

When approached critically, oral history testimonies thus come to appear as complex and sensitive cultural texts that carry within them a (de)constructive potential. As they challenge or negate the erasures at work in popular discourse, they simultaneously bring into view more complex and messy forms of experience and subjective recollection. However, as a form of recollection spoken alongside, through, but also frequently *in excess of* dominant historical imaginaries, oral testimony also places certain demands on the listener. In particular, the speaker's audience must be attentive to those memories that may exist on frequencies that are more difficult to hear due to the dynamics of hearability and speakability engendered by the cultural circuit. Moments of narrative defiance may indeed be fleeting, relatively discomposed, or seemingly paradoxical. Rather than expect the speaker or their testimony to overcome these obstacles, then, I hold that the listener has a critical obligation to adjust their own hearing and to make space for the messiness of people's lived experience.

To call for this kind of work is not to make the case for the detailing of the heterogeneity of everyday life and experience for the sake of variety, but rather a critically engaged practice, which works to defy those heavily bounded categories of the self that delimit the field of imaginative possibilities in popular memory cultures. If there is to be a more serious engagement with the experiences of the 'younger Troubles generations,' it is crucial that the erasure of those lives that do not fit so easily with the creation of usable pasts and presents in post-conflict memory culture, like those of interviewees here discussed, does not take place.

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[ii] Although Summerfield formulated the concepts of cultural circuit and composure in very clear terms in her work, in doing so she draws upon and further develops a theoretical framework elaborated particularly by Graham Dawson, Alistair Thomson and the Popular Memory Group, and originally constructed by cultural studies scholar Richard Johnson. My analysis works within the same theoretical tradition. See especially Dawson 1994; Johnson 1986; Popular Memory Group 1982; Thomson 2013.

[iii] I take the concept of 'hearability' from Blommaert et al. 2006, who explore the circulation of narratives in the South African post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings.

[iv] I conducted 15 separate unstructured oral history interviews during my fieldwork in Belfast, most of which took place between a period of 4 months during September-January 2016-2017. The majority of participants were introduced to me through community workers, with an additional 6 interviewees sourced through other contacts. I did not seek to obtain a 'representative sample' of those who grew up in the Northern Ireland conflict. This is both because I regard this task to be practically impossible—

what would this sample look like?—and because I am not persuaded of the intellectual utility of rendering any individual lived experiences as 'typical' of a social group. Indeed, is in their particularities, rather than their generality, that I feel oral narratives shine a light on often unrecognised areas of historical experience, as well as challenging those dynamics that continue to make certain elements of past experience less hearable and speakable than others in the context of the present.

[v] I discuss the symbolic mobility of the child with reference to the categories of the innocent victim and destabilized combatant in post-conflict Northern Irish cinema in Newby & Roulston 2019.

[vi] On the role of justice campaigns in post-conflict Northern Ireland, see (Hamber 2009, ch. 7; Lundy & McGovern 2008)

[vii] To be sure, some subtle or complex portraits of childhoods lived in the context of the Troubles do exist: Anna Burns's novels are a case in point (e.g. Burns 2001; 2018), as is the more recent TV show *Derry Girls* (McGee 2018), all of which unsettle, to a greater or lesser extent, received tropes about Northern Irish culture and in particular about children's place therein.