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Testimonio and Torture in Northern Ireland: Narratives of Resistance

Lisa White¹

Abstract

Using the Latin American concept of ‘testimonio’ as a suitable tool of analysis, this article explores the narrative experiences of former detainees who ‘went public’ with accounts of State brutality and torture relating to the conflict in Northern Ireland. Referring directly to these historical narratives alongside the findings of a series of contemporary interviews with Republican former detainees, the article argues that the core aspects of testimonio – collective struggle, resistance, audience and action – can all be observed in the accounts of those who were subjected to State violence in the detention system of Northern Ireland and that these accounts represent particular ways of challenging the official discourse around the conflict, its historiography and its legacy.

Testimonio as Concept and Practice

Despite its relationship to justice, power and resistance, the concept of testimonio has only recently been employed by Anglophone social scientists as a tool of analysis and is rarely found within Anglophone studies of crime and deviance.² Testimonio has historically emerged as a practice in the colonial struggles of Latin American communities and usually refers to spoken or written

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² According to Hoffman, (2009) the study of crime and deviance which he describes as “criminological science” has previously engaged with oral history work about crime akin to testimonio, yet has not explored the narratives which emerge from systematic violations of human rights by colonial states. Such omissions strengthen the demands made by Agozino (2003) and Cuneen (2011) for a counter-colonial criminology.

accounts which give voice to the experiences of oppressed and subjugated peoples.³ According to Reyes and Curry Rodríguez (2012), these accounts can take numerous forms, including memoirs, oral histories, qualitative vignettes, prose, song lyrics, or spoken word performance. They might also include “autobiography, autobiographical novel (...) confession, diary, interview, eyewitness report, life history, novella-testimonio, nonfiction novel, or ‘factographic’ literature” (Beverley, 2004: 31). Testimonio is best understood as a form of truth sharing, which gives voice to marginalised and silenced people (Marin, 1991; Behr, 2004; Beverley, 2004; 2005). It can be used as method through which groups whose experiences have otherwise been hidden or previously subjugated can be heard (Pérez Huber and Cueva, 2012) and may be understood as a form of ‘resistance literature’, as one of many “counter hegemonic practices (...) which both organise and document political resistance” (Harlow, 1987: 123). For Beverley (2004; 2005), these diverse forms of narrative become testimonio when they are as untouched by external influences as possible, when they are driven by the voices and experiences of the oppressed, and when they are deeply purposeful, in that they seek social action and the transformation of particular situations of oppression. It is this understanding of testimonio as a means of resistance which forms the basis of this article.

A reoccurring theme in testimonio literature is the gross violation of human rights by agents of the State (see e.g. Menchú, 1984; Gugelberger and Kearney, 1991; Gugelberger, 1998; Pohlman, 2008). The conflict in Northern Ireland has produced a range of narratives about experiences of State violence and human rights abuses, which this article seeks to interpret through a testimonio lens, by highlighting the commonalities between these and more traditional readings of testimonio. These narratives include amongst others, the narratives of

³ The most well-known of these testimonio works is ‘I, Rigoberta Menchú’ (1984). This edited testimonio features the narratives of a K’iche’ Mayan woman - Rigoberta Menchú - and describes violence carried out against indigenous people during the Guatemalan civil war. In 1999, David Stoll published ‘Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans’, which argued that aspects of Menchú’s narrative were misleading or contained exaggerations. Stoll’s (1999) criticisms emerge from a misreading of the testimonio nature of Menchú’s work and seek to apply a one-dimensional, legal reading to its contents, rather than recognise it as a collective narrative. Stoll’s (1999) work has itself been critiqued for its use of sources, its failure to fully explore the violence of the Guatemalan State and its role in further silencing Maya women (Sanford, 20002).

Republicans detained⁴ in the period of detention without trial known as ‘internment’ from 1971-1975 (e.g. Kennally and Preston 1971; O Tuathail 1972; McGuffin 1973; Devlin 1982), their personal accounts about the most brutal years of criminalisation from 1975-1981 (e.g. Faul and Murray 1978; 1979; Adams 1990; McKeown 2001) and their recollections which have emerged about the period post-hunger strike from 1981-1985 (e.g. Campbell, McKeown and O’Hagan, 2006; McKeown 2001). This is not to suggest that these three eras represent clearly defined periods of State violence, or that such violence did not take place both before and after these times. The three periods simply represent a way of organising detention testimonios in order to better reflect their content. Narratives from 1971-1975 are predominantly about experiences of internment, whilst those from 1975-1981 are dominated by experiences of interrogation, along with accounts of State violence in prisons during the protests against criminalisation. The narratives regarding 1981-1985 mostly feature accounts of State violence following escapes in the post-hunger strikes period. These accounts are sometimes penned directly by detainees themselves (such as in McKeown, 2001 and Campbell et al., 2006, for example), or are otherwise carried by journalists (Taylor, 1980) or other concerned civil society groups, non-government organisations and actors (e.g. Faul and Murray, 1972; 1975a; 1975b; 1981; Amnesty International, 1978). Their existence reflects the multiple ways in which testimonios may be produced and the difficulties in defining ways of ‘doing testimonio’. As shown earlier, testimonio is a product and process which defies easy definition, as work by Reyes and Curry Rodríguez (2012) illustrates. Yet it has at its core the lived experience of oppression – something common to the narratives which have emerged from the detention system of Northern Ireland. This article aims to explore the *utility* of testimonio as a concept for better understanding the narratives of male Republican former detainees who went public with accounts of State violence experienced whilst in detention during the Northern Ireland conflict, by identifying aspects shared by testimonio in both this and the more traditional, Latin American context. It is based on a synthesis of pre-existing secondary narratives detailing State violence in Northern Ireland’s detention system, combined with primary data drawn from contemporaneous and original interviews with 10 men who have previously made their personal experiences part of a contested public history of the conflict. As such the work relies on former detainees’ past narratives of State violence, alongside their contemporaneous reflections on the reasons behind

⁴ ‘Detainee’ and ‘prisoner’ are used interchangeably throughout this article, in order to reflect the loss of liberty common to both experiences.

their narration. These two sources of information are used to identify aspects shared between these past narratives and more traditional Latin American testimonies, in order to examine the extent to which narratives of the Northern Ireland conflict can be understood as *testimonio* and the utility of such an understanding to justice, power and resistance.

Narratives of State Violence During Detention

The internment period of 1971-1975 refers to the detention without trial of predominantly Catholic men from nationalist areas, which formally began under Operation Demetrius on 9th August 1971. Over three hundred and forty-five people were detained in the initial 'swoop', with one hundred and sixteen released within forty-eight hours (McKittrick and McVea, 2001). The Operation was based on old and out-of-date information, strengthening the argument that it was little more than a 'fishing expedition' designed to collect new information, engage in surveillance and create a climate of fear amongst nationalist communities. It was carried out in a disproportionate and deeply discriminatory manner, which further illustrated that the British State was largely unconcerned with the violence being carried out by Loyalist paramilitary groups - despite its always erroneous claims of being a neutral party to the conflict.

Those who were interned faced frequent State violence and brutality. Some of the men who had been detained detailed their experiences through pamphlets produced at the time. The narratives published by Faul and Murray (1971; 1972; 1973; 1974), Kennally and Preston (1971), O Tuathail (1972) and McGuffin (1973) feature the experiences of interned detainees, who describe being punched and kicked whilst being forced to run barefoot over broken glass and sharp stones, having their genitals beaten, being hit with rifle butts and batons, being thrown around by the hair, forced into 'stress positions' (to the point of unconsciousness) and having rifle barrels pressed into their faces - all whilst being threatened, insulted and verbally abused. Some of those detained were singled out for particular forms of torture in what became known as the 'Hooded Men' case (Faul and Murray 1971). This included the use of 'Five Techniques', including euphemistically named 'wall standing' - perhaps marginally better understood as 'stress positions' - which force a person's body weight onto particular muscles for extended periods of time, with the intention of causing pain and collapse without the external marks of beatings and other forms of violence. The remaining four techniques refer to the use of hooding,

the deprivation of food and water, the deprivation of sleep and the use of disorientating ‘white noise’. Narratives describing these experiences were carried by a small number of Irish news outlets at the time, but it was coverage in *The Sunday Times* (17th October 1971) under the headline ‘How Ulster Internees Are Made to Talk’, which brought the allegations surrounding internment to a wider audience in the UK. Representatives of the security community initially responded by claiming the allegations were exaggerated and little more than propaganda. This assertion was repeated throughout the conflict and often in the most imaginative of circumstances (Miller, 1994; Curtis 1998; White 2015).⁵

The production of narratives like those describing experiences of internment represent only one facet of State violence in Northern Ireland. Further accounts of violence against detainees also emerged relating to the period 1975-1981. As I have argued elsewhere, this period was underpinned by a policy of criminalisation, which:

[c]ontributed to the creation of criminal justice system for non-state actors [which] resembled a ‘conveyor belt’ of intense interrogations and non-jury ‘Diplock’ Courts, yet failed to hold the British State to account for violence and abuse... Whilst the State’s discourse was one of crime control and ‘normalisation’, rather than war and insurrection, in reality a parallel legal system had been created which sought to deny any political motivation for (suspected) actors in the conflict, and to delegitimise Republican violence and any underlying discourses which sought to justify the wider actions of Republican groups. (White, 2015: 44)

The accounts which have emerged about this period describe in detail abusive experiences of interrogation. They were published by non-governmental organisations including Amnesty International (1978) and by journalists, such as Taylor (1980). Priests Father Raymond Murray and Father Denis Faul continued

⁵ The Five Techniques were the subject of a case at the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) (*Ireland v. United Kingdom* 1978). It found that the Techniques constituted inhuman and degrading treatment, but not torture. A recent investigation by the Pat Finucane Centre and the Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTE) Irish broadcasting company found that the UK government had withheld evidence from the Court – evidence which shows that the UK government had itself deemed the Five Techniques to be torture and that they were aware of the long-term physical and psychological effects of the Techniques. At the time of writing, the Irish government has asked the ECtHR to revisit the judgment in this case.

to provide an outlet for survivors by cataloguing and documenting detainees' experiences of State violence and brutality, as they had done during internment and would continue to do so into the 1980s (see Faul and Murray, 1972; 1975a; 1975b; 1976; 1981). The majority of accounts emerged from the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) Holding Centre in Castlereagh, East Belfast. Men who were detained in this Centre produced narratives describing having their limbs forced back and bent into excruciating angles (known as 'dorsi-flexing'), being beaten whilst hooded and having their throats squeezed to the point of losing consciousness (in Taylor, 1980). Following these allegations, the Government launched an Inquiry into the treatment of detainees during interrogation. Known as the Bennett Inquiry (1979), the resulting report was generally favourable towards the RUC, but concluded that there had been cases where "there can, however, whatever their precise explanation, be no doubt that [some of] the injuries... were not self-inflicted but were sustained during the period of detention" (Bennett, 1979: 55 para 163). Such statements hint at *some* official recognition for injuries, but avoided blaming state agents for the human rights violations detainees had experienced. This reflects broader literal, interpretive and implicatory denials found within the official narrative of the conflict and in wider discourses about State violence (Cohen 2001; White, 2015).

An additional phase of State violence can be observed in the narratives which have emerged in relation to experiences of the 'formal' prison system of Northern Ireland. They include writing by or featuring the words of Republican women (e.g. McCafferty 1981; Harlow 1992; Corcoran, 2006a; 2006b), along with a number of works which detail Republican men's experiences of the 'H-Blocks' (also known as HMP Maze) (see e.g. Murray, 1998; Sands, 1998; 2001; McKeown, 2001; Campbell et al., 2006). Since 1972, those convicted of 'scheduled offences' had been given 'Special Category Status', which granted them access to unlimited mail, the wearing of personal clothing and free association with other prisoners. 'Special Category' prisoners therefore had a greater degree of autonomy from other prisoners, but still experienced incarceration with its violence, abuse and limits on freedom. In the winter of 1974, unrest on the Long Kesh site was met with significant State violence. British troops were sent in to 'regain control' and they employed a range of violent tactics, including the use of rubber bullets and riot gas. An agreement was reached whereby prisoners would return to their compounds on the assurance that there would be no reprisals. However, communications which emerged from prisoners afterwards suggest that there *were* indeed heavy reprisals and that many of the imprisoned men were made to stand for five

hours or more against the prison fences, ill from the effects of CS and CR gas, all whilst being beaten by prison officials and bitten by guard dogs (McKeown, 2001). The BBC (2008 [1974]) reported that over one hundred and thirty prisoners had been injured. The Northern Ireland Office (1974) downplayed the events and put that figure at twenty-nine (cited in Coogan, 2000: 404). State agents yet again failed to explain in any depth what had happened and how the prisoners had been injured.

The phasing out of 'Special Category' status brought with it further examples of State violence and has resulted in vivid and powerful accounts which detail the Republican prison struggle against criminalisation (Sands, 1998; 2001; McKeown, 2001; Campbell et al., 2006). All those newly convicted of 'scheduled offences' in 1976 were required to wear prison uniforms, carry out prison work and have only limited association with other prisoners. They were housed in the newly constructed 'H-Blocks' – a series of eight bleak and imposing block structures, each consisting of four wings set at either end of a central 'administration corridor'. The consequences of the end of Special Category status were not only physical but symbolic. This process of criminalisation was a clear attempt by the State to de-politicise the conflict by criminalising those in the 'H-Blocks' and by association, their supporters outside. However, this attempt to remove political motivation from discourses around armed action actually further politicised the prison struggle and strengthened the prisoners' desire to reject criminalisation (McKeown, 2001; Campbell et al., 2006; Corcoran, 2006a; 2006b). It resulted in a long-running protest, which began when newly arrived Republican prisoner Keiran Nugent refused to wear prison clothes and wrapped himself in a blanket. The 'Blanket Protest' as it became known then escalated into a 'No Wash Protest', whereby prisoners refused to leave their cells due to the violence, harassment and humiliation they had experienced. Unable to 'slop out', prisoners covered their cells with excrement and food waste smeared onto the walls with bits of foam mattress. A statement from Archbishop (later Cardinal) Thomas O'Fiaich criticised the conditions as resembling the "slums of Calcutta" (cited in Coogan, 2002: 265-6), embarrassed the prison authorities and gave the protest increased media coverage.

Narratives about this time describe the violence carried out against Republican prisoners on the protest and how the degrading and humiliating use of forced washes "became another opportunity for the screws to brutalise us" (McKeown, 2001: 60). McKeown recalled how:

At the latter end of 1978... several men had been badly beaten after they had been taken out, forcibly washed and shaved ... The men had

been removed to an outside hospital for examination of their injuries. The news scared us. It seemed that brutality had been taken to a new level. That night we were given a list of the injuries sustained: suspected fractured skull, broken nose and much bruising and cuts. Those were anxious days ... I was sent to H4 with about nine others and a 'reception committee' of screws welcomed us. All of us were put through a fairly rough time in cell 26". (McKeown, 2001: 61-66)

A hunger strike in 1980 failed to achieve the prisoners' five demands of the right to wear their own clothes; the right not to do prison work; the right to freedom of association; the right to organise their own leisure activities; and the right to restoration of lost remission (reduction of sentence). It was followed by another hunger strike in 1981, which would end with the deaths of 10 men.⁶ Narratives describing the strikes (and the events leading up to them) have been extensively detailed elsewhere by journalists and historians (Beresford, 1987; Coogan, 1980; 2000; 2002; English, 2003; 2006, Whalen, 2007) and references to those events appear frequently throughout the writings of former detainees themselves (McKeown, 2001; Campbell et al., 2006). The testimonio writings of Bobby Sands in particular helped to bring the prison struggle to a wider audience. Sands was a prolific writer and poet whose testimonio was written onto scraps of cigarette paper and toilet paper within the 'H-Blocks' and smuggled out. His work is amongst the best-known accounts of life in the 'H-Blocks'. Regularly published by *An Phoblacht* at the time and in later collections (Sands, 1998; 2001), the imagery conjured up by Sands' work is vivid and emotive. It describes the conditions in the H-Blocks and makes frequent reference to brutality and torture. Sands' narratives place the prison struggle within a broader history of Irish Republicanism. His own role in Republican history can also be viewed through a lens of historical continuity, as he is represented in books, music, murals and other cultural materials as the latest in a line of many Irish martyrs throughout history. The strike had significant and lasting social and political repercussions. Sands was the first of the ten to die, but not before successfully contesting an election and winning a seat in the Westminster Parliament with just over 52 percent of the ballot and a total of 30,492 votes. Other hunger strikers also contested elections. In the Republic of Ireland, Kieran Doherty would be voted into the *Dáil Éireann* (Republic of Ireland

⁶ IRA prisoners Bobby Sands, Francis Hughes, Raymond McCreesh, Joe McDonnell, Martin Hurson, Kieran Doherty and Thomas McElwee all died on hunger strike, as did INLA prisoners Michael Devine, Patsy O'Hara and Kevin Lynch.

Parliament) prior to his death, alongside another Republican prisoner (Paddy Agnew). The use of this strategy helped the hunger strikes gain an international audience and the words and images of the protesting prisoners were used to highlight the situation inside the 'H-Blocks' and remain lasting symbols of that period and the wider Republican struggle.

Post-hunger strike, the narratives regarding events in the 'H-Blocks' after 1981 are less numerous and take a different focus, usually describing details of State violence, which often followed escapes. In his account, Harry described how he had initially managed to scale a fence during a mass escape and had:

ran on about 5 yards from the top of the hill. I felt a dull thump in my thigh ... I knew then I'd been shot, although I hadn't felt very much pain. I felt myself going numb and pretty soon the screws were on top of me. They trailed me down the hill and I let out a yell because of the pain in my leg – one of them said 'listen to him!'. So I said to myself 'No more', and just gritted my teeth. They punched me and kicked me and some were screaming 'Turncoat bastard!' (I was raised a Protestant in Loyalist Tigers Bay in Belfast). This went on and on. (Excerpt from Harry's narrative of post-escape violence cited in '*Iris*' *Irish Republican Magazine* 1993: 28)

Harry's description of State violence following the mass escape illustrates something of the brutality which was commonplace within the detention system of Northern Ireland. The three phases – internment, criminalisation and post-hunger strike – were all marked by violence against detainees, as well as State violence outside the detention camps, interrogation centres and prison walls. State violence is currently known to be *directly* responsible for the deaths of three hundred and twenty-six people during the conflict. The real figure is certain to be far higher, given what is being discovered about the extent of collusion between State forces and paramilitary groups (Rolston, 2005; Punch, 2012; Cadwallader, 2013). Such crude statistics of death tolls may give a sense of scale to a conflict euphemistically labelled as 'The Troubles', but say little about the extensive harm caused to those bereaved and/or those left with serious physical or mental injuries as a legacy of the conflict. The accounts of former detainees about State violence as experienced whilst in detention form a further, additional part of the conflict's history and shed light on an aspect which has rarely been considered within much public and political discourse, due to the understandable focus on achieving justice those killed by (or with the support of) State forces during the conflict.

Northern Ireland Narratives as Testimonio

To what extent can we understand the narratives of State violence which have emerged from detainees in relation to internment, criminalisation and post-hunger strike as ‘testimonio’? Former detainees in Northern Ireland do not use this language, though many were familiar with testimonio-style literature from Latin America and the African continent, due to the political and social education which took place in the H-Blocks in particular. Detainees organised much of their own education and this often involved the exploration of various ideologies, including feminisms, capitalism, socialism and fascism, in addition to discussions of the role of education, language and art in the history of liberation struggle in Latin America and the African continent (Dana and McMonagle, 1997; Mac Ionnrachtaigh, 2013). The language of ‘testimonio’ is however rarely used by former detainees in both their original accounts of State violence and in their more recent reflections during my interviews with them. This is not to suggest that the awareness of its use by others in post-colonial and/or liberation struggles was not an inspiration, but only that the label of testimonio was rarely applied by detainees to their narratives. As this article has shown, their narratives share many elements of form with the examples given by Reyes and Curry Rodríguez (2012: 525), such as ‘oral histories, qualitative vignettes, prose, song lyrics’. They also include interviews with journalists and diaries, which as Beverley (2004) argues, can be viewed as testimonio. However, the relationship between the narratives of detainees in Northern Ireland and the language of testimonio is far stronger than simple commonalities in form and format. An awareness of shared experience and the collective is central to understanding the meaning and significance of testimonio, both as a concept and a practice. What is presented in testimonio “is not simply a personal matter; rather, it is the story of an individual who is also a part of a community. A testimonio presents the life of a person whose experiences, while unique, extend beyond her/him to represent the group of which she/he is a member” (Haig-Brown, 2003: 19). As Yúdice (1991: 26) notes “testimonial writing ... promotes expression of personal experience. That personal experience, of course, is the collective struggle against oppression from oligarchy, military, and transnational capital”. Though forms of oppression found in testimonio are more extensive than those briefly listed here, Yúdice’s (1991) work highlights the importance of relationships between and around those involved in struggles and how these might be observed through the practice of testimonio.

Testimonio as representing collective suffering

Narratives about political imprisonment are easily framed as testimonio and as “collective documents, [as] testimonies written by individuals to their common struggle” (Harlow, 1987: 121). In order to understand the significance of the collective struggle to former detainees and their narratives of prison violence, it is worth referring to the words of detainees *themselves* about their experiences of producing testimonio. As part of a research project into the motivation, significance and consequences of speaking out about State violence, I interviewed former detainees who had previously made public their experiences of violence in detention. Laurence stated that:

Republicans speak in the ‘We’. A group of ‘We’s’ rather than a group of ‘I’s. You can ask someone ‘Well, what happened to you?’ and they will say ‘We’ were in the wing...’ ‘Aye but what happened to you?’ Constantly it’s a ‘We’. (in White 2015: 102)

Not all testimonios are so explicit in their references to the experiences of others, but they can still be read as containing a communal element, describing a common experience – especially when they take the form of secondary collections featuring the narratives of various prisoners, like the work of McKeown (2001) and Campbell et al., (2006).

The worst thing was the constant fear ... There is an awful feeling of defencelessness when you’re standing naked in front of people that are hostile to you (JM in Campbell et al., 2006: 10).

I had a great fear of the beatings, I was really afraid. Once I knew they weren’t coming back, I cried. I had no clothes on. Everything was going through my mind and I wondered if I could take any more of this” (PC in Campbell et al., 2006: 91)

I could only think of an increase in the beatings and the cell searches. I didn’t know if I could take anymore ... The pain was bad, but nothing compared to the humiliation I felt at that moment (JMQ in Campbell et al., 2006: 90)

These examples of testimonio (along with participants’ own reflections on the process of speaking out) show that accounts of State violence can be deeply personal, about one’s own experiences, but they both emerge from and return back into the story of a collective struggle. These narratives are all deeply emotive recollections of victimisation, anxiety and vulnerability, which contrast sharply with the powerful and popular depiction of men as emotionally illiterate

(White, 2015). Despite the use of 'I', they show how feelings of fear and humiliation were *shared* amongst a collective of prisoners and illustrate the lived impact of the violence of incarceration – a violence which was intensified by the conditions of the 'Blanket' and 'No Wash' protests. For some of those detained, simply to survive against a prison regime designed to degrade and break them was an act of immense resistance. These prison memoirs which emerged from the detention system of Northern Ireland can therefore be understood as testimonio, as they contain both overt and more implicit references to shared suffering and collective struggle. For, as Des Pres argues, "survival is a collective act, and so is bearing witness" (in Pohlman 2008: 38). Those who spoke out as political prisoners occupy a dual status, in that they are individual survivors of deeply personal subjective experience, yet some 'strive to inhabit a collective subject position, and thus bear witness not only for [themselves], but for those who cannot' (Pohlman 2008: 54).

Not all former detainees have produced narratives describing their experience, so one must rely on existing testimonio to "evoke an absent polyphony of other voices" (Beverley, 2005: 549). The silence of some former detainees might reflect a practical absence of opportunities, or a lack of interest in working with journalists, activists and/or publishers. Yet it may also link to the nature of the violence experienced, in that pain can be language destroying (Scarry, 1987) rendering experiences of trauma difficult to bring into words. It may be borne out of a desire to forget or 'move on' from painful experiences and thus silence becomes a means of coping with the distress caused by State violence. For others, their silence may not be driven by a difficult desire to forget, but by a fear of not being believed, or because of wider social, cultural or political processes and stigmas that pressure survivors of State violence (and many other forms of violence and humiliation) into remaining silent (see Stanley, 2005). Some of those tortured during the Northern Ireland conflict did not wish to detail and publicise the impact of interrogation techniques on their bodies or mental health, as they feared that this information would be used by State forces to hone the techniques even further. This suggests that there is a multiplicity of separate and interlocking reasons for the silence of many former detainees which exist at both the macro and micro level and that the narratives of those who did 'go public' represent only a small fraction of the extent of State violence in the detention system of Northern Ireland. The testimonios which have been published help to give voice to experiences of collective struggle which may otherwise have remained hidden from view in the closed world of the detention system.

Testimonio as a means of resistance

Support for the collective aspect of testimonios which have emerged from Republican detainees in Northern Ireland can be seen in the language used to describe how many of the men (and women) who were imprisoned responded to incarceration. Pre-existing Republican testimonios recall painful experiences of State violence in terms of 'brutality', 'frenzied savagery' and 'barbarous treatment', 'degradation and humiliation' (Campbell et al., 2006: 84-107), yet also hint at the importance of the collective and collective response in strengthening resistance.

Despite the ferocity of the forced washes, men emerged with spirits steeled by the experience. There was great satisfaction that we had stood firm and fought against impossible odds. It was our victory (BM in Campbell et al., 2006: 66)

They ... used violence against us, but we stood firm (SL in Campbell 2006: 86)

[At the end of searches] as the last cell door closed ... then someone would sing and most of the wing would join in. Bawling out the likes of 'Provos March On', finishing with wild cheers and yells, getting rid of the built-up tension and aggression (JMQ in Campbell et al., 2006: 52)

Here, the collective identity becomes an agent of resistance in its own right, and such resistance framing is common in testimonio work across colonial contexts (Marin, 1991). The narratives of former detainees evidence what Harlow (1987: 24) labels as the "collective strategies of political resistance" often found in memoirs of political imprisonment and resistance literature. Casting experiences in this way strengthens bonds between groups and may have helped detainees cope with their experiences of a criminalising prison regime designed to atomise them (Harlow, 1987; 1992; Feldman, 1991; O'Hearn, 2009). These narratives help to build and strengthen the community and like much testimonio work, "create and given expression to personal and group identity" (Senehi, 2002: 48).

The testimonios which do exist in regards to Northern Ireland can therefore be understood as 'present[ing] the life of a person whose experiences, while unique, extend beyond her/him to represent the group of which she/he is a member' (Haig-Brown, 2003). They represent an expression of resistance common to testimonio writings. This can be in a very literal sense i.e.

testimonios detailing resistance against State forces, or it can be more discursive, such as in offering resistance to State denials surrounding experiences of violence. As Cohen (2001) has shown, the stories of survivors of State violence challenge the discourses of the State, which may seek to literally deny what has happened, recast it as something else (e.g. not torture, but 'ill-treatment') or otherwise change the implications of survivors' experiences to the self-representation of the State (e.g. survivors as somehow deserving of their experiences). The number, frequency and detailed evidence contained within the testimonios which have emerged from the detention system around each of the three stages of State violence in Northern Ireland have created great difficulties for the British State which sought to portray itself as a neutral arbiter in the conflict. These narratives show how the political control of truth and the manipulation of knowledge take places in a number of different ways (Cohen, 1996; 2001). In regards to violence against detainees, the British State offered a plethora of denials, which included the claims that the allegations were little more than Republican propaganda, that injuries had been self-inflicted and that prisoners had brought the inhumane conditions of the 'H-Blocks' upon themselves. Those who spoke out in support of former detainees' narratives – including non-governmental organisations, clergy and police doctors - were attacked by politicians and the media. The testimonio of the 'Hooded Men' challenged the British State's denial of the use of torture and its harrowing details show the European Court of Human Rights findings of ill-treatment not amounting to torture to be little more than interpretive denial. Such semantics represent language 'games' which are equivalent to different 'conceptualisations' of truth (Smyth, 2007) and seek to shape how events are represented and understood through official discourse (Burton and Carlen, 1979; Cohen, 1996; 2001; Gilligan and Pratt, 2004; Rolston and Scraton, 2005; White, 2015). The production of testimonio therefore becomes an act of resistance against the official discourse of the State. It is a form of knowledge which is difficult to permanently subjugate and silence, as it finds ways of seeping through the cracks of a hegemonic narrative which is always incomplete. Through testimonio "the individual voice – expressing one's own experience and possibly also representing the similar experiences of others – has the potential to be a critical means of empowerment" (Senehi, 2002: 45) against the denial and dehumanisation of a violent state.

As Rolston and Hackett (2009: 361) illustrate, "the very act of telling their story became inevitably a challenge to the system". The narratives of former detainees' can be seen as a response to the British State's framing of its role in

the conflict and for some detainees, this was precisely their intention. After going public with his account of torture, Jim suggested that publicising his experiences was a way of showing the hypocrisy of the British State.

I was saying 'This is Britain who have portrayed themselves as the mother of all Parliaments, as the democratic centre of the world and here they are torturing their own citizens, and this can't be right'. And that I think that the pompousness of the British public when anything about Ireland was happening was a total denial that their government, soldiers or police could do any wrong was something that I felt they needed to be exposed to the reality in order to show them that it wasn't just this rosy picture that they had of Mother Britain. (Jim)

This primary data collected by the author, suggests that although generally uncertain about his precise motivations for making public his experiences through the work of human rights organisations, Michael shared some elements of Jim's desire to inform the public about reality of British State violence in other interviews I carried out with those who had previously spoken out.

I don't know why I went public. Probably just that we could push back their absolute indifference about rules and regulations. I suppose going public was a bit of a political act, you know... It was a political act in that it was my personal swipe at the British government and the state apparatus. Their ability to just do what they wanted. It is important for me that people know that the state was prepared, willing and more than able to do that." (Michael)

The experiences of former detainees emerge as a challenge to the State's representation of its role in the conflict, for as P suggests "it gives [detainees] a chance to let people know what has happened because the British government will never admit to it or say they were in the wrong". As testimonios which "use truth in the cause of denouncing a present situation of exploitation and oppression or in exorcising and setting aright official history" (Yúdice, 1991: 17) the narratives of Michael, Jim, P and others take on an educative function by bringing to light images of State violence which otherwise may remain been hidden or obfuscated. This closely reflects McGarry and Walklate's (2015: 87) conceptualisation of testimonio as work intending "to illustrate the lived experiences of harmful events in ways that are purposefully emotive, truthful and critical".

Testimonio as seeking audience

Another related aspect of testimonio work is that the accounts are designed to be 'heard' by a particular audience. They are narratives that seek to resonate with an audience and to build a relationship with them. They ask the reader/listener to bear witness to the experiences contained within testimonio and to the experiences of the community it represents (Haig-Brown 2003; Beverley 2004; 2005; Reyes and Curry Rodríguez 2012). Testimonios desire the construction of solidarity and shared understanding. They represent the sharing of a collective memory which is simultaneously accessible and inaccessible to outsiders. By this I mean that testimonio appeals to one's sense of shared humanity and asks its audience to see the self in the 'Other', even when what is being described might fall outside their own experiences. Testimonio asks those who have never been tortured to imagine it and in doing so, bear witness to this violation of a core human right. It forms a means of vicariously experiencing the suffering and strength of others. For those who produce testimonio, their narratives bring into language experiences of pain and suffering which seek to resurrect the once subaltern voice taken through torture and brutality and - where this voice is listened to - may contribute to healing and empowerment (Cienfuegos and Monelli, 1983; Brabeck, 2003; Reyes and Curry Rodríguez, 2012). In this way, testimonio aims to build a culture of solidarity, which stretches beyond those immediately affected by human rights abuses and this culture may be facilitated through networks of political organisations, human rights and civil society groups, sympathetic journalists, publishers and media producers, who all play an important role in the creation and distribution of testimonio (Yúdice, 1991).

Some former detainees' narratives of State violence and torture in Northern Ireland intended to build precisely this wide audience for solidarity. In my discussion with him about the significance of his testimonio, Tommy recalled that:

The first audience is (or was) the Republican support base, to brief them, to let them know what was happening. I suppose also the Irish people, and I think also running with that was an awareness that there was then (and still is) a considerable group of civil libertarians in England ... And probably thereafter, the one - and I'm not sure if you could put them into a hierarchy - the United States, and two, continental Europe because we were aware, or I was aware, of the judgments rendered against Britain in the European Court and that it was necessary to impact in the European context ... There was a

considerable amount of support for the Irish case in France among two different groups; the Left and the civil libertarians.

Tommy sought a broad audience for his narrative about experiences of interrogation. He hoped that by having his testimonio published, his experiences could reach potentially sympathetic groups and raise awareness about the true nature and extent of British State violence. He also hoped that his testimonios would inform the Republican support base, so that they would have a greater understanding of the kinds of treatment being carried out in the interrogation centres of Castlereagh, for example (White, 2015). Other former detainees sought similar audiences for their testimonio. During our interviews, Jim suggested that:

[T]here were several audiences. There were Unionists and Brits, and the British public who I was hoping that because the ordinary working class English are no different from any other nationality and if things were being done in their name that they knew about they would generally say 'No, this isn't right, you are not doing this in my name' ... There was an international audience ...and there was a home audience of our own people, our own nationalist community so that they could understand what Britain was doing [to] Irish people and therefore continue to resist Britain.

The audiences sought by Jim's testimonio are broad and varied. His desire to inform Unionists was not shared by many of those who took part in the research. Most felt that Unionists would not believe the narratives, or as Tommy and F suggested, would perceive Republican former detainees as 'deserving' of the kind of treatment being described in their testimonios (see White, 2015). The audiences Jim sought for his testimonio speak to a different form of solidarity, one which aims to go beyond the usually sympathetic groups and tries to challenge and overcome political divides. To be effective in this way, testimonio must appeal to one's sense of shared humanity and ask its audience to see the self in the 'Other'. For Beverley (2005: 550) what testimonio "asks of its readers is...what Richard Rorty means by solidarity – that is, the capacity to identify their own identities, expectations, and values with those of another. To understand how this happens is to understand how testimonio *works* ideologically as discourse, rather than what it is". Extensive research on the problems of 'victim status' suggest that the recognition of shared humanity and shared suffering has many obstacles to overcome in regards to the legacy of the conflict in Northern Ireland (Rolston 2002; 2006; Smyth 2007; Lundy and McGovern, 2008a; 2008b;

Brewer and Hayes, 2013) These obstacles are particularly pronounced in relation to the experiences of former detainees, who were framed as undeserving of sympathy by the Unionist establishment (see e.g. Robinson, 1981). In this way, victims of State violence in detention have to overcome two levels of denial in proving to an audience that a) their narratives are true and b) that the violence against them was unjustified (Cohen, 2001). Testimonio can form part of a challenge to these obstacles, but only to an extent. Its impact is dependent on the interactions of wider micro and macro factors linked to victimhood, recognition and acknowledgement. Testimonio might have the potential to reach beyond the usual audiences (Alemán, 2012), but those audiences must be open and willing to listen to the experiences of others from a compassionate perspective which acknowledges and affirms universal human dignity and human rights (Schaffer and Smith, 2004).

Testimonio as seeking response

A further aspect of testimonio is that it is purposive and functional communication, seeking to *impact* on its audience and bring about some form of response to the conditions being described. Beverley (2004) describes this as testimonio's 'destabilising effect' through which dominant understandings of communities and events being to break down. More precisely, the "form of response must thus be understood in terms of what, exactly, the particular discourse is supposed to achieve; it must be viewed in terms of the social actions the writer is trying to effect in the world" (Behr, 2004: 130). In the context of detainees' testimonios about State violence, Bobby Sands' (1998; 2001) emotive and vivid testimonios were/are capable of arousing sympathy and the imagery they present is expressively political and analytical, but also deeply personal (O'Hare, 2006). As likely as an intention to generate sympathy may be, the intended response to Sands' writings were never precisely defined in his own testimonio, with a loosely framed exception in the close to one of his articles: "With that in your mind, I will leave off. Think about it, but just don't leave it at that" (Sands, 1998: 152). Here, the audience is left to decide what action to take, but within a framework which seeks to persuade the audience that some form of action *should definitely* be taken.

This lack of specificity about desired responses is common to many former detainees' testimonios, yet research alongside those who made their experiences part of a contested public history can begin to illuminate some possible desired outcomes for their testimonios. In the context of political conflict involving armed groups – such as that in Northern Ireland - testimonios

about State violence can be used to gain support for insurrection and to secure an insurrection's legitimacy. This was acknowledged by Tommy, who stated that his narrative did not emerge from "isolated reasons [for 'going public']". There was a major conflict between us on the Republican side and the British State on the other. It was a battle for legitimacy as much as anything else. So it was all part of our battle and my battle for legitimacy." Jim hoped that his testimonios could become a catalyst for "political action or military action", whilst Harry suggested that his testimonio might contribute to Republican armed action against the prison officers most involved in the brutality against him and his fellow detainees.

During our interviews, it became clear that other former detainees sought very different responses from their testimonio's audiences. Most hoped that their narrative could be used to raise awareness about ongoing human right abuses and bring these abuses to an end. They sought a deterrent effect through making public their experiences of State violence in detention. Laurence stated that "you do always hope that by exposing stuff you can say something about the whole policy in general. You could either deter people or educate them by saying this isn't the right approach to adopt". This desire for a deterrent effect was frequently mentioned by former detainees during our interviews and in particular, by those whose testimonios described phases of State violence linked to the internment period.

I told everything. I didn't think there was any reason why I shouldn't. I told the truth. I told what happened to me. Probably in the back of my head was the hope that it would never happen to anyone else. I felt I had a *duty* to go public and to make it known what happened to me. I didn't colour it, I didn't add anything on to it, I told it as it was, warts and all. It was an attempt by me to expose what they did to us, in the hope that they wouldn't do it to anyone else (Liam)

By getting all this out in the open, you let people know what was going on behind their backs, and strengthening your own case for an open society... Anytime that I speak to people about these experiences I feel good, because I know that that is going to reach somebody's ear... That is enough. That might lever something in their head. That is why I do that... Whenever I think that somebody would read about it and it might sow a seed that would make them query into why that had happened, and that through their writing, or their work, or their raising of awareness then it might not happen again (PJ)

Liam and PJ therefore seek to bring about a shift in the treatment of detainees, in the hope that by their testimonios shedding light on what Crelinsten (2003) calls the “closed world of torture”, it would become more difficult for the British State to continue with its violence against those in detention. Raising awareness was a core motivation, but this awareness was tied closely to prevention and deterrence. “To recall Marx’s well-known distinction, testimonio aspires not only to interpret the world but also to change it” (Beverley, 2004: xvi). For some, going public was not simply an attempt to bring about changes to the structures of power which enabled and facilitated torture, but to change the very mind-set of those who might themselves directly engage in violence against detainees.

What would I like out of it I would like things like that to be known not for any reason other than for hopefully getting individuals who would be of a mind to do that or get caught up in that business of hurting someone to take a step back and not do it. That is what I reckon and what I would like to come out of this; to make us all that bit more appreciative of each other and not be cruel or vindictive to others. (P)

The words of detainees describing their experiences can therefore be understood as testimonios which seek a response. They are intentional and purposive. If as Reyes and Curry Rodríguez (2012: 525) argue, the objective of testimonio is “to bring to light a wrong, a point of view, or an urgent call for action”, then each of these three elements can be seen in the narratives of former detainees about State violence in detention. The narratives seek to change the socio-political consciousness - as described by Beverley (2004; 2005) and Pohlman (2008) – so that torture is rendered obsolete and its victims are returned to their status of human beings deserving of rights and respect.

Problems and Possibilities of Testimonio Research

Despite the many shared aspects which exist between narratives of State violence as experienced in Northern Ireland and the concept of testimonio, there are some minor differences. Whalen (2007) has highlighted some of the problems which emerge when combining prison writings which were produced *during* the period of incarceration with those produced post-release, and these only become more pronounced as ways of remembering and interpreting are filtered through contemporary understandings of conflict and peace. Some of the testimonios featured in this article were released long after the period they refer to (e.g. McKeown 2001, Campbell et al., 2006). On the surface, this appears to contradict the 'urgency' aspect which Polhman (2008) suggests is important to testimonio work. Yet the practical difficulties of producing testimonio during situations of incarceration and detention must be acknowledged. Furthermore, not all of those detained would have wished to produce testimonio in such a situation of immediate trauma and brutality. Even where the desire to produce work exists, there are difficulties associated with finding suitable publication outlets. To reject the testimonio nature (and value) of the narratives of former detainees published in recent times ignores their content and context and obfuscates the importance of community, resistance and social change which characterises this kind of knowledge work. When explored alongside the narratives produced at the time (and in various detention settings), they can still be understood as testimonios which form a body of social, political and cultural history of the Northern Ireland conflict which still impacts upon the present.

It is also important to recognise that testimonio work brings with it numerous risks for those whose words form part of a contested narrative about violence (Trinch, 2010). In Northern Ireland, testimonialistas sometimes risked being identified through their narrative – something which some former detainees were rightly anxious about given the violent context of the conflict and the possible stigma which might have been directed against those named as 'suspects' in parts of Northern Irish society. A minority of former detainees have also spoken about feeling a degree of pressure to narrate their experiences and feeling a loss of ownership over their narratives, as their experiences become consumed by a wider, collective experience (see White, 2015). Testimonio work must therefore find ways to be vigilant against this and seek to balance the individual narrative and the collective experience. The power of counter-hegemonic discourses to both liberate and disempower those 'going public' with allegations of State brutality and torture must be recognised by

those who seek to work with these narratives. The difficulty lies in achieving the gains made possible by a collective experience, whilst preventing the individual suffering from becoming swallowed up by the wider meta-narrative. Furthermore, not all former detainees shared an equal capacity to resist and the experiences of those unable to re-cast their suffering into the mould of victorious struggle sometimes appear only at the edges of Republican testimonio, which is usually focused on triumph over pain and adversity. Equally, care must be taken so that survivors do not become reduced down to symbols of their suffering.

This article has shown how the concept of testimonio can be used as an analytical tool to understand the narratives of former detainees which have emerged from the conflict in Northern Ireland. It has illustrated the significance of the collective in the accounts of former detainees, and explored the nature of resistance to both a violent regime and its representation. The testimonios of former detainees also hint at a desire for social change and make related demands on an audience. The role of this audience is crucial if testimonios are to have the desired effect. Political groups, social movements, civil society and human rights organisations seek to make testimonios useful in bringing pressure to “amongst other things, restor[e] human rights as a central principle of State organisation, redress... imbalances of power and punish... those who perpetrate such unjustifiable acts of violence” (Stanley, 2004: 21). They are also a partial way of marking the transition between different regime types. Testimonios in Latin America have been partially successful in recording accounts of State violence (most famously in Brazil and Argentina), bringing them to light and storing them as a historical record of past abuses. Testimonios can therefore be understood as one aspect of a range of transitional justice mechanisms tasked with making peace with the past (Hayner, 2010). As Northern Ireland continues to stagger unsteadily towards peace, testimonios may play a role in making private memories part of a contested public history. Attempts by the British State to silence narratives, to deny them or render their meaning problematic will no doubt continue, even if occasional acknowledgements are made. The reality is that such acknowledgements give only the shallow *appearance* of recognition and even this has to be actively sought and tirelessly fought for, as experiences in Latin America have shown. Understanding accounts of State violence as experienced in the detention system of Northern Ireland as a form of testimonio not only highlights the importance of the collective, the possibility of resistance and the desire for consequences, but tells us something about the use of violence, its interrelationship to the colonial ideologies in Northern

Ireland and elsewhere and the ways in which those aspects manifest themselves in the workings of criminal justice systems. Whether emerging from internment camps, interrogation centres or prison systems, these testimonios represent the breaking through of a kind of subjugated knowledge tied to conceptualisations of justice, power and resistance.

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