Uses of Oral History in Museums: A Tool for Agonism and Dissonance or Promoting a Linear Narrative?

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Abstract

This paper explores the potential for the deployment of oral history in the museum space to challenge hegemonic narratives on the past and enhance multivocality. Following an overview of the general merits of oral history and debates about its use in museums, we set out the arguments in favour of combining such an approach with the notion of agonistic memory. We then move to a comparative analysis between the Schindler's Factory exhibition in Krakow and the *Voices of 68* project at National Museums NI's Ulster Museum, Belfast to explore the limitations and benefits of digital storytelling as a tool for disrupting linear narratives. In so doing, this article showcases and explains the potency of combining oral history with agonism in encouraging radical multiperspectivity that takes representations of the past beyond the curtailed benefits engendered by approaches focussed on multivocality alone.

Introduction

Museums have traditionally played a dual role as places of education and entertainment whose object-based exhibitions were aimed at the educated elites and provided a passive visitor experience. Public museums

> invited people to conceptualise a sense of national or racial difference from others; and to experience their own worlds as relatively and reassuringly governed ones [...] They helped to instantiate a "scientific", "objective" way of seeing – a gaze which could "forget" its own positionedness (Macdonald 2003: 5).

Ever since the late 1980s, the established mission of museums has been questioned and critiqued. A collected volume edited by Peter Vergo first argued in favour of 'a radical re-examination of the role of museums within society' (Vergo 1989: 3), criticizing the lack of reflexivity in most exhibitions, the passive role assigned to visitors, and the elitist approach which excluded alternative voices and views. In the 1990s, under the influence of these new ideas, museums started to incorporate more innovative practices both in terms of content and in terms of engaging with visitors. In order to promote critical reflection, scholars advocated the adoption of multiple perspectives and contrasting views. As Doering and Pekarik (1996) argued, museums should question and unsettle visitors' pre-established 'entrance narratives', rather than reinforcing them. The growth of the World Wide Web, in turn, has offered museums exciting novel opportunities to attract and involve visitors (Parry 2007) as well as to engage with 'different histories and historical truths about the past' (King *et al*. 2016: 90). Conversely, in this digital age visitors themselves expect museums to provide immersive experiences (Hargrave and Mistry 2014), no longer content to be passive recipients of knowledge and culture; rather, they 'expect the ability to discuss, share, and remix what they consume' (Simon 2010: ii). Indeed, according to Black:

> The engaging museum of the twenty-first century must work to place itself at the heart of the communities it serves. As such, it is incumbent on the museum to seek to attract as diverse an audience as possible, to reflect the complexity of a

changing society and to represent all its communities through collections, content and programming. It must strive to enhance tolerance, build community capacity and promote civil engagement. It should actively encourage and incorporate user contributions, represent multiple perspectives, and willingly share authority. It must not flinch from tackling contentious issues but must instead focus on promoting dialogue and understanding (Black 2012: 11-2).

More recently, the concept of 'multivocality' has been employed by heritage scholars and archaeologists to indicate narratives and practices that engage with multiple voices and different, even contrasting, perspectives, empowering disadvantaged groups. Thus, Hodder refers to multivocality's ability to 'challenge existing power structures' (Hodder 2008: 197), while Silberman (2008: 141) argued that multivocality strives 'to challenge dominant interpretive narratives and to create spaces and structures at heritage sites that will promote the co-existence of potentially conflicting approaches and perceptions at the site's significance'. As Barnabas (2016: 691) sums it up, 'multivocality promotes the co-existence of diverse perspectives and provisions a space to provoke thinking, learning and emotional connection to heritage'. However, the concept has also incurred criticism both for being theoretically imprecise and for its practical application. According to Deufel (2018)

> Multivocality – representing multiple perspectives on a heritage aspect – is often used in an attempt to deliver neutral interpretation […] Neutrality in any guise is an illusion […] Pretending that we can achieve neutrality through including other voices is therefore to mask the reality of inequality in our society, and the power relations that underpin it.

Barnabas (2016: 697) asks the question of whether multivocality is actually unable to challenge top-down hegemonies, while Silberman (2008: 138) berates those heritage sites which use 'the appearance of many voices and multiple stories, while subtly undermining the presumed power of multivocality to contest dominant narratives'. Indeed, some scholars prefer to talk about a much more comprehensive and 'deeper' understanding of multivocality to avoid the pitfall of giving voice to marginal groups without addressing issues of power relations and hegemonic narratives (Atalay 2008; Hodder 2008).

One of the practical ways in which multivocality has been applied in museums and heritage sites has been through the use of oral history narratives and testimonies. As Gazi and Nakou stated, 'Museum education […] has proved a very fertile ground on which to apply oral history as a tool to revealing the complexity and polyvocality of the past and gaining a deeper understanding of human experience at large' (Gazi and Nakou 2015: 16). Providing multiple narratives through presenting personal life stories can also promote empathy and interest in different historical actors and points of view, enhancing visitors' participation (Savenije and de Bruijn 2017). Hence 'the personal turn has found expression in museum and heritage practices of various kinds […] signalled by the shift in oral history practice from focusing on empirical detail to the valuing of personal memories' (Graham *et al.* 2013: 110). Oral history has thus become increasingly incorporated in museum exhibitions, so much so that, as Mulhearn remarked (2008: 28), 'it's impossible to imagine a new museum being planned without a significant oral history component'.

In light of the above, this paper examines the very different uses of multivocality in two museums which have relied heavily on incorporating oral history in their exhibitions, with a view to ascertaining when and how they are employed to strengthen a hegemonic linear narrative or to promote alternative and even conflicting perspectives on the past. In so doing, the paper critiques the concept of multivocality in light of the theory of agonistic memory and proposes a new concept of radical multiperspectivity. The paper is structured as follows. The next section discusses the uses of oral history in museums and its presumed benefits, as well as shortcomings, in terms of providing a tool for 'deeper' multivocality. The following section introduces agonistic memory theory and the idea of viewing museums as agonistic spaces striving for radical multiperspectivity. Section 4 analyses in some depth the Schindler's Factory permanent exhibition in Krakow, Poland as an example of an institution which uses oral history in support of a linear narrative even while providing plurivocal oral testimonies.

By contrast, Section 5 explores a temporary exhibition – at the Ulster Museum in Northern Ireland – which opted to use oral history to present alternative and conflicting oral narratives. Finally, the conclusion revisits the concepts of multivocality and multiperspectivity in relation to the role of oral testimonies, as well as in light of the previous discussion.

Oral history in museums

The general merits and advantages of oral history are well-established and accepted (Frisch 1990; Portelli 1991; Thompson 1998; Della Porta 2014). These include, amongst many others, the possibility to construct 'history from below' (Lynd 1993). Oral history, it is argued, makes way for the inclusion of disparate, forgotten and marginalized perspectives that can be essential to challenging narrow, hegemonic narratives on the past (Bryson 2016: 306-11). According to Thompson, oral history

> can be used to change the focus of history itself, and open up new areas of inquiry; it can break down barriers between teachers and students, between generations, between educational institutions and the world outside; and in the writing of history – whether in books, or museums, or radio and film – it can give back to the people who made and experienced history, through their own words, a central place (Thompson 1998: 26).

Oral history enables multivocal recollections of the past. Its capacity for broadening optics encourages the expression and collection of perspectives that go beyond those that have come to dominate. As a result, the complex tapestry of how the past was experienced and is remembered can be uncovered, exposed and therefore better understood. Drawing on the work of Ron Grele, Lynn Abrams correctly outlines how debates about oral history as 'recovery history' have moved on significantly since their heyday in the 1970s and 1980s. However, as she goes on to argue, 'the practice of interviewing people to provide evidence about past events which could not be retrieved from conventional historical sources, usually written ones, or to uncover the hidden histories of individuals or groups which had gone unremarked upon in mainstream accounts' remains a prime and legitimate motivation for many contemporary oral history projects (Abrams 2010: 5). Oral history facilitates greater multivocality on the past and is therefore particularly potent in the quest to challenge hegemonic narratives. This is no more important than when the past is the focus of contested perspectives and the potential source of contemporary tensions. Indeed, as Portelli argued (1998: 41), oral history is at its best when it allows confrontation between different and even contrasting perspectives:

> Oral history has no unified subject; it is told from a multitude of points of view, and the impartiality traditionally claimed by historians is replaced by the partiality of the narrator. "Partiality" here stands for both "unfinishedness" and for "taking sides": oral history can never be told without taking sides, since the "sides" exist inside the telling. And, no matter what their personal histories and beliefs may be, historians and "sources" are hardly ever on the same side. The confrontation of their different partialities – confrontation as "conflict", and confrontation as "search for unity" – is one of the things which make oral history interesting (Portelli 1998: 41).

However, as in the case of the concept of multivocality, the application of oral history in museums has raised some critical questions. Back in 1989, Griffiths argued that oral history's potential for 'transforming the social relations of research' was severely curbed thanks to the curators' overall control over its uses (Griffiths 1989: 51). More recently, Nakou argued that neither multimedia nor oral testimonies

> necessarily represent a more democratic, open medium of communication, which can in itself challenge the linear narrative structure behind exhibition design. Instead, we have to re-conceptualize museum spaces as having to be more interactive, polysemic and open ended in themselves. Accordingly, we could argue that it is not enough to use electronic media and oral history. We have to

carefully examine how we use them, because they can, potentially, enhance a museum's strong, authoritative and linear narrative.[1]

According to Nakou, 'oral history in museums would have more fertile results if its material, partial and subjective character is underlined by the presentation of different, alternative and even contradictory oral narratives and human reactions related to particular themes, events or situations'.[2]

In short, the use of oral history in museums can either sustain hegemonic narratives or help promote 'open-ended explorations' and 'multiple, alternative readings' of the past. In terms of the former, there are obvious political interests at play. As Ashworth, Graham and Tunbridge have argued, 'governments have a vested interest in promoting a heritage that reassures and reconciles rather than disturbs and divides. Heritage is being used to soothe away our individual and collective stresses, leaving only contented well-balanced people in an all-inclusive harmonious society' (Ashworth *et al.* 2007: 53). As regards the latter approach, at one level we could interpret it as referring to the inclusion and celebration of diversity and difference, without the need to address socio-political tensions and conflicts. By contrast, we could conceive a critical use of oral history as aiming at problematizing the past in an open-ended manner as well as creating space for subaltern narratives. As Coffee remarked: 'Any museum […] needs to consider how its practices support or suppress the subaltern narratives co-existing with it in the larger society' (Coffee 2008: 271). Furthermore, oral history could be used to expose structural inequalities and power imbalances, as opposed to simply representing diversity. As Mesa-Bains (2004: 99) argued, we need to move beyond celebrating diversity and address 'the categorical differences in race, class and gender that are below the surface'. Or, as Leras Figueroa (2011: 200) put it, 'do we silence antagonism and domesticate differences? Can we only accept differences that are like our own? Do we homogenize differences?'.

The dilemmas over the uses of oral history in museums and heritage sites replicate in large part those surrounding the concept of multivocality, indicating the need for further theorization and clarity of concepts. Agonistic memory theory can help elaborate a critical conceptualization of oral history which addresses issues of uneven power and structural inequalities. It can also help clarify the concept of 'deeper' multivocality, and in so doing advocate its replacement with the concept of 'radical multiperspectivity'. The next section addresses these issues.

Agonistic memory and museums as agonistic spaces

According to Mouffe (2005; 2013), agonistic democracy revolves around conflict, specifically around a struggle between hegemonic and counterhegemonic projects. Fully acknowledging that conflict is constitutive of democracy makes it possible to conceive of ways in which the struggle for hegemony can be prevented from turning violent. As she wrote,

> Instead of shying away from the component of violence and hostility inherent in social relations, the task is to think how to create the conditions under which those aggressive forces can be defused and diverted and a pluralist democratic order made possible (Mouffe 2005: 153).

Hence agonism refers to the relationship between political adversaries who respect one another as adversaries, while striving to achieve alternative political projects. According to Molden (2016: 137), Mouffe's theorization of hegemony 'shifts away from exclusive logics of open conflict and competition' postulated by classic Marxist thinkers and instead takes into account 'multilateral and plurivectoral relations of forces that are, however, constructed precisely by the logic of hegemony'. As Mouffe herself argued,

> The project of radical democracy is opposed to the notion that we need a revolution, that liberal democracy has to be destroyed in order to construct a real democracy. That's not what I mean. Liberal-democratic institutions can be radicalized; they can be made more democratic. To work within the system is about transforming its institutions, making them much more accountable, more representative.[3]

Following Mouffe's (2005) theorization on agonistic democracy, Cento Bull and Hansen (2016) have argued that memory work has a very important role to play both in turning enemies into adversaries and in laying bare the historical processes and agents involved in the struggles around hegemony. This mode of remembering engages with human and social emotions in order to promote critical reflection and self-reflection. Specifically, it aims at reflecting upon the social and political conditions, as well as grievances and passions, that led ordinary people to engage in collective political projects, but also to turn to violence. Agonistic narratives of the past allow for alternative views and historical agents to be presented and reflected upon, for instance by contrasting the voices of the perpetrators with those of the victims as well as other agents such as by-standers and collaborators. This is not to provide legitimacy to perpetrators; rather, it aims to contextualize the events of the past in order to understand what social and political conditions led to mass perpetration.

To this end, the associated concept of radical multiperspectivity, whereby a multiplicity of voices portray contrasting views of past conflicts, sets aside the predication of a consensual narrative and lays the foundations for constructive discussions aimed at ensuring the avoidance of repeated past errors and a return to conflict. As Cento Bull and Hansen (2020: 3) argued,

> In consensual multiperspectivism, often applied by cosmopolitan memory discourses, voices and perspectives belonging to characters who basically agree, or at least believe in the possibility of rational consensus, coincide. In radical multiperspectivism, voices and perspectives belonging to antagonistically opposed enemies, typically victims and perpetrators, meet, alongside those of bystanders, traitors, collaborators and so on'.

Can agonistic practices be applied to and enhanced by museums and heritage sites? The answer is yes. As Mouffe herself made clear, museums can successfully promote agonism by providing 'a space for debate and conflict' (Mouffe 2013: 102). In line with Mouffe, Pozzi argued that museums, including national history ones, can engage effectively with counterhegemonic and agonistic practices, 'that portray the nation's hegemonic narrative at the same time that they destabilise their monolithic nature through counter-narratives' (Pozzi 2013: 10). She also maintained that museums can promote interactive practices and multiple perspectives, as well as 'accommodate conflicting voices' (Pozzi 2013: 14).

While neither Mouffe nor Pozzi discusses the role oral history might be playing in 'agonistic' exhibitions, it seems clear that oral testimonies can indeed provide a very valuable tool for disrupting linear narratives and generating passionate debates around controversial issues. In his detailed examination of the Dresden Military Museum, Cercel (2018) identified various instances of agonistic interventions. In particular, Cercel discusses the use of contrasting biographies and personal memories, which in his view is a much-needed feature of an agonistic display, since 'The complexity of the presented life trajectories avoids the risk that agonism in museums may turn into a presentation of static antagonisms' (Cercel 2018: 21). In a paper that examines the use of oral history in the National Museum of Australia, Zarmati shows how Aboriginal oral history was employed to provide a radically alternative version to the official one of the Coniston Massacre perpetrated against Aboriginal people in 1928 (Zarmati 2015). While a first exhibition, entitled *Contested Frontiers*, was heavily criticized for allegedly presenting an undocumented and unreliable view of the past, a new one, entitled *Resistance*, which opened in 2008, deliberately addressed controversial interpretative issues and involved visitors in the controversy.

As Nakou argued, however, much depends on how oral testimonies are employed in the museum, since they can also be harnessed to hegemonic narratives.[4] The next section will demonstrate this argument by analysing the uses of oral history in the Schindler Factory Museum in Krakow, Poland, focusing both on the permanent exhibition and on an associated oral history project (*Saved from Being Forgotten*). The following section, by contrast, will address the agonistic uses of oral history testimonies in a recent temporary exhibition at the Ulster Museum in Belfast, entitled *Voices of 68*. The former museum was analysed in depth, together with four other war museums in different European countries, as part of an EU-funded H2020 project, *Unsettling Remembering and Social Cohesion in Transnational Europe* (UNREST), with which one of the authors collaborated (Berger *et al.* 2019; Cento

Bull *et al.* 2019). The aim of the project was to assess the dominant approach to the history and memory of war and conflict across Europe. Fieldwork consisted primarily of a visit to and analysis of the museums' permanent exhibitions and interviews with their curators. At the Schindler Factory, archival research and interviews with 36 museum visitors of various nationalities from all age ranges were also carried out by UNREST researcher Małgorzata Anna Quinkenstein. This museum proved a particularly interesting case for using oral history in support of a linear nationalist narrative. By contrast, the Ulster Museum's *Voices of 68* exhibition was organized by its Director of Collections, William Blair, in collaboration with Dr Chris Reynolds of Nottingham Trent University as a pilot initiative aimed at showcasing and testing an innovative, agonistic approach to oral history. These two examples, therefore, can be considered representative of two opposing conceptions of the uses of oral history in museums and for this reason they are analysed and compared in this paper.

Oral history at the Oskar Schindler's Enamel Factory

Oskar Schindler's Enamel Factory (a.k.a. the 'Emalia') is located in Zabłocie, a post-industrial district of Kraków, in the administration building of the former German Enamelware Factory (Deutsche Emailwarenfabrik) run by Oskar Schindler. The museum's main stakeholder is the city council, which financed the project and owned the property, which it donated to the Historical Museum of the City of Kraków in 2007. Both archival documents and interviews with the curators established that the main decisions regarding the content and nature of the permanent exhibition were taken by a committee with representatives of the city council, the curators and the designers, who had different aims and interests. While Steven Spielberg's film on Oskar Schindler, released in 1993 and shown in Poland in 1994, had made his factory building in Krakow popular with tourists, the city council was eager to promote a museum that would focus on the history of the city's residents under Nazi occupation, as opposed to the story of Schindler as a 'good German'. Also, the council and various committee members envisaged the permanent exhibition as showcasing the deeds of the 'Righteous Among the Nations', that is to say, those Poles who had helped Jews during the war and were consequently awarded this title by the Israeli Yad Vashem Institute. The same sources indicated that for many stakeholders it was also important to display the positive role played by the Catholic Church during the war and the rescue of Jews by monks and priests. This approach can be partly explained in the context of the international debate and controversy caused by the publication of Jan Gross's (2001) book on the story of a massacre of 1,600 Jewish men, women and children in the Polish town of Jedwabne on 10 July 1941, which had brought to light the 'dark side' of Polish attitudes and behaviour towards Jews during the Second World War. The book questioned the view that all Poles were victims and/or saviours of Jews during this period, as it focused on an episode which showed them in the role of perpetrators. The controversy following publication of this book took place in the same years that preparations for the new museum were underway. Archival sources showed that the views of those committee members who wanted to present a positive narrative of the behaviour of Krakow Poles under Nazi occupation ultimately prevailed, curtailing the possibility to tell contrasting and controversial stories in a critical manner.

The permanent exhibition, entitled *Krakow under Nazi Occupation 1939-1945*, presents a uniform and unproblematic linear narrative, whereby the German occupiers are portrayed as the evil perpetrators (with Oskar Schindler as the exception), Jewish Poles as the (passive) victims, and Catholic Poles as the heroic victims who both resisted the occupation and risked their lives to rescue Jews. Polish Jews are not mentioned on text labels. Moreover, controversial issues like pogroms are not dealt with, even though the first post-war pogrom in Poland took place in Krakow in 1945 – but after the city's liberation from the Nazis; therefore, the topic falls outside the remit of the exhibition. Antisemitism is externalized and largely blamed on German propaganda while the role of the Catholic Church in relation to Jews is presented in a very positive light.

Oral history testimonies by Krakowians who lived in the city during the Second World War are scattered throughout the exhibition, often with visual clips of the narrators. The witnesses are Catholic Poles who remember the German occupation and also the Nazis'

persecution of the Jews and occasionally make reference to episodes of antisemitism or even connivance with Nazism on the part of 'bad' Poles. However, both Nazis and 'bad' Poles are relegated to the margins of these stories, as they are told from the perspective of the 'good Poles', emphasizing the narrators' own positive behaviour in coming to the defence of Jews. A film shown as part of the exhibition focuses on oral history testimonies by former workers at the factory. The testimonies present the perspectives of both Jewish and Catholic Poles as well as both male and female workers. However, the film makers obviously strove to convey a commonality of experiences, with all witnesses recalling, in very similar ways, their own working lives in the factory as well as Schindler's benign attitude towards them and his rescue of Jews from Nazi persecution.

The analysis of visitors' reactions to the exhibition indicated that its binary and largely unproblematized representation of war and victimhood found positive resonance among them. Findings established that the vast majority of respondents identified the victims with Jews and Poles, whereas they considered the perpetrators to be the German people and/or Hitler, the SS, and German officials. Furthermore, visitors viewed both victims and perpetrators as fairly undifferentiated groups, the former imbued with positive qualities, the latter with evil qualities (despite Schindler's almost hero status). Indeed, only a small number of visitors (four out of 36) identified Schindler as a hero, whereas the majority pointed primarily to civilians as heroes. This was especially the case for respondents over the age of forty, who identified mothers defending their children as heroines. As for the conflict, visitors viewed it almost in fatalistic terms, focusing on the 'logic of war' which almost determined the behaviour of both victims and perpetrators. It is interesting, however, that many respondents also acknowledged that the exhibition lacked multiperspectivity. While visitors referred primarily to the perspectives of women and children being overlooked (notwithstanding the portrayal of many mothers as heroines in the exhibition), a 19-year-old black American from Missouri specifically raised the issue of there being no mention of black residents in Krakow during the Second World War. Furthermore, most respondents stated that the exhibition had not clarified the motivations behind the perpetrators' violent deeds, with the exception of a few young visitors aged 15 to 25, who named power and greed as the main motivations. These findings indicate that the use of plural voices through oral testimonies in a museum exhibition can be easily subsumed within an overarching linear narrative, preventing visitors from engaging with the complexity of the different motivations and contrasting perspectives of multiple actors.

While oral history testimonies in the permanent on-site exhibition oscillate between representing both Jewish and non-Jewish Poles as victims of the Nazis on the one hand and distinguishing between Jewish as passive victims and Catholic Poles as both victims and heroes on the other, an associated oral history project veers decisively towards the latter representation. An integral and ongoing part of the Schindler Factory museum, the project, entitled *Saved from Being Forgotten*, is introduced on the museum's website as 'A video record of the memories of the people of Krakow about their lives 1939-1956'.[5] At first sight, and in keeping with Jenny Kidd's argument (2014: 71-86) on how digital storytelling helps democratize narratives, the use of digital technology appears to 'engender active audience participation' (Kidd 2014: 84) amongst ordinary citizens in a local memory project, enhancing diversity and multiperspectivity. As the website openly states, in fact, local people were encouraged to take an active part in the project and share their stories with the museum through digital media, combining texts, images, video and audio. The project allowed many more different voices to be heard than the few whose stories were part of the permanent exhibition.

However, the invitation to participate was limited to specific categories, excluding other, less desirable ones. As the website clarifies:

> We are looking for witnesses who could tell us their stories concerning the times of WWII and living under the Stalinist regime in Kraków. We are looking for people who played part in the important historical events, brave people working for the underground resistance movement, fighting and oppressed because of their wartime past and membership in pro-independence organizations. We want their memories to live on enriching our knowledge of the history of Kraków.[6]

In reality, therefore, this is an obviously nationalist political project. It is part of the *Patriotism of Tomorrow* programme, launched in 2005 and promoted in all main Polish cities in 2007 by the conservative party PiS, aimed at popularizing a form of 'affirmative patriotism' in opposition to any Liberal versions of 'critical', self-reflective patriotism (Szeligowska 2016). As Clarke and Duber (2018: 53) argued, 'The historical discourse of PiS refers expressly to patriotic emotions and the nobility of fighting for national independence, along with a discourse of Polish martyrdom'. It is not surprising, therefore, that the museum website goes on to explain that:

> These were the days of heroes some of whom are well-known as their names have been carved on stone plaques, written down in books and pronounced with respect. But they were the days of unknown heroes, who paid dearly in their fight against oppression. We want their memory to live on.[7]

The testimonies can be accessed online. Each consists of visual excerpts of an autobiographical narrative as well as an accompanying curatorial biographical text which summarizes the life history of the narrator. The testimonies comprise a variety of male and female narrators, from army soldiers to partisans and nurses, and they also include a few stories by Jews who were saved by Schindler himself or by Poles. The latter, however, are deployed primarily to highlight the heroic behaviour of Poles as Righteous Among the Nations as well as the positive role played by the Catholic Church. An emblematic story in this respect is the one by a Jewish woman who as a child was rescued by a Polish couple and later by nuns.[8] While her own (abridged) account highlights her gratitude to her Polish 'parents', it does nevertheless also recall the difficult relationship she had with them, at least at the beginning, and the constant risk of being denounced to the German authorities by neighbours who knew she was Jewish (as in fact finally happened). The curatorial text accompanying the video, by contrast, idealizes the relationship of the Jewish child with her 'adoptive' parents and even claims that after the war she wanted to stay with them and not to 'go back to the Jews', a claim that is missing from the oral testimony. The same curatorial text makes a passing reference to Polish collaborators not in order to raise problematic issues and difficult questions but to enhance the heroism of the Polish couple. Similarly, the testimony of another Jewish woman, who was rescued by Schindler, raises the controversial issue of feelings of animosity and hostility developing among Jewish prisoners at the Palszow concentration camp. As the witness herself states, the hostility was 'caused by the fact that people feared for their lives and would be happy to survive as others would die instead', an attitude she defines as 'amoral'.[9] Yet the accompanying curatorial text makes no reference to these deeply unsettling aspects of the camp's life. Also of interest are the former soldiers and partisan fighters showcased on the website alongside the civilian ones. Their testimonies appear to have been selected because the narrators embodied the ideal-type heroes of Polish national independence as their life history indicates that they first resisted Nazism and later went on to resist the Communist regime. Conversely, there are no testimonies of soldiers or partisan fighters who fought against either Nazism or Communism, as opposed to both regimes.

In short, this case study demonstrates the shortcomings of multivocality as argued by Silberman (2008). In the Schindler museum's oral history project a variety of voices revisit the past through personal testimonies, and their stories incorporate gender, age, social and ethno-religious differences, giving 'the appearance of many voices and multiple stories' (Silberman 2008: 138). Occasionally, the testimonies also address neglected issues, including the active role played by women and girls in the Polish resistance movement, or touch upon controversial and/or unsettling ones, which point to more nuanced, less heroic representations of war and conflict and even highlight the existence of tensions and animosities within each community (Catholic and Jewish Poles). However, testimonies by perpetrators, bystanders, collaborators and other 'less desirable' agents are deliberately eschewed from the project, preventing counter-hegemonic voices being heard. Furthermore, the written biographical texts impose an overarching, moralizing curatorial emplotment, thus ensuring that all stories are seemingly told from the same perspective in terms of the overall narrative of the conflict and the nation. The opportunities and benefits of an approach based on digital storytelling to incorporate diversity and difference via the exploration of multiple perspectives, as exemplified by Jean Burgess *et al.* (2010), are not fully exploited in this project. Instead, oral history is here put

to the service of memory politics, which in turn serves to legitimize the country's rulers and their nationalist vision (Ray and Kapralski 2019). The potential offered by digital technology for promoting interactive participation is curtailed, as no space is provided for relinquishing control over the narratives, for instance through visitors' comments or feedback. As in the case of the permanent exhibition, this use of oral history provides multivocality as opposed to radical multiperspectivity, hence negating the inherent advantages of assembling and showcasing 'competing voices' (Rowe *et al.* 2002: 99). We will come back to this distinction in the concluding section.

Voices of 68 at Belfast's Ulster Museum

Since the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (GFA), there has been a 'smorgasbord' of initiatives in Northern Ireland that have revisited the province's violent past with the objective of addressing its more difficult and divisive aspects (McEvoy and Bryson 2016: 70-4). After initially refraining from dealing with The Troubles, National Museums NI's (NMNI) Ulster Museum later underwent a shift, which involved incorporating a variety of perspectives, including more critical and nuanced interpretations than those that typically dominate narratives (Blair 2016: 181-204). As part of this development, NMNI sought to cultivate closer relations with academics, leading to a collaborative venture with Dr Chris Reynolds that advanced in four phases, culminating in an exhibition entitled *Voices of 68* (Reynolds and Blair 2018; Black and Reynolds 2020). The project's iterative expansion has seen a plethora of interconnected activities including temporary and travelling exhibitions, education programmes, and a body of online content. In addition, it has been gaining traction in ongoing and important debates around the difficult issue of managing the legacy of the past as part of the Northern Ireland peace process.[10] Central to the project has been its theoretical underpinning of agonism, coupled with the deployment of oral history as its core methodological approach.

      As discussed in the introduction, oral history is considered able to provide new, more thorough and inclusive perspectives. This explains why, within the specific and difficult post-conflict context of Northern Ireland, there is a strong recognition of its potency as a key means through which the challenges of the past can and are being confronted.[11] A number of important and successful community-based projects have sprung up since the onset of peace that have placed oral history at the heart of their attempts at confronting the conundrum of the past (Crooke 2008: 124-8; Hamber and Kelly 2016; McEvoy and Bryson 2016: 84-6). The 1968 project examined here similarly tapped into such effectiveness and can indeed be considered as part of the same trend. However, what sets it apart is its agonistic underpinning. It used the inherent capacity of oral history to gather diverse narratives and bring together not only marginalized, but also conflicting, narratives. The GFA may well have brought an end to the Troubles, but the divisions and tensions that defined the conflict have remained in place since, one consequence of which is the durability of contested memories across and within communal divides (McDowell and Braniff 2014; Viggiani 2014; Brown and Grant 2016; McGrattan and Hopkins 2017). As a result, when reflecting on the past, there are no clear winners and losers; definitions of the victims and perpetrators are blurred and the source of much conjecture. In such a context, the possibility of consensus on how the past should be remembered, understood and passed on is an impossible and unrealistic objective. This explains why the issue of 'legacy' is such a prominent and problematic element of the Northern Ireland peace process (Lawther 2014).

      The case of 1968 provides a pertinent example (Campbell 2018). Broadly speaking, the Catholic/Nationalist/Republican (CNR)[12] community has forged a memory of this period that frames the events as a peaceful attempt to secure basic civil rights that met with brutal oppression, thus paving the way for the men of violence to take over and set the province on the descent towards the Troubles. On the other hand, the Protestant/Unionists/Loyalist (PUL) community broadly has a very different perspective, interpreting the civil rights struggle as little more than a front for the Republican movement intent on securing its objective of a United Ireland, with the inevitability of violence that duly ensued. Such divergent, contested perspectives were forged and consolidated during the era of the Troubles and consequently saw the emergence of two distinct narratives perpetuated within the collective memories of

the two different communities, with little or no interaction between the two (c.f. for example, Farrell 1988 and Kingsley 1989).

In light of the above, the collaborative NMNI project explicitly aimed to create a sense of 'narrative hospitality' that would bring together a broad range of conflicted perspectives that had rarely or ever come into contact. The juxtaposition of directly opposing narratives, without any curatorial steer one way or the other, saw this project step away from the traditional, authoritative, top-down approach and cede some control to the visitor, effectively affording them the freedom to draw their own conclusions. Crucial to each of these elements, and hence the project's value, has been the use of oral history. McEvoy and Bryson (2016: 84) outline how 'Affording space for the complex, contradictory and sometimes inchoate nature of individual experience also creates important opportunities for victims and survivors to tell their stories in full and in context, at a time and place that best suits their needs'. One of the most consistently argued attributes of the oral history approach is its ability to give a voice to the previously marginalized or forgotten (Portelli 1998; Aras *et al.* 2012: 4).

In the example of Northern Ireland's 1968, the prevailing narrative has incontestably (and logically) been the preserve of one side of the CNR community. Furthermore, a limited number of figures from within this community have come to dominate how the story of this period has been told. Through its transnational focus and deployment of oral history, this project was able to garner voices that hitherto did not belong and were marginalized (Parr and Reynolds 2021). While some of the key voices from this time featured in the collection of witness accounts captured, the combined agonistic/oral history approach provided the grounds to open up the discussion and encourage the contribution of alternative voices beyond such 'gatekeepers' (Bryson 2016: 334). This not only included former actors/activists with less of a public profile but also, and perhaps most importantly, a range of conflicting testimonies from the PUL community.[13] The result was a 'mosaic of memory that reveals tensions within the remembered past as well as the enduring conflicts of our times' (Aras *et al.* 2012: 2) In addition to encouraging the inclusion of such inter-communal perspectives, the approach also helped to uncover and expose tensions *within* communities. So, for example, on the CNR side, it would be incorrect to suggest that there is complete consensus on how this period should be understood (Reynolds 2015: 194-7). Gathering and presenting a range of CNR perspectives helped further expose the fragmented nature of experiences and memories of this period, thereby underscoring the shortcomings of the binary lens and challenging the dominant narratives that so often simplistically pit one community against the other (McEvoy and McConnachie 2012; Dybris McQuaid 2016: 65-6).

In the presentation of the exhibition, the provision of as balanced a picture as possible was ensured though the plurality of voices included, so as to expose the ongoing contested nature so visible through the multiperspectivist approach.[14] Exhibition panels were carefully assembled in order to showcase the radical multivocality that underpinned the project. This multiperspectivity is in evidence from interviewees' divergent testimonies, as reflected in the content curated for the various iterations of the project. This is particularly apparent in the interviewees' diverse, concluding summaries of how they felt the period should be remembered in general.[15] While some stated that they remembered it as a time of great hope and excitement, others blamed it for sowing the seeds of division and conflict. For some it was a period of chaos and confusion, even 'a tragedy', for others a moment of liberation, a 'brilliant period'.

As argued above, oral history helps encourage the inclusion of perspectives on the past that are not determined by any top-down agenda. In addition, by folding in agonism, the absence of any sense of pre-defined winners and losers, victims and perpetrators, or the need for a consensus one way or the other, meant that both project participants and visitors were made to feel that this part of their history did not preclude them. Such bottom-up credentials were bolstered by the commitment to relinquish control over the narrative via the encouragement of a strong element of participation. At each stage of the project, feedback received, as well as the results of evaluation workshops, were used to hand over control and embolden interviewees and visitors via this opportunity to contribute. Participant Bernadette McAliskey underscored why this was so significant and effective:

> I think it put the responsibility on those of us who were participating to stay with the approach and keep the thesis-antithesis approach to the conversation – which is very difficult for people in Northern Ireland. There was an onus on all of us to

almost stay true to the approach and not get into that combative position and it was certainly easier to do that in the context of those conversations that were then held around that setting.[16]

In an extended, temporary *Voices of 68* exhibition, curated and launched at the Ulster Museum to mark the 50th anniversary of the events, participation went further with the incorporation of videoed testimonies and written feedback from users and visitors aimed at stimulating further comment and conversation, which in turn was curated and included in the exhibition.

To facilitate engagement with the project beyond the confines of the Ulster Museum, three mobile versions of the extended exhibition were produced and travelled to in excess of 35 destinations around Ireland, the UK, Europe and the US.[17] In order to diversify the reach of the audience, the exhibitions were hosted in destinations that included not only museums but also local libraries and cultural centres. The mobility of these travelling versions was enhanced via the use of technology. In order to maintain the importance of the place of the videoed testimonies, the travelling version incorporated the oral history material via the use of augmented reality that enabled visitors to access video clips of testimonies on their phones or tablets. A further aspect of the technological approach was the creation of a digital version of *Voices of 68* that not only facilitated visitors' further research before and after a visit to the exhibition, but also enabled a much easier circulation of the project and exhibition to international audiences.[18] This multi-layered utilization of technology bolstered the 'agonistic contamination' (Pozzi 2013: 13-4) of the project's various outputs that consistently placed oral history at their core.

The platform provided by this integrated tapestry of content facilitated a whole range of public-facing activities where, once again, the focus on putting the combined agonistic/oral history approach into practice was paramount. This included a three-day conference held at the Ulster Museum to mark the 50th anniversary of the 1968,[19] as well as a range of alternative events hosted to mark the launching of the travelling exhibition in different locations.[20] Perhaps most significant in this respect is the project's education programme, developed in collaboration with the local curriculum body CCEA (Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment). In addition to the creation of a set of bespoke online resources,[21] a series of study days have been hosted at the Ulster Museum with in excess of 750 local school pupils witnessing – and contributing to – agonistic discussions on 1968 with a diverse range of protagonists from the time.[22] The following testimony from a teacher in attendance pertinently distils the impact of the oral history/agonistic nexus:

> My students have been able to sit and listen to some of the key players from the civil rights period […] the panel included people from the Unionist community who maybe had a different perspective on the civil rights […] a number of my students came to me afterwards and said they found it quite compelling because they could sense the contention on the platform.[23]

More general feedback points largely to the success of the project's innovative approach, despite the associated difficulties. Given the sensitivities outlined above in terms of the pitfalls in dealing with the past in Northern Ireland, it is hardly surprising that not everyone was comfortable with hearing perspectives that they disagree with. However, when such a viewpoint is clearly part of an overall narrative that is open-ended, bottom-up, and actively encouraging the encounter of contested perspectives, they are more likely to see it as a platform for the inclusion of their own voice. Many visitors, such as those below, recognized and outlined the potential benefits of embracing the multiperspectivist approach:

> I know that in Northern Ireland […] there will never be a consensus. But we need to dialogue and listen to each other to prevent the bitterness and divisions being passed to another generation
>
> So important to recognise people recall it through different perspectives
>
> No war is over until you know the stories of the other sides

> It is of utmost importance to record multiple and conflicting perspectives so that an objective view of history may be retained.[24]

Other visitor reflections outlined how being confronted by opposing perspectives and the lack of consensus helped shift their own interpretations and improved their own level of understanding:

> Understandable why it all happened

> To understand the past we must listen to all points of view not to provide a consensus but to try to understand why people take different routes and make different decisions in their lives.[25]

The evidence of the feedback garnered to date suggests a genuine acceptance of divergent voices, however challenging, as a necessary (and sometimes difficult) step in the quest to improve empathy and understanding.

Conclusions

The contrasting analysis of the uses of oral history in the Schindler Factory Museum of Krakow and the Ulster Museum of Belfast helps us elaborate on the concepts of multivocality and multiperspectivity. Multivocality, through the use of oral history, involves a variety of voices revisiting the past through retelling their personal stories. The narrators and their stories incorporate gender, age, social and ethno-religious differences. However, multivocality can be devoid of multiperspectivity when the narrators are restricted to a limited range of historical actors and 'characters' (e.g., soldiers/partisans, or victims) and there is a strong curatorial overarching voice which ensures all stories are seemingly told from the same perspective in terms of the overall narrative and interpretation of the (difficult) past. This strong curatorial voice aims at silencing those voices which raise controversial issues or have the potential of unsettling visitors. The use of digital technology is fairly limited, curtailing interactive participation on the part of visitors and audiences. By contrast, when multivocality incorporates (radical) multiperspectivity, the narrators incorporate a wide range of historical actors/characters and their stories are told from different, even contrasting perspectives on the (difficult) past which have the potential to unsettle visitors. The curatorial voice is weak or absent, while the presentation of the different and even contrasting stories aims at open-endedness, inviting visitors to draw their own conclusions. Digital technology is used to enhance visitors' participation and promote 'agonistic encounters' beyond the original exhibition. Indeed, the exhibition itself should be considered as just one element in a wider set of socio-cultural, agonistic practices.

We can represent these differences graphically, as in Table 1.

Defining Traits	Multivocality	Multiperspectivity
Number of voices retelling the past	Wide	Wide
Number of historical actors/characters	Restricted	Wide
Overarching narrative	Present/close-ended	Absent/open-ended
Curatorial voice	Strong/authoritative	Weak/Dialogic
Digital technology	Enabling bottom-up participation	Curtailing bottom-up participation

An analysis of visitors' reactions at the Schindler's Factory museum has indicated that when presented with multivocality without multiperspectivity, visitors tend to align with the curatorial voice and view the past in relatively unproblematized terms, even though they may be aware that the museal representation is characterized by a very limited range of perspectives. By contrast, an analysis of visitors' reactions at the Ulster Museum showed that, when presented with multivocality and multiperspectivity, visitors can feel unsettled and

uncomfortable, something which some of them may react negatively to. However, the vast majority of respondents recognized the potential benefits of this approach and acknowledged it had had a positive impact on their level of understanding.

In conclusion, this paper has confirmed and consolidated the argument that the use of oral history in museums cannot in itself constitute a tool for addressing the complexity of the past and the conflicts and struggles that have occurred within and between nation states. Indeed, as exemplified above, when oral history is used to provide multivocality without multiperspectivity, it serves to reinforce unproblematized and linear representations of the past which do not unsettle visitors or challenge their understanding. Furthermore, and as we have been able to argue via the example of Krakow's Schindler Museum, the deployment of oral history can easily be put to the service of nationalist projects. However, and as has been possible to exemplify via the *Voices of 68* project at the Ulster Museum, it is only when oral history combines multivocality with (radical) multiperspectivity that it can render the past in its complexity and ambiguity and can promote dialogue and understanding among visitors.

Notes

1   Irene Nakou, 'Oral History, Museums and History Education', paper presented at the conference *Can Oral History Make Objects Speak?*, Nafplion, Greece, 18-21 October 2005, 4. https://icme.mini.icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/sites/16/2019/01/ICME_2005_nakou.pdf, accessed 18 September 2021.

2   Nakou, 'Oral History, Museums and History Education'.

3   Chantal Mouffe, 'Populism is a Necessity', The European 2014. https://www.theeuropean.de/en/chantal-mouffe--4/8420-why-the-eu-needs-populism, accessed 17 September 2021.

4   Nakou, 'Oral History, Museums and History Education'.

5   Oskar Schindler Factory, 'Saved from Being Forgotten'. https://ocalicpamiec.mhk.pl/en/, accessed 17 September 2021.

6   Oskar Schindler Factory, 'Saved from Being Forgotten'.

7   Oskar Schindler Factory, 'Saved from Being Forgotten'.

8   Oskar Schindler Factory, 'Saved from Being Forgotten', https://ocalicpamiec.mhk.pl/en/?portfolio=janina-ecker, accessed 17 September 2021.

9   Oskar Schindler Factory, 'Saved from Being Forgotten', https://ocalicpamiec.mhk.pl/en/?portfolio=bronislawa-horowitz, accessed 17 September 2021.

10   For example, the project has informed discussions of the Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition (FICT) commission on the legacy of the past and has featured prominently in the NMNI official submission to the 2018 public consultation on 'Addressing the Legacy of the Past'.

11   Northern Ireland Office (NIO), 'Addressing the Legacy of Northern Ireland's Past. Analysis of the consultation responses', 2019. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/814805/Addressing_the_Legacy_of_the_Past_-_Analysis_of_the_consultation_responses.pdf, accessed 8 July 2019; Historians and the Stormont House Agreement, 'Report on a Workshop Held at Hertford College, Oxford, 19 October 2016', 2016. http://irishhistoriansinbritain.org/?p=321, accessed 23 June 2018.

12   All the inadequacies of the CNR/PUL categorization are acknowledged but are used in this instance to help frame the broad outline of the province's ongoing contested memories.

13   The full list of interviewees is as follows: Paul Arthur; Paul Bew; Gregory Campbell; Ivan Cooper; Anthony Coughlan; Austin Currie; Anne Devlin; Michael Farrel; Mervyn Gibson; Denis Haughey; Erskine Holmes; Anne Hope; Judith Jennings; Bernadette McAliskey; Nelson McAusland; Eddie McCamley; Eamonn McCann; Chris McGimpsey; Dympna McGlade; Aidan McKinney; Maurice Mills; Geordie Morrow ; Mike Nesbitt; Hubert Nichol; Henry Patterson; Brid Rodgers; Bríd Ruddy; Carol Tweedale; Eileen Weir; Fergus Woods.

14   The digital version of the *Voices of 68* exhibition provides an overview of how the multiperspectivist approach was applied to the general organization of the material: https://itunes.apple.com/us/book/voices-of-68/id1401984783?ls=1&mt=11

15   This collection of testimonies can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HfYGfMKrfkw&list=PL_UgxDN1Li8-z3G3LJjEiwQA0_uZc69Hc&index=8&t=147s

16   Bernadette McAliskey, testimony letter, received 18 March 2020.

17   The exhibition's host destinations have included: Ballymena Library; Derry Central Library; Newry Library; Dungannon Library; Derry Guildhall; Belfast City Hall; Ulster University (Magee Campus); Nottingham Trent University; Irish Cultural Centre, London Hammersmith; Luton Irish Centre; Victoria Gallery & Museum, Liverpool; University of Bath; World Heritage Centre, Manchester; Cardiff University; Cork County Library; Cork City Library; Dublin City Library; NUI Galway; Kerry Library; Mayo County Library; Arklow Library; Tipperary County Library; Boston College, USA.

18   The digital version of the exhibition was displayed in various venues internationally including Harvard University; Boston College; Rome; Florida State University.

19   https://www.nmni.com/whats-on/1968-and-beyond

20   For example,

      https://news.liverpool.ac.uk/2018/12/05/panel-discussion-and-exhibition-marking-50-years-of-civil-rights-in-northern-ireland/;

      http://lutonirishforum.org/voices-of-68-exhibition-cultural-seminar/;

      https://www.eventbrite.com/e/voices-of-68-exhibition-launch-tickets-53512171345;

      https://events.bc.edu/event/voices_of_68_exhibit#.XNGaMy-ZOCQ

21   https://www.nmni.com/learn/1968-history-resource/Home.aspx

22   For example, https://www.nmni.com/whats-on/1968-an-opportunity-missed

23   RF Associates 2020, 'Evaluation of National Museums NI's work on the Troubles and Beyond', NMNI internal draft evaluation report.

24   Visitor feedback on *Voices of 68* exhibition.

25   Visitor feedback on *Voices of 68* exhibition.

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