

# **Not-the-Troubles: Disinterring the Marginalised Stories of the Ordinary and the Everyday**

## **Abstract**

*Urban studies of Belfast, Northern Ireland, thoroughly explore the contested or post-conflict city. However, these 'grand narratives' do not necessarily accord with people's day-to-day experiences. Although the ordinary and everyday is the lifeblood of anthropological inquiry, the mundane in Belfast dwells on the narratorial margin, as academic and political loci predominantly align to the Troubles: to the protagonists, the causes or the peace-building aftermath. Ten by Nine (Tenx9) is a monthly, public storytelling night showcasing ordinary people and their true, personal, everyday stories, juxtaposing the funny, poignant and educational, and celebrating the quotidian. Retelling Belfast at Tenx9 challenges hegemonic discourse by moving the mundane from the margin to the centre, opening up a space for small 't' troubles to be shared. The communitas at Tenx9 promotes a sense of belonging in the city outwith Troubled narratives and storytelling, an ancient Irish oral culture, becomes a new form of symbolic practice.*

## **Keywords**

Divided City; Belfast; Urban Margins; Storytelling; Communitas

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## **Introduction<sup>i</sup>**

To understand the complexity of city life one needs to consider a spectrum of experience and urban studies draw upon several disciplinary approaches (Amin and Thrift 2002; Sennett 1990). Anthropology's strength can be in the detail of citizens' lives, being well placed to focus on everydayness (Irving 2016), especially for those who dwell on the spatial, political, economic or social margins, since their voices may

be quiescent or absent from generalised accounts. Because of this, Pardo and Prato (2016) argue there can only be an anthropology *in* the city, not of the city, therefore it is the epistemic assemblage of urban studies that gives onto deeper understandings of city life.

However, there can be unintended consequences to this inter- (and intra-) disciplinary project. When accounts of *a particular* city are taken together, a metanarrative of that city emerges; if some voices are absent from academic accounts then representation of life in that city is skewed. Urban marginalisation is understood here not as spatial, economic, political or social processes *within* the city, but as a discursive outcome of analysis *of* the city, since I argue that marginalisation of non-conflicted everyday lives has occurred in academic accounts of Belfast, Northern Ireland.

Drawing on fieldwork undertaken in 2014, my interest is the extent to which people's lives transcend the stereotypical grand narrative of Belfast as a city of conflict, particularly in relation to what is known as the Troubles, the violence that occurred between 1968 and 1998. This was an ethno-politico-religious conflict between Irish nationalists and British unionists, and between Catholics and Protestants. Although the 1998 Belfast Agreement (popularly, and hereafter, known as the Good Friday Agreement) saw an end to hostilities, aggression and violence continue to surface in a number of different ways, and academic focus—in anthropology and sister disciplines—is firmly on the causes, protagonists or consequences of the conflict. Even the more recent focus on peace-building still has the Troubles as its counterpoint.

The island of Ireland has a long tradition of storytelling, personified by the seanchaí (modern Irish spelling, pronounced *shan-a-key*) who travelled around the country telling stories and bringing news of other places, or by a local person known as 'the bard of the house' in great demand for communal gatherings (Zimmerman 2001, 82). Storytelling continues to be a local cultural-symbolic form of communication. As research participant Caroline said, 'it's in our genes, it goes way back'.

Ten by Nine (Tenx9) is a monthly storytelling event in Belfast where people tell true and personal stories of everyday lives and the sometimes-dramatic events that

punctuate the mundane, yet stories of conflicted Belfast are rarely told. Cities are constantly remade through the practice of urban dwellers (see Introduction this special issue) and the stories told at Tenx9 do not fall into a Troubles trope of conflict and division but instead demonstrate inclusivity and togetherness based on notions of a common humanity. This enables a retelling of Belfast that is in stark contrast to academic renditions of city life. Drawing on ideas of *communitas* and the city as a conglomeration of strangers, it is the seeming contradiction of togetherness and stranger-ness that gives storytelling at Tenx9 an urban, indeed a particular Belfast, quality.

### **Northern Ireland, Belfast and the Troubles**

Northern Ireland (population 1.8 million) was established as a separate country of the United Kingdom in the early twentieth century. To understand the present situation in the capital city of Belfast, *indeed to appreciate why the non-conflict stories I present here warrant particular attention*, one needs to acknowledge the atavistic history of the island. Conflict between British and Irish began in the twelfth century, when colonisation of Catholic Ireland by the Protestant English resulted in centuries of repression of the Catholic religion, Irish language and ethnicity, and a long war of attrition by Irish nationalists against what they viewed as their British oppressors. Following a bitter war of independence, partition in 1921 established Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State (the latter became an independent republic in 1949). This embedded resentment and violence in the north, since Northern Ireland now had a Protestant majority and discrimination against Catholics increased (McKittrick and McVea 2000). However, it is the violence that occurred between 1968 and 1998, widely referred to as the Troubles, that has become a defining feature of contemporary Northern Irish society.

On 5 October 1968 a civil rights march in Londonderry led to three days of violent confrontation between local people and the police. Disorder spread to other parts of the country, reinvigorating the Irish Republican Army, a paramilitary group at war with the British state, and Protestant paramilitary groups, such as Ulster Defence Association and Ulster Volunteer Force, resulting in British military deployment in Northern Ireland to contain widespread violence and disorder. Three thousand seven

hundred and twenty deaths are directly attributable to the Troubles (McKittrick *et al.* 2007) although this figure belies the scale of impact. Violence occurred throughout Northern Ireland but Belfast has been especially scarred by the Troubles, where ‘history, identity and culture are played out, in a dramatic and public manner, through the instruments of threat, violence and deviance’ (Shirlow and Murtagh 2006, 2). On 10 April 1998 the Good Friday Agreement was signed, heralding two decades of relative peace, but dissention over competing rights remain. For example, 26 January 2019 saw the two-year anniversary of the *suspension* of devolved government in Northern Ireland because of fundamental disagreement between Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party, the supposedly co-ruling political parties, on how to deal with the legacy of the Troubles (*Belfast Telegraph*, January 26, 2019). Therefore, I use the term ‘conflict’ to refer to the contemporary and historical situation. As Coulter and Murray note, one needs ‘to exercise a little caution before speaking of Northern Ireland as a place that exists “after the troubles”’ (2008, 21).

Residential segregation of Catholics and Protestants is both cause and consequence of the Troubles and in Belfast it is particularly marked. West Belfast is predominantly Catholic, although with significant Protestant areas; East Belfast is predominantly Protestant but with some Catholic areas; and North Belfast is a chequerboard of religious enclaves living cheek by jowl. Violence still occurs at community interfaces and some sixty so-called peace walls serve as physical barriers in the city separating ethno-religious groups, a significant number of which were constructed after the peace accord was signed (Byrne and Gormley-Heenan 2014). Although ethno-religiously mixed areas have increased since the Good Friday Agreement, these are predominantly among the middle classes in the south of the city or in the gentrified city centre by the River Lagan waterfront; during the same period inter-communal violence increased in north and west Belfast (Murtagh 2011). Ethno-religious segregation is most marked in the education system; 93% of children attend a Catholic or Protestant school (Hansson, O'Connor Bones and McCord 2013). There is even segregation in death. An underground wall separates Catholic and Protestant dead in Belfast City cemetery (Shirlow and Murtagh 2006).

Thus, the conflict in Northern Ireland is ethno-religious, political, ideological and not necessarily over. It is between Catholic and Protestant; between nationalists who want

reunification and unionists who want to remain part of the United Kingdom; and between republicans and loyalists, traditionally associated with paramilitary groups that advocate violent means to achieve their ideological ends.

### **Analysing the City, Producing Marginalisation**

In urban studies cities tend to be approached through different tropes. There are contested, postmodern or traditional cities (Low 2005), cities as sites of personal freedom (Park and Burgess 1967), or of consumption and tourism (Sennett 1990). The 1980s saw a rapid increase in urban anthropological research and this was reflected in Northern Ireland (Wilson and Donnan 2006). However, Belfast is most frequently analysed as a divided and conflicted city (Calame and Charlesworth 2009; Arar 2017). Even when the focus is on peace-building, the Troubles is still the anchor point; Komarova and Svašek (2018) convincingly argue that Belfast is too readily defined by conflict, yet seven of the eleven chapters in their recent edited collection explore the (post) conflict city, demonstrating how difficult it is to analyse aspects of Belfast outwith this Troubled history. These depictions are a hegemonic, yet particular, mode of representation.

Anthropologists working on Northern Ireland have made an important contribution to understanding the divisions in Northern Irish society (Donnan and McFarlane 1989) and, along with other social scientists, influence public policy (Bryan 2015), but urban anthropology in Northern Ireland most often utilises an ethnographic model based on ‘tribal conflict’ (Wilson and Donnan 2006, 22), that is the competing ‘tribes’ of Catholic and Protestant, nationalist and unionist, or republican and loyalist. This is *the central ground of academic analysis* on Northern Ireland. However, there is another dichotomy evident, between the urban centre and the urban margin. I am not referring here to geographic or socio-economic division but to a particular kind of narratorial marginalisation, whereby accounts of non-conflicted ordinary lives are pushed to the periphery, or even absent, in academic writing about Belfast. I intend to disinter stories of the non-Troubled city. This is not to deny or denigrate history, to ignore the importance of these issues to people living in Northern Ireland now, or to minimise deeply held religious faith, but too many academics already explore those

positions, those viewpoints, that history (Shirlow and Murtagh 2006; Calame and Charlesworth 2009).

Marginalising voices is not necessarily intentional. Past and ongoing social division in Northern Ireland cannot be ignored, since ‘it is impossible to understand local rural and urban communities without understanding ethnicity, sectarianism, national identities, class, and the overall importance of history in everyday life’ (Wilson and Donnan 2006, 27-28), hence the lengthy ‘conflict context’ thus far. Meanwhile, academic funding priorities often determine research agendas. In the late 1980s Donnan and McFarlane noted a trend of diminishing funds for any research ‘which does not look at least partially policy relevant’ (1989, 1) and that trend has continued in the post-conflict period. There are sound reasons for marginalisation, but the upshot is *academic stereotyping* of Belfast as conflicted and divided, a Troubled city, a peace-building city, and the subsequent marginalisation of the non-Troubled everyday. The city has been ‘stereotyped to death’ (Dawe 2003, 207).

I met many people whose everyday-life stories were non-Troubled ones, that were not determined, nor obviously influenced, by the city’s atavistic and sectarian history. Sara Dybris McQuaid criticises academics for their collective focus on ‘the social pathology of division’ in Northern Ireland (2012, 76). Some do focus on the non-Troubled (Kempy 2010; Nagle 2013; McCaffery 2018), but Karen Lysaght counsels that although an emphasis on everyday activities ‘creates a more complex and nuanced picture of life in [Belfast as a] divided city, it is important not to create a false sense of “normality”’ (2006, 128). I counter that an emphasis on division creates an exaggerated picture of conflict. It is the *totality* of academic accounts, the metanarrative, that does not accord, proportionally, with the totality of prosaic accounts, leading to a very particular kind of urban marginalisation.

### **Challenging Conflict Stereotypes: Storytelling in Belfast**

Belfast has a real thirst for stories that aren’t conflict driven, that aren’t necessarily about Protestants and Catholics hating each other... I don’t want to be Seamus Heaney and write poetry about a foreign nation or

whatever, I don't want to be asking to take a side... I just want to hear someone tell a story and have a drink.

(Justin, Belfast 2014)<sup>ii</sup>

Many commentators see narrative as fundamental to the human condition (Barthes 1993; Jackson 2006), putting storytelling at the heart of anthropology. By listening to personal narratives one can build a picture of the quotidian, including the dramatic moments that punctuate the everyday. This is not restricted to urban lives, of course, but stories are not told in a vacuum, they are placed. Therefore, stories of lives in the city tell us something of that city (Finnegan 1998).

Tenx9 is a popular monthly storytelling event in Belfast. Queues form up to half an hour before the doors open and once maximum capacity is reached people are turned away. Nine people have ten minutes each to tell a *true* and personal story to an audience of just under two hundred. I use 'true' here as an emic term, since this is how the stories are requested and presented, as in this-really-happened-to-me stories. Anyone can participate and new storytellers are encouraged. Each night has a theme, such as 'Grandparents' or 'Labels', giving a wide brief for the stories that can be told. The stories cover the range of human experiences and emotions, but the city of conflict and division rarely appears.

Although held in a public venue, video or audio recording by audience members is prohibited. Therefore, the recreated stories below are taken from fieldnotes of several Tenx9 evenings and recorded interviews with seven of the storytellers and the two Tenx9 founders.<sup>iii</sup> The interviews were unstructured; I wanted to explore what storytelling and Tenx9 meant to people, so I rarely had prepared questions, preferring instead to use our shared participant experiences, as storytellers and audience members, to prompt and guide the interview.

In the quote at the beginning of this section, Justin conveys his frustration about Belfast's Troubled image. Eimear's story that follows illustrates a 'thirst' for non-conflict narratives in a very particular way.

### **Talking About Freedom, Not Conflict Belfast**

It is 28 May 2014 and the theme at Tenx9 is 'Bodies'. Applause greets Eimear, the evening's first storyteller, as she moves to the front of the full-to-capacity room. She turns to face the audience, stands quietly for a few moments, then begins her story.

When I was seventeen I desperately wanted to do Fine Art at the Art College in Belfast, go to the Big City from my small country town, but I needed a crash course in drawing, so I signed up for a life class at the local college. As I walked into the room all the other students were busy setting up their easels, talking animatedly to each other. Would I ever fit in with these people? I so wanted to. Fionnuala, a middle-aged life model draped in a kaftan, sat on a plinth waiting patiently and, in doing so, somehow put me at ease. After a few words of introduction from the life-drawing master, she slipped off her robe to reveal a body beautifully lined with life, stretch marks on her breasts and belly, neither elegant nor poised but an older woman completely comfortable in her skin. I admired her confidence and began to draw.

Eimear went on to tell how, when she came to Belfast Art College in the 1970s, the life drawing classroom became hugely important to her; she was there early in the morning and late at night, learning about drawing, learning about life. Her horizons expanded, 'life at art college was pure freedom' as the bright lights of the big city brought independence and anonymity, qualities of the city that she loves to this day, because she never went back to live in County Tyrone where she grew up, where everyone knew her.

I embraced Belfast with all my teenage desire to be known for myself and not my family history. Yes, there were bombs and bag searches. I have no idea how I survived. But it was wonderful, crazy and I made tons of friends... It was just huge and different, wonderful and colourful.

Eimear's story illustrates several margin/centre tropes. Her geographical journey is from a small country town to the capital city and her social journey is in the opposite direction, from the heart of the family to the anonymity of urban life. Her move into



the art world begins on the outside looking in, so wanting to be like the other art students in the Tyrone life drawing class, to the art college in Belfast, where she is surrounded by and becomes part of a community of creative people. It is the anonymity of the city that enables her to forge a new centre, to be known as an individual not a family member. Belfast, for Eimear, is a site of personal freedom, but this quotidian coming-of-age story has a more interesting margin/centre narrative.

Eimear moved to Belfast in 1978, ten years into the Troubles. In 1978, eighty-two people were killed in Northern Ireland as a direct result of the conflict, almost half of them in or near to Belfast (Conflict Archive on the Internet, n.d.). Both state and non-state actors perpetrated violence as a control measure. Republican and loyalist paramilitary organisations carried out tit-for-tat killing of Protestants and Catholics respectively and, within their own communities, shooting kneecaps and other punishment beatings were common forms of social policing (Monaghan 2004). Meanwhile, the overwhelmingly-Protestant Royal Ulster Constabulary was accused of ill-treating mainly Catholic suspects. Amnesty International (1978) claimed there was sufficient evidence of this at the Castlereagh detention centre to warrant a public enquiry, though it never eventuated. During the Troubles everyday life in Belfast continued but security in the city centre resulted in what became known as the ring of steel, where the main shopping area was encircled by checkpoints controlled by the British Army and every shop had bodyguards to search customers for potential weapons. As one research participant told me about his life back then, ‘violence, when not being enacted, was always hovering just below the surface’. Thus, the Troubles were the context for everyday life.

Academic analyses of 1970s Belfast not surprisingly focus on the Troubles, yet Eimear describes this period of her life, a time that was central to her development as an individual, as ‘yes, there were bombs and bag searches’ but life in the city was ‘wonderful’ and ‘colourful’. This focus does not deny the possibility of an enriching life during that time but stories like Eimear’s, of late 1970s Belfast as a place of *freedom*, appear to be missing from academic accounts.

## **Inclusivity**

Journalist Paul Doran and poet and theologian Pádraig Ó Tuama established Tenx9 in 2012. Paul had previously heard a woman's story of her secret life as a young gay teenager in Limerick, a small Irish town. He told me 'there are so many stories I'd love to tell about life that's so different from life as we normally see it', thus an alternative vision to Troubled Belfast was implicit from the start. Paul and Pádraig wanted Tenx9 to be as inclusive as possible, open to all regardless of religion, ethnicity, sexuality etc. but this immediately set a challenge. The built environment mediates encounters between citizens (Sennett 1990). This is particularly pertinent in Belfast given the spatial segregation in the city as well as the close relationship between religion and ethnicity. For Tenx9 to be inclusive a neutral venue was crucial. The Black Box on Hill Street is an arts and music venue in the Cathedral Quarter, one of the oldest parts of the city near to St Anne's Cathedral. Since 2004 this area has had substantial investment, particularly in the arts, part of the policy to rebrand Belfast city centre as a shared space (O'Dowd and Komarova 2013). As such, the Black Box appears to exist outwith the city's sectarian mapping. Belfast city centre is often referred to as a more neutral space but space is socially constructed (Massey 2005) and the 'neutrality' of the city centre can be unstable depending on whether any overtly sectarian event is being staged there (Smyth and McKnight 2010). Nevertheless, the Cathedral Quarter is a lively area full of pubs, restaurants, gay clubs, music and arts venues and is, by and large, one of the most neutral shared spaces in Belfast.

Free entry at Tenx9 also encourages inclusivity and, although the bar is reasonably priced, there is no pressure to purchase drinks. Paul and Pádraig explicitly welcome new people and work to make Tenx9 a safe and trusting environment for storytellers and audience. For example, there is no comment on the stories afterwards, just applause. As one person said, 'it's easier to tell the most personal things because you're not questioned about it'. The evening is structured so there are breaks after three stories to minimise disruption and people are asked to switch off their phones and listen to the storytellers. Paul and Pádraig are warm and respectful hosts. As Paul says, 'you have to instil the idea in the audience that you're kind of privileged because you're hearing something about somebody's life that they may never have shared with anybody'.

The concept of inclusivity and sharing space is fundamental to policy-driven initiatives in Northern Ireland. For example, the Good Friday Agreement is based on consociation, a political settlement to govern divided societies on the basis of parity of esteem. In other words, each party to the conflict must be explicitly recognised and treated equally. 'Inclusivity' can also mean excluding overtly sectarian symbols. For example, Belfast City Council promotes shared space in the city centre through such decisions as banning the Irish Tricolour at the St Patrick's Day Parade, since it is too closely associated with Irish nationalism, and promoting instead less- or non-political symbols such as shamrocks (Nagle 2006), or by choosing pink as the corporate colour for the city's buses, one of the few colours in the spectrum that does not have political connotations in Northern Ireland (Moore 2016), where green is associated with Irish nationalism, red white and blue with unionism, and orange with the Protestant Orange Order.

In Belfast it is taboo to ask directly someone's religious or ethnic affiliation because, in part, it is not necessary; it can be deduced (or assumed) from markers such as someone's name, the school they attended, or what sports they like. This practice is referred to as 'telling' and serves to establish the boundaries of socially acceptable behaviour (Burton 1978; Lane 2015). Inclusivity is revealed at Tenx9 through stories of everyday lives that illustrate people's common humanity. It is evident from story content that the Tenx9 audience has a spectrum of people: Catholic, Protestant, other religions and non-believers; young adults through to older people; some with happy lives, some with sad lives; those who identify as heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender; able-bodied people or those with a disability or serious illness. Although Belfast has a small population of migrants and refugees, their stories were not evident at Tenx9 during my fieldwork, probably due to a lack of knowledge of the event among this group at that time. When I interviewed storytellers, although the term 'inclusivity' was not specifically used, it was indicated by expressions like, 'the stories [at Tenx9] are about the human condition' and 'I can identify with the stories'. Many people remarked on the 'togetherness' of Tenx9. This implies that audience and storytellers feel connected by what unites them, not what divides them. Humour plays a key part in this.

Stories are often funny and the audience laughs heartily, humour acting as the ‘central yet strangely nebulous heart of understanding, and belonging, in social relationships’ (Carty and Musharbash 2008, 209). Laughter is not only good for one’s physical health (Martin 2002), it is primarily a social phenomenon (Provine 2000). Thus, in the explicitly inclusive Tenx9, funny stories help everyone *to feel good together*. A night out there becomes, as Nula calls it, ‘a great craic’, an Irish expression for fun, the conviviality derived from the social setting, the art of conversation and storytelling, and the enjoyment of being with others (Trude 2001).

There is a resonance here with Belfast’s Festival of Fools, an annual showcase of street performance and circus acts that provides a shared space for everyone to enjoy the performances with laughter as a common thread. Although the festival organisers did not set this up as a peace-building exercise, McCaffery observes that it serves as an ‘interactive spatial sociality’ that transcends the city’s Troubled history, since circus skills are not particularly associated with either ethno-religious group (2018:190). Yet despite being similar to circus festivals all over Europe, this one does not take place in a vacuum ‘[it] is, after all, *Belfast’s Festival of Fools*’ (2018:193, original emphasis), thus transcendence through laughter is significant. Tenx9 was not established as an explicitly peace-building exercise (although it is explicitly inclusive) and these stories do not take place in a vacuum either; ‘story and place are integrally bound and you have to find out about both to find your way around’ (Donnan 2005, 85). Tenx9 story content thus tells us something of what it means to live in this city and laughter is a key component in the success of the evening.

That humour unites is unremarkable but an interesting feature of Tenx9 is how uproariously funny stories sit side by side with serious, sad or poignant ones, and this juxtaposition emphasises the togetherness that people experience. For example, one evening the theme was ‘What I Learnt in School’. A sample of these stories can be seen on the promotional video on the Tenx9 website. There was a funny story of a woman who became the first female table tennis champion at Gilnahirk Primary School, accompanied by lots of cheering. One woman told how she struggled in games at school because she was very large and running around was difficult and painful. This story had some poignant moments but there was much hilarity when she projected a photograph of the awful Big Blue Knickers that were then part of

regulation sports kit for young girls. A man talked about when his dad was imprisoned for protesting against internment (imprisonment without trial) by refusing to sign the census, and how, as a child, he did not understand what that meant. This story was met with respectful silence. One woman spoke of her childhood eczema and how a schoolgirl told everyone she had leprosy. Her delivery, timing and facial expression indicated that she wanted people to laugh. They did.

The most poignant story that night, and one that had a profound effect on the audience, was told by Tom. He began in a quiet voice. He was an outsider at school because he enjoyed his lessons and he made friends with a 'motley crew of misfits' that gathered in the library. Continuing in a quiet and unassuming voice he told anecdotes about his friends but, as his story unfolded, it was about one friend in particular:

It was Christmas time and in my friend's house they had a large tree with lots of presents under it. He was really excited and persuaded his parents to let him open one of them on Christmas Eve. He chose the largest present – a box of magic tricks – and went off to play with it. A couple of hours later his dad went up to the loft, which was the playroom. That's where he found him. He'd set up a small camcorder in the loft to capture himself performing the trick. It went tragically wrong. My friend was hanging from the rafter by his 'magic' rope, a trick from a child's toy box that had fatal consequences. I found out about this when I went back to school after the Christmas break.

When Tom started telling his story there was some glass-clinking-crisp-rustling background noise, but as the story unfolded the audience became absolutely silent. You could hear the proverbial pin drop. All the people I spoke to, some of them weeks afterwards, commented on Tom's story without any prompt from me. They told me how powerful it was and that it was testimony to Tenx9 that these stories could sit alongside those that are funny. Although no one used the term 'empathy', people spoke about how they wanted to reach out to Tom. They talked about 'togetherness' and a sense of sharing the joys and pains of everyday life. To explore this further, I want to resurrect Turner's notion of *communitas*.

## **Togetherness as Communitas, The Company of Strangers**

Communitas occurs when a temporary, often unstructured, group of people experience a shared feeling and a strong sense of bonding (V. Turner 1995). Victor Turner distinguished between three types of communitas: ideological, normative and spontaneous. All three are in evidence at Tenx9. Paul and Pádraig pay particular attention to creating a safe and trusting atmosphere; this sets out the optimal conditions for these experiences to flourish, Turner's ideological communitas. Each month the audience enjoys stories that are funny or sad, sometimes both, and this becomes normative communitas, when the feelings of togetherness become what Turner calls a perduring social system. However, this relies on the intermittent reinforcement of spontaneous communitas, when feelings of specialness and bonding emerge unbidden. This is brought forth by stories like Tom's, the extra-special stories one might say, which are a key component of Tenx9 togetherness. When that kind of story is told togetherness becomes palpable. Caroline told me about a story she heard by a transgendered woman one night, whose story was 'very emotional, very raw... [and] the atmosphere in the room? Everybody, *everybody*, **everybody** was wishing that woman well'. Caroline's prosody emphasised the depth of this feeling. It did not matter that almost all of the people in the room would have been strangers to this woman, because when communitas emerges, 'one feels it; it is a fact of everyone's experience' (E. Turner 2012, xii). Indeed, certain stories rely on the presence of strangers and it is this aspect that connotes Tenx9 as an *urban* storytelling evening.

Any city is a conglomeration of strangers (Sennett 1977), and early studies understood the stranger as an outsider, spatially and socially; a wanderer who is both proximate and distant (Simmel 1950), a marginal person who tries to be accepted or tolerated (Schuetz 1944), yet a baffling figure that is difficult to place (Bauman 1990). I draw on a different configuration, the modern stranger (Harman 1988), whereby encounters with strangers are commonplace and we learn to negotiate these relationships with relative ease. The stranger's role in storytelling is illustrated here by Justin's story, told on the Tenx9 night themed 'Bodies'.

After an amusing and self-deprecating anecdote about his childhood, Justin explained his position within his family through metaphor: ‘when water buffalo are attacked they form a circle with their horns pointing outwards and the young in the middle. That’s me, in the middle of my family, protected’. He also described how the Greek army would form a phalanx with their shields protecting not just themselves but the man next to them as well. The one at the end had to be the strongest. He only had his own shield protecting him and had to hold the line as it pushed towards him; ‘That’s my sister [Laura], the one at the end of the line. She’s always been the strong one, looking out for me’. He went on to explain that a few years ago Laura was dangerously ill with pre-eclampsia (a medical condition of pregnancy that can develop into a life-threatening condition):

By the time I got to the hospital the baby was born and I knew [Laura] was out of the woods but she looked so in need of protection... It made me reassess my relationship with her. I have no idea how I would ever live without her. How the family would cope without her. She’s always looked out for me and I love her for that. I love you.

Laura was in the audience.

When I asked Justin about telling this story at Tenx9 he said that, although he and Laura are close, she is quite different from him in personality. They have different opinions on social matters and politics, different ways of living their lives. He could not tell her that he loved her in any other way: ‘If I’d have told her on our own, she’d probably would’ve said, “ach, fuck off with ye!” [This story] felt like a present to her’. I contend that Justin could share this deeply personal message to Laura at Tenx9 because of the presence of two hundred strangers, two hundred witnesses.

The rules of engagement between Justin and Laura were changed that night. They were at a social event to tell and to listen to true stories, (*true stories, I love you Laura, hear me say that*), where there is an explicit rule for respect and the storytellers are not questioned, where stories can be liberated, ‘articulating things that generally dare not say their names’ (Kearney 2002, 25). The etymology of the verb ‘to witness’ is to be present, to authenticate, to attest to the facts. For Taussig, witnessing has a sense of

gravity: ‘to *witness*, as opposed to *see*, is to be implicated in the process of judgement’ (2011, 71, original emphasis). Justin says ‘I love you’ to Laura and two hundred people silently affirm: yes, he does. Returning to the notion of *communitas*, strong feelings of togetherness among strangers are even more powerful than among friends, because shared meaningful experiences with strangers are more exceptional.

Encounters with strangers in the contemporary city are the rule not the exception (McWeeny 2016) and these encounters can result in ‘the most surprising openness – confidences which sometimes have the character of a confessional and which would be carefully withheld from a more closely related person’ (Simmel 1950, 404). Strangers do not share the basic assumptions of the in-group and thus have to question what the in-group would find unquestionable (Schuetz 1944). In telling his story to strangers Justin has to *explain* his love for his sister. This is where his narrative structure becomes relevant. He must give the necessary context of his relationship with Laura, which he does through powerful metaphors, and the beginning of his story was humorous giving import to the serious *dénouement* through contrast. At Tenx9 storytellers have the floor and there is no verbal feedback during the story, thus Laura cannot come back with a one-liner without breaching that social boundary. Justin’s story was only for one person, but to be told meaningfully an audience of strangers was essential; he needed them, the *communitas* of their silent affirmation *and* the Tenx9 storytelling boundaries of no immediate comeback to make his case so powerfully and publicly.

### **Belfast’s Non-Troubled Quotidian**

Storytelling is a cultural-symbolic form of communication throughout Ireland, in both rural and urban areas. What connotes Tenx9 as a particularly urban phenomenon is the presence of strangers, but this does not explain why stories of conflict or religious division are largely absent. These stories are neither banned nor explicitly invited. The various themes for the evenings are broad in nature so a conflict story could fit within them, and the majority of the audience is from Belfast so will have a shared history, in one way or another, of the Troubles’ impact. On the Tenx9 website there are tips on how to write a story and what kind of stories are told. For example, it discourages proselytising stories, as Pádraig explains:



If someone is telling a story that has religion, politics, conflict etc. in the background, that's great. If someone is telling a story that would only be understandable to someone from their religious/political background, we would suggest they open up the narrative so those who don't share the background can enjoy the story. If someone is telling a story that seems to be trying to make an argument for joining a political, religious or other viewpoint, we suggest they don't tell the story at Tenx9, and instead buy their friends a pint and have a good political or religious discussion together.

Editorial control is exercised through these guidelines and by Paul and Pádraig insisting on seeing first-timers' stories before they are told (although a few people tell stories without notes, most read from a story written out beforehand). In my experience at Tenx9 religion is sometimes referred to as background context but the past conflict rarely comes up. Of course, we do not know in what way the Troubles may have touched those in the room; there may be specific reasons, not shared with me, why people do not tell Troubled stories, but Pádraig Ó Tuama is well known in Northern Ireland as someone working in conflict resolution. His reputation would make telling Troubled tales acceptable. People share other intimate, personal and sometimes painful stories, yet this does not seem to have attracted narratives of conflict or religious division. Maybe people cannot tell conflict stories *because* Tenx9 is in a neutral venue and this might necessitate taking a stand on the underpinning ideology of the province's problematic history. The type of stories may be due to the experience and expectations that people have of Tenx9, in a kind of self-fulfilling wheel; when non-Troubled tales of the everyday are told and enjoyed this becomes the *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977). Certain ways of being, as expressed both verbally and non-verbally through these stories, have become the socialised norm for the evening.

However, Nigel Rapport asserts that notions of people's thoughts or actions being *determined* by culture (and in this I include the storytelling 'norms' of Tenx9) is to deny people's individuality and agency. He believes that anthropology's focus on the socio-cultural is 'the stolen essence of the personal' (2008:331) and urges that individual experiences are put back into the centre of anthropological analysis. The

stories told at Tenx9 are true and personal, but they are also a creative endeavour; people *choose* which stories to tell and how to tell them, whether they will be funny or not, constructing a narrative arc to make their stories engaging and entertaining. Till Förster notes that creativity in urban environments has long been promoted as a means to open up ‘an emancipatory space for the ordinary populace’ (2013, 237) and it is in this emancipatory space that a re-telling of Belfast occurs, that of everyday lives in the city.

I reiterate that stories of conflict are not banned at Tenx9, as shown in the sample of stories from ‘What I Learnt at School’, where one mentioned internment (there is also a Troubles story in one of the podcasts), but of the nearly one hundred stories I heard, the conflict was mentioned once. All the other stories were the mundane, funny, banal, interesting and profound events in people’s lives. One could say it is their small ‘t’ troubles that people choose to share, their everyday joys and sadness, rather than the conflict known as capital ‘T’ Troubles. Throughout my fieldwork, whenever I told people I was interested in personal stories that were not about the conflict this was extremely well received. Creativity ‘grows out of the heterogeneity of the city’ (Förster 2013, 241) and creativity at Tenx9 is in the storied lives that are represented; the heterogeneity on display is the myriad everydayness of those lives. It appears to me that people are *intentionally choosing* to put quotidian stories centre stage despite its urban positioning within a neutral venue in a conflicted city. This sends a powerful message about what it is to be human in Belfast. It is not *just* about the past, the church, politics, conflict or policy-driven peace initiatives, in short, the issues that preoccupy academic literature on Northern Ireland.

## **Conclusion**

Aceska, Heer and Kaiser-Gromilund (Introduction, this special issue) note that urban marginality is frequently understood as a spatial phenomenon, rather than in terms of social relations, and they coin the term ‘mosaic thinking’ to illustrate this seeming disconnect. My contention is that certain stories of peoples’ lives in Belfast are marginalised as a result of *academic stereotyping* of the city as conflicted and divided. Although there are understandable reasons for this focus, given the province’s history of Troubles, the outcome is a metanarrative of Belfast—a mosaic

of stories—that marginalises those whose lives are not dominated by division. Stories told at Tenx9 evidence another version of city life, where mundane and profound events of people’s lives are shared and understood as a common humanity between friends, acquaintances and strangers. I am not suggesting that mundane stories are *only* told there; personal stories are shared between people all the time—in the pub, in the shop, on the street corner. Tenx9 is a stand-in for these places, reformulating the city from its narratorial margin. People at Tenx9 often single out a sense of togetherness experienced there; the juxtaposition of funny and serious stories creates *communitas*. Stories told of lives in the city tell us something of that city and the story of Belfast is not just about conflict. In the seeming contradiction of togetherness and stranger-ness, storytelling, an ancient Irish oral culture, becomes a new form of symbolic practice that challenges academic representations of Belfast.

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## Notes

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<sup>ii</sup> Pseudonyms used when requested.

<sup>iii</sup> A selection of podcasts is now available on the Tenx9 website, although was not during my fieldwork in 2014.