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Recollecting and Re-Collecting

The Ethical Challenges of Social Archiving in Post-Conflict Northern Ireland

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Archives, viewed as active and interactive tools for the construction of sustained identities, are important vehicles for building the capacity to aspire among groups who need it most. (Appadurai 2003, 25)

The ethical dimensions of remembering might usefully be thought of through the activity of recollection in both its contemporary connection to remembering and its archaic sense of re-collection. Since the function of memory turned to principles of what Aleida Assmann calls ‘reactivation, reformulation and reinterpretation’ (2011, 80) in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, recollecting is mostly taken to mean remembering. However, equally important is its archaic pre-sixteenth-century usage in the sense of re-collecting, which, in addition to meaning ‘recalling to memory’, had the implication of summoning up one’s spirits or courage, of gathering together after some kind of dispersal. This chapter will explore the acts of recollecting in the sense of remembering and re-collecting, of gathering and reassembling depleted resources and energies, to explore the significance and consider the ethical implications of memory following the violence of a protracted conflict. Recollection is necessary to work out appropriate ways to remember the dead of the conflict as well as how to pay attention to the continuing impact on those who remain. Re-collection is also essential in the sense of taking stock, creating an emotional inventory of capacity, strength and the desire to rebuild.

To analyse these ideas I will examine the social archiving project on Mount Vernon, a housing estate in north Belfast, to show how a social archiving project there enabled the community that took part
to examine its collective archive through recollection: how they used this to re-collect and expand what Diana Taylor calls the ‘repertoire’ available to them (2003). In this process the mural shown in Figure 8.1 became a marker or touchstone of identity by absorbing and reflecting back the range of choices open to the community for its future. Part of the focus of this chapter is on the ethics of asking participants to remember or revisit a difficult and troubled past when some would argue that it would be more profitable to forget and to move on. However, this chapter argues that it is essential to undertake the kind of memory work outlined here in order to recollect or to make sense of the past and to re-collect or create a space for the new identity formations and views of history that will be needed to move away from conflict. In both of these senses the emphasis is on activity, remembering and gathering, and the key to understanding social archiving lies in thinking of it as a process of archiving rather than placing undue emphasis on the archive itself: to use Appadurai’s terminology above, archiving as an active or interactive tool.

Within theatre scholarship social archiving would most usually be associated with applied theatre but in practice would more accurately be