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## **Notes for input at 'International Human Rights Day 2022: Embracing Human Rights', Ulster Museum 9<sup>th</sup> December 2022**

Thank you to Roberta and conflict textiles team for collaboration, and inviting me to speak today.

### **Background:**

- Met Roberta in August 2020 at an online event to mark International Day of the Disappeared
  - My research on disappeared in NI, broader interest in the ways in which disappearances are responded to in TJ contexts, victim mobilisation etc.
  - Many textiles focus on the disappeared - so this was really the point of intersection between my work and the archive.
- We brought a rotating conflict textiles exhibition to QUB in March 2021 - funded by QUB Human Rights Centre and the Senator George J. Mitchell Institute for Global Peace, Security and Justice.
- In spring of this year, we rotated the exhibition to a new selection of textiles.
- For this talk, I will focus on the 2021-22 exhibit as I used this more in my teaching.
- I want to acknowledge and thank the QUB Library and Estates staff for their support and mention in particular Christine Carrothers from QUB Library.

### **The 2021-22 exhibit:**

- Four textiles: two from Chile, one - Day of Visit - depicting political imprisonment and the other - Centro de Torturas Cuatro Alamos - torture. The third textile, entitled 'Digital Death' focused on drone warfare, and the fourth 'Shannonwarch' on the use of Shannon airport by flights involved in extraordinary rendition.
- Textiles were selected in part to link in with a module I was convening that semester on Counter-terrorism and Human Rights. The issues addressed in the textiles were also of relevance for my Transitional Justice module in the second semester.

- In terms of using this in teaching, I encouraged students to visit the exhibition and attend related events - launch and truth-telling. Also, Roberta joined my Counter-Terrorism and Human Rights class to discuss one of the textiles - Digital Death - which depicts the impact of drone warfare on civilians. In my Transitional Justice class, I was able to use the textiles as an example of truth-telling - and I'll say more about this shortly.

*In my last few minutes I want to talk about the reasons why I think conflict textiles are a valuable tool in education, particularly in the topics I teach around transitional justice, human rights, and state violence.*

1. **First, these textiles demonstrate the real-world impact of the human rights violations which the students are studying in class.** They are tangible and provide a snapshot of someone's lived experience. In this regard they do what reading textbooks or journal articles cannot do to the same extent. For instance, for one of the weeks on my Counter-terrorism and Human Rights module I had included readings on drone warfare as a form of state terror. Having Roberta explain the Digital Death textile gave the students further insight into the on-the-ground reality of this form of violence.
2. **Second, the curatorial process allows for the linking of textiles by theme or relationship to a particular type of event.** So to focus on the 2021-2022 exhibit, the textiles were linked by the theme of counter-terrorism and human rights, but also were connected by the idea of the state as perpetrator of violence. Encouraging our students to reflect critically on the role of the state in its counter-terrorism efforts was an important aspect of the module I was teaching, and these four textiles - individually and collectively - prompted reflection on that. And helped to make connections between acts of violence that are geographically and temporally separated (e.g. Chile in the 1970s and 80s and Pakistan in the 2000s) but where we see these same issues of states using counter-terrorism or security rhetoric as a way to justify acts of violence against civilians.

3. **Third, as Roberta has said on many occasions, these textiles are not simply artworks, they are testimonies.** Having these textiles at QUB brings the testimonies of those impacted by human rights violations across the world to Belfast. In this regard, I want to note that the exhibition is in the McClay Library which is QUB's main library - so the students passing by this exhibition are not just Law students or those with an existing interest in human rights, but students from across the university use this space. One of the aspects I most value is that this exhibition is a way that the university can provide space for often unheard or marginalised voices to tell their stories, and these testimonies are visible to students and staff from across the university.
4. **Fourth, and relatedly, textiles are often made by those at the grassroots, those who have been most directly impacted by harm.** My main area of research is transitional justice, and a key critique in that field is that efforts to address legacies of violence are often top-down, and elite led, and thus disconnected from those who have been most harmed. Conflict textiles are often made by, and tell the stories of, those at the grassroots. So they are, to use Bickford's terminology, a form of unofficial truth telling. In Northern Ireland we have experienced the importance of truth telling by those at the grassroots - organisations like Wave or the Pat Finucane Centre engage in vital work in this regard. Across various organisations we have seen the production of memory quilts, and we have a number of books written by victims and survivors of violence. These conflict textiles are another example of this type of truth-telling.
5. **Finally, one of the aspects of the textiles that I particularly value is their connection to resistance.** The making of these textiles in the first place is an act of resistance, a way to challenge the state or to challenge dominant narratives. In addition, the textiles often depict acts of resistance such as protests. In these times when human rights violations are so prevalent, and when we see push back against hard won rights and freedoms, stories of resistance are especially powerful and it is important that we share them in educational settings, as well as elsewhere.

**These are rough notes only and are not for re-use or publication.**

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