Peace-walls, Flags, and Dark Passages

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ABSTRACT

The cites of Belfast and Londonderry in Northern Ireland are fractured with a network of walls, fences, and barricades, that divide traditionally Loyalist-Unionist-Protestants from Republican-Nationalist-Catholics communities. They were mostly constructed between the late 1960s and early 1990s, during a period of conflict known as 'The Troubles.' Since 1995, the walls have been rebranded with the official euphemism 'peace walls,' and the groups they divide renamed as 'interface communities.' They are due to be removed by 2023, as part of commitments drawn out in the Good Friday Agreement; the 1998 accord that largely brought an end to the conflict. However, due to Northern Ireland's devolved government, and a lack of funding towards the advocacy groups needed to bring these opposing communities together, among other opaque issues, this goal is increasingly unattainable. Woven throughout this network of fortification infrastructures is a nascent tourist typology and muralscape that is complex and murky, bound up in underexplored emergent identity politics. This article leans on spatial post-conflict theory, and first-hand accounts of encounters with this architectural typology, to explore the nebulous context in Northern Ireland.

DARK TOURISM

I grew up in one of the border counties that geographically hugs Northern Ireland. As an adolescent, I would often escape the humdrum of rural life by traveling to the more stirring cities of Belfast and Londonderry. Back then, they had just emerged from a three-decade-long conflict and were awkwardly struggling to find a place in its shadow; genuine peace felt palpable. Physical palimpsests remained, and still do, to distinguish one 'side' of the conflict from the other, and to signal the segregation that exists between rival Loyalist-Unionist-Protestants and Republican-Nationalist-Catholics. Flags always at full-mast mark allegiance to the United Kingdom, others to the Irish Republic. Tri-colored kerbstones striate the same politics next to your feet. Fortification walls criss-cross between working-class neighborhoods hardest hit, constructed at The Troubles' height, and left to ensure the still unresolved tensions do not eclipse in further conflict.

I was reminded of these emblems and symbols when I recently discovered conflict-based tours of Northern Ireland's capital city, Belfast, listed on the website 'dark-tourism.' Part of a broader and relatively nascent phenomenon, the page offers its visitors a comprehensive travel guide of around 900 sites in over 100 countries across the globe, providing excursionists with handy tips and tricks for traveling to places 'historically associated with death and tragedy.' 'Historically,' we'll come to see, is an operative yet inconsistent word for places like Belfast and Londonderry. The site offers a taxonomy of destinations, classified by thematic –from 'grave tourism,' to 'disaster area tourism,' to the more niche and emerging 'cult-of-personality tourism'– as well as by geographical location. Broadly aiming to debunk myths associated with the phenomena, its landing page elucidates the dark tourism (DT) positionality, scope, and vision, by claiming it does not include "anything voyeuristic (like 'slum tourism'), nor does it include 'war tourism' (travel to current war zones) or other 'danger tourism'" (Dark Tourism, n.d.).

I was confused by this set of justifications when I came across conflict-based tours that center around the 45-foot-tall (13.7-metre-tall) walls, fences, and barricades dividing Belfast's – once opposing, now more relationally-convoluted – sides. Since 1995, the walls have been rebranded with the official euphemism 'peace walls,' and the groups they divide renamed as 'interface communities.'[1] To take dark tourism's claims a little further, it is clear that the vantage point of this branch of tourism is a post-conflict context, in

(1) The Belfast Interface Project (BIP) was established in 1995 with a remit to identify the major issues of concern to interface communities in Belfast and, in consultation with community, statutory, and voluntary sectors, to assist in identifying effective means of addressing these issues and facilitating these processes where possible.

other words, looking back to a period of enmity or struggle from a climate of peace. In recent years, local residents and organized groups have offered visitors a peripatetic view of Northern Ireland's lasting divisions. As part of the Good Friday Agreement that brought an end to the conflict, the walls are meant to be removed by the year 2023. Yet they remain because tensions do too, reinstating, as Ariella Azoulay and Adi Ophir describe in Against the Wall, *a "no-law situation" (2005, p. 22). Following the statement that dark tourism would not involve any form of 'danger,' the DT description of Belfast's Falls Road peace line posits that "there are many more murals and other manifestations of the divided political positions in other parts of the city as well," however "some of these may not be as easy or safe to visit, certainly not on foot" (Dark Tourism, n.d.b).*

Fascinated by what story these tours really tell, and again the vantage point and locality in which the narrative emerges from, I began trawling the internet for clues. I looked at TripAdvisor. At the time of writing, the most recent reviews[2] read:

> *'Wouldn't bother'*
>
> *This was a massive let down! Graffiti all over it and was nothing like I expected to see. :(The wall goes for ages and to be honest, it's a whole lot of nothing.*
>
> *'Scary and poignant'*
>
> *A great place to experience the full horror of the troubles, the memory still feels very much alive. The locals are very friendly considering the injustices that occurred here.*
>
> *'Great art'*
>
> *As part of our Falls Road walk we came to the Peace Wall. The art is very good but the issues behind the murals still appear to run deep.*
>
> *'A wall is a wall'*
>
> *Ok I'm gonna get lamb basted but it's a WALL! Belfast is not the only city in the world to have a wall, ok it's a wall with writing on it, in my day that was called graffiti [shocked face emoji] I wonder if they were [sic] taken down would anyone complain [thinking face emoji]. (as cited in Tripadvisor, 2020)*

THE FLAG

Tourists' expectations of the wall are also met by the histories of other signifying objects. In its description of the Belfast peace walls, the 'dark tourism' website refers to a historical flag dispute, itself a complex and long-lasting affair. In early December 2012, Belfast City Council passed a vote that would limit the number of days the Union Jack[3] would fly from Northern Ireland's administrative headquarters. Loyalist-Unionist-Protestants felt the decision was an attack on their cultural identity and protested through heated clashes with the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). As it becomes evident here, the Troubles and its aftermath are linked to knotty aesthetic formations of subjectivity – a fight rooted in emblems and symbols, one side wedded to green, white, and gold; the other red, white, and blue. Julia Kristeva describes the tension that exists within the psychology of modern-day subjects in her 1977 text Polylogue. *For Kristeva, individuals are subjected* to, *while also an active subject who acts* upon. *She unveils the dynamism inherent to these signifying processes: a flag is not merely a flag, it is striating across a complex system of subject identifications and processes.*

A few months following the flag protests, in May 2013, a further post-sectarian 'removal' strategy was implemented by the Northern Ireland Executive Office –run by the First Minister and Deputy First Minister[4]– through a report titled 'Together: Building a United Community.'[5] The document details a plan to remove all interface barriers in Northern Ireland by 2023 as part of a broader project to promote a shared future between sides.[6] Led by the Department of Justice, the document was almost universally praised by those on both sides of the divide, yet has recently come under heavy criticism for its overly ambitious goal. Saliently, Northern Ireland's government devolved in January 2017 owing to disputes between the power-sharing executive DUP and Sínn Fein.[7] Many peace-building advocacy groups have also ceased activity, meaning the trauma-informed approach to peace, that positioned the delicate work of centering the perspective of those who have suffered under years of sectarian violence, was largely paused.[8]

(2) At time of writing (10 April 2020).

(3) The red, white, and blue flag of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

(4) The First Minister and deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland are the joint heads of government of the Northern Ireland Executive and have overall responsibility for the running of the Executive Office.

(5) See Robinson & McGuinness, 2005.

(6) The plan to remove all interface barriers in Northern Ireland is part of a broader policy and strategic framework for good relations in Northern Ireland, called 'A Shared Future,' which includes a programme of cross-community and post-sectarian commitments, such as implementing shared summer schools and mixed housing projects.

(7) The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) is a right-wing political parliamentary party that favor British unity. Sínn Fein is a center-left to left-wing party that traditionally favor an Irish Republic.

(8) On 26 February 2016, a part of the Crumlin Road peace wall was demolished.

THE WALL

The oldest and most-imposing division in Belfast is the Cupar Way peace line that cuts across west Belfast, separating Catholics in the Falls community from Protestant's in Shankill. At almost 400m in length, it was constructed on 10 September 1969 under instruction by then chief of the British Army, Lt. General Sir Ian Freeland, who concurrently declared, "the peace line will be a very, very temporary affair" (as cited in McDonald, 2008). Residents had in fact already constructed a dividing wall, but the army replaced it with their own 'official barricade,' overriding the agency of residents within their own protection.[9] His words are now infamous among interface communities, who have not only seen walls proliferate across the region, but many also double, triple, and quadruple in height, due to the fear of paramilitary resurgences of violence and tensions across dividing lines. This very same still-dilating architecture was featured in a piece by English travel writer Simon Calder. In 'Best of Britain,' Calder encourages visitors to,

> *wander (safely and comfortably) down the Shankill Road and back along the Falls Road and try to make sense of the Troubles through the dark, passionate and sometimes shocking murals from both sides of the religious divide. When conflict passes into tourist attraction, the world is a better place. (as cited in "Terror Murals UK's Top Attraction," 2007)*

The world is a better place.

Wendy Brown defines the existence of walls as demonstrable of ungovernability by the state, law, and politics, present in a "theatricalised and spectacularised performance" of exclusion, stratification, and blockage (2017, p. 37). Emerging, as before, from a "no-law situation" (Azoulay & Ophir, 2005, p. 43) –such as the Troubles– and maintained today through the devolved power-sharing executive –they generate a specific psychic landscape embedded within a cultural and political identity. For Brown, these landscapes have less to do with 'deterrence' and more with managing the image of a border; the spectacle of it. She states, "walls, corridors and irregular zones within nations are not merely backdrops, but active and signifying agents" (2017, p. 39). It is difficult to ascertain whether Northern Ireland's network of interfaces signifies safety for residents in opposition to a real and tangible threat or are in part productive of the very threat their presence claims to quell. As Michel Agier posits in his Borderlands*, walls both "prove indignation" and "reassure," while at the same time are, "visible, photographed, and in a cynical way photogenic" (2017, p. 55).*

MANAGING THE IMAGE OF A BORDER

In July 2006, a further cross-community project was established by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNL), with the aim of "replacing divisive imagery with imagery that reflects communities in a more positive manner," (Independent Research Solutions, as cited in Hill & White, 2012, p. 75) supported by £3.3m of funding for an initial 3-year period. The 'divisive imagery' mentioned refers to the paramilitary and sectarian murals littered across the long stretches of peace lines in the region, commemorating a range of historical figures such as William of Orange – the Dutch monarch who led the 1690 Battle of the Boyne, a notorious victory for Protestants – and Bobby Sands – a member of the Provisional Irish Republican Army who died on hunger strike while imprisoned at HM Prison Maze in Northern Ireland. The changes mentioned sought to intervene in the visual muralscape of Northern Ireland by, in one example, replacing images depicting street violence with those promoting child's play. The project became inextricably bound to the new local tourist-oriented economy, with the newly toned-down walls capitalized through the Belfast City Council and Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB). Scholars Andrew Hill and Andrew White (2012) note that the NITB website has included a 'skewed depiction' of this muralscape on their website, avoiding direct reference to politico-sectarian themes and paramilitary groups, subsumed under the 'culture and traditions' of Northern Ireland as opposed to its real, tangible, and ongoing conflict. This white-washing of Northern Ireland's complex past was captured in a chilling piece written by Lyra McKee, a 29-year-old journalist and LGBTQ+ activist who was fatally shot on 18 April 2019 in the Creggan area of Derry:

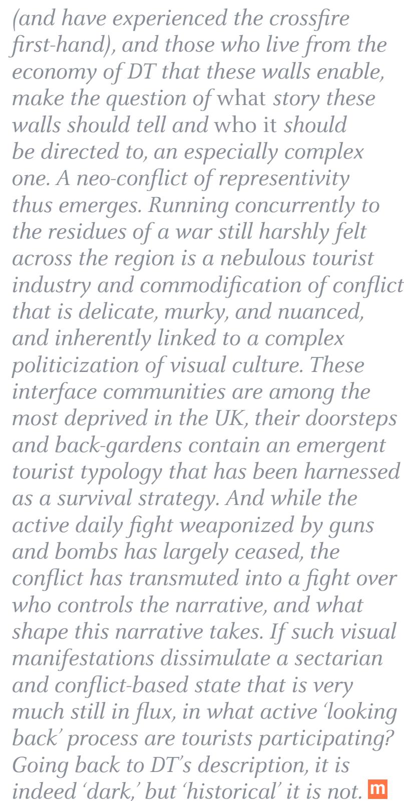
> *Throughout the city, murals dedicated to the terror groups who'd once ruled the districts were slowly being erased. It was a whitewashing of the past and it was happening because we were desperate for the world to know us for any reason other than war. Maybe we were trying to erase our own memories, hoping for a collective amnesia by blotting out reminders of what had happened. But all you had to do was scratch the paint and you'd find the city's past, like a ghost that refused to depart for the other world. (McKee, 2020)*

(9) "As the army last night completed the first half of its mile-and-a-half-long peace line in Belfast, the militant Protestant Shankill Defence Association in a complete about-face decided to advise all loyalists to remove their barricades voluntarily and not resist the Crown forces." (Clare, 1969).

Undoubtedly, such murals generate a level of tourism and, therefore, finance to some of the local communities who are most deprived in the UK. However, many have noted that the focus on "conflict and paramilitary imagery was likely to have a negative impact in the long run and should not be encouraged" (Hill & White, 2012, p. 84). Further, as John Coaffee notes in Terrorism, Risk and the Global City: The Making of a Contemporary Urban Landscape*, since the mid-1990s substantial research has suggested that "fortified landscapes, which are designed to reduce fear, can, in fact, exacerbate the fear of living" (2003, p. 2). The paradox that lies at the heart of these so-called peace walls –an infrastructure that is embedded within interconnected 'space-power' (Hirst, 2005) phenomena – requires a deeper and more textured understanding. How can these walls, sites of visual contestation, become extrapolated from a network of identity, securitization, and, now, tourism, that is still murky and undefined? What role do these new tourists, and tour guides, play in dissimulating such complex relations?*

EMERGENT ECONOMIES

A rudimentary reading of Northern Ireland's political ecosystem would lead one to believe that the region has indeed been in a state of peace since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement on 10 April 1998. Yet there are more peace walls today than there were at the end of the Troubles, with 80 in existence in Belfast alone. Furthermore, in this post-sectarian society, 30 people on average each year since 1998 have been made homeless due to having to leave a Protestant neighborhood, and 90% of children still receive largely segregated education. Between networks of civil and state intervention, those who live among the 'passages' of these walls



(and have experienced the crossfire first-hand), and those who live from the economy of DT that these walls enable, make the question of what story these *walls should tell and* who it *should be directed to, an especially complex one. A neo-conflict of representivity thus emerges. Running concurrently to the residues of a war still harshly felt across the region is a nebulous tourist industry and commodification of conflict that is delicate, murky, and nuanced, and inherently linked to a complex politicization of visual culture. These interface communities are among the most deprived in the UK, their doorsteps and back-gardens contain an emergent tourist typology that has been harnessed as a survival strategy. And while the active daily fight weaponized by guns and bombs has largely ceased, the conflict has transmuted into a fight over who controls the narrative, and what shape this narrative takes. If such visual manifestations dissimulate a sectarian and conflict-based state that is very much still in flux, in what active 'looking back' process are tourists participating? Going back to DT's description, it is indeed 'dark,' but 'historical' it is not.* m

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