‘Muralling’ and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland: The Complex Role of Public Art in Peace Processes

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Abstract

On city walls, political contestation and artistic expression intertwine as hundreds of murals provide a stark representation of the anger, fear and hope felt by the communities which paint them. This case study examines the role of public art in the conflict and peace process in Northern Ireland. First, the context of conflict in Northern Ireland is explored. Second, the history of ‘muralling’ as a practice of ungoverned expression is traced. Third, contemporary contestations surrounding murals are discussed, with emphasis on exploring how engagement between new and old murals may be facilitated. Lastly, the case concludes that the practice of muralling is inseparable from discourse and responses of wider communities, from opposition, and that negotiating this line between controversy and freedom of artistic expression serves as an opportunity to work through tensions and convey solidarity with broader themes of oppression.

Introduction

This case study examines the role of public art in the conflict and peace process in Northern Ireland. On city walls, political contestation and artistic expression intertwine as hundreds of murals provide a stark representation of the anger, fear and hope felt by the communities which paint them. Murals, simply defined as street art created by and for a community rather than an individual artist, have been found on Northern Irish walls for over a century. However, it was during The Troubles - decades of violence which left thousands dead in Northern Ireland - that muralling as a practice developed enormous aesthetic diversity and political importance[1]. Now, more than 20 years after the Good Friday Agreement officially brought The Troubles to a close, the question of how best to engage with old murals and create new ones is a problem facing state authorities, community leaders and local people alike. This paper attempts to explore that problem.

Context and Background to Conflict in Northern Ireland

The political context and historical background to conflict in Northern Ireland does not lend itself to easy summarisation. Even delineating the main parties involved can be contentious, and so two pieces of semantic context are necessary at the outset. First, the fact that certain political parties, activist organisations and paramilitary groups claim to represent a particular community should not necessarily be taken as an indication of consensus within a given community. Who should speak for whom is, in itself, a topic of contestation in Northern Ireland.

Second, the religious denominations Catholic and Protestant are often grouped together with the political designation Republican and Unionist[2]—in political discourse, in contemporary literature and indeed in this article. The conflation, whilst at times necessary to give a general picture of politics in Northern Ireland, fails to represent the vast array of different and changing political stances within the broader population, and the complex manner in which political and religious affiliations can diverge.[3]

That said, it is impossible to understand the murals adorning Belfast's walls without understanding the Troubles, and the Troubles can only be understood in reference to the historical events which led to them. Just as many of Belfast's murals represent historical moments which are ascribed enormous significance in the context of Northern Ireland's recent history, it is necessary to focus on certain events which proved paradigmatic for the later conflict.

[1] Extramural Activity, "Visual History 2 - The Catholic Insurgency", *Peter Maloney Collection*, 2017-2021.
[2] The term Loyalist is often used interchangeably with the term Unionist, but here Unionist is used for simplicity.
[3] As indicated by the variety of political parties which describe themselves as 'Unionist' or 'Republican'.

Commonly, the Plantation of Ulster[4] is seen as critical to the instigation of conflict in Northern Ireland. Until the late 16th century, Ulster was overwhelmingly populated by Irish Catholics. After many decades of attempted colonisation by Tudor monarchs and counterattacks from Irish nobles, a strategy to displace native landowners with English and Scottish Protestants was gradually adopted.[5] Although 'plantations' were attempted elsewhere in Ireland, at the turn of the 17th century Ulster received the most attention. Protestant nobility, soldiers and merchants were given land previously held by Irish Catholics, and imported Protestant labourers subsequently worked on much of the best land in Ulster. Although the stated aim of displacing the native population went largely unfulfilled, by 1622 over 19,000 Protestants had settled in Ulster.[6] One measure estimates that figure grew to 80,000 by the end of the 1630s[7]. Protestant settlement then translated into a Protestant majority across Northern Ireland in the 20th century, which persists today.

If the early 17th century heralded the beginnings of Protestant dominance in Ulster, then the end of the century affirmed that dominance resoundingly. In 1690, the Protestant King William of Orange defeated Catholic former King James II at the Battle of the Boyne. This ultimately led to strict anti-Catholic laws in Ireland and the end of such a significant Catholic resistance for many years.[8] The anniversary of the battle is still celebrated by Protestants in Northern Ireland and William of Orange has become a symbol for Unionists, including on many early murals (see Figure 2).

The 18th and 19th centuries which followed, whilst far too complicated to summarise here, saw British attempts to subdue and 'civilise'[9] Ireland face resistance and occasional open defiance. These efforts came to amend at the beginning of the 20th century, as a growing Republican movement and dissatisfaction with British dominance culminated in the founding of an independent Irish State in 1922. However, six counties in Ulster remained part of the United Kingdom—modern day Northern Ireland. Moreover, the fight for independence involved vicious fighting between various paramilitary and government forces, lasting longest in Northern Ireland.

It is important, in focusing on the Troubles and their influence, not to obscure how historic episodes over a vast swathe of time serve to punctuate and unify the particular historical interpretations and political motivations of different communities, in their murals and in general. For Unionists, the blood sacrifice of the 36th Ulster Regiment as the Somme is

[4] 'Ulster' is one of the four traditional Irish provinces - six of its nine counties of Ulster make up Northern Ireland, although 'Ulster' and 'Northern Ireland' are sometimes used synonymously.
[5] "The Plantation of Ulster," *BBC,* September 18, 2014..
[6] Nicholas Canny, "Making Ireland British" (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 211.
[7] Jonathan Barden, "A History of Ulster", (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2007), 123.
[8] Ron Chepesiuk, "Battle of the Boyne: King William III's Victory in Ireland," *Military History Magazine* (via Historynet), June 2001.
[9] Canny, "Making Ireland British", 196-8.

invoked to characterise a sacred bond between Ulster and the United Kingdom at large. For Republicans, a succession of uprisings in 1798, 1848, 1867 and 1916 represent an unbroken line of resistance continuing to this day.

Figure 1: The burning of Cork during the Irish War of Independence. Image by W.D Hogan in the Public Domain

The Troubles and the Muralling Tradition

Civil Rights Struggles and the First Murals

As we move into the history of modern Northern Ireland, the story of its communities and the art on its streets begin to intersect. The continuing sense of cultural and political dominance felt by Protestants in Northern Ireland was expressed visually through the painting of murals on neighbourhood walls in various areas of the city.

The earliest murals were Unionist, and the first recorded murals replicate the same image of William astride a white horse, either depicted in battle or crossing the Boyne (see Figure 2).[10] The two earliest murals on record are of this kind, and both were first installed prior to the Second World War.[11] Beyond these assertions of continuity, murals were few and far between prior to the Troubles. As Catholics demanded civil rights and major paramilitary organisations armed themselves, more art began to appear on city streets.

[10] Extramural Activity, "Visual History 1 - The Protestant Ascendancy," *Peter Moloney Collection*, 2017-2021.
[11] Dates for one of these two murals is in dispute, given variously as 1926 (Loftus 1983) and the 1940s (Woods 1995).

Figure 2: King William III (William of Orange) mural in Shankhill Parade. Mural dated 1964. Image by Eric Jones CC BY 2.0

Perhaps the most iconic piece of street art from this period, and one of the earliest supportive of Irish Republicanism, is the 'Free Derry' sign (see Figure 3). Originally hand drawn and since renovated and redesigned many times over,[12] the simple message "You are now entering Free Derry" in dark script takes up an entire wall at the end of the Lecky Road. A simple piece with a simple message gains its continuing resonance from the particular social conflict of the late 1960s.[13] The sign marked the perimeter of the majority Catholic "Bogside" area, a scene of serious unrest at the time and into which the Ulster Constabulary and British troops were prevented from crossing. The wall on which it was painted had been lived in by three generations of the same Catholic family, who at the time when the sign was painted had recently vacated the property. At a time when housing regulations and renter bias had fuelled increasing resentment amongst Catholics, the sign could not have been more poignant.

However, it took until the 1980s for proper Republican murals to emerge. As it was with the early Unionist depictions of King William, early Catholic murals tended to retain certain stock

[12] Often temporary alterations will be used to highlight a political cause du jour or a commemoration.
[13] Freya McClements, "'You are now entering Free Derry:' 50 years on," *The Irish Times,* January 5, 2019.

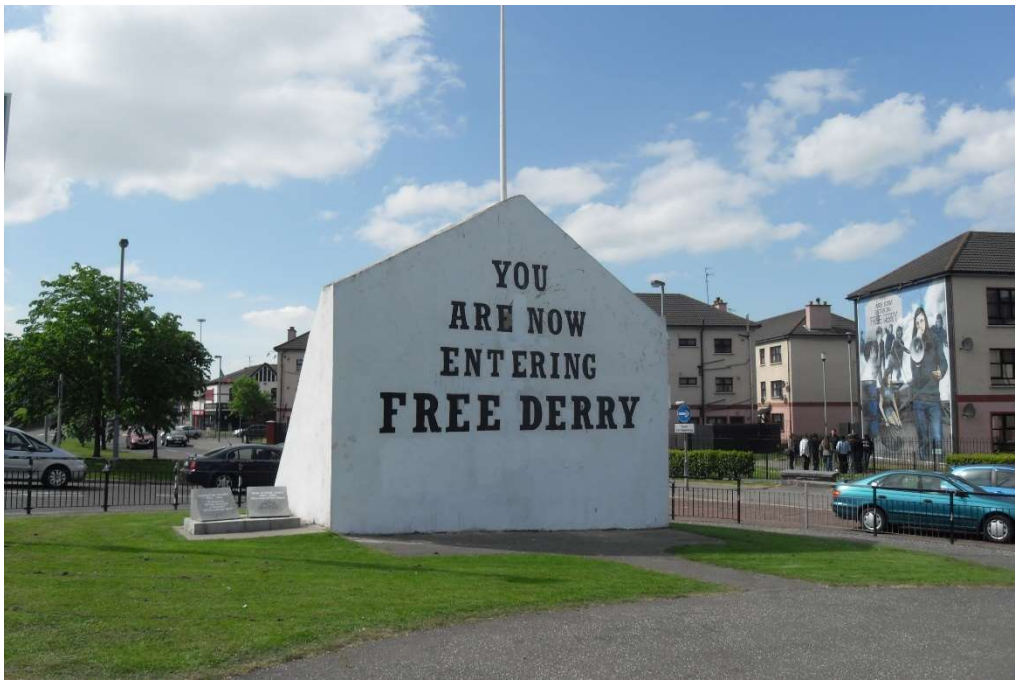

Figure 3: Free Derry corner. Mural painted in 1969 in the early days of Free Derry, self-claimed autonomous area in Londonderry (Ulster). Image by Grünen CC BY-SA 3.0

features - the prominent display of heraldry which placed Ulster and Irish flags alongside one another, and the phoenix as a symbol of Catholic resurgence. By this time, the increased activity of paramilitary groups[14] and violence by the authorities had vastly escalated conflict in Northern Ireland, and the battle over Catholic rights had left scars on all sides of the political and religious divides.

From Hunger Strikes to Good Friday

In the coming years, bombings and shootings became rife throughout the city. It is impossible to adequately capture any real sense of how complicated and terrifying a period this was, particularly in Northern Ireland's two largest cities, Belfast and Derry. Monica McWilliams described The Troubles as, "burned into our DNA."[15] The constant threat of violence and building resentment as casualties piled up on both sides created the conditions for an explosion of public political expression - from protest to scrawled slogans. Muralling diversified and rose to greater prominence both as a way of marking territory and a form of political expression in its own right. Alongside marking territory, murals function as internal markers - reminders of a particular areas' loyalty, and the political commitments those entail.

The single episode which most directly animated the Republican muralling tradition was the Hunger Strike in 1981. Ten prisoners, seeking prisoner-of-war status in The Maze/Long-Kesh Prison (see Figure 4), died during the strike and came to be seen as martyrs for their cause.

[14] The most prominent Republican group being the IRA (Irish Republican Army), the most prominent Unionist one being the UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force).
[15] Allen Cowell, "50 Years Later, Troubles Still Cast 'Huge Shadow' Over Northern Ireland," *The New York Times*, October 14, 2018.

One of the strikers, Bobby Sands, was elected MP whilst on strike. His death attracted international attention and his funeral was attended by 100,000 people.[16]

Figure 4: Long Kesh. Image by Wilson Adams CC BY-SA 2.0

The strikes spawned many new murals. Whilst the phoenix and flags remained, the next few years saw new designs, slogans and faces begin to appear. Most common was the face of Sands himself - the mural below adorns the Sinn Féin constituency offices on the Falls Road, Belfast, and remains one of the most renowned (see Figure 5). Other motifs of Republican wall art—memorials to paramilitaries, commemorations of the dead, and confrontational slogans—first came into prominence during the 1980s.

Unionist murals were generally more direct in their imagery, with the walls themselves being under the control of UVF or UDA paramilitaries, and mainly featuring balaclava-clad gunmen, or war memorials (see Figure 6). Traditional insignia also came to be a more prominent part of the Loyalist tradition. As the Troubles wore on, the aesthetic contrast between the Union Flag and Royalist symbols favoured by Unionists set against the revolutionary edge of Republican murals extracted an ever more pronounced contrast.[17]

[16] Maggie Scull, "Timeline of 1981 Hunger Strike," *The Irish Times,* March 1, 2016.
[17] Jack Santino, "Public Protest and Popular Style: Resistance from the Right in Northern Ireland and South Boston," *American Anthropologist,* 101:3 (1999): 515-529.

Figure 5: Bobby Sands mural on gable wall of Sinn Fein offices on Falls Road, Belfast. Image by Shermozle CC BY-SA 3.0

By the 1990s, efforts towards de-escalating the conflict had made gains both within the communities themselves, and with the support of political actors on a national and international level. With both sides eventually declaring ceasefires, a lengthy peace process resulted in the Good Friday Agreement, allowing for genuine progress and reconciliation to develop. In this agreement and the political consensus which followed, we can see the roots of muralling in the present day, and the contestations which have emerged concurrently.

Figure 6: Loyalist mural in Belfast. Image by Borja Garcia de Sola Fernandez CC BY 2.0

Consensus and Strife: Understanding the Contemporary Contestation

The Non-Sectarian Public Space

The early 21st century has been, in some ways, a time of reconciliation and optimism for those living in Northern Ireland. There was a clear sense from political leaders that cross-community cooperation was necessary to continue the momentum brought about by the Good Friday Agreement, and one of the ways this could be manifested was through a reconceptualization of the belligerent attitudes expressed in the murals. The efforts to bring about these changes have varied in size and scope, from community-led initiatives (mainly in Unionist neighbourhoods where the imagery was often more explicitly militant), to government agency-led projects given significant financial backing. The community-led initiatives have been somewhat discreet, targeting specific murals, while the government projects have aimed at entire housing estates. Both have sought to shift the focus of the murals either to more neutral cultural/environmental aspects of Northern Irish life, or by emphasising the ideals of the Peace Process - in particular, the less political aspects of the social and industrial heritage.

The most significant of the government-led projects was 'Re-Imaging Communities', launched in July 2006 by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. £3.3 million of funding was provided for an initial 3-year period, with a view to 'replacing divisive imagery with imagery that reflects communities in a more positive manner', while simultaneously promoting the socio-economic benefits of art-related development projects.[18] Re-Imaging Communities took a holistic approach to tackling 'the public representation of community separation', in the form of 'public symbolic displays, including marches, banners, flags, wall paintings, bunting, and painted kerbstones'.[19]

The programme continued in fits and starts for the next few years due to funding issues, and by 2009 thirty-nine murals had been re-done. The prevalence of sectarian themes in Loyalist neighbourhoods has seen more funding being allocated to changing murals in these areas. For example, in the Lower Shankill Road, six paramilitary murals have been taken down and replaced with more palatable depictions, as well as four new murals being added. Further changes are detailed as follows:[20]

[18] Andrew Hill & Andrew White, "Painting Peace? Murals and the Northern Ireland Peace Process," *Irish Political Studies*, 27:1 (2012): 71-88.
[19] Tony Crowley, "The Art of Memory: The Murals of Northern Ireland and the Management of History," *Field Day Review,* 7 (2011): 22-49. Print.
[20] Hill & White, "Painting Peace?", 71-88.

- 'A mural depicting Orangemen marching through Drumcree replaced with an A –Z of historical figures, sites and events drawn from the local area.'
- 'An Ulster Defence Association Scottish Brigade mural showing two masked gunmen, replaced with a mural of the Brown Square Gold Rush (in which in 1969 children digging around newly demolished local flats found a hoard of gold sovereigns).'
- 'A siege of Derry mural replaced with images of local boxing legends'.
- 'A mural depicting street violence and burning houses that asks 'Can it change?' replaced with a 'children's right to play' mural'.
- 'A 'C Company' (UFF) mural replaced with a mural celebrating the Shankill parish's history as dating back to AD 455.'
- A mural claiming ethnic cleansing replaced with a declaration of 'sustainable employment for all'
- 'The four murals that have been added reference the Belfast Blitz, VE day celebrations, enlistment for World War I and Martin Luther'.

In the case of the murals that have been changed, plaques were erected depicting the original murals which adorned the walls.

Figure 7: Murals of the Lower Shankhill. Image by Keith Ruffles CC BY 3.0

A plaque has also been erected there showing the original mural of Orangemen marching through Drumcree. It reads "the Drumcree mural depicted a fraught time in the late 1990s when violence and dispute attended a traditional Orange Order march to the church of Drumcree through the Nationalist Garvaghy Road district of Portadown."[21]

The Lower Falls Road contains the only new mural funded by Re-Imagining Communities in Catholic Belfast. It depicts a sky scene, based on the poem 'The Sky' by Tom Kerr, and reads

[21] Ibid.

'This is my sky, I will share it with you' - a message of inclusiveness that incorporates images of both the local Catholic and travelling/itinerant communities.[22]

In 2013, the second wave of 'Re-imaging Communities' began, this time on a smaller scale, with work funded by the scheme going directly into the production of three new murals in the Loyalist Newtownards Road area. These mural projects were led by the community organisation CharterNI, which was granted £4,400 to work with local artists and members of the community to create murals which would promote the Unionist identity of the community, but also sentiments of pride and peace. Again, the new murals were accompanied by plaques which showed the former ones.

Certainly, this project is not concerned with simply creating neutral pieces of art - Martin Luther is a central figure of Protestantism, and a symbol of historical antagonism for Catholics. But gradually shifting the rhetoric away from violent disagreement if not from difference itself is a subtle strategy by which the public space can be reoriented towards co-existence. So too the recontextualisation and alteration of old murals - representing the past without allowing it to subsume the public space today.

State intervention at its best reflects a concurrent impulse within communities themselves. Remarkably, one of the clearest examples of cross-community muralship was erected outside of Belfast by collaborators Danny Devenney (former IRA prisoner), and Mark Ervine (son of a UVF member) at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, in the US. In 2008 the two artists worked together to complete the mural for the campus to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement. It reads "History is a rear-view mirror, you

Figure 8: "Past and Future" mural in Ballymacarrett, Belfast. Image by Albert Bridge CC BY-SA 2.0

[22] Hill & White, "Painting Peace?", 71-88.

must always check back but unless you keep focused on the road ahead you're going nowhere!"[23] These newer murals appear to show that there is a desire for peace and progress amongst the previously war-torn communities.

Contesting the New Normal

> To state a general principle that will be instantiated many times: if it's not sectarian, a community won't bother painting it, only the state will. In the effort to understand post-peace muraling, it must be understood that sectarian politics saturates almost everything, to a greater or lesser extent…While a few expressions of a sect's identity might be perceived as harmless by the other side, there are very few themes to which both sects will say "Mine".
>
> - Extramural Activity via the Peter Maloney Collection[24]

As is common in Northern Ireland, the complexity of the conflict makes linear progression difficult to sustain for authorities and communities alike. One major criticism of new muralling projects argues that avoiding controversy in the public space has led to bland or 'banal'[25] murals. An overwhelming desire for agreement lends itself to oversimplification and a tendency to avoid tensions which persist between Northern Irish communities. Fixating on what little communities have in common can ring hollow, and serve to underline differences as much as resolve them.

Bill Rolston,[26] though in favour of the impetus behind the new murals, fears that the State voice apparent in them is too strong and threatens to take politics out of the murals completely. Rolston believes the opinions and concerns of the locals may be silenced by the depoliticised wall paintings, saying it will be 'a terrible shame' if the medium which has voiced the concerns of communities for decades becomes a State-led canvas.[27] Other scholars echo this appraisal; Hill and White warn of government projects running the risk of 'aestheticisation' which fails to represent practical and political realities for locals.

Their suggestion that new murals may be part of a superficial attempt to divert attention from the complex socio-political issues with which the communities are still coping severely undercuts the stated purpose of these new monuments. The re-emergence of (loyalist) gunmen on new murals and the new geographical semantics, which keep many new murals and most street art[28] out of traditionally sectarian areas provide some evidence that these criticisms of muralling in the 21st century are founded. How far the downturn in violent

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[23] The Psychology of Peace and Violence Program, "Painting From the Same Palette," *University of Massachusetts Amherst,* April 2008.
[24] Extramural Activity, "Visual History 10 - Re-Imagining (2003-2009)," *Peter Moloney Collection*, 2018-2021.
[25] Hill & White, "Painting Peace?", 71-88.
[26] Emeritus Professor, Transitional Justice Institute, Ulster University.
[27] Murals in Belfast.
[28] Attributable to and representative of an individual artist, rather than a community or political/religious affiliation.

imagery or inflammatory language is symptomatic of the relative stability in Northern Ireland rather than any particular initiative to alter the content of murals is difficult to say. Whether the state sanctioned neutrality of these murals alters community perception is similarly unclear.

A second, related issue lies in the additional significance murals now have as a major draw for visitors from all over the world, bringing huge economic benefits on both a local and national level. The popular Black Cab tours see tourists escorted around Protestant and Catholic communities by members on both sides of the divide who lived through The Troubles, and who tell stories of conflict and progress, using the murals as a backdrop for their storytelling.[29] Tony Crowley notes the 'voyeuristic frisson' which attracts tourists to partake in these tours which allow them to wander safely through areas which until recently were arenas of conflict. He cautions that depoliticising the murals may result in a decline in Black Cab tours, and if that were the case 'the state may well have helped kill the (sectarian, antagonistic and offensive) goose that provided if not quite the golden egg, then at least one source of revenue in some of the poorest areas of Northern Ireland'.[30] Resolving conflicts between community expression, economic subsistence and coexistence moving forwards is another daunting task for those in charge.

International solidarity - new contest, old purpose

Conflict in Northern Ireland has never been limited in scope or significance to the six counties themselves. Whilst The Troubles played out across the British Isles and further, the conflict's symbolic power has resonated further still. For decades, Republicans have sought to analogise their side of the struggle to international revolutionary and separatist movements. The earliest known example of this in mural form dates to 1981, with a mural showing an IRA paramilitary alongside a P.L.O.,[31] but today the most striking monument to international solidarity is the 'International Wall'. Formerly a 'peace wall'[32] designed to mark off the Republican West Belfast area, murals first appeared at the beginning of this century. Although its first mural was concerned with victims of police brutality, and many of the current features express such local concerns, tributes to Palestinians, Turkish Prisoners and imprisoned Native American Leonard Peltier were among some of the earliest murals on the wall.[33] Since 2006, the wall has been full - many alterations and replacements have been made since, and often changes are made to reflect contemporaneous political issues which are felt to be the concern of the community. Using murals to relate the Republican

[29] Crowley, "The Art of Memory", 22-49.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Palestine Liberation Organisation.
[32] A structure erected to protect communities from external attacks. Though the majority were built during the Troubles, some were constructed after the Good Friday Agreement.
[33] Bill Rolston, "The Brothers on the Walls': International Solidarity and Irish Political Murals," *Journal of Black Studies,* 39:3 (2009): 446-470.

perspective of the conflict to various international concerns has raised new contestations which continue into the present day.[34]

The recent addition of a mural commemorating George Floyd's killing at the hands of police in the United States illustrates the complexities of the contestation. The mural itself centres on the brutality and negligence of those in authority, recalling the bitter resentment still felt by many Catholics towards the behaviour of the police and armed forces in Northern Ireland. This comparison isn't new - a mural placed an image of Stephen Lawrence[35] alongside that of Robert Hamill, a Catholic civilian who was murdered by a group of Unionists in Portadown, captioned, "London Metropolitan Police: Institutionalised Racism,[36] Royal Ulster Constabulary, Institutionalised Sectarianism".[37]

Figure 9: George Floyd mural in Belfast. Image by Rossographer CC BY 2.0

Claiming to reflect the historical legacy of conflict in Northern Ireland is a fraught and highly contested business. Activists and Republican politicians were keen to emphasise 'solidarity' with the Black Lives Matter movement, and indeed to draw the two struggles together. Michelle O'Neill, Deputy First Minister and Sinn Féin's leader in Northern Ireland, was explicit in this: "Whether in Ireland or the US, an injustice to one is an injustice to all. Racism must be eradicated."[38] In contrast, the Unionist response aimed both to distance the conflict in Northern Ireland from that in the United States, and to point out what they identified as hypocrisy in failures to support and respect victims of terror at home whilst fighting for causes elsewhere. Kenny Donaldson, leader of the 'Innocent Victims United' activist group

[34] It's worth noting that there is a tradition of counter-identification on the Loyalist side, most notably with the Israeli state in contradistinction to the Republican analogy between their struggle and that of the Palestinians.
[35] His murder at the hands of a racist mob, and the subsequent conduct of the police, was a landmark case in the history of British race relations.
[36] The major government investigation into the case famously referred to the Met in these terms.
[37] Martin Melaugh, 'Lawrence and Hamill Mural," *Conflict Archive on the Internet,* Last modified June 18, 2009.
[38] Michelle O'Neal, "Racism has no place in society and must be eradicated." *Facebook*, June 2, 2020.

and a prominent critic of Republicanism, wrote an article responding to the Floyd mural entitled, 'Remembering the black lives murdered by Irish Republican terrorists'.[39] The first line of the article describes Republicans commemorating Floyd as 'recent converts to morality'[40] and criticises their inconsistency in failing to similarly commemorate victims in Northern Ireland.

This case demonstrates the many arenas of contestation at work: how to treat the victims of The Troubles; how to relate sectarianism at home to struggle abroad; and how to respond to narratives around racism, colonialism and authoritarianism developing elsewhere. Murals have an almost unique potential to explicate these latent tensions and tie together seemingly diffuse themes of international solidarity or Ulster specificity, and expecting any single authority to provide a unified response on so divisive an issue is implausible. Conflict in Northern Ireland, for better or worse, is responsible and responsive to the world at large, and discourses of oppression, authority, racism and colonialism will continue to find unique expression on city walls.

Conclusion

Global confrontations over racism and colonialism aren't the only challenge to Northern Ireland's place in the world. A new consensus on movement and trade across the island of Ireland following the UK's exit from the European Union remains oblique, and the deferral of powers from the Northern Irish legislature to Westminster is a constant threat in a deeply divided legislature.[41] The coming years will ask existential questions of Northern Ireland as a political and social whole. Murals gain additional significance in this environment, as aesthetic expression becomes one of the safer ways to express a community's hopes and fears. But muralling faces its own irreconcilable contradiction: how to avoid controversy in the public space without sterilising the conflict or denying communities an authentic aesthetic response to their experiences?

In truth, as with so much else in Northern Ireland, there are no easy answers. Policy makers and community leaders are torn by loyalty to their community's particular struggles and a duty to maintain and build upon the past two decades of relative stability. Attempting to suppress the hurt felt by so many over generations of sectarian conflict is not an option - contextualisation and the gradual building of trust is the move by which decision makers have had the greatest success. Neutering the content of murals themselves appears to misunderstand that murals are, at heart, a community effort which cannot be replicated by

[39] Kenny Donaldson, "Remembering the black lives murdered by Irish republican terrorists", *News Letter,* June 8, 2020.
[40] Ibid.
[41] "Gridlock in Northern Ireland: Why the Real Crisis for the Union is not Scotland," *Oxford University Conservative Association,* June 17, 2018.

any one authority. But murals aren't merely representative of a community; they are inseparable from the discourse and responses of other communities, and so from the opposition they find. Moreover, as diverging responses to the so-called new murals often serves to underline differences rather than inspire unity so too does the painful absence in common ground when murals become banal or cartoonish. Confrontation is not an incidental feature of many sectarian murals, but rather it is their purpose. Whether such confrontations ultimately spur greater divisions or allow the airing of grievances necessary to make definitive progress remains to be seen. It remains clear, however, that murals are not liable to easy governance or neutralisation. Political contestation and conciliation will continue to determine the future of muralling in Northern Ireland, and although decision makers can subtly influence and reframe aesthetic expression in some limited ways, murals will continue to be an ungoverned form of community expression into the future.

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About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories in Public Spaces project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom.

Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

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