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Murals in Northern Ireland: An Evolving Platform for Marginalized Voices

Upon arriving to Northern Ireland, I spent a lot of time walking around Derry in an attempt to get to know the new community I would be residing in for the next few months. As I explored the city, I was initially drawn to the amount of political stickers, posters, and graffiti that occupied the poles, bus stops, phone booths, walls and even the sidewalks in the city. As I observed these political messages and ideologies that were scattered throughout the city, I found myself even more fascinated by the larger than life murals that can be found in Derry's historically Catholic/Republican community in the Bogside. The giant paintings created by the Bogside Artists depict historic events and movements in Derry, such as the struggle for civil rights (Appendix A), the Battle of the Bogside (Appendix B), and Bloody Sunday (Appendix C); additionally, the images also present and pay tribute to the role of youth and women from the Catholic community during the Troubles (Appendix D). I believe that these murals communicate a sense of Republican pride, and show the importance of remembering and honoring the community's history. However, I soon learned that not all communities choose to communicate these same messages within their murals in Northern Ireland.

I realized this the first time I engaged with murals from the Loyalist community in Belfast. While these murals also depicted historical events, such as the Battle of the Boyne and commemorations to the soldiers from their community who fought in the First World War, they still felt less community orientated and did not communicate stories the same way as the murals in the Bogside in Derry. Yet, what I found the most striking about the imagery included in Loyalist murals were the fairly frequent depictions of the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF)/ Ulster Defense Force (UDF)/ Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF) paramilitary men who were masked and armed with guns. I recall passing one mural illustrating UVF men that said 'PREPARED FOR PEACE, READY FOR WAR' (Appendix E). I see these words as a demonstration of just how fragile the state of 'peace' is in Northern Ireland, and as evidence of how easy it could be to potentially return to 'war' or violence, even eighteen years after the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. Simply looking at the contrasts between

Loyalist and Nationalist murals has lead me to ask the following questions, which I seek to address within this essay: What is the history of these murals and how have they evolved in the divided society? Who is painting them and why? And lastly, what is their role in a society that is transitioning from violent conflict to 'peace'?

Throughout this essay, there will be references made to the two main 'communities' in Northern Ireland, which are categorized as the Catholic/Republican/Nationalist community and the Protestant/Loyalist/Unionist community. It's important to note that both sides of these communities experience division within their own groups based on social class, political ideologies, national identity, and the support or lack of support for violence. However, generally speaking, Catholic people in Northern Ireland see themselves as Irish and identify with Nationalist/Republican views. Although Nationalists/Republicans may have different ideologies on the role of politics and violence in the movement for a united Ireland, their general goal is to split from Great Britain and achieve a free and united Ireland. Working class Catholics tend to identify with the Republican ideology, which supports the IRA and the armed struggle for Irish independence, whereas Nationalists, who tend to be more middle class, hope to achieve Irish independence through non-violent, political action. Protestants, on the other hand, do not tend to traditionally identify as Irish, but as more so as British or as Ulster-Scotts. Similarly to the division of politics within the Catholic community, Unionists/Loyalists are divided by social class, as well as by their viewpoints on the role that violence plays in remaining apart of Great Britain. Loyalists tend to be working class people who support the armed activities of paramilitary groups such as the UVF/UDF to keep Northern Ireland within Great Britain. Unionists are usually more middle class and seek to remain with Great Britain mainly through political means (Larsson, 2015, pg. 8).

Before investigating the history of murals in Northern Ireland, it's important to acknowledge what a mural is in the realm of community art. Like graffiti, murals exist beyond the walls of a gallery and have been widely unrecognized by the art establishment within Northern Ireland. While many muralists from the Republican community are content with identifying more so as activists with paintbrushes, Republican muralist Danny Devenny also recognizes their work as art, stating 'of course [murals are] art. We fit all the criteria of what art should be: we deal with people's emotions, we make people think, we get a reaction to what we do' (Rolston, 2012, pg. 449). In Northern Ireland especially, murals have a much deeper meaning than just images that decorate their respective communities, instead, they serve as 'instruments in an ideological struggle for hearts and minds within and between local communities. They are expressions of power and they are attempts

to demonstrate control over space and place' (Mccormick and Jarman, 2005, pg. 50). The use of murals to validate social and political power over neighborhoods and communities is seemingly apparent as one comes to understand the history of how murals have transitioned with the socio-political context of Northern Ireland in the 20th century.

Throughout Northern Ireland, murals have a history that is over 100 years old, dating back to early 19th century. During this time, murals were a Loyalist tradition and were dominated by the more elite class in society, and initially the British state actually encouraged Loyalists to paint murals (Larsson, 2015, p. 4). During the early stages of the mural tradition in Northern Ireland, the most common images that could be found were of Prince William of Orange, as under his leadership the English secured a victory over the Irish at the 1690 Battle of the Boyne. Centuries after this Battle of the Boyne, King William or King Billy, continued to be viewed 'as the one 'who had given to them as Protestants in Ireland their 'freedom, religion and laws' (Rolston, 2004, p. 39). At the same time, this English victory had a very different impact for Irish Catholics in Irish society, as 'the defeated native Irish in the centuries afterwards were subjected to brutal penal laws which blocked their economic and political advance and kept the peasantry in abject poverty. Catholicism was suppressed as the 'Protestant ascendancy' was established and held sway until well into the nineteenth century' (Rolston, 2004, p. 38). The penal codes allowed Protestants to dominate public space for generations, resulting in Loyalists having more opportunities to paint public displays of British colonial power, as well as images of the Battle of the Somme, and the Titanic. These symbols of British power and identity became even more important to Loyalists/Unionists after the 1921 partition of Ireland (Rolston, 2004, pg. 39).

After partition, mural painting transitioned from the hands of the elite to the working class in Northern Ireland. This remains true today as murals are predominantly found in urban, working class areas in Belfast and Derry (Larsson, 2015, pg. 4-5). It's important to note that despite sharing working class identities, there have always been distinct cultural differences between working class Protestants and Catholics that can be understood in relation to each community's relationship to the state of Northern Ireland. Protestant-Unionists have a tradition of supporting the state, granting their community a form social dominance that can be understood through events like their annual marches on the 12th of July, that celebrates Protestant victory of Catholics. In murals, this same sense of superiority can be observed through the recreation of images that glorify British victories and imperialism. On the other hand, Catholic-Nationalists existed on the margins because of their

opposition to the state. Much of Irish culture, such as Irish language, sport, dance and music, was kept within Irish communities, and was not apart of mainstream civil society in the North. By the end of the 1970's, there were very few murals painted in Nationalist communities because of this marginalization and the few that existed were portraits of Irish nationalist revolutionaries Robert Emmet and James Connolly (Rolston, 1987, pg. 8).

However, as the conflict between the Protestant/Unionist and Catholic/Nationalist community began to escalate in the 1960's, murals began to reflect these societal shifts. Rolston describes the social context of the late 1960's and early 1970's during the Troubles as such (2004, pg. 40):

> "Civil rights campaigners had been beaten off the streets, the British army had been deployed as the legitimacy of the state collapsed, British administrators were now demanding that local politicians and bureaucrats act fairly and inclusively, loyalist military organizations such as the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) and the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) were slaughtering Catholics and the Irish Republican Army (IRA) had in effect declared war on British institutions in Ireland."

In the North, it was apparent that Irish Republicans were tired of living in the margins and experiencing the devastating effects of socioeconomic and political inequality. Many members of this community demonstrated that they were ready to fight for not only their civil rights, but also a united Ireland. Meanwhile, Loyalists began to shift their presentation of their ideology, transitioning from a sense of superiority to being on the defensive side against Irish Republicans. As the sense of dominance became threatened by Republican/Nationalists, Loyalist murals began to transition from victorious King Billy, and instead utilize symbols such as the crown, bible, flags, the red hand of Ulster and other inanimate symbols (Rolston, 2004, pg. 40). Soon, the politics of the 1980's would influence both Loyalist and Nationalist/Republican murals in even more drastic ways.

For the Republican community, it was the Blanket Protests and the 1981 Hunger Strike that created a major shift in their mural work. Prior to the 1980's, Republicans weren't as involved in the mural tradition, but after the hunger strikes, murals became a way to literally draw political support within their community. During this time, the most charismatic and famous hunger striker, MP Bobby Sands urged Republicans to create a poster and painting spree to influence citizens to show

their support for the Republican cause. 'This call for support led to an increase in political graffiti, the forerunners of full-blown murals, and set the stage for a tremendous surge of republican mural painting, a pointed show of resistance to British and unionist dominance' (Rolston, 2003, pg. 4). Muralists have shown resistance to British power through creating murals around themes such as the previously mentioned hunger strikes (Appendix F), as well as Sinn Féin and elections (Appendix G), Irish rebellions/rebels, (Appendix H), Celtic and Irish history (Appendix I), and other international causes for justice like occupation of Palestine (Appendix J; Rolston, 2004, pg. 42-43).

For the Republican community, the muralists were and continue to be more than just painters. Most of the artists who create murals are usually trusted community members who are critically engaged in community affairs, which allow them to have quite a lot of freedom in the production of their work. Many of the ideas for these images are heavily influenced by community groups, pressure groups, political activists and military activists, and murals can be commissioned by various constituencies within the community, or the murals may appear because the artist felt it was necessary to make a particular political statement. Particularly true within the Republican community, '[murals] are painted because they serve a social, cultural and, ultimately, political purpose. But such context and purpose is not static and as such the value of the image will change, both to those who produce or own it, and to those who view it,' therefore, it is not uncommon to see artists painting over their work when they feel it's time to convey a new, relevant message (Mccormick and Jarman, 2005, pg. 50). For example, during the Troubles, the Republican muralists created murals that depicted armed IRA volunteers; however, Republicans took the initiative to re-image these murals after the ceasefire in 1994 as the conflict began to transition from violence to 'peace.' Since the ceasefire, there have been new murals painted of IRA men; however, the men are not masked nor are they holding guns in these images, but instead their identity as volunteers is known and honored, which helps to honor the Republican movements history post Good Friday Agreement (Rolston, 2004, pg. 43).

In the Loyalist community, the categories of murals can broken down into six different groupings which are as follows: 1) King Billy murals which are the oldest tradition among Loyalist murals; 2) Flags (Union Jack, Ulster Scottish) and inanimate objects such as the Red Hand of Ulster; 3) Historical murals which often praise and lament the sacrifices of the Ulster Division in the First World War; 4) Memorials of paramilitary volunteers or politicians; 5) Cartoon-style humorous images that are politically obscure; and lastly, 6) Military images that depict masked and armed

gunmen (Rolston, 1992). Due to political events during the Troubles in the 1980's, there was a shift from murals depicting King Billy and historic figures (Appendix K) to militaristic images (Appendix L). One of the most notable political incidents that influenced the rise of anti-nationalist, anti-Catholic and paramilitary-themed murals was the signing of the 1985 Ango-Irish Agreement. The agreement between England and the Republic of Ireland stated that there would be no change in the status of Northern Ireland without a majority consensus from citizens, and the agreement essentially was a stepping-stone for introducing devolved power-sharing governments (Cain.ulst.ac.uk, 2016). Loyalists/Unionists perceived this agreement as a 'sell out to Dublin' and this showed in their now increasingly militaristic murals. After 1985, a younger crowd of more militant Loyalists began to create murals depicting masked UDF/UVF/UFF gunmen, often alongside the red hand of Ulster dripping with blood with the Ulster and Union Jack flags (Rolston, 1992). Additionally, a popular phrase that appears in Loyalist murals is 'no surrender,' which was and continues to be written throughout Loyalist communities today (Appendix M; Rolston, 2003, pg. 7).

Unlike Republican mural artists, Loyalist painters may not necessarily be as involved in the process of choosing what goes in to a mural because in Loyalist communities, the murals are often commissioned by whichever paramilitary group controls that particular area. The artists are effectively told what to paint, which has resulted in Loyalist murals appearing arguably less artistic, and undeniably more militaristic than that of Republican murals (Rolston, 2004, pg. 43). These styles of murals are a testament to how important this art form is for claiming space and place, especially in a divided city like Belfast. Still, it is critical that Loyalist paramilitary groups and muralists consider the implementations of continuing to produce heavily militarized murals eighteen years after the Good Friday Agreement in a society that is seeking to maintain some sort of 'peace.'

Since the ceasefire and Good Friday Agreement, there has been a push by the art establishment, community groups and politicians to re-image the murals that are particularly violent and sectarian (Rolston, 2012, pg. 451). In 2009, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland in Belfast stepped in to encourage and facilitate the re-imaging of murals when they launched 'a pilot programme that places artists in the heart of communities to work with local people to tackle visible signs of sectarianism and racism to create a more welcoming environment for everyone' (Artscouncil-ni.org, 2016). Ultimately, this program can be viewed as a form of censorship, particularly when considering both the historic rejection of murals by the art establishment in Northern Ireland, as well as the idea of incorporating artists from outside of the community to paint

or re-image murals that have traditionally been painted by community members (Rolston, 2012, pg. 451). Considering that murals have traditionally been work created by working class people who are voicing their community's social and political attitudes, it would be a disservice to the community to attempt to whitewash the community through re-imaging. 'The forcible removal of symbols before the community is ready to have them removed is an act of violence against the memory and identity of the community and a potential source of trauma to that community' (Rolston, 2010, pg. 294). While it is important to consider messages that violent, sectarian murals convey in a society transitioning from such a violent conflict, I argue that it is equally necessary to consider why these messages remain in the community, and that it is equally necessary to address the underlying issues around paramilitary presence and dissatisfaction with the peace process, especially within Loyalist communities.

The conflict in Northern Ireland touched the lives of so many people living in this society, and the murals help tell the stories of the two main community's living in this society before, during and after the Troubles. For generations, the murals in Northern Ireland have told stories of history, community, conflict, identity, and perseverance. Throughout the Troubles and into the peace process, murals have provided a platform for working class communities to express their politics and visions to people living within and outside of their community. As Catholics gained civil rights from their efforts in the civil rights movement, as well as political power through the Good Friday Agreement, their murals have reflected this journey (Larsson, 2015, pg. 8). For Republicans, murals have become de-militarized since the violence has stopped, and the murals continue to demonstrate international solidarity and outrage on issues of local and global issues of injustice, especially around prisoners of war and state sanctioned crimes. Meanwhile, Loyalist murals have different approach of demonstrating their social and political frustrations. The Troubles and Good Friday Agreement has left many Loyalists with a lack of faith in both the British and Northern Irish government, which has contributed largely to the production and continuation of sectarian and militarized murals (Goalwin, 2013, pg. 214). I see these murals as messages that are being sent into the community by marginalized voices to inform politicians of their dissatisfaction with their current society and this dissatisfaction must be addressed, not dismissed.

While there have been community and structural efforts to re-image many murals, these images still tell an important story. If Northern Ireland seeks to re-image murals in marginalized communities, that 'would also involve *re-imagining*, encouraging local communities to say what they

fear and aspire to politically in the new political dispensation, to articulate their political identity for this era as they did so successfully in a previous era' (Rolston, 2012, pg. 460). One cannot simply ask communities to de-politicize their traditionally political forms of artistic expression in order to make a divided society look a little brighter during the transition into 'peace.' Murals are cultural artifacts of this society that can never fully be de-politicized, as their politicization is one of the reasons they've become to important in Northern Ireland in the first place. Although post-conflict, the politics in the murals may have a different role; nevertheless, 'to suppress the lingering bitterness under a coating of paint could be counter-productive. Better another mural than more bullets.... The artist in me thinks it would be good to let the communities continue to wear their feelings on their sleeve. Maybe one day the murals will be cherished pieces of history, old pictures of faded feelings' (Perry, 2006).

It is critical to acknowledge the power of murals and their role in creating collective memories of communities who have existed in a divided society for hundreds of years. As Northern Ireland moves forward, it is important to reflect on these memories, and consider the role that community art can play in reconciliation of the past. The issue around re-imaging must be considered with genuine thoughtfulness and concern for the community that is being asked to re-image their murals. It is necessary for the establishment to think critically about what it means to bring outside artists into marginalized, working class neighborhoods in attempt to de-politicize their murals. Even if the work is necessary, it needs to be done with respect and consideration of the people who call these neighborhoods home. 'In short, the way to the future is through remembering rather than enforced forgetting, through display rather than whitewashing, through mature contestation rather than bland reconciliation' (Rolston, 2004, pg. 44). As Northern Ireland continues to move forward, it will be fascinating to see how the role of murals changes in remembering, reconciling and communicating the concerns of marginalized people in a society striving for peace.

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