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Rainbows of Resistance
LGBTQ Pride Parades Contesting Space in Post-Conflict Belfast

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Abstract

The article seeks to demonstrate how marchers in the annual LGBTQ Pride Parade strategically contest and reclaim heteronormative public spaces in Belfast, Northern Ireland. There is an exploration of participants adapting transnational symbolic representations and discourses to the distinct national-local cultural milieu in which they are scripted and performed. The discursive frames, symbols, and performances of Belfast Pride are compared to those of sectarian parades in the city. The subaltern spatial performances and symbolic representations of Belfast Pride are depicted as confronting a universalized set of heteronormative discourses involving sexuality and gender identity, while at the same time contesting a particularized set of dominant local-national discourses related to both ethnonational sectarianism and religious fundamentalism in Northern Ireland.

Keywords: Belfast, Northern Ireland, LGBTQ Pride Parade, Public Space, Heteronormativity, Sectarianism

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Introduction

In Belfast, Northern Ireland, and numerous other cities across the world, LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) pride parades are held annually during the summer months. Such parades can be described as ritualistic, subcultural processions and socio-spatial performances of nonnormative sexual orientations and gender identities, which are largely orchestrated by grassroots activists in a transnational LGBTQ rights movement. Significantly, LGBTQ pride parades often possess social agency, as participants strategically enact and perform their identities en masse to counteract and overcome various social constraints through the creative utilization of public space.[1] Parade participants collectively march, walk, and ride into the spaces of the dominant culture, while holding provocative banners and placards, chanting defiant slogans, and dancing to thunderous music. In effect, they are mounting both direct and indirect challenges to the hegemony of heteronormative norms, values, and discourses in society.

This article explores the phenomenon of LGBTQ pride parades in Belfast – the fragmented, contested capital of the United Kingdom's province of Northern Ireland. With a population of around 600,000 people (and well over a million in its metropolitan population), Belfast has been engulfed for decades by internecine violence due to an ideologically driven dispute that has fragmented the city along ethnonational-religious lines. Like the rest of Northern Ireland, Belfast was plagued by a *de facto* civil war known as "the Troubles" from the late 1960s to the late 1990s, which pit Irish nationalists (mainly Roman Catholics of "native" Irish descent) against pro-British unionists (mainly Protestants of English and Scottish descent).[2] During the Troubles, Belfast experienced numerous deadly terrorist attacks targeting civilians, orchestrated mainly by paramilitary organizations; coupled with a prolonged military intervention by armed British troops. The Troubles effectively divided Belfast into two "communities" that included numerous garrison-style neighborhoods.[3]

However, Belfast and the rest of Northern Ireland have undergone a dramatic post-conflict political transformation since the signing of the "Good Friday" peace accords in April 1998. Though Northern Ireland has remained a province of the UK, new power-sharing arrangements between Protestants and Catholics have resulted in a relatively stable political system. There has also been a significant reduction of terrorist attacks and sectarian-related homicides since the agreement was ratified. Even so, most residential neighborhoods, schools, community centers, civic organizations, hotels, restaurants, nightclubs, pubs, recreation centers, leisure services, and sports teams remain heavily segregated between Protestants and Catholics (Shirlow 2008:75). Belfast continues to be the most divided city in Northern Ireland (Mitchell 2008:142), with residential working class districts much more homogenous and segregated by sect today than they were in the early 1960s.[4]

Tellingly, homophobia is often described as an "acceptable prejudice" in Northern Ireland (Dugan 2008:33; Toops 2014:71). Several experts claim that Northern Ireland has the highest levels of homophobia of any western country (O'Leary 2009:124), as evidenced by decades of anti-LGBTQ sentiments being openly expressed by fundamentalist Christians in political discourse.[5] Numerous officials in the post-conflict provincial government (especially members of the Protestant-dominated Democratic Unionist Party), for instance, continue to strongly oppose LGBTQ rights, including same-sex marriage. Belfast, in particular, has been described as a "sexually conservative, heterosexist and homophobic society" (Kitchin and Lysaght 2002:11) and the "hate crime capital of Europe" (Duggan 2008:34), due in part to a significant number of homophobic-motivated crimes reported to police since the late 1990s. Though sectarian violent incidents have decreased since the Good Friday agreement was signed, homophobic violent incidents have continued unabated and even increased in some years recently.[6]

In many respects, Belfast Pride is similar to other LGBTQ pride parades around the world that feature rainbow flags, celebratory floats, elaborate costumes, and banners and placards highlighting calls for LGBTQ equality. Like many such parades, Belfast Pride visibly moves through the mostly heteronormative public spaces of the city center. But in contrast to most other pride parades, Belfast Pride occurs in a city that is filled with numerous protective walls (known as "peacelines"), murals, graffiti, flags, and curbside markings, which sharply delineate the spatial boundaries of sectarian neighborhoods. In addition, Belfast features hundreds of sectarian parades per year, sponsored by either Protestant or Catholic associations, which are held to commemorate various historical, cultural, or religious events. These parades frequently involve marchers entering the residential spaces of the other sect, which often spark violent altercations (McQuad 2015; Mitchell and Kelly 2010).

The main goal of this article is to demonstrate how Belfast Pride participants strategically contest and reclaim heteronormative public spaces. In particular, the article explores how participants adapt transnational symbolic representations and identity-laden political discourses to the distinct national-local cultural milieu in which they are scripted and performed. In discursive terms, this article suggests that Belfast Pride is positioned within and between the intersecting sociocultural realms of the universal and the particular, thereby effectively hybridizing various transnational and national-local discursive spheres of the LGBTQ rights movement. The subaltern spatial performances and symbolic representations of relevant actors in Belfast Pride are depicted as confronting a universalized set of heteronormative discourses involving sexuality and gender, while at the same time contesting a particularized set of dominant local-national discourses related to both ethnonational sectarianism and religious fundamentalism in Northern Ireland.

The strategic role of Belfast Pride in negotiating, contesting, and transcending various sociocultural boundaries in the social spaces of Belfast is explored in this article. Accordingly, the discursive frames, symbols, and performances of Belfast Pride are compared with those of sectarian parades in the city. The ways in which Pride participants seemingly subvert the ethnonational status quo are examined. The existence of hegemonic-sectarian and heteronormative spaces on the one hand, and shared spaces that are constructed in the heart of the city (at least temporarily) by Belfast Pride on the other, are investigated; based on the hypothesis that sustained socio-spatial interaction between LGBTQ people (and their straight allies) of diverse ethno-religious backgrounds effectively blurs sectarian boundaries and diminishes the salience of traditional identification categories; thereby challenging the sectarian status quo and strengthening the potential for peacebuilding throughout the city.

This article begins by exploring both sectarian and nonsectarian parades in Belfast, along with a socio-historical discussion of the ideological linkages between sectarianism and homophobia. Next, the article focuses on the contemporary reality of socio-spatial contestations involving LGBTQ people in Belfast, including the strategic "queering" of heteronormative spaces during Belfast Pride. The article then proceeds to examine the counterhegemonic role of the rainbow flag as a minority-memory symbol of resistance; subsequently focusing on the hybridization of various local and global discourses, counterhegemonic performances, collective identity assertions, and camp-related performative approaches, which have been observed in recent Belfast Pride parades.

Research Methods

This article utilizes a social constructivist approach for examining public space and place in Belfast, thereby seeking to provide subjective insights into the ways that various social actors interact in a highly contested socio-spatial environment. Such an approach emphasizes the diversity of overlapping urban interests and unequal power relations, all of which are linked to various social spaces and collective identities. Rather than depicting spatially marginalized groups as being contained in fixed ghettoized stasis, they are said to possess social agency. Thus, various groups act to ameliorate or even overcome social constraints through the productive use of space (Gotham 2003).

In preparing to write this article, I conducted ethnographic and participant observations, and other forms of qualitative research, within Belfast's LGBTQ community for two weeks in the summer of 2010. During my time in Belfast, I observed the entirety of the annual Pride Parade that was performed in a processional format on the main thoroughfares of the city center, which began and ended at the same location – Custom House Square. During the majority of the parade,

I watched the procession of floats, automobiles, and marchers from the sidelines, though I also marched in the street as an unofficial parade participant for approximately an hour. In the immediate aftermath of the parade, I attended the official pride festival, held outdoors at Custom House Square, which included several live musical performances and other stage acts.

While attending the festival, I conducted mostly informal, relatively short interviews (five to fifteen minutes per person) with two-dozen parade participants, focusing on their collective identities and personal assessments of the parade. Respondents were asked about their sexual orientation, gender identity, and ethnonational (religious sectarian) background. They were queried about their attitudes and feelings towards the two major ethnonational groups in Northern Ireland (Protestants and Catholics), and how they perceive the role of sectarian identities in the parade. They were also asked about their perceptions of homophobia in Belfast and Northern Ireland, and the potential role of the parade in ameliorating both anti-LGBTQ prejudice and sectarian bigotry.

My research mainly centered on various types of socio-spatial strategies, symbolic representations, discursive scripts, and performances that were observed in the Belfast Pride Parade of July 2010. I also observed two sectarian Protestant-loyalist parades during the same timeframe, which were held in segregated neighborhoods and interface zones of Belfast, for the purpose of comparing such marches with those of Belfast Pride. To supplement my observations, I examined several hours of amateur video footage posted on YouTube of both Belfast Pride and sectarian parades, recorded in 2015 and 2016. Subsequently, a qualitative content analysis was conducted by examining various subcultural artifacts, including flags, banners, placards, costumes, floats, marching bands, and musical selections, observed in such parades. In addition, various promotional flyers, websites, and social media pages, sponsored by Belfast Pride, were examined.

Belfast's hybridized-transnational Pride Parade is compared in style and substance to its sectarian-localized equivalents, as informed by ethnographic observations that were conducted within the contested spatial-habitus of post-conflict Belfast. This article offers an analytical examination of the performative power of Belfast Pride in confronting salient exclusionary boundaries of social space and identity, whilst at the same time investigating the accompanying counterhegemonic discourses of inclusion that address the dilemmas of identity and belonging.

Sectarian and Nonsectarian Parades

Each year, there are over four thousand parades occurring in the cities and towns of Northern Ireland, with Belfast featuring the largest number of parades. The vast majority of parades on the streets of Belfast are sectarian parades, many of which

are highly contested, polarizing events. Such sectarian parades are "expressions of culture, displays of faith and acts of domination; and they are intimately linked to the wider political domain" (Jarman 1997). Northern Ireland has had a long history of sectarian parades, dating back to the 18th century; though the number of such parades has increased dramatically since the late 1990s. In contrast, there are only a small handful of notable nonsectarian parades in the city each year, such as the annual Belfast May Day Parade and the Belfast LGBTQ Pride Parade. Unlike many sectarian parades, the Belfast May Day Parade, for instance, provides a relatively "safe space" for working people of all ethnic-religious backgrounds to come together in the city center.[7]

Various ethnonational-religious associations sponsor sectarian parades, with the majority being held during the annual "marching season" that runs roughly from April to August. In particular, Protestant fraternal organizations sponsor numerous parades during marching season to commemorate various historic events. The vast majority of sectarian parades in Belfast and other cities are organized by "loyalist" (i.e., avid pro-British unionist/Protestant) fraternal organizations, though Irish republican (i.e., avid nationalist/Catholic) parades also occur during marching season.[8] The much larger number of loyalist-unionist parades symbolically reflects the historic dominance of the Protestant majority population of Northern Ireland, which were thereby allowed to become well established decades ago; while minority nationalist-republican events were tightly restricted since they were considered officially to be a threat to public order – especially during the Troubles. Throughout most of the history of Northern Ireland, "the legal regulation of parades in Northern Ireland has generally favored those in power – in other words, unionists" (Bryan 2004:238).

Sectarian parades in Belfast tend to focus on an "inter-communal competition for the domination of urban space" (McQuad 2015); most obviously exemplified by Protestant loyalist parades intruding into many of the predominantly Catholic neighborhoods of Belfast. There are also a much smaller number of parades sponsored by "dissident republicans" (i.e., militant nationalists who refuse to accept the Good Friday Agreement) that sometimes intrude into Protestant-majority areas. Such spatial incursions by sectarian marchers often spark violent counterprotests. In particular, "recreational rioting" has become "the extracurricular activity of choice for youths" (Mitchell and Kelly 2010:16), especially for those living in the relatively impoverished ethnonational enclaves of Belfast. Though alcohol, drugs, and boredom often fuel such riots, the underlying motivation is mainly sectarian. Such riots involve young people gathered in large crowds at neighborhood interfaces throwing rocks, makeshift pipe bombs, and hurling spiteful slurs at one another. Due to such recurring problems, a Parades Commission was established in 1997 to ensure "the adherence to the rules and regulations governing the app-

roval and undertaking of parades" (Duggan 2010:168).

Several researchers have linked such violent sectarianism to the hegemonic prevalence of heteronormativity in Northern Ireland. Walshe (1996), for instance, notes that the British colonizer was traditionally depicted as masculine and dominant, while the colonized Irish were cast as feminine and passive. Irish nationalists have long been aware of the detrimental association between "Irish femininity" and subservience to "British masculinity," and have responded discursively by endeavoring to accentuate and underscore the reputed masculine aspects of the Irish national character (Cairns and Richards 1988). Consequently, Irish cultural discourse has sought for decades to silence sexual difference from the heteronorm, which "became an imperative for consolidating a postcolonial identity because of a supposed link between homosexuality and enfeebled, 'feminized' masculinity" (Walshe 1996:90).

This type of reflexive heteronormativity has reportedly fueled a hypermasculine culture of homophobia, more so in Northern Ireland than the Republic of Ireland. In contrast to the Republic, Northern Ireland's heterosexism "is supplemented by religious, postcolonial, and political discourses that create particular sexual productions of space, ones that are often crosscut by sectarianism" (Kitchin and Lysaght 2003:493). Religious and political doctrines that have sustained sectarianism in Northern Ireland have also vilified LGBTQ people as having an "objective disorder" (Kitchin 2002:215). In effect, the intersectionality of religion, nationality, and ethnicity has effectively bifurcated the province into two adversarial communities, thus resulting in a highly conformist environment on both "sides" of the divide, which tends to marginalize and demean dissident sexualities. Homophobia in Northern Ireland therefore stems from deep-seated fears of sexual dissidence acting to disrupt entrenched notions of "ethnonational purity" (Nagle 2012:85).

Furthermore, the modern history of sectarian violence in Northern Ireland apparently contributes to the widespread incidence of homophobia. Decades of sectarian violence have apparently engendered a cultural environment that both "celebrates" and "conditions" intolerance in the form of widespread prejudice against LGBTQ people (Toops 2014:38). "Paramilitary organizations on both sides foster what might be termed hyper (hetero) masculinity," Kitchin and Lysaght (2003) explain. Many paramilitaries even police their own neighborhoods for what they view as "antisocial behavior, which often includes sexual dissidence" (483). This "suspicion of difference," articulated by paramilitaries and visibly personified by their parades, has led many people in the wider society to tolerate violence and reject LGBTQ persons (O'Leary 2009:127).

In sum, sectarian parades in Northern Ireland not only contest social space, but also perpetuate ethnonational-inspired forms of heteronormativity. However,

there are also nonsectarian social movement mobilizations occurring within public space, including those that articulate oppositional identities and dissident discourses; which are symbolically expressed, for instance, by parade participants in Belfast Pride. In effect, individual bodies in the parade have become the collective carriers of a relatively new movement in Northern Ireland – LGBTQ rights. Parade participants effectively "imprint" their political convictions upon the spatial environment in which they march (Rossol 2010:13). Thus, Belfast Pride provides a more peaceful alternative to the hegemonic culture of sectarian/homophobic violence that has been traditionally dominant in Northern Ireland; though Pride marchers nonetheless engage in spatial practices that are similar in some respects to those found in sectarian parades.

Queering Space in Belfast

Parades paradoxically can be either a symbolic representation of hegemonic (dominant) or counterhegemonic (subordinate) discourses. As a counterhegemonic cultural event, Belfast Pride effectively seeks to subvert power by disputing the heteronormative dominance of public space. This stands in sharp contrast to the way in which public spaces are routinely expected to be "authentically heterosexual" (Bell et al. 1994). Indeed, institutional forms of heterosexism and related social sanctions regulate the sexual behavior of people in most public spaces (Duggan 2016:1), operating through a discursive regime that portrays heterosexuality positively and homosexuality negatively (Kitchin and Lysaght 2003:491). In effect, public spaces in Belfast are sexually marked in a variety of ways, even though such markings are largely invisible to heterosexuals. Same-sex couples do not normally express affection in most public spaces of Belfast, for instance, without expecting hostile or even violent reactions from others.

Over the past several decades, Belfast has exhibited "very little visible gay space" compared to other major cities in the UK (Kitchin and Lysaght 2003:507). Institutionalized homophobia and heterosexism are particularly evident in the modern political-legal realm, as evidenced by the fact that Northern Ireland has considerably lagged behind the rest of the UK in liberalizing laws concerning homosexuality. Consensual homosexual behavior ("sodomy"), for instance, was not legalized in Northern Ireland until 1982; fifteen years after this had been accomplished in the rest of the UK. In fact, legalization did not occur until the European Court of Human Rights intervened, putting pressure on the British government to extend their legal coverage to Northern Ireland. In addition, police surveillance of LGBTQ people and related crackdowns on their pubs were commonplace during the Troubles, much more so that in Britain during the same period (Toops 2014).

More recently, Northern Ireland's provincial government refused to enact

civil partnerships for same-sex couples, even though the rest of the UK had already done so in 2004. The right to a civil partnership was finally implemented in Northern Ireland only after the British parliament issued a nationwide mandate in 2005. Similarly, the provincial government continues to block the introduction of any legislation that would legalize same-sex marriage, even though England and Wales approved marriage equality in 2013 and Scotland did so in 2014.

It was within this relatively repressive environment that the first annual Belfast Pride Parade was held in June 1991, coinciding with the 22nd anniversary of the Stonewall Uprising in New York City.[9] This seminal march occurred at the height of the Troubles when sectarian paramilitary groups were actively engaged in guerrilla warfare and terrorism, though it was a relatively low-key event in comparison to more recent pride parades. As Nagle (2012) observes, "Belfast Pride has developed from just over 50 participants singing 'gay rights anthems' in 1991 (the first LGBT parade in the province) to over 15,000 participants in 2010" (85). For the first several years of its existence, Belfast Pride was centered in the vicinity of Cathedral Square, located on the fringe of the relatively nonsectarian city center. This district has included a relatively small number of LGBTQ bars and related establishments for decades. It first emerged as a liminal queer space during the 1970s, when the city center was largely abandoned at night, due to fears of sectarian violence. LGBTQ people had effectively "carved out an area of society in which they could be completely themselves" (Toops 2014:52).

In recent years, Custom House Square has become the main focal point for Belfast Pride, which is much closer to the heart of the city center than is Cathedral Quarter. It includes some of Belfast's oldest landmarks, such as the Albert Clock, the Northern Bank, and Scottish Amicable. This location provides local historical significance, existing within a space that largely transcends ethnonational identities in the contemporary era. Even though the Square is routinely a heteronormative space, it becomes a highly inclusive space for LGBTQ people and their straight allies to congregate during Pride. One factor that likely facilitates this temporary spatial transformation is the fact that the Square has been a popular, unofficial spot for skateboarding for several years, attracting young people from both major ethnonational groups throughout the city.[10] In effect, the Square provides a cosmopolitan space that regularly features peaceful subcultural interactions of Protestant and Catholic youths; thus marking it as a relatively safe spatial terrain for Belfast Pride.

Custom House Square serves as both the starting and ending point of the parade, and also the main venue for the music festival that follows. The parade dramatically enhances the visibility of the local LGBTQ community, due to thousands of participants marching collectively in a circuitous route through various spaces of the city center. The parade reaches a heteronormative spatial-zenith of sorts

when it passes directly in front of Belfast City Hall in Donegall Square. It then proceeds to wind its way through the informal LGBTQ vicinity of the Cathedral Quarter, which contains the largest and best known LGBTQ nightclub, the Kremlin, along with various other LGBTQ-oriented bars, saunas, and organizational offices. At this juncture, symbolic artifacts of a decades-old LGBTQ space evoke the collective memories of parade participants, at least tacitly. But once the parade exits the Cathedral Quarter, it again "leaves the safety of unofficially demarcated 'gay space', and proceeds through areas that are primarily, albeit invisibly, 'heterosexual'" (Duggan 2010:167).

In effect, Belfast Pride disrupts heteronormativity by occupying public spaces in the heart of the city and expressing collective identities in non-traditional ways. Parade participants tacitly produce non-heterosexual spaces, thereby "queering streets" in the process, whether in a more permanent or transitory fashion. As Enguix (2009) explains, "Pride parades do not simply (or uncontestedly) inscribe streets as queer, but they actively produce queer streets" (16). But to "queer" streets does not necessarily mean to dominate streets; such spaces become fluid zones of inclusion rather than rigid spaces of tacit exclusion, which are subject to nonnormative sexualities and gender identities acting upon them. This stands in stark contrast to most sectarian parades, which seek to assert an exclusionary dominance of the streets on which they march, including those located in neighborhoods of the other major sect.

Rainbow Flags of Resistance

Patriotic symbols have been a common feature of municipal parades for centuries, including the conspicuous display of national flags and related ethnocentric emblems that are evocative of territorial domination by a national hegemon or imperial colonizer. In this respect, parades are "performances of the nation," (Rossol 2010), providing an opportunity for a regime to monopolize public space. Such parades are utilized to perform a particular propagandistic vision of history, culture, and national belonging. Conversely, nonnormative parades such as Belfast Pride tend to represent subordinated groups, thereby illustrating "minority memory positions" rather than "majority memory traditions" (McQuaid 2015). Such minority parades often articulate dissident discourses that foment socio-spatial strategies of resistance, thereby frequently encroaching into the public spaces of hegemonic social actors.

The most common symbol observed in Belfast Pride is the rainbow flag – which is displayed in various sizes and shapes. This is not surprising, considering that the rainbow flag has become the most important minority-memory symbol of LGBTQ pride in the world, since the renowned gay American artist-activist,

Gilbert Baker, first designed it in 1978. Consequently, the rainbow flag and its colors adorn numerous floats, placards, and banners in Belfast Pride. In addition, numerous parade participants march with rainbow flags draped over their shoulders; whilst others wear rainbow sashes. Paradoxically, the emphasis on the rainbow flag is similar in some respects to the brandishing of national flags commonly found in sectarian marches – whether Protestant-loyalists flying the British Union Jack, or Catholic-republicans displaying the Irish Tricolor. But in contrast to such ethnonational-sectarian imagery, the rainbow flag functions as a transnational, multicultural emblem that normally transcends ethnicity, nationality, and religion.

Nevertheless, there are many hybrid versions of the rainbow flag that were observed at Belfast Pride, including some that were combined with ethnonational imagery. Several marchers affiliated with Irish nationalist-republican party, Sein Fein, for instance, were observed carrying a banner adorned with a rainbow-colored map of Ireland, captioned by the phrase, "Sein Fein Proud to Support Pride." A few marchers even carried the flag of the British Union Jack, though displayed in rainbow colors or hues of pink and white, thereby recontextualizing the most important unionist-loyalist majoritarian image for a minority LGBTQ audience. Revealingly, there was a conspicuous absence of the two main sectarian colors, orange (for Protestants) and green (for Catholics), in the parade; thus apparently purposively avoiding the most obvious symbols of sectarianism. Instead, marchers wore various other colors, including purple, pink, lavender, yellow, blue, red, black, and white.

In effect, Belfast Pride participants have strategically sought to recontextualize majority-memory traditions into new minority-memory positions in the contestation of the heteronormative status quo. Akin to national flags displayed in majority parades, rainbow flags flown in Belfast Pride symbolize the political demands of the LGBTQ minority in Northern Ireland. Belfast Pride tacitly promotes the acquisition of "full citizenship" for LGBTQ people, including the right to marry and the freedom to safely express their sexual and gender identities in public spaces.[11] LGBTQ people become visible in the parade "as a community that not only claims citizenship rights, but also claims to leave its own mark on the public space, questioning its self-evident yet often violently enforced heterosexuality" (Igrutinovic et al. 2015:4). Thus, the annual parade promotes the acquisition of full citizenship for LGBTQ people by acting in response to the myriad of limitations that have been placed on the social, cultural, political, and civil rights and activities of dissident sexual/gender identities in the locale of public space.

Glocal Discourses and Resistance

Belfast Pride is currently held annually in July, even though it was originally scheduled in June to coincide with the legendary Stonewall Inn Uprising. Ironically, the month of July is the zenith of the sectarian marching season, which is a likely factor in the scheduling of Belfast Pride. The parade generally attracts an estimated 15,000–40,000 participants per year, vastly outnumbering the participation rates of many sectarian parades in the city. In some respects, Belfast Pride is a tacit nonsectarian entry in a broadly defined marching season. But in contrast to sectarian parades that often prompt extreme socio-spatial discord and rioting, Belfast Pride is enveloped in a mostly peaceful aesthetic. Thus, the timing of the parade seems to be a local-global (or "glocal") synthesis, combining the North American LGBTQ marching season of Stonewall with the national-sectarian marching season of Northern Ireland.

Rather than being held in the sectarian spaces of segregated neighborhoods and interface zones, Belfast Pride occurs instead in the largely nonsectarian city center; thus, it is spatially disconnected from the main spatial terrain of sectarian parades. However, spatial contestations invariably occur in reaction to Belfast Pride. Most notably, a contingent of conservative Christians that is composed primarily of evangelical Presbyterians shows up annually to protest at Belfast Pride. They have even established an official political coalition that sought unsuccessfully to ban the parade between 2005 and 2008, operating under the banner of "Stop the Parade." During this period, Northern Ireland faced yet another marching controversy over contested space. But in contrast to previous contestations involving sectarian parades, which had pit Orange (pro-British) marchers against Green (pro-Irish) marchers, the latest controversy centered on Pink (LGBTQ) marchers (O'Leary 2009).

Since 2008, anti-LGBTQ activists have been largely content to protest mostly in silence at the event. During my observations of Belfast Pride in 2010, I witnessed the presence of around 50-60 anti-LGBTQ protestors, who were completely relegated to the sidelines of the parade route in front of City Hall – several blocks away from Custom House Square. Most of the counterdemonstrators were holding placards and banners featuring Bible verses and related anti-LGBTQ political-religious slogans. Such discursive scripts were similar to those of Christian fundamentalist movements around the world, though often including symbolic references to Northern Ireland. There was very little direct interaction between the LGBTQ marchers and counterdemonstrators; given the relatively strong police presence in the immediate vicinity and barricades placed in front of the counterdemonstrators; coupled with new rules restricting interaction between the two groups, issued by the Parade Commission.

In sum, Belfast Pride encapsulates the hybridized convergence of transnation-

al and national discourses of resistance, which occurs within the overwhelmingly heteronormative spaces of the city center. The annual parade is a highly contentious event featuring rainbow flags and other counterhegemonic symbols, which directly challenges the status quo of nationalist-flag waving sectarian events held elsewhere in Belfast during the same marching season. Belfast Pride tends to elicit highly visible (though relatively small) counterdemonstrations in public spaces of the city center, in the form of nonviolent protests orchestrated by a religious movement, rather than the often-riotous behavior that frequently materializes on sectarian parade routes. Ironically, Belfast Pride and the fundamentalist Christian reaction to it are both syncretistic products of globalizing sociopolitical forces, which have become concretized in opposition to one another within the local spaces of central Belfast.

Performances in Public Space

In dramaturgical terms, Belfast Pride participants are analogous to actors performing on a mobile stage that includes various roles, scripts, wardrobes, choreographies, props, and audiences, which are developed by individuals and groups to create particular impressions in the minds of others. Thus, the Pride Parade is a theatrical event that reflects real-life social concerns, positioned on the transitory front-stage of the street. As a socio-spatial performance designed for an audience of onlookers, such a parade provides "visual images, acoustical impressions as well as physical movements through public spaces" (Rossol 2010:13).

One of the most obvious differences between sectarian parades and Belfast Pride is the type of physical performance that occurs on the street. Protestant-loyalist parades, for instance, tend to be based on a highly militaristic, hypermasculine performance, which features mainly or exclusively young men wearing matching military-style uniforms, engaging in regimented marching band performances. They usually play repetitious, instrumental flute and drum songs that have historical significance and evoke collective memories. In such loyalist parades, older men often walk separately in adjacent small groups, usually wearing British insignias on their lapels or orange-colored regalia draped across their shoulders. The staging of such strictly controlled performances epitomizes conformity to dominant norms and values, while emphasizing monocultural fidelity rather than multicultural diversity.

In contrast, Belfast Pride features marchers from a wide array of gender identities, sexual orientations, ethnicities, religious sects, and generations. The parade features an all-female lesbian percussion band wearing rainbow sashes, for instance, and a mostly female LGBTQ roller-derby group ("The Rockets"), skating under the banner, "Rockets Roll with Pride." The parade also includes a group

procession of muscled, shirtless young men, sponsored by a local nightclub. This particular performance ironically reflects a homoeroticized version of masculinity. Compared to sectarian events, parade participants were dressed in a much wider variety of clothing styles and costumes (including numerous drag queens and kings), while mostly avoiding militaristic marching formations. Thus, there is a great deal of gender fluidity in Belfast Pride, which spans the spectrum from social constructions of femininity to masculinity, along with androgynous displays.

Belfast Pride marchers tend to be less disciplined and more spontaneous in their street performance, compared to their sectarian counterparts. Indeed, the invisible spatial barrier separating marchers on the street from spectators on the sidelines is very fluid and transformational. Many onlookers (including myself) joined the parade spontaneously and sporadically. In place of the regimentation of sectarian parades, there is a substantial amount of nonconformist improvisation on display at Belfast Pride. For instance, one group conducted a call and response routine while marching together. The leader loudly queries, "What do we want?" Other marchers in the group respond with an immediate collective refrain, "Equality!" In addition, a group of college students recontextualizes a children's song, "If You're Happy and You Know It," for an LGBTQ performance. While marching in the parade, they repeatedly sing the modified lyric: "If you want equal marriage, clap your hands!" The participants sing the song enthusiastically with playful, though intense, spiritual fervor, as if they are members of an ecumenical gospel choir responding to their Christian fundamentalist critics.

Many of the political messages observed on placards and banners in Belfast Pride do not refer directly to LGBTQ identities or issues. Parade participants and especially "straight" onlookers could easily interpret some of these scripts as having a broader meaning, thereby acting as a critique not only of homophobia, but also sectarianism. Examples include messages such as, "No Spite, Just Human Rights," "All are Equal under the Law," and "Students Driving Change." Several pro-LGBTQ equality statements in the parade were apparent in meaning to those in subculture, but relatively subtle nonetheless, such as "It's Time," "Changing Attitudes," and "Out in Unison." One banner contained the phrase, "Peace Equals Equality and Diversity," and an accompanying explanation: "If people can get along and respect one another, then we can have peace." There was also a rainbow banner featuring with the word "Peace," which was basically a hybrid amalgamation of the classic rainbow-colored anti-war flag[12] with the contemporary LGBTQ rainbow flag. The implicit message was that peace in Northern Ireland is contingent on ending all forms of prejudice, whether homophobic or sectarian in form.

Thus, Belfast Pride is a collective socio-spatial event aimed at influencing and mobilizing "multiple publics" – not simply the LGBTQ community (Conrad 2006:600). Parade participants effectively constitute a subaltern *counterpublic* – a

parallel discursive arena in which "members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, so as to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (Fraser 1993:14).

Collective Identity Assertions

Generally speaking, parades involve collective identity assertions and related enactments of nationality, ethnicity, religion, social class, gender, sexual orientation, and other identity-laden social categories. Simply put, parades are a highly visible means of "asserting collective identities and claiming political dominance over territory" (Jarman 1997:79). The visible presence of individuals in public space can transform the space itself, through identity-laden contestations or assertions of "previous identity claims to the space" (Hinze 2013:31). But Belfast Pride "purposively crosses and contests the saliency of ethnonational cleavages" (Nagle 2013:85), and is situated in the nonsectarian spaces of the city center that are not currently marked by any conspicuous ethnonational political divisions. Thus, Belfast Pride "is not exclusionary on the basis of identity politics" (Duggan 2010:168).

What distinguishes Belfast Pride from most other parades in the city is that it "draws in both sections of the Catholic/Protestant communal divide" (O'Leary 2009:135). The relative inclusivity of the parade is due to many possible factors, including the strong likelihood that the LGBTQ community in Northern Ireland is "less sectarian than the wider society" (O'Leary 2009:126). Indeed, the LGBTQ community has largely eschewed the labels of "Protestant" and "Catholic" for decades, even prior to the first Pride Parade in 1991. As a 1980 report indicated about the gay social scene of Belfast, "The band of common sexuality is far stronger than adherence to sectarian differences" (Toops 2014:63).

In my interviews of Belfast Pride participants, I found that such inclusive sentiments remain widespread, with an LGBTQ collective identity largely trumping any ethnonational-religious identities. Indeed, all twenty-four of my respondents (ten Protestants and fourteen Catholics) claim that their sectarian backgrounds are largely or mostly irrelevant at Pride. As several respondents noted, the annual parade is open to anyone – no matter their ethnicity or religion. "We don't really care if a person is Catholic or Protestant or atheist or whatever, as long as they support us," a 24-year old gay male respondent observes. A 19-year old bisexual woman agrees, noting, "My best friend grew up in a Protestant neighborhood, and we're both here today. Even though I was raised a Catholic, we have a lot in common." Similarly, a 30-year old gay man exclaims, "We don't dwell on what divides us at Pride; instead we think about what unites us." His 28-year old transgendered friend observes, "Most of us don't really fit in very well with religious types, you know. Some of those folks couldn't care less if we live or die." In addition, an in-

clusive message was evident in the yearly themes of Belfast Pride, such as "We Are One" and "Diverse Equals Proud."

Four of the respondents claimed to be "fighting" for equal rights for everyone; which is a major factor that brought them out to Belfast Pride. Such sentiments were apparent in several of the banners and placards observed in the parade, featuring such messages as "Out, Proud, and Fighting for Liberation," "Fighting for Your Rights," "Fighting for our Future," and "Fight 4 Unity." There were also several signs observed in the parade that made more specific assertions, such as "Enough is Enough – Action Against Homophobia," "Love is a Human Right," "Marching for Equality Today," "Homophobia is a Social Disease," "Transphobia is a Political Disease," "Christians Enjoying Gay Pride," "Gay Blood is Good Blood," and "Help LGBT People Feel Safe at Work." In addition, a common theme in many of the parade banners and placards was an emotional appeal based on relatively nonpolitical terminology such as unity, community, love, and respect. Examples of such slogans observed include "Show me Love," "Love isn't Political," and "Love is Human Experience, not a Political Statement."

Along these lines, nine respondents indicated that the primary motivating factor that prompted their participation in the parade was a collective feeling of "family" or "friends." As a 17-year old lesbian observes, "Lots of us have gay and straight friends who are here at the parade and festival too. We've formed our own community, and that's what really matters." In addition, at least seventeen respondents indicated that they felt a stronger sense of camaraderie and community with other marchers, as a result of Belfast Pride; thus indicating a greater fortification of associational network ties between participants.

Therefore, Belfast Pride is a ritualized celebration of an LGBTQ collective identity, which largely transcends ethnonational identities and sectarian differences. Rather than simply consisting of an annual processional existing in social stasis, Belfast Pride implicitly endeavors to transform identities from mere thoughts into action by visibly asserting dissident sexualities. The collective identities of parade participants are given meaning and relevancy through the *ecology of encounters* (i.e., multiple interactions with like-minded others), which are experienced in intense, concentrated socio-spatial situations (Heikkila 2001:266). Participation in the parade, often encouraged by friends and acquaintances, stirs up primary emotions and creates an enduring "sense of we-ness," thereby reminding participants of their individual and collective moral commitments. As Nagle (2013) observes, "Ritualistic activity – even if only performed on a yearly basis – often involves intense emotional moments of solidarity that can help bind participants together" (86).

Camp Performances

Belfast Pride is not simply an identity-laden sociopolitical event, but also an entertaining spectacle that features a *carnivalesque* atmosphere in public spaces normally reserved for heteronormative commerce and recreation. In sharp contrast to sectarian parades, Belfast Pride effectively combines serious political assertions with melodramatic theatrics, humorous antics, and a cacophony of amplified musical selections emanating from floats and other vehicles. Even the timing of Belfast Pride seems to be a parody of sectarian parades, occurring during the same timeframe as the annual sectarian marching season. Though Pride contains many similar features as sectarian parades – such as drum corps, colorful flags, and marchers performing for crowds, while entering contested social spaces that have historic significance, many of these performances have a comedic flair that is lacking in most sectarian events.

In particular, popular music plays an important role in forging collective identities in Belfast Pride – both among parade participants and onlookers. Brucher et al. (2013) explains that parade music acts as a "primary catalyst in promoting collective sentiment in a processional environment" (19). Though some Belfast Pride entries feature live percussion routines or whistles being blown, the vast majority of musical selections in the parade observed are dubbed "gay anthems." Such songs tend to be highly popular with LGBTQ audiences around the world, featuring lyrical themes of acceptance, pride, perseverance, inner strength, and unity. Examples of such songs played at Belfast Pride include, "I'm Coming Out" by Diana Ross, "Dancing Queen" by Abba, "I Will Survive" by Gloria Gaynor, "Born This Way" by Lady Gaga, "Show Me Love" by Robin S, "YMCA" by the Village People, "We Are Family" by Sister Sledge, "I Love It" by Icona Pop, and "I'm So Excited" by the Pointer Sisters.

Many of these gay anthems qualify as *camp* – an excessive seriousness that is unconvincing in its delivery, yet nonetheless provides comic relief to a shrewd audience (Sontag 1999:59). Put simply, camp is an over-the-top "performance by a knowing agent" involving melodramatic parody (Conrad 2009:28). For decades, camp has been connected to various forms of LGBTQ entertainment in bars and nightclubs; most obviously, drag performances. Accordingly, drag is described as a subversive type of "gender parody" that deconstructs the ostensible universality of rigid heterosexual gender norms (Butler 1999). Camp is even often labeled a "queer phenomenon," and has become a major component of pride parades and their cunning discursive critique of heteronormativity in many national-local spaces. As Conrad (2009) observes, "Those who practice camp within the parade are double-voiced, echoing the structures of the majority culture(s), while at the same time providing a comic commentary on them through parody" (26).

The destabilizing discourse of camp is evident in many of the street perfor-

mances of Belfast Pride observed in this project. Numerous drag queens and kings, for instance, were festooned in elaborate gender-bending costumes, while waving to passersby with exaggerated facial expressions. Making a subtle political point with campy zeal, several drag queens were bedecked in white-wedding dresses and veils. One group named "Queer Space" featured drag performers and others in outrageous costumes riding scooters – including a man dressed as a Catholic bishop. Another man nearby was wearing cowboy attire, though farcically carrying a pink-hued Union Jack. The Kremlin float featured the signature red star of communism – a normally serious symbol that is parodied in its camp performance. The same float also features an androgynous man dressed in flowing black robes, similar to a mystical wizard-king, waving to the crowd. Next to him is a drag queen with neon-red hair, dressed in a sliver miniskirt, staring at onlookers with an expression of tepid bemusement.

Moreover, several placards and banners observed display messages with camp sensibilities. One large sign sponsored by the group, Historic Royal Palaces, for instance, includes a rainbow-colored castle with an ostensibly serious but amusing caption: "1,000 Years of Kings, Queens, and In-Betweens." Additionally, a rainbow flag, held aloft by two gay men dressed in astronaut suits, contains the tongue-in-cheek phrase, "One Small Step for Man, One Giant Mence for Mankind." The word "mence" implies homosexuality in Northern Ireland; thus, the statement is both a sarcastic meme and a serious statement promoting LGBTQ equality.

Belfast Pride participants have endeavored to disrupt heteronormativity in public space by expressing an LGBTQ identity in often provocative, campy ways. In effect, many marchers are utilizing the subversive discourse of camp to both garner attention and facilitate positive social change, thereby mixing the profane and the religious with the political, and combining melodramatic sarcasm with the quest for social justice.

Conclusion

The annual Belfast Pride Parade has grown exponentially since its marchers took their first collective steps in 1991. Over the decades, the parade has become an annual municipal and national event that attracts countless thousands of marchers and onlookers of all ethnicities, religions, ages, sexual orientations, and gender identities. Indeed, Belfast Pride has become the most visible socio-spatial affirmation of LGBTQ rights in all of Northern Ireland. The parade is a compelling series of socio-spatial performances that effectively elicits participation from marchers and onlookers alike, as it moves on the street past City Hall, eventually culminating in a massive throng of thousands of people attending a

music festival at Custom House Square.

By marching beyond the liminal spaces of the traditional LGBTQ ghetto of Cathedral Square, Pride participants are conspicuously entering the central heteronormative-spatial realm of Belfast. In essence, the ritualistic experience of marching in the same parade for a common purpose has facilitated an associational network-based connection between participants, which strengthens assertions of a common collective identity. Belfast Pride marchers are engaging in collective resistance to the heterosexist status quo by dramatically expanding the visible presence of LGBTQ people in both the city and the province. Parade participants are tacitly reclaiming heteronormative spaces by "queering" streets, albeit in a temporary fashion on an annual basis.

In sharp contrast to sectarian parades, Belfast Pride focuses on the relatively nonsectarian spaces of the city center, thereby providing a decidedly less regimented, more inclusive, multicultural street performance. In the case of sectarian parades (especially of the Protestant-loyalist variety), there is a hegemonic, hypermasculine assertion of ethnonational dominance by marchers. Among sectarian parades, provocative spatial incursions into rival sectarian neighborhoods have often prompted violent riots. But in the case of Belfast Pride, there is a counterhegemonic gender-diverse performance enacted in opposition to the dominance of heteronormativity, which largely transcends ethnonational identities. Even though the social activism of Belfast Pride has elicited heated rhetoric from counterdemonstrators, there have not been any violent altercations on the parade route.

In many respects, Belfast Pride includes the symbolic representations, minority-memory positions, and related argot of the transnational LGBTQ movement, as reflected in the pageantry of banners, placards, floats, and people adorned with rainbow flags and colors. Many such symbolic representations are drawn from other LGBTQ pride parades around the world. But Belfast Pride is also framed in the symbolic representations of cultural syncretism that effectively hybridizes the global with the local. Rainbow imagery (or pink hues), for instance, are sometimes combined with Irish nationalist or British unionist symbolism, though in reputedly non-sectarian ways. The subversive, often campy combination of such disparate imagery, effectively neutralizes the sectarian militancy that otherwise exists in such symbols. The contours and colours of the rainbow flag recontextualizes such national symbols into emblems of LGBTQ pride, thereby redirecting the particularistic ideologies of Irish nationalism and Protestant unionism implicitly towards the new common goal of human rights and peaceful coexistence.

There is an overwhelming opposition expressed to both homophobia and sectarianism among Belfast Pride participants interviewed for this article. In many respects, respondents have depicted homophobia and sectarianism as two sides of the same prejudicial coin. But respondents generally have claimed that ethno-

national-religious identities are largely rendered irrelevant within the spaces of Belfast Pride. Similarly, discursive scripts displayed on the placards and banners of Belfast Pride are often framed in the language of unity, peace, and equality, which can be interpreted broadly as a critique of all forms of prejudice. Even when "fighting" metaphors are employed, the phraseology tends to be positive rather than negative, thereby focusing on constructive social goals rather than an implicit denigration of other cultures.

In the counterhegemonic-spatial practices of Belfast Pride, irreverent humor, melodramatic camp, and delirious drag have become the new weapons of the weak; thereby successfully empowering the sexually oppressed as they commemorate their collective memories of the past, while promoting their shared hopes for the future. Thus, the streets of central Belfast are queered at least once per year, as the spatial habitus of heteronormativity and the related ethos of sectarianism implicitly yield to the conspicuous presence of a subaltern counterpublic that has gone fully public.

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Notes

[1] See Gotham (2003), for more on the strategic use of space by oppressed groups.
[2] According to recent figures, Protestants account for 48 percent and Roman Catholics comprise 45 percent of the population in Northern Ireland.
[3] Belfast is more evenly divided by sect than the rest of the province, with 48.6 percent identifying as Protestant, 47.2 percent as Catholic, and 4.2 percent indicating that they are either non-religious or affiliated with a non-Christian faith. Significantly, Belfast is a "young city" with 19.5 percent of the population under 16 years of age (Belfast City Council 2010).
[4] Recent studies indicate that around 80 percent of Belfast residents live in neighborhoods that are populated by more than 60 percent of the same religious sect (Shirlow 2006:102). Approximately two-thirds of Catholics (67.3 percent) and almost three-quarters of Protestants (73 percent) live in neighborhoods in which at least 81 percent of the residents are from the same ethno-sectarian background (Shirlow 2008:78).

[5] There appears to have been some improvement in homophobic attitudes in recent years. For instance, a Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (2012) found that a majority of people polled claim that they are not prejudiced against gay men (73 percent) and lesbians (76 percent). The number of respondents who said that same-sex relationships were "always wrong" declined from 76 percent in 1989 to 28 percent in 2012. Even so, the rates were found to differ sharply by age, religion, and gender. Older respondents (especially over 65) were much more likely to express homophobic sentiments than were younger respondents. Also, the study found that Protestants were more likely than Catholics to express homophobic prejudices, as were men and regular churchgoers in both major sects. In turn, nonreligious people were the least likely to hold such sentiments.

[6] A Rainbow Project study in 2009 found that one in five (21 percent) of LGBTQ people in Northern Ireland have been the victims of a homophobic hate crime in the past three years, and one in ten have experienced such an attack in the past year. According to the Police Service for Northern Ireland, there were a higher number of homophobic-motivated crimes reported in 2012-13 than at any time since 2004-05 (Gray et al. 2013). In addition, a Rainbow Project and Age (2011) study revealed that homophobic language and bullying are common in Northern Ireland's schools. 98 percent of LGBT young people have reported hearing such language from other pupils, teachers, and nonteaching staff members in school.

[7] Even during the Troubles, the organizers of the May Day Parade sought to proscribe nationalist or unionist groups from participating; thereby framing the event as emblematic of working class unity. Thus, the May Day Parade involves "a form of mobilization that embraces ethnic diversity within the broad unity of a class-based movement" (Nagle 2013:84).

[8] According to the Northern Ireland Parades Commission (2013), 60 percent of the applications received annually for parades were Protestant (or unionist/loyalist); while most of the remaining 40 percent were Catholic (or nationalists/republican) (8).

[9] The Stonewall Inn riots and demonstrations that occurred in New York City's Greenwich Village in June 1969 are regarded as "the emblematic beginning" of the modern gay rights movement in the U.S." (Enguix 2009:16).

[10] For more on skateboarding and other subcultures of youth in Belfast, see Drissel (2007) and Drissel (2012).

[11] For more on the concept of "full citizenship" for LGBTQ people and other "sexual citiziens," see Kitchin and Lysaght (2004).

[12] More commonly known as the "peace flag," it was first used in an Italian anti-war march in 1961.

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