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Post-Melancholia Belfast: Street Art, Tourism, and the Contested Visions of a Wounded City

By
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Abstract

This essay explores the numerous roles that visual art plays for tourism in various Belfast neighborhoods. In the commercial districts of City Centre, Cathedral Quarter, and the Titanic Quarter, street art and other tourist attractions like the Titanic Museum offer a sanitized past or ignore the city's troubled history altogether. In the working-class districts of North, East, and West Belfast, political murals mark territories and serve as ceaseless reminders of Northern Ireland's sectarianism by either lionizing one's own side and/or vilifying the other. However, despite these vastly different visions of Belfast found in white-collar tourist districts and working-class communities, they all remain mired in a post-colonial melancholia, which Paul Gilroy defines as a psychic defense mechanism that post-colonial nations engage in that prevents a reckoning with its settler-colonial practices and the trauma produced upon those it ruled over. The political murals manufacture an idealized, heroic past that never existed. The street art looks toward an undefined future with often abstract or cartoonish imagery. But neither address the present post-colonial melancholy whereby Northern Ireland's colonial legacy and the Troubles are either completely ignored or represented in idealized representations.

Keywords: Visual Culture, Urban Studies, Street Art and Graffiti, Belfast, Conflict Studies, Postcolonial melancholia

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A November 10th, 2021 Instagram post by Francoisgotbuffed [Ray Bonner], the street artist known for his humorous, vibrant compositions, announced a new vision for Belfast's future. With David Bowie's song "Changes" playing over the short 9 second clip, the shot begins with *Freedom Corner*, an East Belfast stronghold of the Loyalist paramilitary group Ulster Defense Association (UDA), that prominently displays its mural of men with automatic weapons and painted statement, "The Ulster Conflict is about Nation/This We Shall Maintain." The camera then quickly pans towards street art sprayed on the back of Vault Artist Studios, a collective space for around 100 artists, temporarily housed in an abandoned school that has no heat. The artwork, enclosed by an iron fence with barbed wire on top, is of a large cartoon-like bird, with a bright yellow beak and pink feathers falling around the word JOY. The "J" and the "Y" are intricate 3D letters, highlighting the artist's skills, while the "O" is a bright yellow cut lemon. The post drastically highlights the differences between the violent and threatening imagery of the paramilitary organization with the fun, campy, and positive message of JOY (Francoisgotbuffed 2021).

Figure 1. Freedom Corner, November 10, 2021.

Figure 2. Joy mural by Francoisgotbuffed, November 10, 2021.

Francoisgotbuffed's post illustrates a key point of tension between the "old" and "new" Belfast. The sectarian murals in this working-class section of the city mark a territory mired in historical grievances and trauma; the street art, on the other hand, offers an unspecified yet more hopeful vision attempting to look beyond the city's traumatic past.

Belfast is a divided city defined by what Paul Gilroy (2005) has described as "post-colonial melancholia." According to Gilroy, this melancholia serves as a psychic defense mechanism that post-colonial nations employ, preventing them from reckoning with their settler-colonial practices and the trauma inflicted on those they ruled over, as well as subsequent generations. Instead, the unsettling history that undergirds such trauma is "diminished, denied, and then, if possible, actively forgotten" (90).

This form of nationalistic melancholia is what Judith Butler (2004: xiv) in another context regards as "disavowed mourning" whereby the state denies certain forms of representation that would have to address how its settler-colonial practices impacted select historically marginalized communities. Instead, this melancholia creates a national "antihistory" governed by "amnesiac principles" that "become the mechanism that sustains the unstable edifice of increasingly brittle and empty national identity" (Gilroy: 108, 106). For example, in Northern Ireland the British government has avoided responsibility for its actions in fostering violence and sectarianism during the Troubles, those twenty years of sectarian fighting and British military rule (McKay 2008: 274-279). Such unaccountability most recently

takes the form of the Northern Ireland Troubles Act that legally absolves most participants from any wrongdoing during the Troubles. Despite such legislation being challenged by a newly elected Labour government, it nonetheless comes as an affront to the communities and families attempting to hold accountable the British state and the paramilitaries for their lethal actions during this moment in time (UK Parliament 2023; McKinney-Perry 2024). Despite the relative peace following the passing of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, imposing gates still shut nightly, separating Catholic and Protestant neighborhoods to avoid sparks of sectarian violence that might ignite at any moment and serve as a stark reminder of the colonial legacy that still impacts the working-class communities that reside by them.

Within the framework of post-colonial melancholia not all images are created equal. The Instagram post reveals that within East Belfast, Loyalist imagery prevails, lining a major thoroughfare while the street art hides down an alleyway on the back of a building that the artists had to abandon in 2023 because of redevelopment plans (Vault Artist Studios, n.d.). The violent images have a perlocutionary power, resonating with the many additional Loyalist murals that line Newtownards Road and other Loyalist working-class areas like the Shankill. As Tony Crowley (2015: 58-76) notes, the murals that line working-class districts tell a violent and generational story that is quite different from the street art found in the city center and other tourist locations within the city. Despite being located in East Belfast, the JOY mural harkens towards those tourist zones that provide an alternative vision of Belfast that comprises a crucial part of this city's economic and political rejuvenation. It is this aesthetically pleasing street art that plays a central role for the tourism that flourishes in these areas that house the Titanic Museum and the future home of Belfast Stories, a 100 million pound self-described "tourist-led generation project" (Belfast City Council n.d.).

However, despite these vastly different visions of Belfast found in working-class communities and more white-collar tourist districts, they all remain mired in a post-colonial melancholia that avert the framing of their images from Northern Ireland's colonial legacy, the Troubles, and related anxieties that the GFA only partially addressed. The Loyalist murals discussed above manufacture an idealized, heroic past that never existed. The street art looks toward an undefined future with often abstract or cartoonish imagery. But neither address the present post-colonial melancholy that creates what Colin Coulter and Peter Shirlow (2023: 5) define as Northern Ireland's "quintessential liminality . . . that remains trapped somewhere between its [the country's] actual past and its putative future, a region that is no longer at war but even now does not quite feel at peace with itself."

Butler (2009: 22, 21) argues that for a nation to mourn and move forward from traumatic events there needs to be a grieving process that recognizes what

has been truly lost. However, as Freud ([1917] 1957: 245) reminds us, often the melancholic "cannot consciously perceive what [he] has lost," and, on a national level, the repression and concealment of colonial histories come with significant ethical and psychological consequences. With the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, there was a desire to move on from the Troubles and enter a new era of "good relations." But instead of mutual recognition, the city mainly remains segregated by class and religion. In an effort to transcend these tensions and residual traumas, the Belfast City Council has been refashioning the city to be an European destination for travelers with tourism and culture playing central roles through museums, festivals, concerts, and public art.

Some scholars have argued against a post-colonial framework in understanding Northern Ireland by suggesting that its unique constitutional and cultural integration into British socio-political structures differentiate it from other former British colonies (Martin 2021; Sidaway 2002). Others contend that a binary colonial/colonized framework erases complex Ulster Protestant identities that don't easily fit into either category (Mitchell 2006; Holmes 2009). First of all, post-colonial studies offers a much more multifaceted theoretical outlook than its critics often acknowledge where complex power dynamics are not easily reduced into that of the oppressor and that of the oppressed. To assume so is to overlook the pioneering work by C.L.R. James, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, and Amitav Ghosh, to name only a few (James 1989; Bhabha 1990; Spivak 2006; Ghosh 2021). Furthermore, we assert that a post-colonial framework allows for a nuanced reevaluation of Northern Ireland's history and its relationship to British empire that other interpretations are simply incapable to address.

Robbie McVeigh and Bill Roslton (2023) argue that a post-colonial outlook allows for one to understand how Northern Ireland's "statelet" status reflects its liminal position—neither fully integrated into the UK nor decolonized—a condition exacerbated by Brexit's disruption of cross-border dynamics and demographic shifts. To better understand this present liminal position, we investigate Belfast's street art, a complicated site that is anchored with sectarian histories of violence but also reaches toward an amorphous future. Despite extensive scholarship on this divided city's political murals, little attention has been given to street art beyond sectarian muralism, its ties to citywide street art, and its uneven role in mitigating the post-colonial melancholia that remains and is further institutionalized in its problematic implementation of the GFA in 1998. Committed to this broader perspective, we adopt a mixed-methods approach (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie 2022), integrating Gilroy's theoretical concept of post-colonial melancholia with qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews, walking tours, participant observation, and close analysis of various

art, websites, and government literature to examine the complex socio-cultural dynamics that define Belfast's street art.

This essay explores the ambivalent roles that visual art plays in various Belfast neighborhoods. The city is becoming increasingly divided among different zones of regeneration and gentrification. In the commercial districts of City Centre, Cathedral Quarter, and the Titanic Quarter, street art and other tourist attractions offer a sanitized past or none at all. In the working-class districts of North, East, and West Belfast, political murals mark territories and serve as ceaseless reminders of Northern Ireland's sectarianism. Regardless of the location, however, public art and tourism are dictated by a post-colonial melancholia that keeps the city's colonial legacies out of their frames.

We begin with the political murals in West Belfast. Focusing on a political walking tour organized to "bring together" opposing sides, we discuss how the Troubles has become commodified for a tourist's gaze, with art reinforcing sectarian divides. We then move to the Titanic Quarter, a "blank-slate" where the history of sectarian conflict was erased to create a non-offensive visual history that centers around the Titanic Museum. Finally, we move to the Cathedral Quarter, a transitional area where the street art festival Hit the North has temporarily found a home. We discuss the recent efforts by street artists to re-image the city while providing some sense of community for themselves. In their attempt to redirect Belfast from its traumatic past towards a more gentrified future, they often further buttress class and sectarian divides. Mixed emotions surround these public art efforts that move from elation to ambivalence regarding their impact and outreach. Gilroy (2005, 104), not coincidentally, identifies such emotions as also belonging to post-colonial melancholia. Our analysis of the public art that constitutes various Belfast districts assists, therefore, in providing indexes of the city's liminal state and varied relationship to the post-colonial melancholia that frames its outlook.

West Belfast and Touring the Troubles

We arrived early on a July morning for the "Conflicting Stories Walking Tour," advertised as "an opportunity to experience the tour of a lifetime" while walking the streets of West Belfast and listening to the history of the Troubles from both a Republican and Loyalist perspective (Belfast Political Tour. n.d.). We met our Republican tour guide, Robert, in front of the famous Divis Tower, a drab high rise that had a number of Irish and Palestinian flags hanging from windows. Situated on Divis Street, Divis Flats was built in 1966 as Belfast was experiencing a deep housing crisis and became a symbolic flashpoint of sectarian fighting when the young Robert Rooney became the first child killed in the Troubles when shot by a

constable of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) who fired his machine gun into the Tower. Throughout the Troubles, Divis Tower served as a base of Republican activity with a strong IRA presence, featured recently in the limited Hulu series *Say Nothing* (2024) (Moore 2023: 146).

We would hear Rooney's story and others like it from Robert, a short, unassuming man wearing a black tracksuit with white and green trim whose energy and willingness to tell a good story was obvious from his first words. He began the tour seemingly mid-sentence, talking about the origins of the Troubles. Robert talked while hustling us through the neighborhood, often stopping to discuss a relevant historic site or shaking hands with locals while asking about their families. Heading West on Divis Street, the road turns into Falls Road, an epicenter for Troubles tourism. Trailing after Robert, we had to walk around other tourists and tour groups taking pictures of the murals on the International Wall.

Opening the tour, Robert causally stated that as a young man, he was in the Maze, the infamous prison located 10 miles outside of Belfast that held political prisoners like "Bobby," referring to Bobby Sands, the IRA prisoner and elected MP, whose Hunger Strike death inspired many to join the fight for a United Ireland. Robert did not linger long on his own personal history or the reasons why he was in prison, nor did he show any regret; he matter-of-factly stated his connection with Republicanism and moved on with the tour.

A mural with the smiling image of Bobby Sands still looks down upon those entering the Sein Fein office on Falls Road (Bobby Sands Trust 2024). Images of IRA members punctuate the prominent walls in the area along with murals related to international freedom struggles like those concerning Palestinian and Black civil rights. The history of political muralism and its significance in bringing international attention to the political situation in Northern Ireland have been written about extensively by Bill Rolston (1987, 1992, 1997, 2022), Neil Jarman (1997, 2005) and many others. As a result, we will not recount this history here.

These murals have created a niche tourist trade referred to as "Troubles Tours" that take place mainly in and around West Belfast and form the backdrop to the history lessons the guides relay to tourists. The so-called Peace Walls are the centerpiece of many of these tours where public art decorates physical barriers demarking Catholic and Protestant working-class neighborhoods throughout 21 miles of the city. These interface barriers range from a few meters to over eight and are made of varying materials like cement, corrugated metal, and brick. They were initially constructed in the 1920s during the struggle for Irish independence. The majority, though, were built during the onset of the Troubles in 1969 and continued even *after* the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, suggesting the lingering post-colonial melancholia that plagues the area despite enacting a formal peace process in 1998 (Peacewall Archive n.d.).

The men responsible for many of the murals found on these walls grew up in these neighborhoods and eschewed the role of artists, instead seeing themselves as political activists. Bill Rolston (pers. communication, July 25, 20022), who has known many of the muralists, clarifies that their rejection of being called artists arose during the Troubles. To them, artists desired international success for the sake of avoiding addressing Northern Ireland politics that might undermine their careers. As a result, a persistent divide remains within Belfast between the older activist-muralists and a younger group of artists who embrace being "artists" and want to produce non-sectarian street art that is not mired in the imagery of the Troubles (Hocking 2015: 109-110).

Nonetheless, these activist-muralists have created careers and livelihoods by painting murals that tourists flock to and post on social media. It is their art that anchors a Troubles tourist economy. Twenty-five years after the Belfast Agreement that was to "end" the Troubles, Belfast is awash with competing murals, with over 700 sectarian/political pieces found in its streets bringing in thousands of tourists into the area (Extramural Activity 2024). Without them, many of these tours would most likely cease to exist.

For some scholars, these touristic practices further segregate neighborhoods by bulwarking sectarianisms that "exacerbate difference rather than transform conflict and division" in more productive relations (McDowell 2008: 412). Sara MacDowell critically examines Republican-led tours in West Belfast, arguing that they are "problematic" due to their partisan approach. She contends that both the sites shown to tourists and the guides' interpretations of murals and the surrounding environment present a one-sided narrative, overshadowing the losses and trauma experienced by non-Republican communities. MacDowell (406-407) is particularly critical of the number of paramilitary ex-prisoners, like Robert, who offer these tours, arguing that they see the "landscape as a political tool through which they can vie for external support or sympathy." In our experience, this is certainly true. Robert is a community organizer, deeply embedded in the machinations of Republican politics and issues that he champions during his tour.

Despite these objections, partisan tourism has entrenched itself within sectarian neighborhoods and, interestingly, a variety of mural tours are prominently featured on the *Visit Belfast* website, a one-stop collection of Belfast tourism (Visit Belfast 2025). While the murals' images can be violent, these promoted tours are billed as a sober history for tourists to learn about Belfast's "unique" history.

One of the most visited wall on these tours is on Cupar Way located on Bombay Street in West Belfast that has separated Catholic and Protestant neighborhoods for over fifty years. In 2013, the Northern Ireland Executive planned on removing all interface barriers, including this one, by 2023 (Coles, Hamber, Grant 2023:

1058). But remaining tensions between Catholics and Protestants in these areas have not abated and even intensified as concerns about Brexit have escalated (Carroll 2021).

Robert brought us to Bombay Street while telling the story of neighborhood resistance to colonialism and patiently answering questions from a tour member interested in how recent riots affected local real estate prices. At the end of his part of the tour, Robert escorted us across the interface area, taking us from the Republican to Loyalist side where he shook hands with Mark, a husky army veteran dressed in a blue windbreaker who walked stiffly due to the shrapnel embedded into his spine after multiple IRA bombing attacks on him and his family. Contrasting Robert's stories of resistance and resilience that always contained a touch of humor, Mark's somber discussion of the terror of the IRA was centered on trauma, with particular emphasis upon innocent casualties of women, children, and babies.

At one point during the tour, after walking us past plaques, murals, and photos of victims of IRA campaigns, Mark led us along Shankill Road to the Battle of the Somme Memorial Garden, which commemorates a World War I battle that looms large for Protestant veterans like Mark as a symbol of their bravery and allegiance to the British Crown. After offering a brief prayer for the fallen dead, Mark revealed his military background. While Robert briefly mentioned his Republican credentials at the beginning of his part of the tour, Mark's story culminated in his disclosure of his own and his family's trauma among a memorial dedicated to the Protestant dead of WWI. His father, a bricklayer, was killed when completing a job within a Catholic neighborhood. His brother, a constable for the RUC, was killed by a bomb placed under his car. Mark suffered multiple injuries from IRA attacks. He concluded, "No one was brought to justice for my family and attack on my life." Individual and collective, national and familial accounts of trauma seamlessly intertwined. Mark's narrative, told amid this street featuring visual images of loyalty to the British crown and graphic images of IRA violence, embodies post-colonial melancholia in which he relives "the multilayered trauma—economic, and cultural as well as political and psychological" of the loss of empire while still unable to "work through the grim details of imperial and colonial history" (Gilroy 2005: 99).

The Conflicting Stories Walking Tour reveals how Belfast remains a deeply wounded city. Karen Till (2012: 6) defines a wounded city "as densely settled locales that have been harmed and structured by particular histories of physical destruction, displacement, and individual and social trauma resulting from state-perpetrated violence." As a result, "Places and sites of memory have meanings that exceed their forms" due to past traumas and memories projected upon them by those who live there (7). The walking tour escorts tourists into such wounds

with the murals serving as their fetishization. Sara Ahmed (2014: 34) notes how such fetishized wounds serve as a sign of identity where "narratives of pain and injury have proliferated." Such identities bulwark its populace from uncertain precarious national futures like Brexit or Northern Ireland becoming a majority Catholic country that challenges a century of Protestant hegemony (Carroll 2022). These fetishized wounds are manifestations of post-colonial melancholia that either idealizes the past like Robert does when highlighting the mural of a near saintly portrait of Bobby Sands or serve "to restore an ebbing sense of what it is to be English" as Mark's stop in the memorial for fallen soldiers does (Gilroy 2005: 88).

Despite the trauma that underlies many of these tours, these walls—which have drawn the likes of politicians and celebrities from Bill Clinton to Justin Bieber—provide a source of income for working-class people in an economically deprived area, where nearly 30% of children live in poverty (see Markham 2018; McCann 2023). The walls are a focal point for participating artists of the Hit the North street art festival where many participants take a pilgrimage from the city centre to the working-class neighborhoods at the end of the festival to paint on the interface areas in order to display their artwork to passing tourists and serve as promotional material to photograph and post on social media. The walls serve important dual functions. They both repel and attract. They separate communities, but they also draw in artists and tourists to these economically deprived areas and provide modest sources of income for enterprising locals who build tours around them.

A multifaceted touristic economy focusing on these murals and walls is, therefore, embedded within working-class areas, even though, theoretically, state authorities could remove these murals at any given time since such sectarian imagery runs counter to the "good relations" policy found in the Good Friday Agreement. We argue that this type of tourism is a shadow version of the officially State sanctioned, gentrified tourism that we will discuss in the next two sections related to the Titanic and Cathedral Quarters. While the Belfast City Council attempts to create an image of a post-conflict city, the interface areas, which represent some of the poorest areas of the UK (Silva 2024: 2), are creating their own touristic enterprises by occupying an alternative reality that dramatically contrasts the image of Belfast as a cosmopolitan European city.

The "Blank Canvas" of the Titanic Quarter

If one is to walk Northeast from Falls Road and across the Lagan river via the Queen's Bridge, one visits a very different tourist area: The Titanic Quarter. The Titanic Museum sits on what was once called Queens Island, land that had

belonged to the former shipbuilding giant Harland and Wolfe where two of their enormous cranes, Samson and Goliath, still tower over Belfast as a reminder of the city's industrialized past. The derelict property was bought by Harcourt Developments, a Dublin-based corporation in 2001 for 47 million, and rebranded the Titanic Quarter, with plans to regenerate the area (McCaffery 2003). In 2008, Arlene Foster, then Minister for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, revealed that a public-private partnership would be formed to build the Titanic Museum with fifty percent of the funding supported by the Northern Ireland Tourist board and the remainder being financed by private partnerships and Belfast City Council (Northern Ireland Assembly 2013). The museum ushered in a new era of tourism for the city, with millions of tourists coming to Belfast since it opened in 2012. It provides an alternative to Troubles tourism by diverting tourists' gazes towards the opulence and wealth of a distant age and blockbuster movie.

Unlike West Belfast's tourist trade focusing on sectarian violence, the tourism centering around the Titanic Quarter is limited to commerce and a sanitized past. This area is populated by luxury car dealers and hotels along with a sports arena that houses the Belfast Giants, the city's ice hockey team that is not plagued by sectarian history unlike most other Northern Ireland sports (Lepp 2022). Before breaking ground, Harcourt developers referred to the area as "a pleasingly blank canvas" allegedly free from the historical trauma that defined other sections of the city that made it difficult to rejuvenate (Ramsey 2013: 164).

The Titanic Museum, which is itself a visual artwork, defines this section of the city and stands at eight stories, with an exterior built of acid-stained steel plates made to emulate the abstract design of a ship's bow and hull. The building design hovers between abstraction and figurative representation, serving as a perfect metaphor for the "quintessential liminality" of Northern Ireland that both wants to vaguely reference a past free of The Troubles while simultaneously evading it and gesturing towards the future. Within its walls, sectarian history is scoured away from its exhibits. We learn about the different types of quarters the rich, the poor, and workers occupied. But there is little mention regarding the labor struggles over the shipyard as Catholics fought for employment (see Hodson 2019). Tellingly, the final exhibit offers quotes from famous personages celebrating *contemporary* Belfast. Barack Obama is quoted stating: "Belfast is a different city. Once abandoned factories are rebuilt. Former industrial sites are reborn. Visitors come from all over . . . This island is now chic." A final panel announces, "Belfast Tomorrow," and celebrates its college graduates and optimistically advises visitors: "Enjoy it before the rest of the world arrives."

As Dean McCannell (2013: 78) notes, all tourism is a form of "re-presentation" that "requires an arbitrary cutoff from what would have surrounded its original

context, a frame, and usually a certain amount of filling in on the part of the museum." It creates a sense of authenticity within the limited confines of the display. The Titanic Quarter is one instance of a form of urban redevelopment that uses nostalgia of the past to smooth over present community antagonisms. As Marik Shtern and Scott Bollers (2021: 972) observe, in Belfast, this form of redevelopment "produces bubbles of globalization within the urban realm that depoliticize the historical context of the conflict and contemporary ethnic disparities." The Titanic Quarter doesn't engage the city's working-class communities but instead embalms them in an idealized past before industrialization collapsed in the city, before the Easter Uprising, and before the Troubles ignited.

The Titanic Quarter is a part of a larger "selective tradition," as Raymond Williams (1977: 115) defines it. Such traditions offer "an intentionally selective version of a shaping past and a pre-shaped present, which is then powerfully operative in the process of social and cultural definition and identification." All nation states engage in selective traditions and histories. But Belfast's is distinctively shaped by a post-colonial melancholia that must evade the country's settler-colonial origins and legacies. As Butler (2009: 72) reminds, "the state works on the field of perception and, more generally, the field of representability, in order to control affect" that determines which communities can be mourned and which ones cannot.

Our prior section of the paper addressed one core community that has been largely ignored: the working-classes living by the interface walls who bore the brunt of the violence of The Troubles. In general, working-class communities "do not feel a part of revitalized spaces" like the Titanic Quarter since they are rarely, if ever, consulted on developing them since a selective history of post-colonial melancholia must ignore their histories of trauma and dispossession caused by settler-colonialism (Shtern and Bollens 2021: 962). As Butler teaches us, grievability is not equally distributed. Despite both West Belfast and the Titanic Quarter having been called the "two faces of Belfast" with the former known as "Troubles Belfast" and the latter as "consumerist Belfast," we argue that they both perform an interrelated form of tourism that a post-colonial melancholic outlook dictates (O'Dowd and Komarova 2011: 2016).

The Cathedral Quarter: Gentrification and Community

Regeneration, as Liam O'Dowd and Milena Komarova (2011: 2015) claim, is always a delicate dance between politics and economics, but in Belfast, "a third, cultural logic, is embedded in the material fabric of the city through contested notions of space, place and territory." Street art is one prominent way that gentrification negotiates these contestations to take root in the Cathedral Quarter.

What makes the Cathedral Quarter ripe for gentrification is that it is adjacent to the city center, a bustling hub of economic activity where many commute to work. From the 1930s to the 1960s, the downtown area was a vibrant place for entertainment featuring a two thousand seat Ritz Cinema and large department stores like the Belfast Co-operative in the opulent Orpheus building (Harvey 2021). The city, although divided, was interconnected (Abdelmonem 2022: 133). But as sectarian tensions increased during the Troubles, the State created buffer zones and barriers between communities that transformed the city centre into a no-go zone that was riddled with numerous bombings by the IRA (Coyles, Hamber and Grant: 1070). Public transportation ran along distinctly sectarian routes so that Catholics and Protestants had minimal interaction.

People moved out to the suburbs or other neighborhoods, leaving many buildings in the city centre derelict. In the absence of densely populated local residences, post-Good Friday Agreement developers reimagined the area as another "blank slate" for fostering cosmopolitan consumerism. As Aihwa Ong (2006: 77) observes, it is a common practice for many cities attempting to transform themselves to use market-driven logic to determine developmental decisions and government planning. Such cities "promote the differential regulation of populations who can be connected to or disconnected from global circuits of capital." Belfast is no different. Shtern and Bollens (2021: 962) note, "The primary approach to creating shared space in Belfast has been to focus not on the problematic sectarian neighborhoods, but on the regeneration of city center."

In the 1980s, artists began to settle in what was then known as the Northside, an area that had been neglected and disinvested by the city council throughout the Troubles, which had led to its decline. Capitalizing upon the allure of the non-sectarian artistic community that squatted in and utilized its derelict building as studios, galleries, and performance spaces, the Langside Corporation, a governmental organization, invested and encouraged creative industries to move into the area, rebranding it the Cathedral Quarter in 1998 (Grounds and Murtagh 2015). Belfast City Council projected that this "cultural reanimation" would revitalize the local economy (Nagle 2009: 332) and undertook "a strategic mapping project" that focused on the Cathedral Quarter as part of an overall plan in transforming Belfast into a tourist destination (Keenan 2013: 220). Large festivals like the Festival of Fools and Hit the North played a critical role in maintaining the "neutrality" of the area by promoting arts and culture independent of sectarian politics.

Neutrality is a key term guiding the implementation of "good relations" as outlined in Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act of the Good Friday Agreement. This section made it an "obligation" of all public authorities to place equality of opportunity and good relations "between persons of different religious belief,

political opinion or racial group" as the central component of both policy and its implementation (*Northern Ireland Act* 1998: Part VII, Section 75). This section of the GFA assumes that by regenerating certain areas of the city for its middle-classes and global elite, benefits will trickle down to its working-class neighborhoods, a failed economic policy that still defines many neoliberal rejuvenation projects. Instead, risky development interests benefit speculators, developers, the culture industry, and college students at the expense of more working-class concerns like affordable housing, steady employment, and needed social services. Building university housing and expensive lofts, for example, takes precedent over needed working-class housing.

We can see this faith in gentrification and avoidance of Belfast's sectarian past in an advertisement for Castlebrooke's Tribeca Belfast, a proposed area for "working and living" that will be "bringing together the old, the young, the brave and the curious" (Tribeca Belfast 2025). The highly contested and frequently revised plan for a 1.5 million square foot mixed-use development—encompassing the area bounded by Royal Avenue, Donegall Street, and Rosemary Street—includes a diverse array of small businesses, public houses, a park, and a combination of historic and derelict buildings.

The ad claims that Belfast desires a regenerated area where people can be "brought together," suggesting a needed healing in this divided city. But the differences being mediated are not socio-economic, ethno-nationalist, or religious, but one of only age and, seemingly, temperament. While suggesting the area will conjoin "different" people, it is really about avoidance. Communities are not being brought together but separated as middle-class individuals buy or rent an expensive flat in a neighborhood bubble where shopping and work prevail.

This ad exemplifies Bree Hocking's (2022:150-151) observation about Belfast that "discourses of community and reconciliation are mobilized to support discourses of globalization and consumption, two forces presumed by almost all official rhetoric to bring about economic prosperity." Street art, music, and other forms of public art play a central role for Belfast City Council in regenerating such spaces for tourism. In 2020, the Belfast City Council devised a new ten-year cultural strategy to create a cosmopolitan city highlighting its arts, which the Covid-19 pandemic temporarily halted. Undeterred, in 2022, the Council increased funding among the arts along with longer-term grants that run for two-year and four-year stints (though, more recently, arts funding has precipitously declined).

Hocking (2022: 7) observes, "The spread of cultural quarters, cultural tourism and the promotion of the so-called creative industries as a mean to wealth, jobs and regeneration are key components of the urban orthodoxy and the 'aestheticization of everyday life'" in Belfast. We see such an outlook advocated in the white paper, "A City Imagining," produced by Belfast City Council (2019). It claims that the

Council will "activate and repurpose derelict, neglected or underused space in imaginative ways." Although such areas lie throughout the entire city, the main areas being targeted are found within the city centre that caters mainly to tourists, developers, and white-collar workers.

Much faith is being placed in "the Hub," describing it as "a landmark signature experience in the heart of the city centre that speaks to the essence of this vibrant place." When it is built out, it will contain a large exhibition space, a film center, and, Belfast Stories, an interactive tourist experience. Currently, the Hub's space comprises a large, mostly abandoned lot surrounded by derelict buildings on the perimeter of North, Kent, and Union Streets and Royal Avenue. It serves as the main space for the Hit the North Street art festival.

Walling off the empty lot and future tourist center from Royal Avenue is a multicolored plywood wall that has "Belfast Stories" spelled on it interspersed with pieces of street art to deter it from being bombed and tagged with graffiti. The Hub provides a central location where street artists are regularly commissioned to produce work. But such opportunities, according to "A City Imagining," are merely a holding pattern that will eventually be deemed irrelevant as the Hub becomes "a major cultural attraction" that "will invite visitors to explore the many stories of the city and its people through an immersive, multi-gallery experience." Such tourism is promoted as being aligned with creating "an inclusive city" where "cultural participation" is seen "as a central part of active participation in civic society." The white paper assures readers that "complex and long-standing issues such as life inequalities require a multidimensional response, and we believe that creativity has a significant role in the ongoing transformation of Belfast." The vague language only indirectly gestures towards sectarian divides and the Troubles, which reveals how a post-colonial melancholia defines the very language city government employs that only indirectly references the troubled past in pursuit of more ideal futures.

Storytelling, then, becomes a main vehicle for such cultural participation. The white paper claims: "Our citizens, neighbourhoods and local communities are at the core of telling these stories." But post-colonial melancholia dictates that only some stories can be highlighted over others because not all lives and communities are considered equally worthy of representation (Butler 2004: 37-38). Such framing, according to Butler (2009: xix), "are the means through which social norms are relayed and made effective." Excised from view will be the Troubles and its origins in colonialism, which would force the state to reckon with the fallout from both. Structural constraints place Belfast City Council in a fraught position as it attempts to fund public art to foster "good relations" that neither disrupts the circuits of financial global capital or too directly evokes the traumas of the Troubles. Street art, with its pleasing aesthetic that highlights artists' skills

in painting complex, intricate, non-controversial subject matter, has been a key strategy for the Belfast City Council to maintain this delicate balance.

Street art has been accused as comprising a main mechanism of initiating gentrification into blighted neighborhoods. According to artist Lutz Henke (2014), in its worst iterations, street art and gentrification go hand-in-hand in destroying local artistic communities in a once vibrant area by reanimating creativity through commissioned consumer-friendly murals while dispossessing local artists through loss of work and high rents. While we don't associate Belfast with such a stark view, over the course of two weeks as participant observers in the Hit the North Festival, where we interviewed administrators, artists, politicians, and onlookers, we did see ways that this art festival ushers in and validates a gentrified outlook. Hit the North's block party is sponsored by Hennessy, the French cognac company (although they are no longer sponsors for the 2025 iteration), where people can walk and drink while observing a variety of artistic pieces from the cartoonish to the abstract as long as such artwork avoids any mention of Irish reunification, Brexit, or any other pressing socio-economic concerns.

During the festival, we interviewed a couple who were enjoyably watching French artist Nean create an intricate mural of a woman in a forest. The young Italian woman, who lived in one of the new apartment buildings overlooking Union Street while attending Ulster University, stated that the artwork and event was a clear antidote to the political murals in the other sections of the city. However, her partner, who was born and raised in West Belfast, disagreed and said the street art was "nice to look at" but had no effect on the overall peace process. This reinforces Hocking's (2022:171) observation that the government's official belief in the power of public art in striving for reconciliation jars against residents much more skeptical notion of its purpose. This interview, though anecdotal, offers valuable insight: the foreign woman living in a gentrifying area of Belfast views street art as contributing to the peace process, while the working-class local perceives this art as disconnected from any political resolution.

However, the physical manifestation of street art only tells part of the story. As Katherine Keenan (2022: 99) stresses, all public art belongs to wider social relations "wherein the networks and exchanges among the people connected by an image are much more important than any specific symbol represented therein." We witnessed this firsthand as we observed and interviewed Adam Turkington, the founder and principle organizer of the festival, and a number of local artists participating in Hit the North.

Figure 3. Nean creating Adrift mural during Hit The North Festival, Belfast, UK. 2023.

Turkington is a key figure in Belfast's art scene who cherishes and fosters community among artists. He not only established a large street art festival but also regularly assists mainly local artists with getting paid council projects like painting electrical boxes and beautifying gable walls. He also was central in establishing subsidized studio space for artists in places like Vault Artist Studios where he fostered a non-sectarian artistic community network. We visited The Vault in April 2023 when they were having a garage and art sale in order to prepare for their eventual eviction in a few months' time. Families with young children roamed through a large room and sifted through piles of clothes, electronics, art supplies, and other sundry items that occupied the main floor of the studio. A DJ spun records in the foyer as a passthrough of a wall served as a makeshift bar. Studios lined the four floors where the artists eagerly spoke to curious visitors who might be interested in buying some of their wares or at least showed an interest in their work. Although ostensibly selling their art to visitors, none of the artists seemed to be that concerned doing so. It was a casual, friendly atmosphere where they spoke at length with visitors and each other.

We talked with and informally interviewed various artists for around three hours. All of them appreciated the sense of community that Vault provided. Quite a few of the artists shared studios since many spaces were enormous. One artist on the first floor was looking after his two young daughters while talking about his and his wife's work to visitors. His wife was busy making paintings that were commissioned by the city council for the 25th anniversary celebration of the Good Friday Agreement.

The Vault serves as a certain corrective to scholars who mainly see the creative economy as introducing a younger generation of workers into individuated, casualized, non-unionized jobs which offers fewer social protections and safety nets while promoting an entrepreneurial outlook that equates art with commerce (McRobbie 2016: 99). The Vault reminds one of the residual practices of an earlier age where subsidized space was provided to artists because such work was seen as a public good for the community in general and created a sense of solidarity and community among the artists themselves. While some of the street artists' work may be used by City Council to help establish Belfast as an international tourist destination, local community is still being fostered through such artistic exchanges.

The street art scene, therefore, is punctuated with ambiguities. In one way, Turkington might seem the embodiment of the neoliberal creative entrepreneur who marshals his skills as a DJ and art promoter to build a career as project manager in the creative art sector. As Angela McRobie (2016: 43) notes, the creative economy has "professionalized, aestheticized, and institutionalized"

various subcultures like rave culture, graffiti, and street art to co-opt it into neoliberal practices that justify austerity measures and the gutting of workers protections. But during our multiple interviews and casual conversations with him, Turkington wrestled with his role and its relationship to neoliberalism and gentrification, underscoring the tensions involved in creating art within a wounded city in the haze of post-colonial melancholia.

In our first meeting (June 28, 2022), Turkington kept fretting over the function of street art in Belfast recognizing how its beautification of neighborhoods fed into gentrification that might either appropriate street art for the functions of capital and developers or simply chuck it as irrelevant. "Are we an agent of gentrification by sitting here [in Vault Studios]?," he rhetorically asks us. "I get the argument. I think all I can do is say, like, it's at the forefront of my mind all the time. But I can't then go just not do my art. What are you supposed to do? Are you just supposed to say, yeah, it [the neighborhood] looks like shit?"

As we attempt to ease the interview forward, Turkington keeps returning to the issue of gentrification. "We're not top-down gentrification," he asserts, which suggested that his form of gentrification shouldn't be conflated with that of some outside developer like Castlebrooke's Tribeca Belfast trying to simply capitalize on the value of a rundown section of the city. Instead, he is from a nearby suburb and genuinely wants to see the area improved. He provides roughly an equal amount of female and male artists to show their work at the Hit the North festival. He helped establish subsidized studios for artists and assists many of them with gaining regular paid public commissions. He has created another business, Daisy Chain, that connects artists with paid council projects and offers background research to the artists for projects that require some historical link between the artwork and the place in which it is located. Needless to say, such research shies away from anything related to Northern Ireland's colonial past. To indiscriminately associate Turkington with gentrifiers who only see the land and property as sources of profit is inaccurate and unfair.

As many urban studies scholars have shown, gentrifiers take many different forms and hold different relations to the neighborhoods they want to rejuvenate and the local city government they must negotiate. Researchers like Japonica Brown-Saracino (2004), Suleiman Osman (2011) and John Lennon (2022: 197-208) emphasize the preservationist impulse some gentrifiers embody who want to protect the communities from further commercialization and standardization. Turkington similarly wants to protect the artistic community that still defines Belfast even though the spaces that they can inhabit become increasingly precarious as finance capital invests in them or they remain blighted due to the shadows of the Troubles lingering over them. A salient example of this politically sensitive dynamic is the old Crumlin Road Courthouse, a site where

Irish Republicans were historically tried. Due to ongoing political sensitivities, the courthouse has remained derelict since 1998.

During our interview with Turkington, he works through his own tangled thoughts and ethical quandaries regarding the function of street art's relation to gentrification. "And capitalism is the problem, not the art, right?," he declares. "So it's basically people trying to flip shit and make money out of thin air just because they're invested in something that is worth more for some reason." Yet as Turkington is fully aware, street art is often deeply complicit with capital and gentrification.

Rafael Schacter (2015 167–168), a scholar specializing in graffiti and the global expansion of street art, contends that the phenomenon of "art-washing" in transitional neighborhoods functions similarly to a military vanguard. He asserts that street artists serve as an unwitting initial force that secures new territory ahead of an advancing wave of gentrification, identifying and displacing existing communities much like a vanguard locates and neutralizes adversaries. New York City, which many Belfast graffiti writers and Turkington himself champion as ground zero for the emergence of graffiti during the 1970s and inspiring their own work, provides a perfect example of how graffiti and the art scene in general abetted gentrification as the city pulled vital resources from working-class areas to decimate them and then sell them off to developers (see Moss 2017; Moskowitz 2017).

Exploring New York city in the 1980s, Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan (1984:104-05) argue, "In addition to the economic impact of artists and galleries, the art world functions ideologically to exploit the neighborhood for its bohemian or sensationalist connotations while deflecting attention away from underlying social, economic, and political processes." This description aptly describes what is happening in Belfast. The beauty of street art and Belfast as a cosmopolitan destination for tourists and businesses is celebrated, unbeleaguered by the trauma, sectarian politics, and poverty that gnaw at its edges from the working-class neighborhoods that encircle it. Although you don't have the onslaught and rapidity of gentrification within Belfast that you witness in many other cities, it's difficult not to conclude how the local art scene is feeding it at the expense of other, more pressing issues related to the Troubles and colonization that corporations and the British government find less attractive. But until Northern Ireland fully addresses its post-colonial melancholia and its settler-colonial origins, no amount of street art and wishful thinking can substantively improve the situation.

In the weekly street art tours led by Turkington and Ray Bonner throughout the gentrifying areas of Belfast, both the Troubles and gentrification are lightly touched upon. But an idealization about the power of art, in general, and street art, in particular, is championed. Bonner (as quoted in Connghaile 2023) asserts,

"It's not about where you're from or what community; it's just about showing up and taking part," where the past can be pushed aside by art's strength to change environments. Turkington (as quoted in Corr 2021) advocates, "Aesthetics are important in that regard and we need to have murals that can tell stories and things that connect us and make us feel like part of a civic collective." This is a nice sentiment. But how to translate such multicultural civic engagement from art within the tourist centers of the city to the more sectarian working-class neighborhoods that are struggling with a whole host of socio-economic issues remains the distinct challenge that no one holds the answer to.

Clearly, Turkington offers some vital assistance by providing subsidized studios and regular city commissions for many artists. But none of these efforts have much impact upon the most blighted and economically deprived neighborhoods. Art alone, of course, should not be responsible for such momentous tasks that multiple other government agencies should be pursuing in coming to terms with the city's and Norther Ireland's colonial legacies that the GFA only partially addressed. But, as we have highlighted in this paper, public art often is used by public officials as a convenient distraction from these other necessary forms of reconciliation and government support that need to take place, helping to create an "antihistory" that undergirds the "unstable edifice" of a fractured national identity and liminal space (Gilroy, 108, 106).

Francoisgotbuffed's use of David Bowie's song "Changes" in his Instagram post that we started the essay off with traces the movement from the paramilitary-centric UDA muralism to the "Joy" of street art. Read through a touristic gaze, though, what we have shown in this paper is how the change from the "old" to "new" Belfast is not about removing community boundaries but instead evading them. In present day Belfast, the ethno-nationalist trauma and tensions of the Troubles are certainly present but muted; there are no RPG attacks by British soldiers on Falls Road and the Shankill Butchers are only present in the stories of tour guides and locals. But the interface areas remain. IRA graffiti covers many walls in West Belfast. King Billy's portrait oversees Loyalist areas. The city centre bustles with activity and street art that distracts from focusing on Northern Ireland's troubled past. But the different strands of tourism located within the working-class and commercial districts of the city remain enshrouded in a pall of post-colonial melancholia that fails to address and mourn Northern Ireland's colonial legacy by increasingly embracing neoliberal practices that focus on tourism and the economy rather than accountability and the well-being of all the city's residents. Street art, regardless of its noble intentions, cannot independently resolve this crisis; however, it serves as a powerful medium for visualizing the psychological wounds and post-colonial melancholia that must be acknowledged and mourned.

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Endnotes

1 The authors would like to state that they equally participated in the research and writing of this article.

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