Symbolic landscapes:
Exploring what markings, murals and memorials reflect about interculturism on Belfast's Ormeau Road

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Abstract

This article explores what the symbolic landscapes in an area of Belfast reflect about the development of interculturism in the post-conflict city. It builds on previous research, focusing on the particular characteristics of South Belfast's Ormeau Road, containing communities defined as 'Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist', 'Catholic/Nationalist/Republican' and 'Mixed'. Secondary statistical data, montages of visual images, photo-elicitation and interview data are integrated to present an in-depth perspective on the current development of pluralism and interculturism in this one part of Northern Ireland. While the findings support the orthodox narrative about oppositional and contested identity in Northern Ireland, it is also concluded that many other meanings are silenced, hiding levels of unaddressed complexity.

Keywords: Symbolic landscapes, post-conflict, contested identity, interculturism, pluralism, Third Space.

Introduction

Belfast is a city characterised by the construction of symbolic landscapes (Bryan, 2015) which represent a way of seeing and a way for people to represent their identity and relationships to themselves, to others and to the world (Cosgrove, 1998).

Generally researchers examining these landscapes have focused on the traditional binary cleavages and few have focused on the possible impact of changes in migration patterns and the fact that, since 1998, net emigration has been replaced by net immigration. Gilligan et al. explored whether this has brought greater levels of pluralism to the 'new' Northern Ireland and found there were factors which worked for and against pluralism; they also noted a need to focus on the extent and nature of the community divide and to include exploring attitudes towards ethnic minorities and immigrants (Gilligan et al., 2011). The present study focuses on what the symbolic landscapes reflect about these issues.

Graham notes that the iconography of demarcated territories often reflects a resistance to adulteration and refers to Glover's argument (Glover, 1999 cited in Graham, 2004) that we need to become aware of why and how people construct the depicted narratives if we are to "escape from ethnic absolutism" (Graham, 2004: 499). Glover argues people need to grasp the hows and whys, the roots of their narratives, and that reflexive understanding of one's own and the other's culture is necessary for the development of interculturism.

Shirlow and Murtagh found a lack of capacity for an interculturalist world view, and stressed the importance of developing interpretations of Belfast inhabitants' lack of capacity to move beyond subjective cultural categorisations of belonging and uphold pluralist approaches (Shirlow and Murtagh, 2006)

This study focuses on peacebuilding as a process of transformation with the objective of achieving a positive peace which extends the concept of peace beyond the absence of violence and includes addressing underpinning structural and cultural violence too (Galtung, 1969). In the creation of a pluralist society characterised by positive coexistence, the extent of the development of interculturism may be seen as an evaluative indicator, reflecting ethno-national divisions and the integration of 'others', those who are not defined by the binary ethno-national cleavages.

Research objectives and research design

The research seeks to evaluate what markings, murals and memorials, that is the symbolic landscape, reflect about the development of interculturism in one area of Belfast, 20 years into the Peace Process.

To explore the question a literature review was carried out and a number of objectives were established. Different methodologies were used to collect three datasets and the results were then analysed. The research objectives and the corresponding methodologies are set out in the panel below:

Research objective	Methodology
To describe and compare the demographic makeup of three geographical areas – Donegall Pass, Lower Ormeau and Ballynafeigh	*Presentation of comparative tables based on secondary quantitative data from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA)*
To produce images of murals, memorials, graffiti, flags, markings and symbols and describe them	*Researcher-generated photographic images, description of manifest content*
To explore what the images may reflect about the geographical areas and interculturism	*Discussion of the findings*
To explore community workers' response to the markings	*Semi-structured interviews incorporating photo-elicitation*
Report findings from community workers' interviews	*Thematic analysis of the interviews using QDA Miner Lite software*
To discuss and critically analyse the data to evaluate what cultural expression and the creation of symbolic landscapes reflect about the development of pluralism and interculturism and interrogate the emergent narratives	

Literature review

Most of the literature notes that the legacy of segregation between the main communities in Northern Ireland is a polarised society with alienation of the one from the other (Byrne et al., 2006), although Boal observed that middle class areas were less ethnically segregated than working class ones (Boal, 1984).

There is little evidence that attitudes to mixed religion marriage, integrated schooling and residential segregation have changed in the past 20 years (Hayes and McAllister, 2009, cited in Lowe and Muldoon, 2014), although a case study of Ballynafeigh, a "mixed" area, suggested that class as a group identifier had more importance than traditional factors and had a positive impact in the development of more pluralistic attitudes (Murtagh and Carmichael, 2005).

Byrne et al. (2006) explored what constitutes a mixed area and what sustained a sense of sharing and mixing. They found that integration is not clearly defined by residents, though mixing was categorised broadly as informal and integration as formal. They identified factors supporting mixing and integration, such as community participation and the role of community groups or residents' associations. For example, they identified the positive role of the Ballynafeigh Community Development Association and the Christian Church Fellowship in resolving contestations in the local community by virtue of knowing all the actors in the area.

Another factor they identified which supported mixing and integration was the range of accommodation and environmental factors, such as the presence of shops, pubs and leisure facilities, which facilitated complex interactions. Their study recorded changing demographics, with an increase in Catholics, ethnic minorities and migrants in the Ballynafeigh area. This lends some credence to Boal's thesis that many mixed areas could be characterised as areas in transition (Boal 1984).

Segregation, in relation to Northern Ireland, is generally construed in terms of the majority binary identities of Catholic/Nationalist/Republican and Protestant/Unionist /Loyalist but another dimension which has been less studied is the segregation/integration of ethnic minorities. These minorities may have to negotiate the tensions between the majority communities — tensions which may be revealed in territorial contests about place-identity and concern about changes or perceived changes in politico-cultural place-identity (Chan, 2006). Further, the polarised identity landscape makes the incorporation of "others" very difficult, as their identities cannot be easily reconciled to the dominant cleavages (Gupta, 2015).

There has been a growth of interface areas, where segregated residential areas meet, since the Belfast Agreement in 1998 (Shirlow, 2003). This is particularly true in the North and West of the City. The research shows that various narratives underpin the reproduction of ethnic enclaves. These narratives explain, create and maintain cultural and political identity and can be interpreted through the spatialisation of fear, threat and attack, and the devices that create and maintain them. These are in turn reflected in the symbolism and rituals of contestation (Cairns and Derby, 1998; Shirlow and Murtagh, 2006; Bryan, 2015).

Segregated areas, especially working-class areas, are often identified by visible symbolic expressions of group identity. These can be understood through an analysis of the complex relationships between the communities (Shirlow and Murtagh, 2006).

Symbolic landscapes and forms of contestation

The cultural landscape has been identified as a space for struggles of identity, allegiance and power (Graham and Whelan, 2007; McDowell, 2008). Symbolic landscapes reflect this, being spaces where the discourses are embodied (Graham, 1998).

Flags are one manifestation of culture in the symbolic landscape. McCartney and Bryson note that not only are flags territorial markers, but they also represent shared community, history and values (McCartney and Bryson, 1994). They can have added complexity because they can mean different things to different people (Brown and McGinty, 2003). Flags seem to be more tied to Unionist cultural expression. The Institute of Ireland Studies monitored flag flying from 2006 to 2010, finding a ratio of Unionist to Nationalist flags of 13-1 (Bryan, 2015).

Murals are probably the most visible and remarked-on manifestations of culture and identity in the symbolic landscape. Rolston (2012) argues that the roots and range of murals differ between the two main communities, Unionist mural traditions going back about over a 100 years to the 12th of July commemorations and Republicans' to the hunger strikes of 1980-1981. These developed to include the armed struggle, with hooded men and weapons and portrayals of mythological characters and events. They reflected changes such as the move towards engagement with electoral politics, incidents of police and army repression, and expressing solidarity with other conflicts.

Rolston notes that post peace process, Republicans voluntarily moved away from militaristic murals, except as memorials, while for Loyalists, a government-sponsored re-imaging programme negotiated the removal of some of this symbolism (Rolston, 2012). This programme was extended to all communities in light of the politics of equality.

Remembering the Troubles' dead, aspects of history such as the First and Second World Wars, the Famine and 1916 are appropriated to lend legitimacy to intergroup narratives in the symbolic landscape. In both communities, it is argued that memorialisations are politicised processes which parties use to support intergroup identity and to demarcate boundaries of exclusion and inclusion which undermine efforts to move to a shared future (Switzer and McDowell, 2009).

Cultural expression also includes language and one of the features of the symbolic landscape is the use of the Irish language. O'Reilly reports a strong link

between politics, culture and affiliation to the Irish language which places Irish in the Nationalist cultural package and denotes membership of the Catholic community (O'Reilly, 2016).

Bradshaw (2016) describes a trajectory of colonial nationalism, through political nationalism to cultural nationalism from the 17th to the 20th centuries. He says that the twin commands of establishing an independent republic and severing the English connection defined the nationalist project. This was underpinned by persistent Catholic sectarianism moulded by the history of oppression, and by the identification of Protestants and Dissenters with Unionism and as British.

Culture ''designates a way of looking at the world that requires an account of how symbols operate in practice, why meanings generate action, and why actions produce meanings when they do'' (Weedon and Jordan, 2012, p720). She argues that examining meaning-making practices helps us understand how particular meanings become authoritative. Developing understanding of the complexity also needs to take into account the effects of external factors like institutional arrangements, strategic interests and power or dominance structures.

Research methodology

The neighbourhoods were chosen because of their perceived different orientations in relation to ethnicity, identity, religion and class and economic status. Donegall Pass was perceived as Protestant/ Unionist/Loyalist, Lower Ormeau as Catholic/Nationalist/Republican and Ballynafeigh as 'Mixed' in all of these categories.

A multi-strategy, mixed method research design combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies was used. Three data sets were gathered and analysed to address the research question. Neighbourhood profiles were compiled using secondary quantitative data from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), based on Small Output Areas (SOAs). Photographic images and photomontages were then generated and their manifest content described and

semi-structured interviews incorporating photo-elicitation were conducted with six community development workers.

The Ballynafeigh area is, for statistical purposes, divided into 3 Small Output Areas (SOAs) (B1, B2, B3) by NISRA while Donegal Pass (DP) and Lower Ormeau (LO) are each represented by a single SOA. The reporting and analysis followed this division. The qualitative data sets were analysed using a thematic approach, and coded using QDA Miner Lite software.

Demographic and socio-economic context

Table 1   Population

Area (SOA)	B1	B2	B3	DP	LO
Total 2016	1764	1947	2200	2845	2456
Increase 2006-2016	71 (4%)	70 (4%)	341 (18%)	540 (23%)	653 (36%)
Male	888 (50%)	985 (51%)	1200 (55%)	1507 (53%)	1241 (51%)
Female	877 (50%)	962 (49%)	1000 (45%)	1338 (47%)	1215 (49%)
Age 0-15	308	314	325	446	543
Age 16-39	719	892	1151	1255	1141
Age 40-64	536	608	550	780	607
Age 65+	201	134	174	364	164

Source: Population Estimates 2016, published June 2017

Table 2   Accommodation

Tenure	B1	B2	B3	DP	LO
Owner occupied (%)	48.3	52.6	29.1	21.7	24.2
Rented (%)	49.8	44.8	67.9	72.3	73.2
Owned outright (%)	18.5	18.3	12.4	8.6	10.5
Households with single person +65 (%)	7.9	7.3	8.8	13.9	6.3
Lone parent households with dependent children	6.8	6.1	9.4	9.0	18.8

Source: Census 2011

Deprivation

There are significant differences between the areas in their ranking on the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measures 2017. These provide information on seven types of deprivation and an overall measure of multiple deprivation for SOAs. The 890 SOAs are ordered from most deprived (rank 1) to least deprived (rank 890). Of the five SOAs, B1 ranked 579th, B2 ranked 652nd whereas LO was in the bottom 100, DP in the bottom 200 and B3 in the bottom 300. See Table 3.

Table 3   Deprivation ranking

Area	B1	B2	B3	DP	LO
Multiple deprivation measure	579	652	270	146	79

Source: Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measures 2017 for 890 SOAs

The socio economic profiles indicate that B1 and B2 are more affluent, they have much higher owner occupied housing, more economically active people and are considerably less deprived across all measures. SOAs B3, DP and LO are ranked amongst the third most deprived areas in Northern Ireland, and indicators of poverty such as over-65 and lone parent households (DP and LO) support this finding. However, the picture is not straightforward with, for example, the level of those with a degree or higher qualification in B3 nearly 40 percent closer to the statistics for B1 and B2, while nearly 25 percent of the population is economically inactive.

Ethno-national identity is reflected in affiliation to religion and national identity in Northern Ireland. The data indicates that there is a majority Catholic/Nationalist population in all the areas of the study, except for Donegal Pass where 49.8 percent identifies as Protestant and 53.5 percent claim a British national identity. What is perhaps more interesting is that over a quarter of the area's population identified as Northern Irish, over 20 percent claimed Irish affiliation in all SOAs, including Donegall Pass which is a majority Protestant area, and over 20 percent indicated affiliation to British identity in Lower Ormeau, 77 percent of whose population are Catholic.

Ethnic and ethno-national identity and culture

Table 4   Ethnicity, identity, language and religion (percentages)

Area	B1	B2	B3	DP	LO
White	93.6	93.8	88.8	87.1	93.9
Catholic	66.6	57.1	44.6	32.9	76.5
Protestant	21.2	27.4	31.9	49.8	13.6
Other or none	12.2	15.5	23.6	17.4	9.9
British identity	28.8	29.1	37.2	53.5	22.3
Irish identity	41.5	36.7	31.4	21.9	48.2
Northern Irish	29.6	31.3	27.4	22.8	26.6
Speaks some Irish	22.0	17.4	14.7	9.2	22.3
Speaks some Ulster-Scots	6.1	5.5	5.3	5.4	3.4
English not first language	8.8	11.0	13.1	12.7	8.4

Source: Census 2011. Other or none calculated here as 100% less percentage Catholic or Protestant

The comparative statistics indicate that all the areas are mixed, with more than 10 percent belonging to the non-majoritarian community, i.e. identifying as neither Protestant nor Catholic, while popular perception is that both Donegal Pass and Lower Ormeau are segregated along the traditional cleavages. However, the statistics do not provide information about all minority ethnic groups, for example those from Southtern and Eastern European Union states.

Irish and Ulster Scots are cultural significators for the Nationalist and Unionist communities. Irish speakers cross apparent class distinctions, with almost the same percentage (around 22 percent speaking it in B1 and LO. A much smaller percentage speak some Ulster Scots, which is a more recent addition to the symbolic landscape.
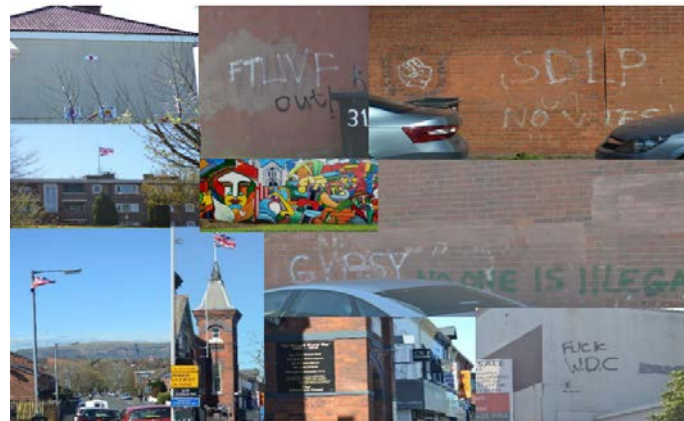
Symbolic landscapes

Photo montage Donegall Pass   Photo montage Lower
Ormeau

Photo montage Ballynafeigh

The symbolic landscapes in the three areas appear to reflect at least four
divergent narratives. These can be summarised as reflecting single ethno-national
identity and cultural narratives associated with one of the majoritarian
communities. These narratives all focus on the impact which the conflict, has had
on their community. The absence of symbolic references which have meaning
outside of the particular community makes it difficult for non-Northern Irish ethnic
groups to relate to or understand the narrative proffered.

The inhabitants of the Donegall Pass and Lower Ormeau areas display a rich
cultural symbolism, which is linked to their single ethno-national identity and
culture in their areas. The landscapes in these two areas also reflect the impact of
the Troubles, through paramilitary references and memorials to those who were
killed or murdered. This is also referenced in Ballynafeigh 3 through the

paramilitary symbolism and the "dual use" (Kilpatrick, Belfast Telegraph, 2014) memorial in Annadale Flats[1].

The apparent threat to outsiders indicated by the "Locals Only" graffiti in Donegal Pass and the "Gypsy" and "No-one is illegal" in Ballynafeigh 3 is the only evidence of the ethnic minority presence.

The symbolism in Ballynafeigh 3, particularly the flying of the union and loyalist paramilitary flags is also counter to the information in the quantitative data, that this is an area with a majority Catholic/Nationalist population.

In two areas, Ballynafeigh 1 and Ballynafeigh 2, there are no symbolic displays of cultural, ethno-national or ethnic differences.

Interviews

While the interviewees represent a small sample and a particular perspective, all were agreed that demographic changes over recent years, with the increased presence of minority ethnicities in their communities, was a big issue although in one area, Donegall Pass, there has been a Chinese ethnic minority presence since the 1960s.

While they were disposed towards inclusiveness, the community workers interviewed were wary of the impact on established communities, particularly around the distribution of resources:

> "there is a balance that has to be struck and it can become as if it's a
> sectarian area. When I spoke to the people in Donegall Pass at the time it
> had got to the stage where the most recent 14 house allocations that were
> done in Donegall Pass were all done to ethnic minorities and it started
> causing discontent" (1_2)

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[1] Plaques to local loyalist paramilitaries are brought out and placed at the site of the First World War memorial, (funded by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive) at specific times of the year and then removed.

The interviewees agreed that perceptions around resource distribution were part of a tendency by locals to problematise the presence of non-Northern Irish ethnic groups but they also acknowledged the role which a lack of integration, sometimes due to self-segregation, racism, but also due to issues around the distribution of power within the community and the exacerbation of the community's sense of threat, particularly in loyalist areas:

> "*while there's still intimidation for sectarian reasons..., now race is a big issue*" (1_6) and

> "*because we can't control who's going to live in these houses but too ya have to understand that this community feels under siege at times*" (1_1)

The interviews indicated that community workers were positive about the work being done in their communities, reflecting that Donegal Pass's Community Garden, the opening of the Shaftesbury Recreation Centre in the Lower Ormeau outside 'normal' hours to facilitate Romanians' leisure activity, the use of the Ballynafeigh Community House by the 'new' churches to hold their services, the Chinese Welfare Association's programme 'shop and cook', where different cultures tried each other's food, the re-imaging of St Patrick's Day as a multi-cultural event. These were examples of initiatives that were building shared space and developing intercultural understandings.

For the interviewees, the symbolic landscapes do not reflect the views of many in the community but their alternative perspectives were often silenced, as were those from ethnic minorities.

The findings reflect that there are still unresolved issues from the Troubles and around cultural symbolism and identity which the interviewees felt were exacerbated by political instability and the uncertainty around Brexit. Personal loss and grief, the failure of reconciliation and a search for truth were themes expressed by interviews from all community backgrounds.

Discussion

The comparison of the quantitative statistics presents an interesting picture of the overall area profile. Not only does Ballynafeigh appear to qualify for its 'mixed' designation, and it appears that it does so in terms of class as well as ethnicity, religion, national and cultural affiliation, but this designation also appears to be applicable to the other SOAs in this study. This picture is complex and does not fit easily within the parameters of the dominant cleavages and narratives.

Although the areas other than DP have a majority Catholic population, the data does not reflect a homogenous ethno-national identity in any area, with LO being the closest to a single identity community and figures indicating a correlation between religion and national identity in DP. Mitchell and Todd (2007) reported radical shifts after the Belfast Agreement in the content of identity which was based on an interplay of interest and identity. The present study shows perhaps a wider application of their finding, suggesting that, despite the strong cleavage that the polarised political landscape indicates, there is movement in identification.

More than one in four people designated themselves as Northern Irish. This concurs with the findings in the literature which hold that, since the Peace Process, increasing numbers of people are affiliating themselves to this identity (Hayes and McAllister, 2009; Muldoon et al., 2007). While this could reflect a move towards a shared intercultural identity and improvement in intergroup relations (although people could designate more than one national identity in the Census), Lowe and Muldoon (2014) found that while it indicates more positive social attitudes between communities, this is not so for political attitudes. Bryan (2015) argues that a transformative process will produce alternative political manifestations; on this thesis, the absence of new political manifestations would therefore seem to indicate a lack of transformation.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore what the symbolic landscape tells us about the development of interculturism in post-conflict Belfast. This exploration showed that the orthodox narrative about identity and culture in Northern Ireland is expressed in the symbolic landscapes and that these are oppositional and contested.

However, these cultural expressions do not reflect the full picture and many other meanings are silenced. Giving a voice to diversity is an important step in post-conflict society towards building positive peace and developing a Third Space characterised by pluralism. The present study suggests that further research with those who are not overtly represented in the symbolic landscape, and on the narratives which underpin their identity and allegiances, would give them voice and be a valuable contribution to these ends.

The study found that, overall, the exploration of South Belfast's symbolic landscape indicates that interculturism does not appear to have developed in the post-conflict society, but that less obvious things are happening which reflect changing attitudes. While there are specific issues around racism and sectarianism and in communities' capacity to accept "an-Other" (Soja, 1996), there is evidence of a practically-orientated pluralism that includes ethnic minorities. This is reflected in the community initiatives which were described above.

The comparative analysis of the quantitative statistics presents an interesting picture of the complexity of the overall profile which is supported by the qualitative data. Although Protestant/ Unionist/Loyalist v Catholic/Nationalist/Republican contestations reflect apparently oppositional narratives of the struggles of identity, allegiance and power, the study concludes that these contestations have similar threads which are woven together to construct parallel stories of identification, interactive processes underpinned by history, memory, and personal hurt. The stories are complex and are a kind of juxtaposition of interpretations of history and memory that are not as removed

from each other as the meanings that their creators seek to give them and want to impress on 'outsiders'. The analysis of the symbolic landscapes revealed the oppositional but closely linked narratives of the respective single identity categorisations which appear to have similarly rooted identity constructions.

The areas chosen for the study could together be viewed in terms of Foucault's conception of a heterotopia: although they are not a contained space or utopian, they appear to represent something like a "counter site" (Foucault, 2008). This picture does not easily fit within the dominant cleavages and understandings of Northern Irish society in that it does not reflect a homogenous ethno-national identity. Instead it shows a significant and growing multi-ethnic representation in the population as well as a mixed class profile apparently sharing space.

This could possibly be explored further by practitioners to build on existing dialogues. Targeted discourse programmes could be developed, not focused on what and who, but on why and how the narratives produce, maintain and reflect identity and culture and, for example, designed to challenge cognitive illusions, using forms of agonistic dialogue based on a heuristic model of engagement. This is an area of practical work worth pursuing.

Perhaps a metaphor for positive peace is that of a healthy couple relationship: both maintain their individual identity and culture yet create the third space of their coupledom which necessitates a negotiation at levels beyond the obvious.

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