

'NOT SO MUCH ABOUT BELFAST, AS *OF* BELFAST': LESSONS FOR THE DISCOURSE OF PUBLIC HISTORY FROM THE APPROACH OF POST-CONFLICT BELFAST POETRY

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Abstract

*But as the charred beams hissed and flicked I glimpsed a map of Belfast In the ruins:
obliterated streets, the faint impression of a key.*

– Ciaran Carson, *The Irish for No*, 'Smithfield Market,' ll. 7-8.

The legacy of the Belfast Agreement is neither simple nor static: a peace at once realised yet still in progress, as recent events continue to illustrate the liminal nature of the city and its peace. Commemorative efforts in Northern Ireland have focused on the key variations of sharing inherent to the peace process – a 'shared space' and the 'shared future' – but rarely seek to interrogate or challenge collective identities. This paper considers how one might read a poem like a museum. I argue that both represent contact zones through which genuine cross-community cultural exchange is possible across the liminal, poetic space at the heart of the heritage of post-conflict Belfast.

KEYWORDS: *poetry, Belfast, public history, commemoration*

Introduction

A public historian may not appear, at first glance, a likely candidate to examine contemporary Belfast poetry and its relevance to the peace process. There are, however, crucial similarities between how one might *read* a museum or a poem; they are both, after all, forms of 'contact zones' within which perspectives 'enter into dialogic exchanges that are not subordinated to a controlling point of view.' (Clifford 1997; Bennett 2006; 279) Both the curator and the poet distil a subject by utilising relevant artifacts to present a work representative of a whole, the latter through metaphor and the former through material objects. I am playfully proposing that a reading of changes in poetry written about Belfast since 1998 may offer a novel approach to the peace process and representations of its history. The legacy of the Belfast Agreement is neither simple nor static and the recent restoration of power-sharing at Stormont is illustrative of the liminal nature of the peace process – a peace at once realised yet still in progress – and the city itself. I will argue in this paper, through a selection of readings, that contemporary Belfast poetry, like a museum or heritage site, represents a contact zone through which genuine loyalist/nationalist cultural exchange, within the liminal space of the post-conflict city, furthers the peace process.

Space, especially public space, plays a critical role in the peace building process; competing loyalist/nationalist paramilitaries clearly demark their spaces of influence through depictions on Belfast's gables. Post-Agreement, the progression of peace process discourse developed the language of the 'shared future', which, in part, aims to enable all communities to collectively partake in a 'shared society' and 'shared spaces' as part of the post-conflict city (for example, OFMDFM 2005). These variations on 'sharing' exist also in the field of contemporary Irish public history – these can be squared away within our conceptualisation of 'collective identities' – and are neatly exemplified by points three and five of the Community Relations Council's 'Decade Principles for Remembering in Public Space' (CRC 2017).

Shared space is that in which communities can partake in an efficient and equal cultural exchange, openly problematising and scrutinising collective identity and memory (Komarova 2008). Identity, particularly collective identities contextualised and reinforced within a community, can be defined as either contingent or categorical – the goal of those in the peace process is to foster the former. Categorical identities are essentialist; they rely on fixed perceived preconceptions and are closed to criticism. Contingent identities are open to information and study from the outside, they adapt to feedback and are self-critical (Komarova 2008). An approach that mixes these concepts of space and identity provides the contextual nexus of an 'inclusive and accepting society' and actively problematises and questions meaning and interpretation of identity. Contemporary Belfast poetry, by its literary nature, provides a novel framework to observe approaches to shared spaces. The textual structures and practicalities of the post-agreement period neglect the critical role that art may play within the wider peace process. Poetic meditations on the post-conflict city may offer an antidote to the economics and legalism of the peace process by providing new foundational texts exploring the shared space of a peaceful Northern Ireland.

To this purpose, I propose the examination of a selection of poets that, I argue, are representative of a geospatial ceasefire generation, rather than a temporal one. Grouped together by the core subject of Belfast, each of these poets has followed a shift observed in the later writing of Ciaran Carson. Comparing Carson's early Belfast-centric work to his similar later work reveals a profound change in form and tone, a change that he recognised and was not prevalent in his own contemporaries (Kennedy-Andrews 2009). Carson's writing transforms from comprehending Belfast as a setting of individual reflection to a vast liminal cityscape in which identity, memory, and history co-exist to promote interrogation and dialogue. This change in Carson was followed by a number of younger, ceasefire generation poets who took his influence in their own direction; among these I will focus on a selection of pieces from Sinead Morrissey, Alan Gillis, and Leonita Flynn.

Ciaran Carson

Carson's poetry in *Breaking News* represents that clear change in his writing style;

embracing and, in turn, forging shared space and contingent identity. Carson's earlier poetry obsesses with observed and mapped spaces, categorical lists and the interrogation of the individual self. He identifies and presents (un)known spaces within the cityscape, take, for example, in 'Smithfield Market':

But as the charred beams hissed and flickered I glimpsed a map of Belfast
In the ruins: obliterated streets, the faint impression of a key.
Something many-toothed, elaborate, stirred briefly in the labyrinth. (2008, ll. 7–9)

Through the navigation of this map, a representation of physical space, Carson meditates on his self. Consider the 'fusillade of question marks' in 'Belfast Confetti':

'Why can't I escape?
... My name? Where am I coming from? Where am I going?' (2008, ll. 7–9).

He was familiar with the contested spaces of Belfast and his early works use reference and allusion to them as fragments of the whole poet, marking points to guide a reader like the fragmented narrative presented by physical objects in a museum.

Carson's later work, however, takes the presentation of these elements of collective identity in a new direction. Fragmentation and representation take on a literal meaning wherein his poetry metaphorically reduces the city to its constituent elements and presents the gaps between them from which meaning may be read. Unlike the wordy lines of 'Belfast Confetti' there is space found throughout the poems of *Breaking News*. 'News', for example, never has more than three words to a line:

'alarms
shrill

lights
flash

as dust
clears

above
the paper
shop

The Belfast Telegraph
reads
 fast rap'

(Carson 2008)

The language and structure pare back elements of description and focus on the representation of Belfast's liminality. The post-conflict city exist in a space where the activity – 'alarms' and 'sirens' – of the Troubles exists at the same time as the peace, 'as dust / clears.' Carson's late, minimalist approach clearly stepped in a poststructuralist direction, inviting readers to interpret meaning through the expression and exchange of their own and other ideas.

Let us consider then, as a case study Carson's poem simply entitled 'Belfast' from *Breaking News*. In 27 words he creates a fully realised contact zone, a shared space within which both communities are represented in a manner which allows for exchange and scrutiny. Carson depicts the city through a short series of seemingly simple, counterposed images:

'east

beyond the yellow
shipyard cranes

a blackbird whistles
in a whin bush

west

beside the motorway
a black taxi

rusts in a field
of blue thistles'

Each turn of phrase represents more than its whole by contextualisation, through metonym or, more poetically, kenning, but can still be summarised into binaries: beyond/beside, yellow cranes/black taxis, blue thistles/blackbirds, east/west. Carson's minimalist selection directly engages with the liminality of place and identity in the post-conflict city. These static images (there are only two verbs in the poem) manage to convey meaning to the collective memory and identity of Belfast. From the deep past, the Irish Gaelic tradition of the blackbird from 'The Blackbird of Belfast Lough' and the 'blue thistles' of Scottish origin derived from the Ulster Plantation, to the present day cranes of Harland and Wolff associated with East Belfast and compared with the black taxis of West Belfast and the Falls. Rather than explicitly referencing the loyalist/nationalist divide Carson draws this iconography from the depths of collective identity, presenting their meaning to the reader in a series of narrative steps like archival objects in a museum. They are not opposed but interwoven, offering ideas, reflections, counterpoints and dialogue in a shared space.

Sinead Morrissey

Sinead Morrissey reflects the rapid, post-Agreement redevelopment of Belfast which sanitised its sectarian past and promoted 'neutral' narratives. This process of 'Titanicisation' has been, on its capitalist surface, a success; ever increasing investment and tourism pays tribute to the popularity of the story of the Titanic city (Heidemann 2016, 2). Conversely, it perverts the contact zone turning Belfast's past into a mythical, antebellum golden age. Morrissey's writing is deeply critical of the role that public forces pursue in guiding the city towards consumerism at the expense of reconciliation. In 'Tourism,' she explores how commercially driven changes deeply pervert the shared space. A new influx of visitors to the city could fulfil the Agreement's 'manufactured prophecy of spring' (2002, l. 5), but they are, literally, interested in seeing '... the festering gap in the shipyard / the Titanic made when it sank' (2002, ll. 17–18). From which Morrissey draws parallels between the ships and its souls, and Belfast and its citizens. Belfast is a 'splintered city' whose 'talent for holes that are bigger / then the things themselves' and is part of 'our off-beat, headstrong, suicidal charm.' (2002, ll. 13, 19–20, 25) Morrissey characterises the Titanic's relationship with the city as metonymic, the attributes of the tragedy stand in for Belfast.

In the poem 'Belfast', Morrissey foregrounds the presence of history in the shared space of the contemporary city. Morrissey puts the blame for the neutralisation of post-Agreement Belfast at the pedestal of the British dedicated to their capitalist 'Third Way'. (Kelly 2008, 548). Reaching across the contact zone is Belfast's past:

'Victoria Regina steering the ship of the City Hall
in this the first and last of her intense provinces.' (2002, 2–3)

There had been three suspensions of devolution before 2002 lasting from a few hours to a couple of months – and in October 2002 a five-year suspension would commence – so the province of Northern Ireland kept returning to and leaving direct rule under Westminster. This new city is strange and unfamiliar to Morrissey. She illustrates this through the imagery of homelessness (the 'corners I have slept in' (2002, l. 15)). Moreover, she emphasises climactic change through climatic imagery and metaphor:

'... the city is making money
on a weather mangled Tuesday.

While the house of the Transport Workers' Union
fights the weight of the sky and manages
to stay up. ...' (2002, ll. 7–10)

Belfast's past, the history of labourers, industry, and class hierarchy is figuratively faced with collapse and would increasingly disappear through the process of 'geopolitical eclipse' which subsequently gave way to Titanicisation. Morrissey establishes post-

Agreement Belfast as a liminal space between old and new economies; between the more nationalist, unionised past (that of James Connolly and Jim Larkin) and the new British way.

Leontia Flynn

In her poetry Leontia Flynn unveils a vision not merely of Belfast but of the city and the peace itself. It is both the topic and setting, the shared space for the assessment of the meaning of identities in a post-conflict city. In 'Belfast', for example, Flynn foregrounds this intention clearly:

'The sky is a washed-out theatre backcloth
Belfast is finished and Belfast is under construction' (2008, ll. 1–5).

Within both she addresses the process of urban-renewal be that construction — 'green sails of ... scaffolding' — or change through the development 'of arcades, mock-colonnades, church-spires and tapas bars' (2008, ll. 3–9) and expresses frustration, 'harsh attempts at buyable beauty?' (2008, l. 10). This is the frustration extant in the results of Titanicising the city, of changing Belfast to suit the outsider rather than question the problems inherent in the city. Consider this passage from 'Leaving Belfast':

'... you are leaving Belfast
to its own devices; it will rise or fall,
it will bury its own past, it will paper over the cracks
with car parks and luxury flats, it will make itself new - or perhaps
become the place it seemed before you lived here.' (2008, ll. 10–14)

This is the liminality of Belfast; fluidity which is both the old and the new. The process of Titanicising the city will only, metaphorically, 'paper over the cracks' (2008, l. 12) and if left unchecked it will only bury Belfast's past. From a shared space follows a shared future so, within her poetry, Flynn shifts gear from depicting the post-Agreement city to creating a shared space for reflection and critical thinking on collective memory and contingent identity.

The incongruities of the liminal space of post-Agreement Belfast, identities collide for Flynn in 'Belfast' as 'A match at Windsor Park has fallen in Gay Pride week.' (2008, l. 13) The lingering legacy of threat present in the post-conflict city is alluded to by her observation of music coming from two homes on the one street. The first plays 'We are the Billy Boys' an anthem of a number of generally Protestant football clubs, and while Flynn does not quote the lyrics of this song those aware of it will recognise that these include 'We're up to our knees in Fenian blood. / Surrender or you'll die.' While from the second home she can hear Patsy Cline's cover of Crazy:

'I'm crazy for trying
And crazy for crying
And I'm crazy for loving you.' (1961)

The inter-community violence of the Troubles lingers in the collective identities of the post-conflict city. Each song is a separate text, an object, pulled from Belfast's past and presented to express the narrative. Reading just beneath the surface, a quaint cross-community moment of two celebratory events (a football match and Pride) is laden with menace; the 'four doors' (2008, 16) between a metaphor for the liminal and shared space that post-Agreement Belfast occupies. It is also a shared space within which the reader may scrutinise the concept of the pre-Agreement Belfast. Flynn suggests that the present socially occurring shared space is more natural than the one constructed by the efforts of the city's elite:

'And gathering in the city's handful of bars,
not sunk into darkness or swathed in beige leatherette
men are talking about Walter Benjamin, and about 'Grand Narratives' which they seek to 'fracture' and interrogate' (2008, ll. 17–20).

It is ironic that, in the 'here and now' of the piece, it is the very academics that Flynn reflexively reads that analyse her now. The German philosopher Walter Benjamin is often cited as a thinker associated with discourse on the transitional nature of art (Kelly 2003, 549, 552). Problematizing identity, however, is not intended to be a comfortable process. The reader, whether a football supporter of the Shankill or an academic at Queen's University, must recognise that their own identity is contingent on preconception and myth. Flynn's 'Belfast' sets the city as a stage, a shared space, upon which her audience may think critically about their own identity.

Alan Gillis

What may pass for irreverence in the work of Alan Gillis hides the depth of his intimate familiarity with Belfast's 'bulletproof knickers' ('To Belfast, 2004, l. 1) Beneath his sardonic tone and flippant turns, he calls into question the problematic qualities of old identities. Gillis' personal experience of Belfast was of its shadow to the East, it was 'over there' but ever present, a shared space in which to find 'communal belonging' away from 'Ards'. In his writing there are clearly similarities to Carson's approach to the city, especially his manner of considering its urban topography to represent contested space between communities, identities, and progress.

In Gillis' work the act of observation is commonly associated with the city to express the search for meaning – the divination of a shared space. He builds ornate, often incredible images to express the awesome nature of the post-conflict city:

'I saw the jungle of gymnasium
of cranes, slips and pulleys, the mangle of rusted hulks, iron mammoths
still prowling with wan malice
over the dockyard's dun immensity' ('Wasps', 2007, ll. 9–13)

The city's presence looms in piecemeal, it is observed and classified by a poetic taxonomy. Metaphorical objects, 'rusted hulks, iron mammoths', are objects displayed for the reader's interpretation. Similarly, in 'Lagan Weir' the pulse of rush-hour 'hurly-burlyed, / humdrummed traffic' ('Lagan Weir', 2007, l. 8) merges with the murmuration of starlings into a 'scatter-wheeling circus of shadows' (2007, l. 18) making their way homeward within the shared anonymising space of the city. He presents the city in a series of binaries that emphasise liminality: hawk/dove, traffic/river. Even the poem's title suggests a stark binary, a 'weir' literally representing a structure that splits a river, just as the Lagan, symbolically, bisects Belfast. The post-conflict city is in a transitional state from conflict to peace, and during the peace process itself, 'there'll be no quick fix.' (2007, l. 2) Gillis' Belfast poetry provides the topographic map of a shared space in 'Lagan Weir' but not a path through it. He stands 'in two minds' on a 'scuffed bridge' over a 'fudged river' (2007, ll. 6–8); he is at the intersection of an intersection from which he observes the process. Even prepared he fears 'things are going to get / a whole lot worse before they get better' (2007, 18).

Within this space Gillis questions identity and especially offers scrutiny of the collective identity of the city's loyalist community, problematising narratives associated with life in East Belfast. 'To Belfast' is an intentionally incomplete sestina, within the form there is repetition of the words 'grace' and 'trace'. Grace, I would argue is here utilised in a religious sense, the transmutation of divinity, given by God, observed in a form of deep understanding. Gillis sees public expressions of religion within a loyalist community context as 'warning messages' or instructions. It contextualises and informs an internal, categorical view of the community. Considered in this sense 'grace' as used in line 15 of the poem, is a religious metaphor for the passage of collective memory through community:

'Once in school, on a greaseproof page, we had to trace
the busts and booms of your body, and I was ashamed to hand mine in because it
lacked what Da called grace' (2004, ll. 13–15).

Gillis, however, is distressed to learn that the lesson of school is not the same as the lesson of the community and household; through education and shared space he sees and scrutinises his identity and understands it in a contingent way.

Conclusion

The poetry of post-conflict Belfast provides a poetic framework that explores the 'shared' qualities of space, future, and society post-Agreement. By their textual nature, poems provide a meditative contrast to the cold, legalistic language of policy and governance in the peace process. Each piece presents a contact zone, a shared space within which the exchange of cultural identities freely transpires, which draws a clear parallel between poetry and public history: from a collective cultural cache, an archive of the (in)tangible, both construct a narrative for the enjoyment and interpretation of their audience. Over the Decade of Centenaries the focus on equal perspectives on history has often promoted separate, uncontextualised histories. The work of these contemporary Belfast poets, however, illustrates a novel approach to achieving the aims of peace building and commemoration. In their stanzas, the poets create a shared space – that borrows from a tangible and artistic Belfast – which emphasises scrutiny and cultural exchange; like the approach of a museum these poems display artifacts representative of life from the perspective of both communities for their audience to view, consider, and study. Poets will not replace public historians but we, and our museums, should embrace and explore more of the poetic. The deceptively simple craft of poetry deftly handles the creation of literary contact zones and by the inclusion of a little more art in their own processes the heritage sector may learn a valuable lesson in how to recontextualise Irish objects into the narrative of an 'inclusive and accepting society' which promotes the peace process.

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