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DOI:

[10.1016/j.polgeo.2020.102185](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2020.102185)

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Nisbett, M., & Rapson, J. (2020). The role of ex-paramilitaries and former prisoners in political tourism. *POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY*, 80, Article 102185. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2020.102185>

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The Role of Ex-Paramilitaries and Former Prisoners in Political Tourism

ABSTRACT

Northern Ireland has a turbulent history, enduring 30 years of violence known as 'The Troubles'. Streets in Belfast that were once 'no-go' areas are now popular tourist attractions. They are the sites of assassinations, attempted murders and memorials to the dead - both those killed and those who killed. This article reports back on interviews and focus groups with ex-prisoners and ethnographic walks, participating in guided tours of streets, memorial sites and cemeteries, led by former paramilitaries turned tour guides. These local, sometimes controversial, figures play a key role in Belfast's tourist industry, letting those at the very centre of the conflict present and represent the city's dark and contentious history. In this article, we argue that 'Troubles tourism' is not about glorifying or commodifying violence, as its critics have suggested (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2008; O'Doherty, 2016; Tinney, 2017), but rather, it enables the contested nature of the conflict to be understood by allowing competing discourses to co-exist and divergent positions to be tolerated, which is politically important for peace. As such, post-conflict tourism requires a different analytical approach than that currently offered in the 'dark tourism' literature, which often focuses on visitors' motivations and expectations, and the commodification of history. Instead, we suggest that increased attention be dedicated to the voices of those with previous experience of violence, and the potential of this to understand current ongoing struggle, as well as consider how tourism might contribute to community transition in a post-conflict context.

KEYWORDS

Conflict tourism; Troubles Tourism; Troubles; Northern Ireland; Paramilitary; Irish Republican Army (IRA); Belfast.

INTRODUCTION

Lonely Planet recently voted Belfast and the Causeway coast tourist destination of the year (McDonald, 2017). The appeal of the latter is obvious. Famous for its cliff-top walks, it is home to the Giant's Causeway, a natural geological wonder and UNESCO World Heritage Site. Its forests, mountains and moorlands form the rugged backdrop for the fantasy television series *Game of Thrones*. However, Belfast is a curious choice. After decades of violent conflict, streets that were once the sites of kidnappings, bombings and shootings are now tourist attractions.

This article examines two weeks of fieldwork in Belfast, engaging in 'Troubles Tourism'. We undertook ethnographic walks, participated in guided tours of memorial sites, gardens and cemeteries; and conducted focus groups and interviews with tour guides from former paramilitary and ex-prisoner communities. The aim of the research was to explore how our interviewees understood and practiced their roles. We were interested in the way in which political dynamics played out on the ground and within the context of tourism.

'The Troubles' is an ambiguous term referring to the violent ethno-nationalist struggles over the constitutional status of Northern Ireland, which is part of the UK. On one side, there are those born in Northern Ireland who identify as British, and feel loyalty towards the British state. They believe their interests are best served by membership of the UK and oppose the idea of being ruled by a parliament in Dublin. There are others born in Northern Ireland who identify as Irish. They believe that the country should be a single sovereign state and the annexed North should be reunited with the Republic of Ireland. This disputed claim to sovereignty was at the centre of The Troubles, which killed 3,739 people and injured over 80,000 (McKittrick and McVea, 2012). The two opposing positions are referred to as Unionism and Nationalism, and, respectively, Loyalism and Republicanism at their most militant (dissident, hard-line and paramilitary). Nationalists and Republicans saw The Troubles as a war of liberation, whilst Unionists and Loyalists viewed it as domestic terrorism. The conflict was not about religion *per se* but had a sectarian dimension, as Nationalists and Republicans tended to be Catholic, whilst Unionists and Loyalists were mostly Protestant.

The Troubles ran from the late 1960s to the late 1990s and has a long and complex history. There remains a lack of consensus around the historical and contemporary narrative, which can be observed through many different interpretations. The literature demonstrates this, offering a range of perspectives on the sequence of events, key moments, role of the state, and allocation of victims and perpetrators. This has an impact on popular understanding of the history, region and conflict. Rather than providing an account of Ireland's deep past here and attempting to capture this multitude of viewpoints, re-treading ground that has already been expertly covered, we signpost the reader to a selection of resources¹. We begin our history in the

¹ For useful starting points, see Dawson, 2007; English, 2012; Hennessy, 1997; McAuley, 2015; McKittrick and McVea, 2012; Mulholland, 2002 and Robinson, 2017.

second half of the 20th century, a time characterised by gerrymandering, discrimination and sectarian clashes, as Catholics continued to be denied adequate housing, employment and education. Partly inspired by the civil rights movements in the USA and South Africa, protestors took to the streets in 1967 to campaign for the rights of the minority Catholic population. They were met with violence from the police and non-Catholic communities, resulting in rioting (Hennessy, 1997). The British army was brought in to quell the violence, but the occupation became hostile and stoked the conflict. Paramilitary groups existed but were galvanised and new factions emerged, as both communities felt that the State was incapable of protecting them (Dowler, 2013). They formed armed opposition groups and a 30-year war ensued. The Good Friday Agreement (Belfast Agreement, 1998) resulted in ceasefires from the majority of paramilitary organisations and led to relative stability. However, some groups still exist and hold weaponry (McEvoy and Shirlow, 2009), and new dissident factions emerged (Hoey, 2019). There are simmering tensions in the region with low-level disorder and sectarian rioting (Carroll, 2019).

'Troubles Tourism' is a geographically specific variant of 'political tourism' or 'conflict tourism', and is part of a broader phenomenon called 'dark tourism', where sites of death, destruction and atrocity are turned into cultural attractions (Lennon and Foley, 2000). With a broad, loose remit covering all types of death and suffering, critics have pointed to a lack of justification for grouping very different sites, experiences and motivations under one banner, leading Isaac and Platenkamp (2018) to call for an end to its use altogether. Indeed, this literature does not provide a useful framework for the examination of our experience of engaging with the political geography of Belfast as encountered on Troubles Tours. Firstly, an emphasis on visitors' motivations and expectations, which has become a key 'sub-discipline' of dark tourism scholarship (Korstanje & George 2018), fails to account for those of guides and facilitators. As tour guides nearly always mediate visitors' post-conflict experiences, their perspectives are valuable both to understand their participation in the industry as well as gain a fuller picture of the complex dynamics of tourist/guide interactions. Secondly, the dark tourism literature has been dominated by discussions of commodified histories and associated ethics (Reynolds, 2018). Whilst questions have been raised about the ethics of Troubles Tourism, as will be addressed in this article, the Troubles remains politically and culturally contested. As such, whilst it concerns the past, Troubles Tourism does not treat history as a commodity but as a violent phase of an ongoing struggle that continues in the present through, for the most part, non-violent means. As guides walk visitors through the landscape, the past is continues to be negotiated. We suggest that such contexts require a more nuanced approach to recent conflict sites than is currently found in the dark tourism literature, which offer an approach more suited to places where 'the past' is more firmly located in historical terms, at least according to popular consensus.

Correspondingly, tourism at post-conflict sites is a fairly new area of enquiry both within and beyond dark tourism scholarship (Light, 2017), and again research has tended to focus on tourists' experiences, rather than on those

who deliver tourism initiatives. Conflict tourism in Northern Ireland is under-researched (with exceptions: Simone-Charteris et al., 2013; Dowler, 2013; Skinner, 2016; Gould, 2011; Boyd, 2000, 2013; Leonard, 2011; Wiedenhoft Murphy, 2010; and McDowell, 2008), particularly from the perspective of former paramilitaries. We argue that further attention to the voices of those actively involved in the conflict would enable both a better understanding of their struggle, as well as the potential of tourism to contribute to post-conflict transition.

Beyond these suggestions for new perspectives within dark tourism, this research further contributes to several current debates in dark and broader tourism geography discourses. Whilst we do not focus on visitor motivation, our results shed light on how the guides' own priorities and, in this case, their ongoing struggles, inform the experiences they offer tourists and the impressions and understanding that visitors gain and leave with. This chimes with the desire for firsthand accounts of violence, which are viewed as educational and authentic (Frochot and Batat, 2013). 'Community-based tourism' has been established as a growing phenomenon in recent decades. Grounded in local participation, such activities aim to contribute to local economies and social regeneration, and are designed to protect specific identities and environments (Russell, 2000). Increased attention to issues of responsibility and ethics is also apparent in recent literature. Our research speaks to these concerns, primarily in cultural terms. The case study offers further empirical examples of local participation from a marginalised and traumatised group that holds a controversial status outside of its own local community. Tourism, in this case, aims to contribute to the local economy, provide employment and protect local identities, suggesting that this example furthers current debate in these areas.

TOURISM IN BELFAST

Early tourism initiatives glossed over The Troubles, romanticising Ireland's magical landscapes and people (Rolston, 1995), in contrast to the media images of war-torn Belfast (Lisle, 2000). According to International Relations scholar Debbie Lisle, later strategies promoted Belfast as safer than other cities and emphasised that the conflict was confined to non-touristy areas. Today, Northern Ireland is billed as somewhere for the 'culturally curious' (Schultz, 2017), with Belfast marketed as a city break destination, for shopping, restaurants and cultural attractions, from the zoo and aquarium, to the castle and cathedral. Yet 'Troubles Tourism' is extremely popular with visitors. Tripadvisor's Travel Trend Report (2018) ranks three Troubles themed tours amongst the ten most popular attractions in Northern Ireland, and Belfast City Sightseeing Tours revealed that 75 per cent of visitors wanted to explore Troubles sites (McNeil, 2013). Despite this, it does not feature on the city's official tourism website, although niche interests are promoted such as 'theatrical history tours' and the 'George Best trail', continuing a trend that seeks to overlook The Troubles (Rolston, 1995).

Instead, the city's tourism offer is dominated by the Titanic Experience, a £100 million visitor attraction that sits on the site of the shipyard where the fateful vessel was built in 1912. This area was derelict following the decline of

the shipbuilding trade, but has been regenerated as part of a £7 billion development. In 2016, the Titanic Experience beat Ferrari World Abu Dhabi, Machu Picchu and the Las Vegas strip to be crowned the 'World's Leading Tourist Attraction' at the World Travel Awards (Conghaile, 2016). The Troubles death toll eclipses that of the maritime disaster, yet there is no state sanctioned museum, educational facility or official memorial in the city centre², as The Troubles has not been fully consigned to history, despite the inception of the peace process and the success of its political settlement. People don't agree about the past, how to mark the dead or whether they should be honoured at all, and not everybody agrees that the conflict is over. In contrast, the sinking of the Titanic on its maiden voyage and the death of over 1,500 passengers and crew was tragic, but it sits firmly in the past and is not politically sensitive or contentious. Although the Titanic Experience commemorates a catastrophe, it proudly reminds visitors of a time when Belfast was known throughout the world for its industrial prowess. It is a tale of luxury and decadence; engineering and innovation; and economic growth and prosperity. It takes tourists back to boom-time Belfast, which is easy to package and sell, and offers a story *other than* violence. It neatly sidesteps difficult questions about poverty, class and religious discrimination, although the Belfast shipyard was highly politicized. Its owners and managers were hostile to Irish independence (Moss and Hume, 1988), fearing it would threaten industry (Crossland and Moore, 2003) as the shipbuilding trade was dependent on the free markets of the British empire. Most of its 35,000 workforce were Protestant and the minority of Catholics faced intolerance (Moss and Hume, 1988). Despite this, the story of the Titanic is celebratory, which is not possible with the more recent, raw and contested narrative of The Troubles. It is understandable that a post-conflict region would prefer to officially promote positive histories at a time when society remains divided, peace is fragile and the re-building of identities is paramount.

Although it is not officially promoted, visitors to Belfast take guided tours around Troubles sites, as well as memorials, gardens, cemeteries, and other significant locations, from political murals to the 'peace lines' (walls that segregate Catholic and Protestant communities). As well as hop on/hop off bus tours, there are many taxi and coach tour companies whose drivers were not involved in the conflict, do not live locally and have no paramilitary links. Other organisations have grown out of the paramilitary groups such as the Ex-Prisoners Interpretative Centre (Epic) and Coiste Na n-Iarchimí (henceforth Coiste). Epic is a Loyalist network of ex-combatants providing employment to former paramilitaries to enable reintegration. Coiste supports the rights of former Irish Republican Army (IRA) prisoners. In 2002, it launched a 'political tours' initiative, with ex-combatants guiding visitors around Catholic areas. It began collaborating with Epic so that tours of Protestant areas could be

² There are smaller organisations outside the centre that tell the story of Republican struggle (Conway Mill and the Roddy McCorley Republican Museum), Protestant history (The Museum of Orange Heritage) and Loyalist conflict (Andy Tyrie Interpretation Centre). None of these offer diverse or contested narratives, or acknowledge the tragedy on both sides. Ulster Museum's newly opened permanent Troubles exhibition worked with the local community and attempts to offer multiple perspectives in a shared space, as opposed to the previous presentation, which lacked alternative viewpoints.

offered. This access to lived experience is a major draw for tourists, providing them with a better understanding (Frochot and Batat, 2013). This raises questions around who should speak for these communities and how victims' voices should be represented, not to mention issues of employment, as it remains legal for employers to discriminate on the basis of conflict-related convictions. As social deprivation is a potential recruitment tool for dissident groups, barriers to employment are dangerous. Coiste and Epic are social enterprises that significantly under-charge for what they offer, so well-worn critiques that dark tourism commodifies suffering (Lennon and Foley, 2000) and cashes in (O'Doherty, 2016) to exploit the deceased (Stone, 2012) does not seem accurate when applied to this case.

Conflict tourism draws attention to how these sites are managed, and questions whether to preserve the reminders of violence. For example, some claim that the political murals prevent business investment (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2008; Hall, 2006) and reify division by presenting singular narratives of the past (McAteckney, 2018). Whilst they do not inspire integration, their purpose is to mark territory, protest, issue warnings and pay tribute, not appease. Their removal is contentious as they are important for community identity and memory. Whilst the tangible features of dark histories are important for reflection and commemoration, this does not take into account political sensitivity. What is offensive and intimidating to one may be a source of pride, an expression of identity or means of belonging to another. Belfast's council and tourism agencies must tread carefully, so it is no wonder that resources are ploughed into the Titanic Experience.

Some assert that these tangible manifestations of violence and the tourist industry surrounding them reproduces conflict (Skinner, 2016), fuels separation and exacerbates division (McDowell, 2008). Relatives of the victims accuse tour companies of glorifying murder (Tinney, 2017). For example, campaigner Raymond McCord argued:

'I would never pay to go on a tour like that, and don't understand anyone who would, especially not if it was hosted by ex-terrorists ... profiting from misery and death ... Those involved ... are murderers and thugs' (Tinney, 2017:online)

Troubles Tourism in Belfast has been contentious since the outset. The Northern Ireland Assembly (NIA) archives show politicians split along party lines in their support for/opposition to conflict tourism in the early days. For the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), it was an issue of distaste:

'Will the tourist experience mock kneecappings? Maybe even the recorded screams of the supposed victims? What about dummy bomb runs? ... Political beatings? ... With a bit of blindfolding and torture, the tourist could relive the experience of the terror victim' (NIA, 2008)

The DUP accepted that visitors wanted to see the political murals, but argued that local people wanted to 'move on' from their 'bloody past' (NIA, 2008), accusing the tours of 'glorifying terrorism' (NIA, 2008) and warning that tours

would result in 'unsafe and uncomfortable' experiences for visitors, keep local communities locked in the past, and disrespect victims and their families (NIA, 2008). There was no recognition by the Unionists of the educative potential of political tourism, echoing the early dark tourism debates that saw it as macabre and morbid (Lennon and Foley, 2000), focusing on the ethics of why people would want to visit these sites and whether they should be allowed.

In contrast, Nationalist politicians were welcoming of conflict tourism and expressed similar views to those emerging from recent dark tourism research, showing that tourists are not primarily driven by ghoulish voyeurism but are informed, respectful and eager to learn (Isaac and Çakmak, 2014; Clark, 2014; Tinson et al., 2015; Sather-Wagstaff, 2011). For example, for Sinn Féin politicians:

'People ... from all over the world are interested ... We should not talk about glorifying these things ... because we make them available ... we should make people welcome. That is the job of the tourism industry' (NIA, 2008)

Nationalist politicians argued that conflict tourism should benefit parts of the city that are in social need, such as the divided West Belfast, where many of the most popular and visited Troubles sites are located. It was primarily the working-classes that experienced the conflict as social deprivation was a driving force, and this area that remains untouched by large-scale investment in tourism (Skinner, 2016):

'Political tourism attracts many visitors, whether people like it or not ... Belfast City Council has carried out several tourist surveys ... visitors would rather see attractions that relate to The Troubles than ... the Titanic ... People are ... curious about the North's history. They want to be told ... by the people who have lived through it ... Political tourism ... has the potential to lift those communities ... into areas that have great employment and socioeconomic opportunities ... The Assembly must ensure that tourism benefits everyone' (NIA, 2008)

West Belfast is the most deprived constituency in Northern Ireland (NIA, 2016) with the lowest employment rate in the UK (Press Association, 2018). Since visitors to Belfast generate over £926 million each year (Northern Ireland Tourist Board, 2017) and Troubles Tourism is a key attraction, it is reasonable for some of this income to go to post-conflict areas. More than this though, McEvoy and Shirlow (2009) argue that expecting ex-prisoners to disengage with their former lives and reintegrate into civilian life without addressing structural need is not going to achieve stability.

Any experience of tourism is interconnected with, and cannot be isolated from, built heritage. In Belfast, The Troubles continue to shape the urban environment (Crooke, 2016). The city's memory landscape is rich in everyday, community-based, vernacular markings such as flags, murals, graffiti, volunteer-run gardens, memorials and plaques. Whilst this 'unofficial heritage' (McAtackney, 2015:116) is at odds with official narratives, or what might be described as the 'Authorised Heritage Discourse' (Smith, 2006), it is a way in

which those impacted by The Troubles can honour and memorialise the past. It is a material reminder that much of the violence took place in everyday urban locations, yet Belfast is not a stable, fixed space that crystallizes national memory to prevent forgetting (Rapson, 2012). It is a place where lives lived are 'still felt as physically manifest, shaping what is remembered beyond the discourses of architects, developers, preservationists and planners' (Crinson, 2005:xii). The material infrastructure of the conflict and its aftermath such as peace walls remain in place and are important for safety and security (Byrne et al., 2012), as well as commemorating.

However, these aspects of the urban landscape are not just about physical barriers or memorialisation. Areas like West Belfast are dynamic, socially mediated environments, continuously evolving. Komarova and Bryan remind us that space is an 'interplay between the physical and psychological, neither of which can be understood in the absence of the other' (2014:429). For museologist Elizabeth Crooke (2005), it is about identity making and constructing a sense of place. For heritage scholar Laura McAtackney, it is about controlling the narrative of the past (2017) to maintain segregation and division (2018). McDowell et al. argue that it is about reinforcing 'narratives of the past onto ... contested streetscapes' (2017:198) to promote community cohesion, claim victimhood and ensure the transfer of tribal politics to the next generation.

METHODOLOGY

We spent two weeks in Belfast: one week in autumn (2017) and another in late spring (2018). The former was spent on tours, which enabled us to build up contacts and the latter undertaking interviews. These separate trips allowed us to note the changes in the landscape, such as the replacement of murals and the marching season preparations. We undertook seven guided tours with paramilitaries including Loyalist tours of Shankill Road, Sandy Row and Newtownards Road; and Republican tours of Falls Road and Milltown Cemetery. Our 'Conflicting Stories' tour began with a Republican guide who then handed over to a Loyalist for the second half. We did three 'conflict tours' with a taxi driver, a Sinn Féin councillor, and former conflict mediator.

We spent time independently walking around some of the local working-class areas, including Falls Road and Shankill Road, visiting community hubs, cafes and memorials. These are the most popular tourism sites as they are the interface areas and during the conflict, were under the political control of the paramilitaries. They are the locations of homes and places of work, and were the sites of battles and resistance. These streets demonstrate how those involved in the conflict utilise the urban landscape, not only as physical territory but to construct identity, delineate difference (Jarman, 1996; Gallaher and Shirlow, 2006) and demarcate space (Bryan, 2018). They have material, discursive and physical value (McDowell et al., 2017) in making ethnosectarian politics visible (Graham and Whelan, 2007). The continued separation articulates inclusion and exclusion (Graham and Whelan, 2007; McDowell et al., 2017), and reflects the endurance of spatialised segregation (Herrault and Murtagh, 2019), through its materialisation, reproduction and normalisation via peace lines (McAtackney, 2015), flag-flying (Bryan, 2018) and

murals (McCormick and Jarman, 2005; Rolston, 2010), as well as annual activities such as Unionist parades and bonfires, the Somme and Easter Rising anniversaries and the Féile an Phobail festival. These events not only unify, but under the guise of civil liberties, tradition and culture, they are used as a political weapon (Jarman, 1997).

We also visited the Ulster Museum, Republican History Museum, Andy Tyrrie Interpretative Centre, Roddy McCorley Republican Museum, Crumlin Road Gaol, Orange Heritage Museum and the Titanic Experience, documenting these activities through field notes and photographs. Whilst the walking and driving tours were a curated experience, participating independently in the everyday life of these places provided a fully embodied experience, connecting us to our topic and location. Observational walking provided interpretative insights, enhanced local literacy and added rigour (Pierce and Lawhon, 2015). Whilst we did not undertake a long-term ethnographic study, our fieldwork facilitated an intensive immersion in scripted and unscripted tourist environments, providing a good impression of how visitors encounter the city.

We conducted three interviews with former IRA guides, four with ex-Loyalist guides from the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), and a focus group with five former IRA guides. The data was captured as audio files, photographs and notes, and analysed using discourse (Wetherell, Taylor and Yates, 2001) and thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The second half of the paper is structured around the common themes that derived from our analysis. The focus group took place at Coiste, and the interviews were conducted at Epic, on the tours themselves, in pubs, and at the Andy Tyrrie Interpretive Centre. We sought to avoid falling into the trap of trying to decide what was or wasn't factual, or adjudicate on who was 'telling the truth', as we recognise the existence of many truths. Our aim was to understand how our participants constructed their worlds and presented their narratives. We were interested in how those at the centre of the conflict contribute to the stories that are told in and about these places and what role tourism plays.

We used snowball sampling, with the ex-combatant guides as gatekeepers. The Republicans were receptive from the outset, responding with enthusiasm when they found out that we were researchers. In contrast, we struggled to secure interviews with the Loyalists. It was difficult to get Epic to commit and guides were not keen to participate. Despite the eagerness of our Republican interviewees, those participating in the focus group seemed uncomfortable with the formalities and protocols (for example, signing consent forms), which created some awkwardness. There may be reasons for this discomfort and reluctance to participate, such as a suspicion of official institutions. Betrayal and distrust were significant themes in their accounts. Past negative experiences may play a role. For example, the Loyalists were understandably irritated by the frequent misrepresentation of their communities by outsiders and academics who had failed to share their research findings. Republicans take strong ownership of local spaces. The geography of the city does more than act as a backdrop to their stories - it is part of those stories. They

perform these to an audience, which is a different context and dynamic to a focus group. The Republicans invited us to local talks on Nationalist history and music nights at the pub, where we met friends and families. These occasions provided opportunities to delve deeper into conversations that yielded richer insights. As we responded to the hospitality of our participants, we noticed the boundaries of the research blurring and the impact on the data collection and interpretation. In returning to the relaxed spaces these people occupy in their daily lives such as pubs and social clubs, we found an increased willingness to open up, in what the anthropologist Clifford Geertz referred to as 'deep hanging out' (1998:69). As our conversations developed, they became personal and laden with emotions. Hearing accounts of state brutality or someone's final moments was distressing. Interviewing and spending time with the victims and perpetrators of violence, and engaging emotionally in challenging conversations requires an ability to listen and a willingness to understand and learn. Whilst we found it difficult to maintain a critical distance, geographer Chih Yuan Woon (2013) explains that the 'emotionality' produced in response to accounts of violence:

'results in a collapse of distance between the researcher and his/her respondents ... it is through this process that more expansive and nuanced knowledges of violence and terror can be generated' (2013:34)

For Woon, emotionality is not an obstacle to scientific inquiry. It draws attention to the unpredictability of research as a practice, yields revelations into the diverse and fluid subjectivities of researchers, and grounds knowledge production in lived experience and embodiment. Emotions orientate and mediate interactions. They are invaluable for reflexivity and critical engagement, helping researchers to know themselves and their subjects (Lund, 2012), generating empathy and establishing trust (Jones and Ficklin, 2012). Our project required us to both *think and feel*. It was essential to think critically about the role of emotions within our research and these shaped our data collection and analysis. We used reflective discussion and writing to explore this messiness, documenting the challenges posed by the research process, relationships to participants and how all of this made us feel, especially during moments of unease or contradiction.

Care and ethical attention was needed as we were asking our participants to re-live and re-experience difficult, traumatic and painful pasts. We were also negotiating our position as privileged outsiders. As British citizens, we were conscious of our identity as that of the coloniser in a space of contested sovereignty. Whilst there may be assumptions of 'expertise', we were being educated on our participants' experiences and perspectives. This had consequences for the dynamics of our encounters, which was compounded by our identity as younger female scholars in what is an almost entirely male and masculine, in some cases, hypermasculine, milieu. This was not only in accounts of localised combat, but through the presentation of identity, industry and infantry. Our interviewees reflected the predominant demographic profile of paramilitary members in Northern Ireland, as laid out by Ferguson et al., (2008) in that they were male, first committed acts of violence between the

ages of 15-25, had families who supported and/or were involved in paramilitary activity, lived in communities sympathetic to political violence, and had access to armed groups that were welcoming of their involvement. They had experienced some kind of violent incident, which had prompted them to act, so joining a paramilitary group was not just the precursor to violence but the result of it. Furthermore, our participants were entirely white, from working-class families, with little to no education when they joined a group. Two of our twelve participants differed in that they were from a younger generation of Loyalists. Whilst they fit the characteristics above, they were active in the 1990s, rather than the 1980s.

We also had to reflect on our use of language. 'The Troubles' is vague enough to avoid the contested allocation of blame, but can offend those who identify as having fought a civil war or as victims of domestic terrorism. Whilst recognising its limitations and attendant controversies, we use the term as it is the most prominent, frequently used term in vernacular and academic discourses. It is instantly recognisable, graspable and geopolitically specific. During our conversations, our Republican participants challenged us on our use of 'paramilitary', which was rejected by those who saw themselves as members of an army that was commensurate with the British military. To speak of 'Northern Ireland' is not acceptable for those who deny its legality as a nation. We use such terms in the interests of clarity and consistency, whilst acknowledging their contested nature and respecting the deeply felt reasons behind that contestation.

AUTHENTICITY AND STORYTELLING

We began our focus group by asking our Republican participants about their motivations for becoming tour guides. They were irritated by the bus and taxi tour guides who were not from the local area or involved in the conflict. They felt that these tours were inaccurate and voyeuristic, and that other people were profiting from their plight:

'The taxi driver jumps out and starts telling a story and it's clearly a script that has no bearing on the actual experience of prisoners ... They don't even get the factual information correct' (interviewee 3)

'You see these hop on/hop off buses ... and there is someone ... going 'blah, blah, blah' ... Local people resent that ... there's a sense of anger ... people coming here and treating us like goldfish in a bowl' (interviewee 1)

'You see a taxi pull up and in two minutes they are away. It takes me 10-15 minutes to explain the blanket protest and hunger strike ... how can people explain Bobby Sands in two minutes? ... The taxi tours are complete and utter nonsense ... People are paying £30-£40 to be told nonsense ... Some of the guides walk away when they see us!' (interviewee 5)

'The bus tours are simply money-making exercises ... It isn't a political tour' (interviewee 4)

Disliking outsider interpretations may also relate to the need to control the narratives of what visitors are told. Our taxi tour guide informed us that he was doing it purely for the money. His tour was scripted and well-rehearsed, which lessened its impact. Leonard's (2011) account of Belfast City Sightseeing Tours revealed how guides with little knowledge used awkward jokes and factually inaccurate information to discuss the conflict. These quotations reveal the tensions that result from the competitive nature of tourism, which is relevant in relation to the discrimination ex-prisoners face around employment. However, this is not about the commodification of suffering (Stone, 2012), as our guides offered a different take. They are telling a Republican/Loyalist history from a Republican/Loyalist perspective, and this is vital to give voice to marginalised groups and avoid misrepresentation, even criminalisation (Skinner, 2016). For Republicans, tourism provided a crucial means of storytelling:

'I had a realisation that people wanted to hear *our* story from *our* mouths ... Our stories weren't getting told ... Stories were being told by people who had never experienced the conflict ... We needed to get our story out. Everyone else was telling *our* story' (interviewee 1, emphasis in original)

'For 800 years, Irish people weren't allowed to tell our story ... We have a voice now. In prison, we didn't have a voice ... it's only these last few years that we've had a voice, and people are listening ... We don't need another war ... We don't need guns ... We have education ... We are *seanchaí* [Gaeilge: storyteller/historian]. These are stories you don't read in books ... about what happened, why people joined these movements. We were never Republican. We were *forced* into this. People think jail was the end. Jail was the *start*' (Emphasis in original)' (interviewee 3)

'Tourism provides a platform for us to tell our story ... It's a very important vehicle for us to tell our history, our politics and our experiences' (interviewee 4)

Republican guides are skilful storytellers. Their tours were dense with historical detail, covering centuries of Irish oppression through wars, imperialism and genocide. They took a long view of the conflict, starting in the Middle Ages, and weaving a complex set of events into a comprehensive chronological narrative of struggle against social injustice. The Loyalist story was more individual, less coherent and swiftly moved from one topic to the next, echoing what Graham (2004) notes as a lack of coherence in Loyalist ideology: the Titanic shipyard, British monarchy, brutality of the Magdalene Laundries, Battle of the Somme, paedophilia in the Catholic church, World War II, interspersed with reports of IRA sectarianism and the murder of Protestants. There was no prehistory or recognition of centuries of Irish struggle. It was not chronological or themed and it was a less saleable narrative, as it was easier to sympathise with the idea of a discriminated minority. Republican accounts were seamless, fulsome and detailed. Every name, date and time was etched onto the guides' minds. Each point was

brought to life by a compelling anecdote and the landscape was utilised to great effect. For example, some tours began at a derelict primary school. Its crumbling façade was pock-marked with bullet holes, reportedly from gun battles in the 1970s. This relic added authenticity and facilitated a discussion about discrimination in schools, the removal of Irish history from the curriculum and the 19th century wooden ‘tally stick’ that denoted the number of beatings children would receive if they spoke Gaeilge. This, inevitably, stirred the emotions.

Loyalist guides utilised significant locations during their tours. For example, the site of Frizzel’s Fish Shop, now a credit union building, where the infamous Shankill Road Bombing took place in 1993. However, these landmarks were not integrated into one story and in some cases, they disrupted the narrative. In the case of Loyalists, body-language, tone and demeanour were more significant in producing an authenticity, such as the reflections on what the lives of these men might have been if circumstances were different; the fact that their fates were determined at birth; and the insistence of one interviewee to vigilantly have his back to the wall and to face the door.

POLITICS AND PROPAGANDA

Republican narratives were underpinned by accepted historical facts and political theory, with a liberal scattering of Marx and Gramsci. This was a community of serious political thinkers and the guides clearly enjoyed the intellectual sparring. We learnt how ex-combatants turned their prison cells into teaching spaces: ‘we were reading Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and liberation theology.’ Another interviewee described how prisoners would read and discuss chapters together, joking that the IRA had ‘brains *and* courage!’ (interviewee 2, emphasis in original)

Loyalist guides were aware of the coherence, saleability and persuasiveness of the Republican narrative. They recognised its efficacy and saw this, pejoratively, as a ‘slickness’. Loyalists struggle to make their politics palatable as they are viewed from the outside as the last vestige of colonialism. This hinders them in finding a voice and gaining political legitimacy (Mitchell, 2017). They noted their own ‘image problem’ (Hall, 2006) and the need to restore their reputation (Gallaher and Shirlow, 2006). We spoke to two younger Loyalists who referred to peoples’ ‘pre-conceptions’ of them as ‘skin-headed’, ‘tattooed’, ‘hooligans with guns’ whilst pointing to their own shaved heads, body art and the weapons surrounding us in the museum. Several referred to the perception that Republicans educated themselves in prison, whilst Loyalists bulked up in the exercise yard. We met Loyalists who had got degrees in prison or following release. Despite these achievements and a reflexive insight into how they were seen, they lacked confidence and felt ‘left behind’ by Republicans, ‘big house’ Unionists and the British government. Loyalist guides lacked the critical mass and solidarity of the Republicans, and did not have the same level of focus (Mitchell, 2017), as indicated by the failure to successfully decommission (McEvoy and Shirlow, 2009), the

ongoing feuds (Steenkamp, 2008), political isolation (Graham, 2004) and the lack of a voice (Hall, 2006).

For Republicans, tourism was part of an education and awareness raising campaign. The guides saw themselves as activists, with Irish independence a live struggle:

'We are educators. We want to make people politically aware of ... how the State works and how it can assassinate its own citizens'
(interviewee 5)

'The tours are a continuation of the activism work I was doing before [prison]. People say 'pre-peace process' and 'post-peace process' as if there are two parallel tracks, as opposed to a straight line through it all. It's just different contexts, different tactics, different strategies. The politics are the same' (interviewee 1)

'[T]ourism has made massive gains for our struggle and how people see it ... The tours are an extension of our commitment to what we believe in ... they give us the opportunity to go out and tell people'
(interviewee 4)

Tourism for Loyalists was less organised and resourced. Their battle was not about about loyalty to Britain but about keeping six counties within Ulster separate, which follows the findings of Graham (2004). For some, the tours were a way to counter what they saw as IRA propaganda:

'The thing for me is to counter Republican propaganda. That's my main thrust ... Republicans are rewriting the history of what happened. The sectarian violence on Shankill Road is very rarely spoken about by Republican guides ... They won't admit it ... they carried out the atrocities on this road that led us to retaliate ... It's important for me that people know the facts ... that's my motivation' (interviewee 7)

'We want to expose the lies of Sinn Féin and the IRA and we do it as *graphically* as we can. It was murder and mayhem. Republicans have a romanticised idea of conflict ... They are very good at propaganda'
(interviewee 9, emphasis in original)

One Loyalist participant confessed: 'we are 10-15 years behind in the propaganda campaign', whilst Republicans acknowledged 'the battle of the narratives' as 'a continuation of the conflict by other means ... a different type of battle' (Engle, 2018).

Republican guides seemed comfortable with contradictory accounts, reaching out to Epic to collaborate on political tours:

'We engaged Loyalist prisoners because we're in a peace process, whether we like them or not, irrespective of what they've done to our community, our friends, our families. We have to move forward'
(interviewee 4)

This led to the 'Conflicting Stories' tours, with Republicans and Loyalists working together. Tours begin with one guide and visitors are passed over to the other side when they reach the peace line. The guides sometimes shake hands. This symbolic moment signifies a level of unprecedented cooperation that has come about through self-developed tourism initiatives. Importantly, the tour enables, nay encourages, discordant interpretations. When we spoke of the different narratives, a Republican interviewee explained:

'We don't contradict Loyalists. We just tell our own story. Sometimes tourists tell you stuff that they've said. I just say: "well, that's his version of events". I don't challenge anything ... There's objective information out there' (interviewee 5)

This is different to the Loyalists' motivations to counter 'IRA propaganda', 'correct' the narrative and 'expose' the 'yarns'. At the same time, throughout the tours, there was a refusal on both sides to recognise the perspective of the other and a dismissal of its culture and history. There was little effort or desire for impartiality, objectivity or balance, but why would there be? These are people who have fought, killed and been prepared to die for what they believe in. For many, the struggle continues, as the issue at the heart of the conflict persists. Yet there is an assumption in some of the literature that these tours should be neutral, for example, Republican guides have been accused of 'territorial politics', using tourism as a political tool to elicit support and sympathy, 'a war by other means' (McDowell, 2008:407).

Political messages also came through the urban landscape, such as the murals and memorial sites on Falls, Shankill and Newtownards Roads, Sandy Row, and on nearby housing estates. At the beginning of Falls Road is the 'International Wall', a series of murals referencing global political struggle. It is an optimistic sight, demonstrating cosmopolitan values of solidarity with others worldwide. These murals situate the Nationalist struggle as part of a global resistance movement, a clever strategy that raises international awareness, galvanises support and evokes sympathy (Crooke, 2016). By locating the IRA hunger strikers and the blanket protestors amidst the giants of global civil rights - Martin Luther King, Harriet Tubman, Stephen Biko, Nelson Mandela, and Angela Davis - the murals earn Nationalist struggle crucial legitimacy. By connecting with the fight of oppressed people all over the world, Republicans maintain the relevance and vibrancy of their struggle. The wall is regularly repainted to reflect contemporary conflicts, ensuring that unification remains topical. Visibility is paramount, hence it is situated on a major arterial route (McCormick and Jarman, 2005).

Some of the Nationalist murals have religious overtones, with long-haired, bare-chested and barefoot blanket protestors and the self-sacrifice of the hunger strikers almost Christ-like. This is despite our participants renouncing religion: 'we went to prison as Catholics and came out as atheists!' (interviewee 11) There is a tradition of institutionalised fasting in the history of Nationalist struggle and hunger-striking is an established practice of Republican martyrdom (Byrne, 2016). The focus on a small group of brave individuals puts a human face to the resistance. They are the 'unequivocal

victims of aggression' (McAtackney, 2018:55) and as such, we view this as heroic rather than horrifying. Republican tours centre on oppressed people surviving brutality, and the triumph of the human spirit to endure mistreatment. Further along is a mural dedicated to the iconic Bobby Sands, who is similarly celebrated, martyred and heroised (Graham and Whelan, 2007), but more than that, he is deified.

Whilst noting who is represented, we also reflected on who is absent. Civilians with no political affiliation represent 53 per cent of those killed during The Troubles and Republicans were responsible for 59 per cent of these deaths (Ferguson et al., 2008). Whilst what is represented visually and verbally comes from community activism, it is an incomplete and carefully curated experience for visitors. Controversial and less comfortable aspects of these histories - civilian casualties, the 'disappeared', alleged informers - are erased. These material features of the landscape are selective attempts (McAtackney, 2018) to present history in singular, hierarchical and bounded narratives for easy consumption (Lisle, 2000). This is significant as Republicans overtly align themselves with the principles of non-violence, human rights, inclusiveness and tolerance (McEvoy and Shirlow, 2009). The murals reflect a broad set of interests within the movement, from feminism and socialism to trade unionism and anti-colonialism. They act as social commentary, with the objective of mobilisation. Despite the media continuing to downgrade and dismiss the murals as anachronistic relics (see Burley, 2018, for example), we recognised their purpose as 'instruments in an ideological struggle' (McCormick and Jarman, 2005:50).

FRAGMENTATION AND ISOLATION

In contrast, the heavily militarised wall paintings of the Loyalists speak of a different kind of sacrifice. Loyalists have one objective: to keep Northern Ireland in the UK. Our conversations revealed that Loyalists feared a Republican uprising, which is compounded by what they perceived as a betrayal by the State. Loyalist murals often combine aggression and fearlessness with vulnerability and insecurity. Many depict hooded men with heavy-duty weapons. Sometimes these figures are looking down the barrel of a gun, with the weapons pointed at the viewer. When you move, the gun follows. These have a menacing and panoptical quality, which are intimidating to outsiders. In the words of our participants: 'these act as a warning, not a welcome' (interviewee 10) and 'these murals say to Catholics, "if you come into our area, all you'll find is death"' (interviewee 9).

Many of the most hardline murals were replaced as part of the £3.3 million 'Reimaging Programme', funded by the British government. Republicans removed gunmen from their murals during the peace process talks, so this has largely affected Loyalist communities. It was controversial due to political sensitivity, enduring local support and commitment to paramilitarism and tourism. Many of the guns and balaclavas have been replaced by fairies, flowers, children's drawings and archival photographs, heavily nostalgic for the good old days of poverty and happiness. Nonetheless, we also saw new paintings depicting masked gunmen, acting as territorial markers of Loyalist

power and presence, reminding us that we were within a site of ongoing political struggle and sectarian division (McCormick and Jarman, 2005).

Loyalist murals are notorious for showcasing their credentials as assassins. For example, the tribute to Stevie McKeag, a well-known UDA figure who predominantly murdered civilian Catholics, hence this mural pays homage to sectarian violence. We observed McKeag's head in the clouds, heaven-like, amongst the Union Jack, the crown and silhouetted saluting soldiers. References to the military and monarchy legitimate his status as a hero. He is, unquestionably, a soldier, with a military-style beret and ribbed navy jumper with epaulettes. The painting is indicative of the way that Loyalists imitate the imagery and discourse of the British military. Loyalist areas are littered with Latin slogans: the UDA appropriated the SAS motto 'Who Dares Wins' (Rolston, 2012); the UDA motto 'Quis Separabit' ('Who Will Separate') is borrowed from the British army; and the Ulster Freedom Fighters adopted 'Feriens Tego', ('Striking, I will defend'). Loyalist memorials mimic cenotaph displays and feature familiar captions: 'lest we forget' and 'at the going down of the sun, we will remember'. Imagery of bowed heads and downturned rifles echo the respect and honour given to veterans. This idea of 'service' is a repeated leitmotif with a literal meaning, as UVF members fought in the First World War and were slaughtered at the Battle of the Somme. The tours present this in a celebratory fashion, as the 36th (Ulster) Division of the British Army, comprised mainly of the UVF, was the only unit to achieve its objectives on the opening day of the battle, capturing a section of the German front line. Narratives of courage, loyalty and sacrifice permeate murals and memorials, which are dominated by the red poppy of remembrance, regardless of whether the deaths they commemorate were connected to formal duties.

The McKeag mural is metres from a primary school and our guide argued that this exemplifies radicalisation. He may be correct, and McKeag himself may have been a victim, as he was typical of second-generation working-class Protestants who 'emerged from Loyalist ghettos' (McDonald, 2000:online) and rose through the ranks of the Ulster Young Militants. One Loyalist guide described sectarianism as 'handed down by parents to their children' and that youngsters aspired to be paramilitaries 'because they have little prospect of meaningful futures' (interviewee 9). Another interviewee told us about his upbringing in a Protestant Unionist working-class household. His uncle was in the Orange Order and regularly took him to Reverend Ian Paisley's sermons. Paisley espoused the superiority of Protestantism and Unionism, whilst inciting hatred against Catholics through his thunderous rhetoric of devils and anti-christs. Our guide was 'indoctrinated into Loyalism' with paramilitaries 'incited by the clergy and armed by the military' (interviewee 6). After a childhood immersion in the demagoguery of Paisley, our guide joined the youth wing of the UVF and quickly became a military commander, with multiple life sentences for several murders. In prison, he had a realisation:

'What we were doing as Loyalists wasn't making me any more British. What the Republicans were doing was not bringing them independence. All it was doing was making the prisons overcrowded and the graveyards full ... Violence is futile. Dialogue is the only way'

(interviewee 6)

The tours were personal in that they offered individual perspectives. Republicans drew on their prison experience but there was an overall narrative that the Loyalist tours didn't have. Instead, they stressed that they were speaking only for themselves, emphasising the division within Loyalism. There wasn't the same solidarity from Loyalist interviewees, in contrast to the Republican's convivial comradeship. They felt misunderstood:

'My motivation is to try to portray The Troubles as ordinary young men and women caught up in a circumstance that wasn't of their making' (interviewee 8)

'It's about saying "we weren't monsters. These were monstrous things but ... it was unavoidable because of the circumstances" ... it was wrong ... but *it happened*' (interviewee 6, emphasis in original)

'I want to let people know that we are not bad people. Shankill Road ... has had a bad press. It's time to show the human side' (interviewee 7)

Loyalist interviewees felt that politicians and the media had demonised and criminalised their communities, a point supported by the literature (see Gallaher and Shirlow, 2006). None of our participants expressed solidarity or association with Unionist parties, and there was resentment towards the DUP for its failure to represent their interests:

'We were blatantly used by this middle-class party, carried to victory every time by a working-class electorate who couldn't tell you what the benefit was and probably hadn't read the manifesto' (interviewee 9)

'The DUP were elected here for years on a manifesto that was "smash Sinn Féin". When they come to your door and say "can I rely on your vote?", I say "what is smashing Sinn Féin going to do for me? Is it going to get my daughter into a better school? Is it going to keep the accident and emergency unit open 24/7 instead of shutting at 5pm?"' (interviewee 6)

Whilst segregated cities are easily exploited for votes (Herrault and Murtagh, 2019), Loyalist interviewees felt distanced from political Unionism, underlining their isolation. They believed they had not benefitted from the peace process, nor had their loyalty been appreciated, which compounded their sense of abandonment and betrayal:

'I've been wracking my brains for years why we are so loyal to the queen and crown because they tried to ditch us' (interviewee 6)

'We took the crown off our flag ... when we realised ... the British state was against us' (interviewee 7)

This intensifies the perception that they can only trust those in their community or paramilitary faction, reinforcing the insularity they are criticised

for.

For one Loyalist participant, the tours help him to come to terms with his actions. The interview was reflective, almost confessional, touching upon themes of reparation, justice, forgiveness and restoration: 'tourism is not about simply saying sorry. Saying sorry isn't enough. You can only say it so many times'. Another set up the Andy Tyrrie Interpretive Centre to house his collection of paramilitary artefacts and prison artworks. This was a personal, deeply felt project, which he referred to as 'therapy'. He set up the museum to provide a space for ex-prisoners:

'to reflect on what actually happened. We were going at it so ferociously we didn't have time to think about what we were doing and the repercussions ... It's a way of dealing with the past' (interviewee 8)

Since Northern Ireland has the world's highest rate of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (Ferry et al., 2012), and the highest prevalence of suicide (O'Neill, 2018) and mental illness (O'Neill and Rooney, 2018) in the UK, setting up museums and tours may be important for reflection. This is significant in the context of the collapse and absence of Stormont³, which has resulted in mental health services being restricted, strategies not being implemented and key decisions put on hold (O'Neill and Rooney, 2018).

Whilst Loyalists seemed lost, Republicans are actively involved in Sinn Féin as grassroots activists and in paid roles, having strategically enmeshed themselves into the apparatus of the State. This exemplifies the sophistication of the Republican campaign, which was evident throughout the fieldwork and acknowledged by a Loyalist guide: 'Republicanism is based on a 5/10/15/20 year political strategy' (interviewee 9). Loyalism, in comparison, appeared rudderless.

CONCLUSIONS

This research presents a picture of how former paramilitaries understand and undertake their roles as tour guides. Tourism enables ex-prisoners to take an active role in their communities in a city with a legacy of deprivation, discrimination and unemployment. It raises awareness of historic and ongoing class politics, whilst allowing marginalised individuals to represent themselves, share their personal experiences and have the right to be heard. Both parties tell heartfelt stories of heroism, bravery and courage; of victory over adversity; and of enduring suffering and sacrifice, further dramatized by the landscape, with its physical remnants of the conflict and its everyday territorialisation, often via commemoration.

For Loyalists, they are the true defenders of sovereignty, 'more British than the British', and whilst they have paid the ultimate sacrifice for their loyalty, they do not feel adequately rewarded. Stepping up during The Troubles was a matter of civic responsibility to the community and paramilitary factions. For

³ The devolved Northern Irish Assembly collapsed in 2017 after disagreements in the power-sharing leadership between the Unionists and Nationalists. At the time of writing and after a three-year hiatus, the British and Irish governments agreed on a deal to restore the NIA.

Republicans, the IRA was a minority of a minority, fighting oppression and imperialism. Their struggle was represented in humanitarian terms, via the lens of civil rights and hence have a more saleable narrative. They locate their struggle in a linear and comprehensive (Graham, 2004) timeline of centuries of persecution, framed by the contemporary discourse of decolonisation. This has international traction, as we turn away from colonialism and recognise the right of indigenous peoples to regain their land and protect their cultures (Tuck and Yang, 2012). Republican guides see themselves as political activists, with tourism an important means of campaigning. They promote a Nationalist, Socialist and Internationalist ideology, and the tours are a non-violent, legitimate vehicle. In contrast, Loyalists struggle to make sense of their position, feeling increasingly isolated and under siege, 'having the whole world, at best, not understanding them and at worst, despising them' (Spencer, 2015). Their tours serve a more individual purpose, from self-reflection and sense-making, to rebutting Republican propaganda and resisting unification. Whilst the tours are primarily personal, the personal is politically inflected. At a time when many feel politically, economically and socially disenfranchised, tourism provides an opportunity to process their actions and critique their opponents as well as those claiming to represent them. Due to these different motivations, Loyalist tours lack the consistent message of the Republicans, who are more effective because there remains an unwavering commitment to the original cause. However, Loyalists' sense of their 'loyalism', as one participant put it, as 'evolving and changing ... in flux', lent pathos to their narratives and created an empathic response. Tourism, for both sides, presents a political and personal opportunity to those who have lost legitimacy in other spheres.

It also provides a space to discuss the past in an uncensored fashion, to remember the deceased and to learn about the conflict. Crucially, Troubles Tourism enables competing discourses to co-exist and first-hand narratives to be shared in a palatable and non-confrontational way. The memorials, flags, murals and other vernacular additions to the urban landscape are ways in which competing and contested ideologies are 'concretized as material realities' (Graham and Whelan, 2007:493) in segregated places. The violence of the past is evident in the everyday, with tourists forming 'multiple and unstable subject positions' (Lisle, 2000:104) from these messy competing narratives. This enables divergent positions to be tolerated, which is politically important for peace, whilst, simultaneously, allowing the conflict to remain present (McDowell et al., 2017).

These differing narratives are essential for these two groups to work together, suggesting that whilst reconciliation is yet to be realised, there is the potential for tourism to contribute to a more stable post-conflict community. This conclusion follows a range of projects where ex-paramilitaries have been shown to lead peace-building and cooperation, and are perfectly placed to do so precisely because they understand violence (McEvoy and Shirlow, 2009). Whilst this article sheds light on the experiences and motivations of the former prisoners, more data is required to understand how Troubles Tourism intersects with other activities, especially around conflict transformation, and how it can be harnessed with a view to post-conflict transition. At the same

time, whilst the tours facilitate competing interpretations and narratives, and enable the contested nature of the conflict to be understood more widely, they raise questions of how genuine peace can ever be established whilst they continue to propagate sectarian interests and reassert hierarchies of victimhood. These issues are not addressed in detail in existing discussions of dark tourism. In moving the focus from the experience of the visitor to that of the guide, and in understanding the Troubles as an ongoing past in the present, rather than a commodified history, we advocate for a more varied and nuanced approach to post-conflict tourism in and beyond the Northern Irish context. For example, through mobilising local communities, providing employment, contributing to the local economy, and protecting specific local identities, Troubles Tourism can be understood as a form of community-based tourism. We suggest that other examples of post-conflict tourism may also be fruitfully analysed through this lens.

The persistence of singular versions of a complex history (McAtackney, 2015) is understandable in what, for many, is a live issue. The struggle did not end with the Good Friday Agreement. It continues for those who refuse to recognise the legitimacy of the British State and those who seek to preserve British sovereignty. Our participants believed that it was a matter of time before the UK relinquishes Northern Ireland. This vision of the future is not farfetched. The peace deal that led to the ceasefire recognised the wish of the majority to remain part of the UK, but acknowledged the legitimacy of the desire for unification. It declared that the latter can only be achieved if it is subject to the agreement and consent of a majority. As the Catholic birthrate outnumbers that of Protestants, a referendum on a united Ireland, as legislated for, is perhaps to be expected and has potentially been fast-tracked by the implementation of Brexit⁴, the recent political earthquakes of same-sex marriage and abortion reform in the Republic of Ireland, and the forthcoming reinstatement of Stormont.

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⁴ The consequences of Brexit for Northern Ireland are unclear at the time of writing, as arrangements depend on forthcoming negotiations that will take place in the transition period up to 31 December 2020.

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