Charles University

Faculty of Humanities

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Beyond Sectarianism: the Dynamics of Memory in Northern Irish Muralism

Doctoral Thesis

Mgr. Gabriella Rava

Supervisor: Prof. Mgr. Irena Řehořová, Ph.D.

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Abstract: The present research aims to analyze the famous political murals of Northern Ireland within a renewed frame that moves beyond the theoretical dimension that has dominated the study of mural painting in the province. Proposing the concept of 'muralism', which allows for the adoption of a systematic and unitary perspective on this well-rooted practice, this work investigates its contemporary development through the analysis of some functions/trends underlying it. These are identified as: commodification and heritagization, transnationalism, commemoration, archival impulse and the related digitization and archiving of images of murals. These functions/trends, which encompass muralism both within the realm of material culture and digital practices, fall within a theoretical model that describes muralism as a dynamic system through which the communities of Northern Ireland have embodied and transmitted their own collective memories, especially those of the conflict. It is within this model, which highlights the dynamic nature and (auto)poietic character of muralism as a system of memory, that the aforementioned functions/trends are examined, moving on multiple levels of manifestation. These include the level of the material practice of mural painting with all its significance and rhythm of change, the level of the dynamics of memory conveyed by muralism, but also that of the widely neglected online circulation and digital life of images of murals collected in (digital) archives. This wider perspective, grounded in the recent developments of the semiotics of memory, sociosemiotics and memory studies, allows for understanding the growing complexity of muralism in a society that is profoundly changing, while still struggling with the legacy of the conflict and its 'ghostly' or actual remnants. Aiming at 'moving beyond' sectarianism as the dominant frame within which the murals of Northern Ireland have been researched, this work attempts to fill some of the gaps in the study of these artefacts and their contemporary perception. Indeed, as an expression of the collective imaginary of the communities, muralism mirrors a much more fragmented reality that (re)images itself between the return of the past and a confident projection into the future.

Keywords: muralism; dynamic system; memory; archive; Northern Ireland

To Northern Ireland,

place whose memory is unforgettable

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Introduction. From murals to *muralism*

The sarcasm with which the British writer and actor Quentin Crisp comments on the religious division in Northern Ireland reveals quite clearly the centrality of a certain paradigm that has dominated the interpretation of the thirty-year conflict known as 'the Troubles'. Described as ethno-religious, ethno-national or more commonly as sectarian, the conflict was the result of a much longer history of violence and discrimination whose roots go back at least to the sixteenth century, when "the British Government were engaged in the subjugation of the island [of Ireland] and the imposition of an alien ruling class on the native Catholic peoples" (Kennedy-Pipe 1997, p. 2). These events, followed by the so-called plantation of a large number of Scottish Protestants in the province of Ulster, in the future Northern Ireland, are certainly key in explaining the ethno and religious divisions in the narrative of the Troubles. And yet, understanding why the conflict erupted in the late 1960s may prove to be more complex than what pure historical facts tell us (Rose 2000).

Crisp's words also reveal something more interesting beyond the common Catholic-Protestant or nationalist-unionist dichotomy, namely the persistence of a certain imaginary, conveyed by the woman's question, that imposes itself in spite of its explicit 'irrationality' with respect to Crisp's belief in the non-existence of God. In short, the woman's question can be considered a sort of cognitive bias behind which lies her inability to acknowledge an alternative imaginary. This subtler reading of Crisp's quotation helps to reframe the Troubles and their legacy in a different light which, along with the political-historical reasons, takes into consideration a dimension of the imaginary in which the discourses, narratives and representations of and around the conflict are shaped and circulate. This is exactly the dimension in which the famous political murals of Northern Ireland exist. They may be regarded as one of the most prominent manifestations of the collective imaginary of the province, a material and yet symbolic space in which the communities have been commenting and representing the evolving political circumstances for more than forty years.

Murals and conflict are closely connected in Northern Ireland, despite the fact that the first political murals to appear in the province (exclusively Protestant/unionist) date back to the beginning of the previous century (Crowley 2022). However, it was only in the context of the conflict that murals could also be adopted by the Catholic/nationalist communities as 'political tools' through which they could make their voices heard. When the Troubles formally ended in 1998 with the signing of the so-called Good Friday (or Belfast) Agreement, the practice of painting political murals in working-class neighborhoods did not end, particularly in the two main cities of Belfast and Derry/Londonderry. Murals continue to be painted and, above all, they are now at the center of successful tourist tours focused on the recent history of conflict in Northern Ireland. It may be possible to talk about a new 'stage of their life' after their political use in the past, but that would be simplistic and fundamentally wrong. In the contemporary panorama, the political murals of Northern Ireland should be regarded as complex artefacts, whose significance and social functions are varied and partially overlapping.

Excluded from the field of institutional art for a long time (Rolston 2012) and still largely neglected in this respect, murals have mainly been studied in recent research as representations of the political struggle or, in connection to it, as expressions of the ethno-sectarian identities claimed by the communities (Goalwin 2013). This view is still reflected by most analyses, in which the sectarian nature of murals is affirmed along with their touristic appeal, a perspective that the segregationist geography of much of the space in Northern Ireland reinforces. Moreover, this approach has generally privileged the spatial dimension and distribution of murals, considering that their location in a highly politicized territory determines to a great extent how they are interpreted. A missing aspect in contemporary research on these artworks seems then to be a temporal dimension, or a diachronic perspective that grasps their transformation over time. The inclusion of this second dimension along with the spatial one allows the long-established practice of painting murals in Northern Ireland to be embraced in a more systematic way that acknowledges the 'unitary' character and specificity of this tradition in the province. From these considerations, it follows that instead of adopting a pluralist, and too often binary, perspective on the working-class murals, it may be more productive to treat them as a unitary form of expression that is here defined as *muralism*.

To talk about muralism implies the affirmation of a certain degree of cohesion that should characterize this practice in spite of the obvious differences in terms of political and identity claims made by the communities. In short, the notion of muralism suggests an underlying

political view that makes of it a movement, or enables it to be perceived in these terms. It is common, for example, to refer to the muralist project that developed in the 1920s and 1930s in Mexico as muralism, because of its socio-political commitment. In the case of Northern Ireland, however, muralism and the more unitary character it entails are denied through the use of the term 'murals', which reflects the internal divisions between the communities. It then becomes clear that adopting the concept of muralism, which is central in this study, aims to challenge some established ideas on the political murals of Northern Ireland and their (exclusive) interpretation as a residue of sectarianism. Obviously, this does not mean that there are no significant differences in terms of content, iconography or political beliefs, or that murals are no longer rooted in sectarianism. Instead, referring to muralism is motivated by the attempt to grasp the 'systematic' nature of this practice, which already has a long history in Northern Ireland.

Murals have changed over time, and their functions too, as the present study will try to show, but they have also developed an increasing level of awareness that is reflected in both their greater sophistication and the not infrequent forms of self-reference; these latter are favored also by the murals' touristic success, which in turn encourages their promotion (see chapter 1). These aspects still remain largely unaddressed by current research, with the exception of Tony Crowley's works, which constitute an important source for this study. This scholar is one of the very few to have adopted a more systematic approach to the Northern Irish murals, culminating in the digital archive that collects thousands of images of these artefacts, analyzed here in chapter 6. Crowley is also one of the few, along with the most famous researcher in Northern Irish murals, Bill Rolston, to have acknowledged the complexity of these artworks in terms of their political, aesthetic, historical and memory significance. As he affirms with reference to the lack of deep research on the murals:

> the recourse to the walls is a fascinating phenomenon, suggesting both a certain type of confidence (even the walls can convey the message) and desperation (only the walls can convey the message). And this makes the absence of critical response all the more peculiar. It may be that the failure to engage critically with the murals is simply a matter of distaste for the war and all its bitter, violent consequences; they are a reminder of a period that is best forgotten (Crowley 2011, p. 47).

Things have certainly changed in the last 10-15 years, since the interest shown by tourists in the history of the Troubles has contributed to a different understanding of the murals, whose connection to the conflict is well emphasized by Crowley. And yet it is revealing that

much of the present research still deals mainly with the sectarian nature of murals and their commodification as a consequence of tourism. What is still missing then is a wider approach, to be understood on a double level: first, it should encompass the plurality of functions/meanings of murals in contemporary Northern Ireland; second, it should offer a comprehensive account of muralism per se. Apart from the very few works which have collected a large number of mural images, and which are then mainly a visual record of these artworks (see Borthwick 2015 or Rolston's *Drawing Support* series, published between 1992 and 2013), almost all the studies are journal articles or single chapters[1], while more extensive analyses are still to be done. In addition, there is a general tendency to treat muralism as one *among* the various expressions of community-based arts or as simply another form of commemoration in a landscape marked by temporary or permanent memorials. Only rarely is it treated as a very specific artform or political expression, a unique phenomenon in its scope and insight.

The present work tries to fill this void, both in its more systematic approach to muralism and in its attention to the diversified and largely overlapping functions performed by murals. More specifically, muralism is here regarded as a highly fragmented system of representation in which multiple trends coexist, identified as: commodification, heritagization, transnationalism, archival impulse/intentionality, digital afterlife and commemoration. The commodification and heritagization of murals are largely dependent on their touristic promotion, which started shortly after the end of the conflict and is still run by people from the working-class communities of Belfast, including ex-prisoners who offer the famous Black Taxi Tours of the political murals. Transnationalism refers to the increasing attention and inclusion of international figures and events that has been characterizing more recent muralism. This trend, which is definitely more typical of nationalist/republican murals, has been largely overlooked, Rolston being a notable exception (2009); however, it is fundamental to acknowledge the transnational dimension of many representations within a perspective that places muralism in a broader context and in the presence of a global audience. *Archival impulse*, to borrow a concept introduced by Hal Foster (2004), here means the 'testimonial value' underlying many murals, both in relation to their location in the geo-political space of Northern Ireland and to their claim of authenticity, i.e., their involvement in the narrative of the past. The archival impulse is often connected to the

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[1] Apart from the works of Bill Rolston and Neil Jarman, the two leading authors in the study of Northern Irish murals, see the most recent publications by Goulding and McCroy (2020), Fillis and Lehman (2022) and Germain and Doutre (2021), to mention a few.

prevalent function/use of murals as commemorative devices: although mainly temporary and characterized by a short lifespan, murals are often conceived as memorials, depictions that keep alive the memories of the victims killed in the conflict or those of key events for the communities, around which their own identities are preserved over time. Finally, the last of the trends mentioned above refers to the digital afterlife of the murals. Apart from Tony Crowley (2015b; 2022), no other scholar has as yet analyzed their existence as digital images, despite their circulation and promotion online and, above all, despite the digital archives created to collect the photographs of these murals.

It appears clear from the functions/trends illustrated above that the present study places itself within the narrow body of works on the Northern Irish murals while introducing a wider perspective and significantly new directions of research. Whereas the relationship between murals and tourism, and the related issues of commodification and heritagization, have recently become a focus of investigation (see Skinner and Jolliffe 2017 and Crooke and Maguire 2019), the other aspects (transnationalism, archival impulse and the digital afterlife of murals) are almost absent from contemporary research on muralism. More questionable is the function of commemoration- since the role played by murals in the transmission of (collective) memories has often been acknowledged (Crowley 2011; Rolston 2010), but the only work that explicitly addresses the commemorative function of certain murals is Viggiani (2013). Certainly, the very broad perspective adopted here potentially risks producing a vague overview of what is in fact a long-established and complex phenomenon. On the other hand, however, it seems all the more necessary to finally provide that comprehensive approach discussed above, recognizing the highly dynamic nature of Northern Irish muralism that enables its transformation and diversification across time.

To sum up, the present work aims to raise a set of issues, most of which have never been addressed, and which can be summarized in five research questions around which the following chapters are structured. The first question concerns the previously mentioned possibility of talking about muralism with regard to the working-class murals of Northern Ireland. The second question deals with the increasing 'internationalization' of muralism in the province as a consequence of its conversion into a tourist attraction, and if and to what extent it is affecting the public perception of murals. The third question raises the issue of transnationalism, i.e., if the transnational figures and events represented in some murals are really able to promote a different imaginary, moving beyond sectarianism and mere political propaganda. With the fourth question, one wonders whether commemorative murals reveal what is here defined as an 'archival impulse/intentionality' that comes into conflict with the

temporary nature of muralism. Finally, the fifth question concerns the way in which the digitization and consequent archiving of photographs of the murals are affecting (if so) their perception, marking the transition from their existence as material artefacts to their extended life as detached images.

Muralism and imaginary

While recognizing the ideological and propagandistic nature of most of the political murals, Tony Crowley (2015a) affirms their importance for understanding the complex reality of Northern Ireland. More radically, it is possible to assert that they are often able to 'reveal' certain ongoing dynamics that the post-conflict culture tries to erase from the public landscape, often literally. Echoing similar observations, and yet surprisingly without taking the murals into consideration, Rush (2022) talks about a "cracked art world" with regard to the community arts of Northern Ireland. The metaphor of the cracked mirror, built on the common image of art as a mirror of reality, simultaneously affirms and denies the imitative nature of art. Rush acknowledges its ability to 'reflect' some aspects of Northern Irish society, while at the same time it restores a fragmented image, a "broken picture" of the peacebuilding policy lurking beneath the surface of normalization as its internal contradictions (re)emerge and coexist. This idea is at the core of the present work: like other community arts, muralism is equally revealing of those multiple dynamics that continue to shake Northern Irish society well after the end of the conflict. Through these community-based artworks, Northern Ireland, at least in part, mirrors itself, but in a deformed manner; murals become then the space in which the collective imaginary of the province is manifested and performed, the past is revived and the future projected, if not strategically planned.

The concept of imaginary is central also in the work of Keenan (2022). She studies the role of Belfast's community arts in envisioning a new city in post-conflict Northern Ireland, especially in relation to the influence exerted by globalization and cosmopolitanism. Keenan's work (p. 21) emphasizes a notion of imaginary that largely derives from Benedict Anderson (1983), to be understood as the mental image a certain community forms of itself. However, imaginary should not be regarded as an abstract exercise in visualizing alternative scenarios- since it is enacted by the community/nation's members in the public space, where it unveils the political tensions underlying post-conflict society. Moreover, in the case of Northern Ireland, and particularly in relation to the murals, talking about imaginary involves another dimension, that of the actual *re-imaging* of the visual landscape of Northern Ireland.

With her use of the concept of "reimagining", Hocking (2015) succeeds in bringing together the intrinsic dynamism that drives change in symbolic landscapes (including those arising from the painting of murals) and the dimension of the imaginary, this latter embracing both that of the communities involved and that inspiring the numerous initiatives which aim to replace certain visual elements in the space. In short, it is possible to state that the murals, and their re-imaging, are part of the material manifestation of a collective imaginary that reveals an internal fragmentation, that cracked mirror evoked by Rush (2022).

These observations reconnect to the reflections that opened this introduction, which affirmed the centrality of the imaginary to muralism and, more generally, to all the symbolic representations through which politics is enacted in the public space. Whereas the imaginary put forward by the state's initiatives and its numerous schemes for re-imaging Northern Ireland focus on the future of the province, the imaginary that dominates community-based muralism largely tends to revive the past. Therefore, it is not only the sectarian nature of many representations that is perceived as being at odds with a post-conflict society, but also their backward looking perspective, often blamed for preventing a real change in people's mindsets. Community-based murals would then contribute to the *re-presencing* of the past (Pogačar 2016) in contemporary Northern Ireland, slowing down or eventually compromising the shift towards a more inclusive society fostered by the future-oriented imaginary of state policy. While these concerns are certainly valid, the enlarged perspective on muralism that this study proposes also encourages consideration of the genuine political aspect implied in the murals' recovery of the past.

With regard to contemporary arts in Northern Ireland, Long (2017) sheds light on the relevance for many artists of the recent past's legacy, especially in relation to traces the conflict has left in the landscape. These traces, at risk of disappearing in the near future because of regeneration plans in the province, have been 'exhumed' by the gaze of numerous artists, determined to make these endangered traces visible again in the context of the post-conflict society. Inspired by the work of Derrida, Long frames these tendencies of a part of contemporary art practice within that 'science of hauntology' coined by the French philosopher with reference to the return or persistence of the past in the present, which threatens to disrupt it. Instead of resuming a backward looking perspective, however, the artistic expressions analyzed by Long acquire a political dimension in their ability to jeopardize the apparent stability and normalization implemented by the peacebuilding process. The hauntological impulse that moves many artists in post-Troubles Northern Ireland is indeed what gives rise to

a range of art that potentially 'harbours threats and arouses anxieties' as it offers alternative, unorthodox reflection on the uncanny landscapes of returning 'normality', on the ghostly interference of the past in the smooth progress of the present, and on unavoidably phantomistic forms of public collectivity at this supposed 'post-political' moment (Long 2017, pp. 9-10).

It is an art that, in questioning the remnants of the past and their ambiguous position in the post-conflict society, discloses the tensions and feelings of discomfort that the peacebuilding policy has only superficially suppressed. Moreover, it is an art that deals with the dimension of memory and its silent persistence in the landscape, the backdrop of the now 'normalized' lives of Northern Irish people. Indeed, it is only from engagement with the ghostly presence of the past that this art can become fully political and contribute to the development of a critical perspective towards the state's politics of oblivion. While Long's analysis concerns the work of established artists, excluding the rich heritage of community-based art, part of his observations may also be regarded as relevant when applied to muralism. On closer inspection, murals represent a space of resistance, even if in a much more controversial way: they literally *materialize* the past in the landscape, making visible those narratives and memories that the future-oriented imaginary would like to erase.

And yet, this 'subversive' aspect of muralism is overshadowed by the emphasis given to its roots in sectarianism, responsible for continued discrimination and bigotry in present-day Northern Ireland. Moreover, muralism has never been regarded as a (proper) form of art, but rather as mere (uncritical) propaganda. In this sense, its political dimension is conceived as backward looking in a very different way from the art analyzed by Long, which turns to the past to question its ghostly presence behind the surface of normalization. To sum up, muralism is largely regarded as an empty repetition of the past that, rather than being merely recovered, is 'imposed' on the landscape- in the form of ideological representations that 'manipulate' or re-write history. What this work will try to show, however, is that even those controversial depictions deemed to reiterate a contentious past and its associated violence may reveal a subtler political dimension in the present: they *compel* passers-by to confront the past, especially in a context dominated by the peace-building narrative and its impulse to forget or, as seen above, re-imagine the legacy of conflict. This is particularly evident in the case of explicitly commemorative murals, which evoke the past in relation to the landscape in a very significant way. It is within this framework that the archival impulse of muralism emerges, as chapter 5 will investigate, disseminating 'traces' of the past where

they are not visible or present in the space. This archival impulse can be assimilated to the 'ghostly interference of the past' identified by Long in his analysis of contemporary art in Northern Ireland, revealing thus a line of continuity that unites muralism (in its obsession with the past) with recent trends in the works of many artists.

Although a number of authors have acknowledged the role played by murals in the (re)production and circulation of memories, only Tony Crowley and Neil Jarman explicitly address the material dimension of muralism beyond its political symbolism. Shortly after the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, Jarman (2002) was already talking about "troubling remnants" with reference to the traces left by the conflict in the landscape of Northern Ireland. Somehow anticipating the hauntological approach embraced by Long, Jarman seems to recognize the material presence of a past which is not yet a reality, and which compels the country to deal with it as a necessary step towards a better future. The fact that the memory of the Troubles and its victims has been 'managed' mainly on a community/local level in past years, however, casts doubt on the efficiency with which the process of conflict transformation has been implemented and, not least, imagined. As Lehner (2019) remarks, both the figures of victims and survivors "are held as exemplars of the past that must be left behind" (p. 92) in the context of the post-1998 Agreement. If they are acknowledged as reminders of the past, says Lehner, their status as *remainders* of that same past tends to be regarded as incompatible with the imperative of the peace-building process.

Due to the difficulty and uncertainty in dealing with the past and its legacy, it is therefore no surprise that political murals are still largely treated as a problematic issue, if not an embarrassment, that threatens to haunt future society with memories of violence and alienation. Seen from an enlarged perspective that re-connects the murals with the re-presencing of the past, the murals acquire a different political dimension, an almost subversive nature in relation to the prevailing politics of selective amnesia. While backward looking in many respects, this post-conflict political dimension of muralism does not, however, prevent the (re)imagining of both the past and future. In Northern Ireland, this is always a *reimaging*; the collective imaginary tends to be immediately converted into images, to the point that renewing the visual culture is perceived as equivalent to regenerating the imaginary itself. This is all the more true in the digital age, where images of murals circulate globally and contribute to diffusing a certain perception of Northern Ireland, as well as the (visual) permanence of its haunting past.

Certainly, the shift from muralism as an expression of material culture to its digital afterlife means entering a very different space of memory, where the status of murals as

remnants of the past changes but does not disappear. On the contrary, it invokes a transnational framework that represents the ultimate dimension of muralism, caught between its local rooting and its orientation towards a wider public. Clearly, in this changed context, descriptions of the murals as "part of a systemic process which delineates and defines sectarian territoriality" (Bush 2013, p. 179) appear too limited. At present, muralism exists as a much more fragmented phenomenon, even if something still remains valid: its capacity to mirror the dynamics of a collective imaginary that is still in its making, and that, while lingering in the past, has always been projecting itself into the future.

Work Methodology

The wider perspective on contemporary[2] muralism adopted here with reference to its internal dynamics and fragmentation, necessarily forces us to focus on a limited timeframe. This study is not a history of muralism, or, more precisely, it does not provide a historical account of this practice. Whereas, as anticipated above, the temporal dimension is (re)introduced along with the spatial one, such temporal dimension is not only reduced to the diachronic development of muralism. This does not mean that it is completely absent: the change in the use and perception of the murals can be appreciated throughout the work, but the synchronic perspective takes priority, since this latter allows for the full acknowledgment of the coexistent functions performed by muralism. When talking about a temporal dimension, then, it is not only to a diachronic perspective that one refers, but also to the way in which temporality is 'managed' and ultimately conveyed by the murals. It is in fact through these artworks that narratives of the past are (re)produced and circulated in the public realm, affecting in a significant way people's feelings towards that same (traumatic) past.

More specifically, at least three different declinations of the temporal dimension may be distinguished with regard to muralism. The first one concerns the 'creation' of temporality itself or, more precisely, of certain 'effects' of temporality through the constant reproduction of events/figures of the past. Their presence in the landscape forces the locals to deal with

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[2] Based on the definition given by Terry Smith in his work *What Is Contemporary Art?* (2009), 'contemporary' should be here understood not (necessarily) as a synonym for 'new', but as an equivalent of "multiple ways of being with, in, and out of time, separately at once, with others and without them" (Smith in Long 2017, p. 51). This understanding of 'contemporary' highlights the concomitant (and often discordant) dynamics that animate muralism both internally (as a system) and externally (in relation to the changing environment).

their legacy on a daily basis by exposing them to the influence exerted by the past in the present. The second manifestation of the temporal dimension is strictly connected to the previous one, since it concerns what can be defined as the 'dynamics of memory', meaning the creation, (re)production and circulation of collective memories by the murals. This dimension includes both the return of certain themes/iconographic patterns internal to the local culture and the incorporation of 'external' or transnational memories (De Cesari and Rigney 2014). Finally, the third expression of the temporal dimension that can be identified refers to the actual rhythm of change of the murals in the public landscape. This encompasses their material lifespan, as explored by McCormick and Jarman (2005), as well as the internal and symbolic conflicts that largely determine that same lifespan or may alter the rhythm of change of the murals.

The (re)introduction of the temporal dimension in the three expressions illustrated above can restore the complexity of muralism, integrating another perspective that coexists with the dominant spatial dimension in which murals have traditionally been analyzed. Fundamental works such as those by Shirlow and Murtagh (2006) or Feldman (1991) have explored the interconnection between the violence and the geography of segregation, this being a spatial and symbolic context from which murals derive much of their significance. And yet it is undeniable that the 'manipulation' of temporality and the (re)production of memories embodied in the murals are central aspects that deserve more consideration in contemporary research. Moreover, they need to be addressed from a truly interdisciplinary perspective that can grasp the different dynamics at play and the change of muralism from a locally-based practice to a global phenomenon that attracts tourists and has a digital afterlife. This is the reason why this study, as a qualitative analysis of contemporary muralism in Northern Ireland, crosses the fields of semiotics and memory studies, integrating their disciplinary perspectives to the sociological approach that mainly dominates current research on the murals.

Semiotics- particularly the recent developments of sociosemiotics and the emerging field of the semiotics of memory- allows for a comprehensive understanding of muralism. Thanks to its ability to analyze the way in which cultural expressions are articulated, how they are transmitted/mediated over time and ultimately enacted in the public sphere, the semiotic approach is exactly what enables the study of the murals *as* muralism, i.e., a unitary phenomenon in the sense explained above (see in particular chapter 1 and 4). On the other hand, the multidisciplinary field of memory studies provides some indispensable concepts for analyzing the dynamics of memory mentioned above as one of the manifestations of the

temporal dimension of muralism. In particular, the more recent shift from nation/nationhood as the main focus of investigation to the travelling of memories (Erll 2011) within a transnational framework is indispensable for understanding the constitution of collective memories in contemporary muralism. This does not mean that the ethno-sectarian identities conveyed by many representations are disappearing from the walls; on the contrary, they tend to persist despite the various public schemes aimed at replacing more contentious depictions and, occasionally, they may reappear in relation to political events or commemorations. Nevertheless, Northern Irish muralism can no longer be interpreted as an exclusively ethno-sectarian phenomenon, as the growing references to foreign policy suggests. In this sense, memory studies can contribute to the analysis of the articulation and perception of collective memories by the murals, providing the methodological tools for studying their dynamics. Finally, in order to investigate the afterlife of murals as digital images, this work integrates some of the issues archival studies are currently dealing with.

Structure of the work

This dissertation is divided into two parts, the second of which is marked by the centrality of the concept of 'archive' in relation to the murals of Northern Ireland. The first part comprises four chapters, in which muralism is analyzed as an expression of material culture. Chapter 1, the theoretical core of the dissertation, begins by placing muralism in the framework of a semiotic theory of memory that allows for its definition in terms of a *dynamic system* which is deeply rooted in the recent history of the province. In particular, the model proposed by Elena Esposito (2008), and derived from Luhmann's social systems theory, provides a fertile ground for understanding some relevant aspects of contemporary muralism and its relation to the collective memories that are shaped by it. After this predominantly theoretical part, the chapter continues with some case studies that show in practice the previous assumptions on muralism. More specifically, the two recent trends of murals' *commodification* and *heritagization* are addressed, in a renovated context in which they have acquired a different status as a consequence of the growing interest shown by tourists in Northern Ireland's history of conflict. Controversial and often criticized, the touristic promotion of the political murals contrasts with the strategy adopted by the state, which reinforces a politics of forgetfulness- if not of real amnesia- that took the form of the several re-imaging programs implemented in the province.

The second chapter starts with a brief historical overview of the civil rights protests of the 1960s in Northern Ireland and their importance for advancing a transnational dimension through which the Catholic/nationalist/republican communities could (re)frame their socio-political position in the province. The focus then moves again to contemporary muralism and the role played by certain representations in establishing transnational links with other struggles/events from around the world. A central strategy in much nationalist/republican muralism, this trend triggers the *travelling of memories*, a concept that Erll (2011) coined with reference to the increasing transnational dimension of contemporary forms of remembrance. This trend may open a space for a different way of remembering, encouraging political activism and a *memory of hope* (Rigney 2018), in spite of the many absences and deficiencies in the representation of past and present-day Northern Ireland.

The third chapter, in strict continuity with the previous one, deals with the apparent lack of a transnational dimension in Protestant/unionist/loyalist muralism. While seeking to clarify the reasons for the more territorial nature of these depictions, the chapter also challenges the limits of this view, proposing a wider perspective that considers the potential transnationalism hidden behind some representations. In particular, two case studies are analyzed, devoted respectively to the iconography of the Battle of the Somme, a widely celebrated event in unionist/loyalist communities, and the re-emergence of the memory of the Titanic, built in Belfast by an almost exclusively Protestant workforce. The global resonance of both of these symbols of heroic defeatism represent perfect examples of the struggles of unionist/loyalist communities to 'claim back' what they perceive as their own cultural heritage; and yet, from these struggles, a new loyalist identity may arise, challenging 'traditional' unionism and its legacy.

Having focused on case studies in the second and third chapters, the fourth one is again a more theoretical section that defines muralism as an expression of material culture. Adopting an approach that largely derives from sociosemiotics, as well as from the intuitions of Jarman (1998) and Young (2015), the chapter highlights how murals should be understood as complex artefacts with a certain (and often unpredictable) lifespan, an aspect which is at the center of Jarman and McCormick's (2005) analysis of the 'death of a mural'. These observations lead to a reflection on the dynamic nature of muralism, which also includes the various interactions and performances triggered by murals in the public space. It follows that much of their significance lies in their material presence and actual lifespan, which introduce a temporal aspect that may affect the same dynamics of memory and their circulation; it is

exactly this dynamism that 'comes into conflict' with the archival impulse, which constitutes the other side of muralism, this latter being the focus of the second part of the work.

The fifth chapter introduces the concept of archive, which is central in the remainder of the book. The archival impulse is set against the need to commemorate those who lost their lives during the conflict, a need that emerged in particular with the end of the Troubles. In this context, muralism is thus redefined as a living and urban archive (Rava 2022) through which the past is both visualized and 'witnessed'. The testimonial value of the images is firstly questioned with respect to photography and the regime of visuality in Northern Ireland; then, considering the role played by photographs in inspiring the realization of many murals, images are examined as a form of evidence of the past, especially in the case of murals painted at a spot where death occurred. The archival impulse that animates these representations appears strictly connected to space, but also to the need to remember and bear witness to the past through images that claim their own 'authenticity'. The chapter ends by analyzing the techniques employed by some muralists to evoke the past and the way they manifest that archival impulse which haunts post-conflict Northern Ireland.

The sixth and final chapter moves its focus from murals as material artefacts in the public space to murals as digital images. Following the inspiring article by Conrad (2007), the chapter starts with some reflections on the reproduction of images of murals on a global scale, before introducing the central issue of preservation in the digital age. Through the example of street art, which shares very similar concerns, the digital afterlife of murals is addressed in all its complexity, exceeding the previous framework based on the concept of collective memory; this latter is replaced by that of *multitude memory* (Hoskins 2017), i.e., a digitally mediated and globally accessible way of remembering. It is within this new framework that digital archives are analyzed, focusing on the collections of murals known as the *Mural Directory* and *Murals of Northern Ireland*. These two case studies shed some light on more general issues of digital archiving/preservation, such as the communities' loss of control over their own representations (and their related interpretation) or the alternative temporalities that arise from the archive (Ernst 2013; 2017). They represent just some of the critical aspects of archiving muralism and the way it is affecting people's future memory of the Troubles.

Finally, the conclusions sum up the functions/aspects of muralism illustrated in the previous chapters in order to restore its complexity and the way it reflects the various dynamics at work in contemporary Northern Ireland. These dynamics are distributed on three levels: the different functions/aspects of muralism (dynamism of the system); its rhythm of

change (lifespan of the single representations); and the collective memories put into circulation by murals (the more specific dynamics of memory). It is then affirmed how the identified levels may be linked to a changing Northern Ireland, still described as a 'post-conflict' society, a concept that has proven to be limited when not ideologically-oriented (Murphy et al. 2017). Showing the ways in which muralism engages with the peace-process at a vernacular level (Coulter et al. 2021), however, reveals a more fragmented reality that transcends a post-conflict imaginary. It opens up a space of plural identities that the muralism of the future is called to fully manifest.

Lastly, before starting to analyze muralism, a small clarification regarding the terminology adopted by this work should be made. Throughout the dissertation, the concept of 'community' is largely used, in line with a consolidated tradition in studies on Northern Irish society. As common as ambivalent, "definitions of 'community' have tended to focus upon two aspects- community in terms of place or shared geography, and community in terms of shared interests" (Mayo 2000, p. 39). This may explain why the term is widely used with reference to Northern Ireland both during and after the conflict, where the politicization of space and a related legacy of segregation have traditionally played a fundamental role. Despite the vagueness of the term community and its abuse in present-day Northern Ireland (Graham 2009, p. 152), there does not currently seem to be an alternative concept that could effectively replace it. Therefore, this work adopts the 'established' terminology instead of proposing a different one. Nevertheless, in order to convey the internal fragmentation of what is traditionally conceived as a uniform group (i.e., the Catholic/nationalist/republican community or the Protestant/unionist/loyalist community), the plural form is here preferred, so that, for example, we will talk about nationalist/republican or unionist/loyalist *communities*. While inadequate, the plural form conveys at least an idea of dynamism and fracture that better reflect the actual redefinition of identities, at a local level (Northern Ireland) as well as at a global one, partially eroding monolithic concepts which may not encompass a more complex reality in evolution.

A final remark about the different concepts of memory employed in this work should be made. Despite its inadequacy for describing the contemporary processes of remembering in an increasingly digitally-mediated environment, the concept of 'collective memory' is here preferred when referring to the memories put into circulation by muralism in Northern Ireland. However, throughout the dissertation, other definitions of memory are also used on a case-by-case basis, depending on the specific dynamics at play; each time, the choice of a

certain term will be explained and justified in relation to the context, especially with the transition from analyzing the memories conveyed by (material) murals to those conveyed by their digital and archival images (see chapter 6).

Chapter 1. Muralism as a (dynamic) system of memory

Northern Ireland has long been marked by division and spatial segregation (Bollens 2012). Described in the terms of a "political geography" (Feldman 1991) both before and during the Troubles, the province and its capital city,[3] Belfast, contain evidence of the long-established sectarianism that still characterizes the post-conflict society in the present. Traces of division, in particular, defines the working-class communities of several neighborhoods of Belfast, while an equally noticeable contrast stands between these areas and the city center. Whereas the latter offers a modern and vibrant atmosphere identical to that of many other capital cities around the world, a walk in the working-class areas reveals a quite different reality, not only because of their vulnerability in economic terms, but especially on the visual level. During the conflict, these areas have generally suffered more violence than the rest of the city or the country, an aspect that further increased the already strong link between territory and identity that characterizes the political geography of Belfast.

This short premise is key to frame the murals of Northern Ireland within a spatial perspective and in relation to dividing elements like walls, fences and barbed wires that mark the landscape of Belfast, extensively analyzed by several scholars (McAtackney 2011; 2018; Féron 2011; Dixon et al. 2020). With the end of the conflict in 1998, the number of these dividing elements grew instead of decreasing, and their complete removal is at present an unfulfilled promise. Whereas there are scholars like McAtackney who mark the importance of removing them in order to foster a different and more inclusive society, others also underline the problematic aspects of this operation. When considering the feelings of uncertainty that may emerge as a consequence of their removal, and the residents' memories connected to the space, "extant physical and symbolic boundaries may prove difficult to dismantle as attempts to do so provoke resistance amongst local communities" (Dixon et al. 2020, p. 2). Moreover, peace-lines (as they are euphemistically known), are often the stage where threatening behavior tends to occur, an aspect that may affect the local response to their removal[4].

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[3] Northern Ireland is described in various ways, as a country, province or region.

[4] As early as 2013, the Northern Ireland Executive proposed the removal of most of the interface barriers and peace walls in different areas (and especially in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry) by 2023. The proposal represents an encouraging step towards a more inclusive society, although many barriers are still in place (see Dixon et al. 2020, p. 2).

The dimension of such physical barriers in Northern Ireland (McAtackney 2018), however, does not only materialize the historical division between the communities, but has also offered the ideal space for them to represent themselves in their own terms. In order to understand muralism in Northern Ireland, it is in fact necessary to highlight the close relationship between dividing elements (and the related political geography from which they derive) and murals themselves; from this perspective, the latter appear almost as a 'natural' outcome of a specific territoriality marked by ethno-sectarian divisions since at least the XVIII century. Murals and other symbolic representations are then deeply rooted in the geography of the province, as previous and contemporary research on their spatial dimension has shown (Jarman 1998; Roulston and Taggart 2021).

Starting from the 1980s, however, the appropriation of muralism by the nationalist/republican communities resulted in the emergence of a more explicit political use of the walls that revived the political geography of the working-class neighborhoods. Such appropriation, in addition, seems to mark a turning point for muralism on the temporal level: it appears in fact to recover and 're-adapt' the already established tradition of painting murals that until then was the exclusive prerogative of the Protestant/unionist/loyalist communities of Northern Ireland. The use of murals for celebrating historical episodes and figures like that of King William III of England (William of Orange), affectionately nicknamed by unionist people *King Billy*, marked the beginning of muralism in the province, where these representations already had a memory dimension. The recovery and consequent 'renewal' of this unionist practice by the nationalist/republican communities is a central aspect when considering it from a temporal (or eventually diachronic) perspective. The same perception of muralism changed in a significant way, since from a popular form of heritage-making it turned into a disturbing practice charged with political meaning and resistance towards the British troops. For the nationalist/republican communities such a change towards a form of propaganda on the walls also marked the passage from sporadic and simple graffiti to more sophisticated representations which, however, were mostly short-lived, not only because of the need to constantly refresh the themes depicted according to the ongoing political agenda, but also because they were regularly erased by the British Army[5].

To (re)interpret muralism within this temporal perspective, which relates the later adoption of this practice to its previous use, goes beyond its understanding in the terms of a

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[5] See for example the strategic use of Irish language in graffiti and murals analyzed by Carden (2017) both during and after the conflict, especially in 'Irish-branded' areas like Belfast's Gaeltacht quarter. See also Rava (2020) for an analysis of the use of Irish language as a brand fostering a new image of contemporary Belfast.

'territorial marking' that has dominated research until recently. As already seen above, murals are strongly connected to space in Northern Ireland; and yet, this spatial dimension should be integrated with the temporal one in order to grasp the unitary character of a long-established practice that has changed over time, gradually developing its own 'memory' and sense of awareness. Muralism, in short, can be rethought as a very specific (and eminently local, at least originally) form of representation that has gained a *historical* dimension in Northern Ireland. On one side, it is possible to suggest that the practice of painting murals has been shaping the actual way to remember the past, and especially the Troubles. Murals can be regarded as one among the media through which (popular) history and memory are represented and, more radically, materialized in the landscape. This material dimension (see chapter 4) is central: it has a direct impact on the way collective memories are articulated and transmitted, highlighting their dynamic nature (on which much research has recently focused[6]) that is a consequence of the same dynamism of murals in the landscape. On the other side, it is muralism in itself which has become part of the recent history of Northern Ireland, a defining element that characterizes its visual culture in a fundamental way.

A semiotic theory of memory that rearticulates the opposition between stability and dynamism may be particularly useful for (re)framing muralism in a more systematic way. Daniele Salerno (2021) recovers from Erll (2011) two opposing models of (collective) memory: the *containment* and the *flow* model. The first one derives from the pioneering work of Maurice Halbwachs, re-elaborated later by Pierre Nora and his successful notion of *lieu de mémoire* (site of memory), which highlights the connection between space and memory, or how the latter tends to be articulated in spatial terms[7]. The second model, that of the flow, dates back to the work of Aby Warburg, more interested in the recurrence of certain patterns over time. These two models, which, as underlined by Salerno, have usually been regarded as mutually exclusive, can however coexist from a semiotic perspective. Memory, in fact, needs some stability in order to persist and acquire a certain form/structure (its systematic character); on the other hand –yet- the dynamic nature of the patterns and figures which re-

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[6] This is particularly true in relation to the concepts of *transnational* (De Cesari and Rigney 2014), *travelling* (Erll 2011), *multidirectional* (Rothberg 2009) and *transcultural* (Bond and Rapson 2014) memory which emerged in the recent years. These different notions of collective memories share a very similar theoretical background, focused on their dynamism, which goes beyond the static nature of previously dominant frameworks, i.e., the nation or state.

[7] An aspect, this latter, that the semiotician Jurij Lotman has extended to the system(s) of culture in its entirety: according to Lotman, space becomes, along with the verbal language, what he calls a *primary modeling system*, i.e., the basic level on which other systems, like religion or ideologies, are constructed. See Lotman and Uspenskij (1973), but also Sedda and Cervelli (2006, pp. 171-192).

occur within a specific memory system, as well as the contact between memories across time and space, are indispensable for the survival of the system itself.

The coexistence of the synchronic and diachronic levels inside the memory system is also found in Northern Irish muralism. Regarded as a unitary practice, it appears as a system characterized by a certain degree of stability as well as, simultaneously, a constant transformation in connection with social change in the province and abroad. The stability of muralism derives mainly from its established history in Northern Ireland, where, as already seen above, it is strongly associated to local communities and their identities. Although murals are now recognized as successful tourist attractions, they remain a form of public art deeply rooted in the territory of these working-class communities. More generally -yet- it is muralism per se to encourage a systematic reading, in the form of a practice that recovers and re-enacts its own tradition and memory.

On the other hand, the dynamic nature of muralism can be detected on multiple levels: first of all, murals are repainted, removed or replaced according to several factors, including socio-political demands, communities' wishes and, not least, specific schemes like those implemented by the Belfast City Council for promoting a non-sectarian imagery. Secondly, dynamism derives from the circulation of memories in the murals (a central aspect of this work, as the following chapters will show), which is reflected also on the iconographical level. If it is true that, in the recent years, muralism has been changing in a significant way, increasingly moving away from paramilitary-related representations to the most varied themes, more controversial memories often reappear or, as chapter 3 will illustrate with regard to loyalist murals, are (re)appropriated within a logic of persistent sectarianism. Finally, and in relation to this last point, the dynamic character of muralism also depends on the previously mentioned tendency to recover in the present its former functions, in particular that of commemoration. The first murals to appear, exclusively in Protestant/unionist neighborhoods, were mostly commemorative ones; this 'original' function of muralism coexisted and overlapped with that of marking the territory along sectarian lines. It was only when the Catholic/nationalist/republican communities adopted the practice of "drawing support", to quote Rolston's expression[8], that murals turned into an instrument of propaganda, giving them a new function. And yet, especially with the end of

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[8] The reference is here to the title of Bill Rolston's photographic work, which develops across 4 volumes published between 1992 and 2013. Taken as a whole, the work offers an overview of how muralism and its imagery changed over time, especially with the end of the conflict; see Rolston (1992; 1995; 2003a and 2013).

the Troubles and the need to remember the victims, muralism seemed to 'rediscover' its former function of commemoration, even if in a renovated way compared to the past.

The recovery of previous uses of murals in the public landscape is particularly important for understanding the systematic nature of muralism as illustrated in this work and its dynamics of transformation over time. Whereas contemporary murals are still powerful tools for political propaganda and, particularly for the nationalist/republican communities, for articulating a form of political activism (see chapter 2), their recovering and re-appropriation of the function of commemoration both consolidates and renovates muralism per se. This temporal dimension, largely neglected by previous research, reveals to muralism its own memory, on which it may develop, as will be seen later, an increasing capacity of self-awareness that is expressed on several levels (and with varying degrees of efficiency). In view of these considerations, it appears then clear how muralism needs to be analyzed in its own terms, and not just as one among the many other practices and forms through which Northern Irish communities remember and represent themselves; this remains true even if muralism is inextricably linked to them, as well as to the territory and the socio-political developments in and outside of the province.

Reflecting the coexistence of the synchronic and diachronic levels identified by Salerno (2021), muralism can be rethought as a complex system of representation. From the perspective of a semiotic theory of memory which overcomes the traditional opposition between the aforementioned levels, dynamism is grafted onto the continuity of the system, which ensures its durability in time. Within this framework, and specifically with reference to collective memory, *permanence* and *repetition* become fundamental. As the collective analysis on cultural memory realized by the doctoral students of the University of Bologna proposes (see Cappuccio and Paolucci 2008, pp. 7-29), the Peircean concept of *habit* is particularly suitable for grasping the propensity of memories to exist through permanence and repetition. The notion of habit should be here understood as a complex set of practices, beliefs and behaviors shared on a local (or eventually social) level. They are responsible for a certain degree of stability within the same process of semiosis, i.e., "the renewing of interpretation around a stable semiotic node which is a kind of *memory* of interpretations that will guide the future ones" (Ivi., p. 12; my translation, italics in the original).

The authors also insist on the *mediated* nature of cultural memories, or, better said, on how they can only exist through mediation. More specifically, memory is rethought as a "*distributed device*, i.e., a product emerging from a configuration of heterogeneous instances involved by processes mediated by habits" (Ibid.; my translation, italics in the original).

Within this framework, permanence and dynamism, stability and change actually coexist: while ensuring continuity, habits create the conditions for the renewal of the cultural memory, or, eventually, the formation of a new one. On this basis, it then becomes possible to reimagine it in the terms of a *dynamic system*, a paradigm that embodies the containment and flow models introduced above. To describe it, the concept of *filtration*, proposed by the authors to illustrate the processes through which cultural memories are (re)created, is more appropriate than that of transmission, which implies on the contrary the mere transposition of information/meaning over time. The concept of filtration, instead, is put in relation by the authors with the complex and rich notion of *translation* as theorized by Jurij Lotman (1985; 2006), who places emphasis on the dynamics of a given cultural system as 'filtering' processes through which external information is assimilated by the system itself (which he defines as *semiosphere*). These processes are not mechanical, since new information is always created, thus allowing the end system to preserve itself through transformation.

These theoretical premises with reference to cultural memory (or more generally any other cultural system) (re)articulate muralism in new terms, which simultaneously grasp its systematic and dynamic nature. Collective memories in Northern Ireland are mediated and 'filtered' by the practice (among others) of painting murals, which has rooted in time in the working-class areas where it has reinvented itself in relation to a changing context and the new demands of a society in transformation. The notion of *reinvention* should be here conceived in all its significance of perpetual re-creation of the communities' past and memories through the murals. From this perspective, they can be compared to the role played by communications in Luhmann's social systems theory (Luhmann 1990)[9]. Communications, or communicative events, are the elements through which social systems produce and (re)produce themselves, being them "their particular mode of autopoietic reproduction" (Luhmann 1986, p. 174). Before returning to the concept of autopoiesis, it is interesting to see how this theoretical model has been adopted by Elena Esposito (2001) in her definition of social memory and its functioning. As the scholar affirms:

> Collective memory […] is not social memory, because its seat and its reference are not in society,
> but indirectly in the consciousnesses (or in the minds) of the individuals taking part in it. We
> could argue, radicalizing the position of Durkheim himself, that social memory gets stronger as

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[9] Communications are meant by Luhmann to be events 'composed' of three elements: information (the message conveyed), utterance (the act of saying it, including the interlocutor's intentions) and understanding (the ability to distinguish between information and utterance that ultimately *realizes* the communication). For a clearer definition of these notions and their use in Luhmann's theory, see Baraldi, Corsi and Esposito (2021).

collective memory gets weaker. […] The more complex the society is, the more limited collective memory is, and the increase in complexity tends to separate them more and more clearly—up to the emergence of a social memory based on *social operations* (Esposito 2008, p. 183; italics mine).

The concept of *social operations*, inspired by Luhmann's model, is particularly interesting for the comprehension of muralism as a practice that, like Luhmann's communications, continually (re)produces itself. In this sense, it is necessary to specify that are not the specific memories put into circulation by the murals to be understood as expressions of a more general social memory (they are still regarded here as forms of collective memory)[10]; on the contrary, it is muralism in itself as a 'memory device' that should be understood as an expression of social memory, according to its –both systematic and dynamic- structure described above. This also means that it acquires independence from time and, to a certain extent, external events: muralism, like (social) memory as described by Esposito, "does not record the past […] but reconstructs it every time for a future projected in ever new ways" (Ivi., p. 185). This is undoubtedly a radical position that echoes the semiotic understanding of cultural memory seen above. These perspectives may be combined in a productive way, (re)articulating the theory of memory in new directions and rethinking its relation to culture, a suggestion already made by Jurij Lotman when he defined the latter as the "*nonhereditary memory of the community*" (Lotman, Uspensky and Mihaychuk 1978, p. 213; italics in the original).

Coming back to the notion of (auto)poiesis introduced above, it appears then clear how it is appropriate for describing the processes through which a memory system (re)creates its connections to past events. 'Poiesis' refers to the act of producing something that did not exist before; introduced by Alice Cati (2013) in the study of the role played by media in articulating the discourses of memory and testimony, it epitomizes their mediated nature as a constitutive element. It follows that "the reconstruction of the past corresponds to the creation of reality, since the remembrance *produces* the past which aims to describe" (Ivi., p. 102; translation and italic mine)[11]. The narration given by the witness goes well beyond

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[10] As stated in the introduction of this work, the concept of 'collective memory' is here generally preferred over other similar notions (including that of 'social memory') when referring to how communities remember their past, while muralism per se should be regarded as a form of social memory for the reasons explained above.

[11] Alice Cati's theory is based on the proposal by Birgit Neumann of a *performativity of memory*. See Neumann's article 'La performatività del ricordo', in Agazzi Elena and Fortunati, Vita (eds.) 2007. *Memoria e saperi. Percorsi transdisciplinari*. Roma, Meltemi, pp. 305-322.

the mere description of the event and, it should be added, it is strictly dependent on the act of recollection.

The concept of poiesis is radicalized by Luhmann in his theory of social systems. Rearticulated as *autopoiesis*, it refers to the self-reference of the system, which (re)produces and change its own structure as well as the elements/units that constitute it (Luhmann 1986, p. 173)[12]. The notion of autopoiesis, which derives from the studies of the Chilean scientists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela[13] within the field of biology, is realized in social systems through communication: "their elements are communications which are recursively produced and reproduced by a network of communications and which cannot exist outside of such a network" (Ivi., p. 174). This model, which shares some similarities with that of the *semiosphere* elaborated by Lotman (1985)[14], does not imply yet that the system is completely isolated from the external environment. In spite of its operational closure, which ensures the autonomy of the system, it is in fact dependent on the environment, even if separated from it by a boundary (Baraldi, Corsi and Esposito 2021, pp. 37-40).

What is important to underline for the purpose of an analysis of muralism as a system of memory, however, is that the autopoietic character of the system allows it to distinguish between hetero-referentiality and self-referentiality. In Luhmann's theory, they refer, respectively, "to the content of previous communications, asking for further information about the information; or they can question the 'how' and the 'why' of the communication, focusing on its utterance" (Luhmann 1986, p. 175). Self-referentiality, in particular, is recovered by Esposito (2008) in her theory of social memory, where it is subsumed under the more general concept of *autology*, i.e., "the relativity of the world to the system observing it" (p. 182). With reference to memory, this implies that the latter "must be referred to the specific structures of the remembering system" (p. 183), an aspect that makes of memory what Esposito defines as a *social performance*.

The notion of social performance, the characteristics of which, with reference to muralism, will be analyzed in chapter 4, brings Esposito's model very close to the

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[12] The very social character of this mechanism is well described by Seidl (2004, p. 5): "the structures themselves however are not pre-given in any sense, as in structuralist theories, but are themselves the product of the autopoietic system. In other words, in its reproduction the system produces and reproduces its very own structures of reproduction. This aspect, i.e. the self-determination of its own structures, is referred to as *self-organization*. Thus, while autopoiesis refers to the reproduction of the elements as such, self-organisation refers to the determination of structures" (italic in the original).

[13] See Maturana and Varela (1980) for the development of their theory in relation to biological systems.

[14] The theoretical model of the *semiosphere*, probably the most famous concept in Lotman's semiotics of culture, comes equally from the scientific world, since it was modeled on the notion of *biosphere*, i.e., the zone on Earth where (biological) life is possible. With the notion of semiosphere, Lotman means the 'space' where culture (or, broadly speaking, semiosis) is possible.

understanding of memory proposed by semiotics. Concepts like those of performance/performativity, practice or agency have become central in the theory of semiotics, and particularly of sociosemiotics, which re-explores the importance of materiality and the body in shaping the meaning of our world[15]. Both approaches focus on the role played by discourses and practices in producing our social reality on a performative basis through which the object of analysis (and the entire system of which it is part) is every time re-created, not pre-given. Within this framework, circulation, dynamism and connectivity become central for the formation and transmission of a social system, as evidenced by Esposito (2001) with reference to social memory as an autologic system. But how are these observations reflected in Northern Irish muralism?

Recovering the concepts of hetero-referentiality and self-referentiality introduced above makes it possible to analyze the evolution of muralism from a new perspective. Hetero-referentiality and self-referentiality may be understood in relation to the murals on two different levels of complexity: they may be referred to the simple internal-external opposition already proposed by some scholars (Goulding and McCroy 2020), or they may be referred to a subtler differentiation that has been emerging over time. Previous works on the murals of Northern Ireland have insisted on their reading as forms of representations closed in on themselves, or "part of an internal debate concerning power and the meaning of traditional symbols" (Jarman 1992, p. 149). This means that murals were primarily painted by the community for the community in order to (re)affirm one's 'possession' of the territory, an aspect that can be interpreted as the *internal* function of murals.

Since muralism was for a long time exclusively the preserve of Protestant/unionist/loyalist communities, there was no need to refer to the Other, i.e., the rival community (identified with the Catholic/nationalist/republican people). The internal function of muralism is strictly connected to the political geography of Northern Ireland described at the beginning of this chapter, and to the established practice of 'marking' the territory with symbols of identity. And yet, even before the great change that has affected contemporary muralism, such an approach appears too narrow when referring to former murals, at least for two reasons. The first is that to understand the internal function as a form of self-referentiality is likely to reduce it to a mere tautology that threatens to 'freeze' the system over time. The second reason is that, as taught by semiotics, meaning emerges from opposition; this also applies to identity, which is built through antagonism, being it symbolic

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[15] See Landowski (1989) for an example of the sociosemiotic approach to social reality.

or real. To sum up, if an internal function of muralism can certainly be identified, it coexists, since the beginning, with an external function that re-incorporates the Other, either real and imaginary.

The opposition between an internal and external function is proposed by Goulding and McCroy (2020) in their analysis of the contemporary murals of Northern Ireland. The scholars trace it back to the appearance of the first nationalist/republican representations, when the external function prominently emerged in the form of resistance towards the British Army, and the shift towards their propagandistic use involved a much wider audience[16]. Despite the fact that Goulding and McCroy restrict their analysis mainly to republican murals (and that they seem to disregard the existence of an embryonic external function even in early muralism), their research takes into account the increasingly transnational dimension in which Northern Irish murals exist, especially in relation to tourism. Such dimension also concerns the reference to external memories/events (the focus of the second and third chapters of this work) that incorporates an Other that is no longer local or close, but also from the outside; from this perspective, the external function of muralism may be thought as a form of hetero-referentiality that opens it up to a greater complexity.

Nevertheless, following more closely Luhmann's theory, hetero-referentiality and self-referentiality can be referred to muralism as a system on a more abstract level. Whereas for Luhmann hetero-referentiality implies the reference of communicative units to the content of former communications, when adopted for the description of muralism this function may be referred to the previous use of murals in Northern Ireland and how it is recovered and (re)translated at present. This may include the appropriation of the practice by the nationalist/republican communities in the 1980s, the fluctuation between different functions played by muralism over time (and how they are retrieved), but also the more direct (re)incorporation of previous themes, figures or memories. On the other hand, self-referentiality, which in Luhmann's theory refers to how communicative units may question the purpose/process of communication, may be referred to the growing tendency of muralism to include itself in the same murals. This self-referential aspect is linked in particular to the self-promotion of muralism in the tourist market, but also to its rising self-awareness; while the latter tends to strengthen the system as such, it may simultaneously expose it to an

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[16] This does not mean, however, that a form of self-referentiality (or internal function) was absent when muralism was converted into an instrument of political propaganda by the nationalist/republican communities. Murals were still painted to (re)claim possession of the territory, as a form of self-affirmation of those communities, even during the convulsive phase of the conflict, when the priority was to gain political power internally and recognition externally.

increasing rigidity that contrasts with the intrinsic dynamism of murals (both as artefacts and images)[17].

To conclude, hetero-referentiality and self-referentiality are the processes through which muralism as a system constantly renews itself, balancing stability and dynamism and thus ensuring its own permanence. This dual form of reference of the system to itself should then be understood, following Luhmann's description of the process of communication (1986), not just as an expression of auto-referentiality, which simply reasserts "that it is what it is" (p. 175); on the contrary, hetero-referentiality and self-referentiality are both expressions of a self-reference that "(1) is based on an ongoing auto-referential (autopoietic) process, which refers to itself (2) as processing the distinction between itself and (3) its topics" (Ibid.). For this reason, hereafter we will adopt the notion of self-reference, which subsumes both the processes of hetero-referentiality and self-referentiality. It is through it that muralism reveals its increasing complexity.

A fragmented landscape

In more concrete terms, the reference of the system to itself that has been defined as 'self-reference' can be identified as a specific trend of contemporary muralism in Northern Ireland. As already mentioned, the success enjoyed by political murals as a tourist attraction plays a fundamental role in developing their self-awareness, affecting their perception in a significant way. These aspects are still largely overlooked by contemporary research, which seems to be more focused on murals' tourist success in terms of a controversial exploitation of the communities' past. In addition, it appears that old prejudices about muralism as a form of 'minor art', deeply rooted in violence and sectarianism, are still affecting the way murals are considered. One of the few exceptions in this regard is represented by the work of Tony Crowley, whose interest in Northern Irish murals dates back to the end of the 1970s, the time when republican graffiti began to appear on the walls of their own communities more and more frequently. Having observed and recorded photographically murals' change over time, Crowley has developed an in-depth knowledge of their past and present uses, as well as of their growing complexity in terms of style and imagery.

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[17] A similar mechanism is described by Jurij Lotman with reference to the *metadescriptions* or *grammars* which tend to form in the center of the semiosphere. Whereas they structure it in more rigorous terms compared to its periphery, they simultaneously tend to become excessively rigid, potentially preventing the dynamism of culture (see Lotman 1990).

These aspects are at the heart of an article (Crowley 2015a) that analyzes examples of murals painted some years after the Good Friday Agreement, and specifically between 2005 and 2015 (with particular attention paid to the years between 2010 and 2015). Crowley, as already mentioned in the introduction, shows a more systematic approach to the murals which tries to move beyond their understanding as (exclusively) persistent remnants of sectarianism[18]. Their incorporation into the cultural heritage sector of Northern Ireland (as controversial as it may be) has inevitably affected murals' form and functions (p. 59), and represents an evolution that deserves more attention. Quite remarkably, as early as 2004, a painted poster promoting the West Belfast Taxi Tours organized by community members (usually ex-prisoners) appeared on a wall in Divis Street, in a prominently Catholic/nationalist/republican area of the city (Ibid.). Radicalizing Crowley's observations, it can be argued that the mural/poster does not only reflect the increasing self-awareness of muralism in post-conflict Northern Ireland, but also that it reveals a *metatextual* dimension emerging as a consequence of the inclusion or 'quotation' of images of other (existing) murals.

The actual meaning and perception of murals are considerably altered when the latter are transposed from their original support (the wall) to an image incorporated into another mural. Firstly, the images of murals 'quoted' in posters or other murals lose part of their political strength, which tends to be relegated to secondary status, as the remnant of their 'authenticity'. Secondly, it can be added that the process of replicating images of murals anticipates their circulation and consumption in the digital realm, which will be the focus of the last chapter of the present work. Lastly, and this can be regarded as the most radical level of muralism's self-reference, these images cited in other murals already represent the production and consumption of the cultural memory of muralism in Northern Ireland[19]. This not only implies that tourists are invited to come and see the murals per se, but also that they are encouraged to 'consume' the very tradition of muralism as an example of the 'authentic' Northern Ireland, both in relation to its past (temporal level) and to the space of the working-class communities (spatial level). With regard to this latter, it appears then clear how it

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[18] It should be added, however, that many of the considerations made by Crowley in relation to the evolution of murals in the recent years are definitely more appropriate for describing nationalist/republican murals more than the unionist/loyalist ones, since the latter tend to remain faithful to tradition, an aspect that has been widely remarked in the research on the murals of Northern Ireland.

[19] The use of 'cultural memory' is here motivated by the emphasis placed on the processes through which a collective or social memory becomes part of a given culture, usually stabilizing its own form and values. Whereas muralism per se remains an expression of social memory in the terms stated above, its image promoted by tourism tends then to become a form of cultural memory to be sold off to the international public.

remains central in the promotion of muralism within the tourist routes; far from being suppressed by the images' replicating process, the spatial dimension is in the end restored by the discourses on authenticity that surround the communities' areas in the province.

The observations made above, however, do not intend to homogenize a much more complex reality. Contemporary muralism presents itself as internally fragmented, a set of various and conflicting representations in which self-referential dynamics coexist with more 'traditional' functions and processes that reproduce old iconographies. This dynamic system, made of change and stagnation, raises the inevitable problem of what to preserve (or eventually promote) and what to erase from the landscape: not so surprisingly, the most controversial murals, linked to an imaginary of sectarianism and violence, tend often to be regarded by tourists as the most interesting representations in terms of their 'truthfulness' (as ambiguous as it may appear). The policy of replacing them with less contentious ones, in order to promote a different image of the country, may ultimately undermine the interest of tourists in the murals. In short, Northern Ireland is in the difficult position of determining whether and to what extent political murals should be preserved and promoted as a local heritage, or they should be 'sacrificed' for the sake of a shared future (more will be said about this in the following paragraphs).

The heterogeneous landscape that Northern Irish muralism reflects, also reveals how the dynamics of memory put into circulation by murals do not always proceed in a uniform and unidirectional way. Given their ideological nature, such dynamics, especially in a society in transition, mirror exactly its internal contradictions, that manifest themselves as *temporal slippages*. The reference is here to the semiotic theory of ideology elaborated by Ferruccio Rossi-Landi (1972; 1978)[20]: according to the author, ideological representations are rarely able to reflect what he calls, in a Marxist language, the *base* (meaning the level of the economic and social production). More frequently, these representations are in an asymmetrical relation to the base, in the form of more or less evident temporal slippages that may manifest as anticipations, delays, stagnations, etc… in relation to the status of the base. An example is when revolutionary ideologies predict the collapse of the monarchy (and its economic system), or, on the contrary, more conservative theories 'survive' the affirmation of the modern state. In all these cases, the ideological representations produced by some

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[20] Ideologies are understood by Rossi-Landi as complex messages or signs, made up in turn of more basic signs. Although they mainly circulate in the society through verbal language, in the form of narratives and (social) discourses, ideologies should be understood in terms of collective representations that also circulate through other languages (visual, musical, body, etc…).

groups within the society fail to reflect the actual status of the base, since they are either projected into a time to come or into a revived past.

Temporal slippages are clearly visible when looking at the narratives promoted by Northern Irish murals, which may often come into conflict with the image of a modernized country that has left behind violence and segregation, as advanced by political institutions. As already mentioned in the introduction, these forms of temporal slippage, although explicitly ideological, may often be revealing of the actual internal fragmentation of a society that is still struggling with its own past and memories. Within this context, it is unionist/loyalist representations which tend to be more backward-looking when compared to the nationalist/republican imaginary, an aspect also due to the political uncertainty experienced by loyalist communities in post-conflict Northern Ireland (see chapter 3). Nevertheless, the traditional opposition between a more 'conservative' attitude (on the part of unionist/loyalist communities) and a more forward-looking mindset (on the part of nationalist/republican communities) should not conceal the resistances internal to the second ones.

Goulding and McCroy (2020) analyze the fragmented landscape of the New Lodge area of Belfast, a northern district of the city deeply affected by violence during the Troubles. The area, predominantly Catholic since the 1950s, is characterized by a larger number of murals that "propagate messages of support for dissident republican organisations and prisoners" (p. 10). Economic deprivation and the proximity to loyalist neighborhoods have contributed to make of the New Lodge area a site where conflicting and, it can be added, discrepant representations with respect to the peace-process, appear with more frequency. Manifestations of temporal slippages (on the ideological level) are then far from alien to the nationalist/republican narratives: they also include the reappearance of traditional figures like the paramilitary men, so frequent in the murals painted during the conflict, or "a continuity of struggle […] commemorated through the (re)appropriation of historical republican symbols to contemporary contexts" (Goulding and McCroy 2020, p. 17). To sum up, the example of the New Lodge area proves that (ideological) fragmentation is internal to the same communities, which may mobilize the past in order to symbolically revive it or, on the contrary, (re)imagine it for the sake of a different future.

The observations made with regard to the temporal slippages on the ideological and iconographic levels, clearly show the complexity of muralism as an internally heterogeneous and fragmented system in which various dynamics and functions are simultaneously at play. Dynamism is thus not only given by the transformation of the system across time, but also

by its internal conflicts on the synchronic level. The actual processes through which collective memories, public commemorations and the tourist promotion of muralism are generated should be understood within this framework. If transnational dynamics tend to dominate the contemporary world, they nonetheless coexist with ideological representations that 'resist' them, manifesting in the form of temporal slippages like those mentioned above. Contemporary muralism in Northern Ireland finds itself at the crossroads between these dynamics, that, along with the pressures exerted by 'external' actors (political institutions, tourism, European funds, etc…) increasingly influence its present-day evolution.

On the basis of the theoretical premises illustrated above, the remainder of the chapter is dedicated to the analysis of more concrete examples of murals and other commemorative spaces of post-conflict Northern Ireland. In particular, it is to the two functions of heritagization and commemoration, as identified in the introduction, that the following paragraphs will turn; closely related to the tourism industry in the province, these functions are mainly the result of community-based initiatives enacted at the local level but largely influenced by external dynamics. Heritagization and commemoration, in this respect, are inscribed within a transnational dimension that underlies contemporary muralism: it is a movement that goes from its touristic promotion to its digitization and archiving, as the present work will exemplify.

Political tourism and the heritagization of a controversial past

The conversion of the political murals of Northern Ireland into a conflict-related heritage has been implemented mainly as a community-based enterprise that eventually involved ex-prisoners as leading figures (Widenhoft Murphy 2010; Simone-Charteris and Boyd 2010). Soon after the conflict, it appeared clear that local realities strongly connected to the violence of the Troubles could become the space where a new form of tourism (at the beginning mostly from United Kingdom) was likely to develop. The space of the communities, in particular, with their display of political symbols, flags and murals, was especially suitable for the promotion of a political –if not openly dark- tourism, as such highly controversial in a post-conflict Northern Ireland which was struggling to reimagine itself. Murals' connection to sectarianism, violence and segregation, in fact, makes them a disturbing presence within the peace-building process and the Shared Future ideology that came to dominate the province's re-development right after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement.

The ambiguity and concerns that accompanied the implementation of political tourism in relation to the murals are reflected in the lack of consideration given to them by the institutions, including the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB). As underlined by Simone-Charteris and Boyd (2010, p. 187), "There were […] criticisms of the NITB's failure to develop the necessary infrastructure, and as a consequence, political tourism operates through few private sector tourist companies and organizations". This situation has inevitably facilitated the development of community-based initiatives like the now famous 'Black Taxi Tours'[21], which drive tourists across the working-class areas of Belfast to narrate them the history of the conflict through the murals. Although things have partially changed, and "official tour agencies advertise political walking tours and black taxi tours in West Belfast" (Widenhoft Murphy 2010, p. 545), this form of tourism remains largely questionable from different points of view.

Whereas there are scholars like Simone-Charteris and Boyd (2010), Widenhoft Murphy (2010) and Hill and White (2012) that focus on the positive aspects of political tourism in the province, others are more critical towards it (McDowell 2008). While it is true that the representations in the murals and their narratives are biased, it is equally true that the local guides do not generally negate it: very often, tourists are invited to take a second tour in the 'other' community, in order to listen to the history of the same events from another perspective (Simone-Charteris and Boyd 2010). In addition, it should be remarked that also students and pupils are occasionally involved in the political tours, as well as people coming from countries which have been affected by violence and conflict, like Palestine or the Basque Country. The idea behind these initiatives is that of promoting a possible model of peace that can eventually be 'implemented' in other contexts, following on a local level the claims made when the Good Friday Agreement was signed. Reversing McDowell's (2008) affirmations about the promotion of political murals as a way to 'selling' the conflict to tourists (including its perpetuation on the symbolic level), these initiatives can then potentially 'sell' a positive model for conflict resolution and reconciliation.

Beyond these different views on political tourism, however, the process through which murals and other artefacts have been converted into a local heritage is recognized by all scholars. Whether positive or negative, the growing heritagization of this conflict-related

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[21] The same black taxis are part of the cultural memory of Northern Ireland; as highlighted by Widenhoft Murphy (2010), they were used during the conflict as substitutes for buses in areas of Belfast which were more subject to bomb attacks. Black taxis were mainly used by local people to cross the city, but, occasionally, also by paramilitary soldiers on the run, which made these vehicles in turn targets for further attacks.

symbolism is a fait accompli that asks for the integration of murals within a transnational dimension reinventing their relation with the territory. Whereas the space of the communities was previously characterized by its internal closure, which affected the perception of murals on the exclusive basis of internal or external discourses, this is no longer valid. Opening up to tourism, the space of the communities and its traces of sectarianism are "exposed to wider global networks" (Lisle 2006, p. 33), while claiming however to be as authentic as before. This is highly problematic: muralism is perceived in different ways depending on changing circumstances, even when apparently static on the iconographic level. Whereas it tends to self-reproduce according to autonomous processes, as indicated above, muralism 're-converts' the external pressures into internal dynamics that mark its transformation and the effects it triggers at the social level. The process of heritagization, and the related commodification, of muralism is one of the consequences of such dynamics. They occur at the cost of an inevitable trivialization of the legacy of conflict, that is made accessible to the outsiders. As it often happens with public memorials or monuments commemorating tragic events, murals risk then

> becoming commodities to be consumed by the gaze of the tourist and losing their authenticity. The tension between commodification and authenticity may be particularly problematic in postconflict societies where local communities view commemorations and memorials as sacred sites and daily reminders of past violence and injustices suffered. If the main desire of tourists is a search for authenticity and ''otherness,'' local communities may be in danger of being marginalized or mere objects of the voyeuristic tourist gaze if they are not empowered to tell their own version of the past (Widenhoft Murphy 2010, p. 539).

From a semiotic perspective, these considerations are questionable. The contraposition between commodification and authenticity is in turn the result of the processes of heritagization to which forms of commemoration, and the same communities, are subject. In this sense, authenticity is nothing more than an *effect* that depends on the success in 'branding' a certain reality as 'authentic'. This operation largely relies on interpretative processes that involve both communities and tourists: these latter, in particular, are led to 'believe' in the 'truthfulness' of what they see, treating them as traces, i.e., signs ontologically defined by authenticity. Semiotics, however, showed how even the acknowledgment of traces as traces depends on the effectiveness of the social discourses that surround them, as illustrated by Patrizia Violi (2014) in relation to what she calls "landscapes of memory", i.e., places marked by traumatic events that left traces inscribed in

them. As a consequence, the opposition between commodification and authenticity blurs, since the latter results equally from the cultural sedimentation of values, beliefs and meanings that regulate the processes of commodification.

In all this, the communities play an active role. The promotion of political tourism through initiatives like the Black Taxi or walking tours, that 'authenticate' murals and other artefacts as actual remainders of the past, originated within the communities. Becoming increasingly aware of the "wider global networks" referred to by Lisle (2006), they engage with the tourist's gaze mentioned by Widenhoft Murphy (2010), no longer a foreign presence, but an integrated part in the same creation of new murals. It should be remembered that, as will be analyzed in more detail later (see chapter 5), visuality and visibility were central aspects in Northern Irish society during the conflict, especially with regard to the power to visually monitor (exercised by the state over the communities, Feldman 1991) and 'control' the images produced on the walls. Feldman (1997, p. 29) speaks of "a circuit of visual prosthetics" within which "political subjects are formed":

> the surveillance camera, the helicopter overflight, the panoptic architecture of the interrogation room and prison, and the aimed gun. These instruments of fatal vision can be divided into hardware and software technologies, and among the latter must be included the *human eye*, subject to a high degree of spatial and temporal extension and electronic supplementation (Ibid., italics mine).

The "human eye" (or gaze) mentioned by Feldman as one among the instruments of vision can be extended to include the tourist's gaze, partially assimilated by the communities to the violation of the space carried out by the state. This was common until quite recently, when a memory connected to vision and control used to affect the communities' attitude towards tourists[22]; nowadays, with the local promotion of political tourism, the 'external gaze' is no longer perceived as such or, at least, as a potentially threatening alterity. Besides, the origins of nationalist/republican muralism and graffiti lie in a climate of intolerance that directly involves the authorities' gaze, called into question since the very beginning. This can be translated into the need on their part to expose themselves to the gaze of the other as a key component of their functioning in the landscape. After the conflict, this intrinsic drive has been developing into the impulse to show themselves to another external gaze, that of the

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[22] In the recent past, some (isolated) attacks against tourists occurred in the working-class areas of Belfast, proving the permanence of distrust and suspicion towards the presence of the 'external human eye' (see Widenhoft Murphy 2010).

tourist involved in the same process of their heritagization. It is an impulse that collides with the communities' need to treat murals and other sites of commemoration as private spaces of memory[23]. In the end, the discourses on authenticity that surround muralism and the growing influence of the tourist's gaze risk to further compromise the already fragile link with the communities: these latter find themselves caught between the conflicting needs to preserve a local practice deeply rooted in the territory or to 'sell' it to the demands of commodification.

Once again, it becomes clear how the dynamics of memory are, in Northern Ireland as elsewhere, inserted within a transnational dimension that increasingly determine them. Whereas murals and, more in general, street art "have become assets for the development of heritage-related tourism" (Skinner and Jolliffe 2017, p. 5) internationally, the situation is more complex in Northern Ireland, where murals also are at the center of community-based practices of commemoration/memorialization. This double function of muralism seems in part to reproduce the opposition between *cultural* and *communicative* memory proposed by Jan Assmann (2011). The first one refers to a more objectified and symbolic form of remembrance, transmitted from one generation to another; on the contrary, the second form of memory (communicative) tends to be less formalized and strongly dependent on everyday interaction, which is the reason why it has a limited time span (of approximately three generations). Broadly speaking, the cultural memory of muralism emerges from the processes of heritagization and commodification described above (including the growing self-reference that derives from them), while the communicative memory corresponds to the community-based practices of commemoration in which murals are involved.

This double function may also be articulated in the terms of the coexisting representational and performative aspects of muralism, that largely overlap. Even before their heritagization (corresponding to the cultural or representational memory), murals could not be thought as merely a form of performative or communicative memory: their political use made by the nationalist/republican communities starting from the 1980s had already initiated (and *accelerated*) their transformation into cultural memory. This is clearly evident with the murals representing the *Blanketmen*, almost immediately 'converted' into martyrs even before the death of ten of them in 1981[24]. The Christian and Christological iconography

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[23] This is particularly true in relation to those murals depicting victims of the Troubles and painted on the spot (or close to) where their death occurred; see chapter 5 of the present work and Viggiani (2014).

[24] The *Blanketmen* were the republican prisoners detained in the HM Prison Maze, few kilometers away from Belfast, who went on protest between 1976 and 1981, when ten of them starved to death in the most dramatic phase of their struggle (the hunger strike) to regain the political status, withdrawn by the British

that characterizes the representation of the prisoners' bodies was then not only strategic in order to politicize their figures and mobilize the communities to support them, but also to forge their future cultural memory (even beyond Northern Ireland). This strategic use of the murals as simultaneously performative (political propaganda and instantaneous commemoration) and representational (myth-making of the protestors) is indicative of the multiple levels of meaning on which muralism exists, often at the cost of 'suppressing' any form of resistance to the (paramilitary) rhetoric of heroism that came to dominate the narrative of the events[25] (Rolston and McKeown 2017; O'Rawe 2005).

To sum up, muralism in Northern Ireland illustrates how the processes of heritagization can be successfully implemented by the local communities (or some of their representatives), and not only at the institutional level. In both cases, such processes tend to generate conflict: an example is given by the debates that have accompanied the various projects for the recovery of the land where the HM Prison Maze stood until its almost complete demolition in 2006, six years after its closure (McAtackney 2014; Purbrick 2019). Despite having detained both nationalist/republican and unionist/loyalist prisoners, the HM Prison Maze is still ideologically linked to the memory of the former, and especially to that of the Blanketmen. This troublesome heritage was the main reason behind the rejection of the proposal to preserve and transform it into a museum dedicated to the history of the prison; many unionist/loyalist groups saw the proposal as a 'legitimation' of its legacy that would have ended up privileging the nationalist/republican narrative(s) of the events over theirs. Whereas other projects for the redevelopment of the site followed, its future is still uncertain, and proves how the issue of heritagization may lead to protracted negotiations in those societies coming out of conflict (Crooke and Maguire 2019).

Nevertheless, there are also cases of more successful processes of heritagization in relation to political tourism. One of the most emblematic example in this regard is the *Museum of Free Derry* in the town of Derry/Londonderry. Located in Glenfada Park, a highly symbolic place for the Catholic/nationalist/republican people of the Bogside area[26], the museum tells the history of the civil rights movements that took place in the streets of

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government. See here chapter 2 for a more in-depth analysis of the Blanketmen and the influence exerted by their protest inside and outside of Northern Ireland.

[25] This form of silencing also concerns the INLA (Irish National Liberation Army), the paramilitary association which fought along with the IRA during the Troubles. Although actively participating in the protest and having lost three prisoners during the 1981 Hunger Strike, the INLA narrative of the events has been largely marginalized compared to the hegemonic discourses and imagery promoted by Sinn Féin, the political wing of the IRA.

[26] Glenfada Park is part of the overwhelming Catholic/nationalist/republican area known as the Bogside, theater of Bloody Sunday in 1972.

Derry/Londonderry and Belfast in the years 1968-1972, and that culminated in the infamous Bloody Sunday. This event is the main focus of the museum, and the most traumatic episode in the recent history of the town, when 14 civilians were shot dead by the British Army during a peaceful demonstration on January 30, 1972. The museum presents itself as "the people's story of government oppression, the struggle for civil rights, the descent into conflict, Free Derry and Bloody Sunday"[27], thereby emphasizing its one-sided narrative of events. Moreover, it appears evident that 'the people' to which the museum makes reference to are the Catholic/nationalist/republican communities (the victim of government oppression). Although promoting a local and explicitly partial narrative, it is interesting to note that the museum places itself within a transnational frame, both in connection to the events of the past and those of the present. The site underlines in fact how local history should be related to the civil rights movements that took place worldwide (with an emphasis on the 1960s protests in the United States), but also the museum membership to a global network that supports present-day human rights movements. These transnational connections reflect the republican propaganda carried out on the walls and analyzed in detail in the following chapter.

Other examples of community-based initiatives in the field of political tourism and heritagization of conflict can be found in Belfast, where there are two paramilitary museums located in the working-class areas of Conway Mill, in West Belfast, and Newtownards Road, in East Belfast (Markham 2019). The first is known as the *Irish Republican History Museum*, and was founded in 2007 by the family of Eileen Hickey, a Northern Irish politician. It displays several artefacts celebrating the history of republicanism (and specifically the IRA), including the Blanketmen[28]. The second museum is the less known *Andy Tyrie Interpretive Centre* (ATIC), named after the Supreme Commander of the largest loyalist paramilitary group, the Ulster Defence Association (UDA)[29]. The museum is directly connected to the walking tours of the murals that take place in the area of East Belfast and, contrary to the general assumption that unionist/loyalist communities are unable to address a global audience, it organizes tours for different categories of participants, including an international public and students.

Both museums are good examples not only of the management of local 'heritage' (as controversial as it may appear), but also of the transmission of collective memories mainly

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[27] See the home page of the Museum of Free Derry at https://museumoffreederry.org/.
[28] See the website at: https://eileenhickeymuseum.com/.
[29] See the website at: http://www.loyalistconflictmuseum.com/about.

through the preservation of the material culture of the communities. In a way not different from how murals are involved in the same processes, the museums represent the response to the inability of the state to articulate a shared memory of the Troubles. They are certainly sites of commemoration (both of them are dedicated to leading figures from each political side), but also sites of remembrance, where a certain cultural memory can be forged and transmitted. Lastly, they are recognizable heritage sites, well connected to the new international frameworks opened by the Black taxi, bus or walking tours in the working-class areas of Belfast. This does not happen without challenges: as remarked by Markham (2019), the need to articulate local narratives of the conflict within a transnational frame has inevitably led to a politics of victimhood that "focusses on the violence inflicted upon their communities by others" (p. 53). By selecting a certain version of the past and simultaneously remembering exclusively their own victims and pain, both museums attempt to justify violence from their own perspective. Added to this, is the ambiguous fascination with weaponry and criminal activity that is exerted on visitors through the museums' expositions. The result is a strident combination of militarism, masculinity and victimhood that largely reproduces narratives similar to those promoted by the murals on the gable end walls of the surrounding areas.

Coming back to muralism, there are cases in which heritagization, commemoration and remembrance meet in the name of an alleged 'historical treatment' of the events represented. An interesting example is offered by the murals realized by the so-called *Bogside Artists* in Derry/Londonderry. From 1994 to 2008, the trio, composed by the two brothers Tom and William Kelly and their friend Kevin Hasson, painted a series of twelve imposing murals known as *The People's Gallery*, located in the Bogside area of the town[30]. Their artworks are slightly different from the typical murals that can be found in the working-class areas of Northern Ireland. While recovering the practice from that social background, the artists seem in fact to conceive their work in different terms: firstly, their choice to name the series of murals a 'gallery' does not only highlight the collective nature of the artworks, but also reveals that they have been created as a form of public art. This is not always the case with the working-class murals in Northern Ireland, since they generally place more emphasis on their ability to 'authentically' represent the local communities more than on their aesthetic

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[30] Originally, the project consisted of eleven murals, but another work was added in 2008 as a tribute to John Hume, native of Derry/Londonderry, founder of the SDLP (Social Democratic and Labour Party) and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1998. See an image of the mural reproduced in the following chapter in Figure 2.6.

quality. This remains true in spite of the growing attention that is payed to murals' artistic taste. Secondly, the Bogside artists have dedicated their artworks to an anonymous 'People', without addressing to one or other of the two communities that dominate the political sphere in Northern Ireland (in oversimplified terms). Considering that they started working on their first mural about four years (in 1994) before the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, at the time of the IRA ceasefire, it is possible to think that the choice of the neutral 'People' was in line with the peace talks that would have led to the end of the conflict.

Nevertheless, as it is quite clear to anyone with some knowledge of local history, the events represented in the murals are mostly (if not exclusively) part of the nationalist/republican narrative of the conflict; to identify with them would be very difficult for the unionist/loyalist groups. Moreover, the location of the open-air gallery in the overwhelmingly Catholic/nationalist/republican area of the Bogside, as seen above an emblematic site of memory for this community, contributes to frame the representations within a very specific historical narrative. Most of the murals are dedicated to the people of the Bogside and their sufferance during the conflict, starting from the civil rights movements and the aggression on the part of the British Army to the central event that is Bloody Sunday. There is only one mural that appears less controversial, an image of the dove of peace on an abstract and mosaic-like background (Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1 *The Peace Mural*. The Bogside Artists, 2004, Rossville Street, Derry/Londonderry; picture by Tony Crowley, from *Murals of Northern Ireland Collection*, The Claremont Colleges Digital Library

Based on these reflections, it is surprising that the artists claim the neutrality of their artworks, refusing "to compromise their work or to align themselves with the politics or politicians of the day" (Skinner and Jolliffe 2017, p. 12). As they state (Ivi., p. 11), their work should be regarded as an expression of "visual poetry" rooted in the history of political activism that characterizes Derry/Londonderry and the area of the Bogside in particular. In this regard, they refuse to frame their murals within the Northern Irish sectarian culture underlying muralism in the province[31]. And yet, which meaning do they attribute to the word 'community' when they say that their art aims to "be a voice for the community"? (Tom Kelly in Ivi., p. 12). It is obvious that the community the artists are addressing is the Bogside, but devoid of any political connotation. However, given the rich and complex use of the word 'community' in Northern Ireland, it appears difficult to claim its neutrality, even when it is referred to the more abstract concept of (the real) 'people'. In this regard, the statements made by the Bogside artists are not really different from the claims on the authenticity of their artworks advanced by other muralists in Northern Ireland.

The ambiguity of the artists' alleged neutrality with regard to the history of sectarianism in the province also derives from their attempt to separate the space of the murals from its political identity, while simultaneously affirming its traumatic memories. The historical events represented on the walls took mainly place in the area where they stand at present, contributing to preserve the memories inscribed in the landscape in spite of its change and against erasure (Crinson 2005). And yet, that same space is treated as politically neutral, dissociated from the Catholic/nationalist/republican identities that oppose it to the Waterside, the mainly Protestant/unionist/loyalist area of Derry/Londonderry. In this case then, the heritagization of conflict does not pass through its commodification, as in the examples seen above, but through an ideological operation of denial of the artists' co-implication in the maintenance of controversial narratives. This is all the more true in relation to the static nature of the People's Gallery artworks, which, contrary to the dynamism that has traditionally animated Northern Irish murals (through their replacement or erasure), are preserved in their integrity. In this regard, heritagization goes hand in hand with processes of 'museification' that are starting to also affect the practice of muralism elsewhere (see chapter 4).

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[31] The Bogside artists published an illustrated book of their artworks in 2001; un updated version was released in 2005, while a final edition, which also includes the twelfth mural, was launched in 2009 under the title *The People's Gallery*.

In the end, the case of the People's Gallery illustrates how heritagization is already transforming muralism into a form of cultural memory in the terms stated above, i.e., as a strongly symbolic and objectified system of representation. The artists' murals have turned the Bogside area into a *heritage landscape* (Crooke and Maguire 2019) in which the past is "curated for the present, involving selective remembering and deliberate concealing in equal measure" (p. 3). These aspects are at the center of the following paragraphs, dedicated to state funded initiatives and their attempt to forge other memories of the past; it will emerge how the control of the images produced or the (commodified) appropriation of muralism may often converge into a politics of forgetting.

Promoting another imaginary: moving towards a post-conflict muralism?

Two concepts have accompanied the transformation and management of muralism by the state in post-conflict Northern Ireland: these concepts are those of *Re-imagining* and *Shared Future*. Both of them place emphasis on a time to come that –yet- seems already within reach, and that entails an accurate dose of amnesia masked behind the incentive to (re)imagine the past as much as the future. This has nothing to do with the human necessity to forget that is highlighted by Esposito (2008, pp. 184-185) on the basis of Luhmann's systems theory: it rather concerns an actual politics of forgetting. In their attempt to elaborate a social theory of forgetting, Dimbath and Wehling (2016) base their observations on the theoretical work of more authors, including Niklas Luhmann. Reflecting on the function of filtering out redundant or irrelevant information exerted by systemic memory, Dimbath and Wehling (p. 151) underline how

> even the structure of this very memory is not permanently fixed. During the process of each structural change within the system, the selection criteria for its memory are also adjusted. Memory always operates synchronously with every communicative operation of the system and is part of its autopoietic, autological reproduction.

Within this framework, muralism can be rethought as a memory system that 'adjusts itself' according to selective operations determining each time what to preserve and what to forget. This is true in relation to the processes of heritagization described above, but also with regard to subtler forms of control of the collective memories conveyed by muralism. However, as Dimbath and Wehling remark, Luhmann's systems theory "raises the questions,

whether there can be a systematic loss of existing knowledge on the level of supra-individual elements of social structure, and whether and to what extent the social practice of processing thematic information is transformed" (Ibid.). For our purposes, this can be translated into the question whether the combination of heritagization and politics of reimagining (as forms of forgetting) are producing some systematic loss in contemporary muralism, or are affecting its 'selection criteria' in any significant way. While it is difficult to answer to these questions on a theoretical level and definitively, the analysis of some concrete examples may suggest some partial responses.

Focusing on the politics of reimagining in Northern Ireland, whether they be in relation to heritagization or not, brings to mind Barthes' considerations on the semiotics of the city. According to the author, (spatial) signifiers tend to remain, while signifieds are generally transient (Barthes 1985, p. 267). In the case of Northern Irish muralism, this translates into its permanence in the urban landscape as a working-class practice, while simultaneously adjusting itself to the demands of a society in transformation. This remains true even when apparently identical images (re)appear over time, since their meaning (the signified in Barthes' language) is perceived differently in relation to the changing context. As a form of social forgetting in the terms described above, the politics of reimagining that have characterized post-conflict muralism attempt to replace contentious images with 'neutral' ones, eventually recovering an ideal pre-conflict time or the industrial past of the country. It is within this frame that the concepts of Re-imagining and Shared Future came to dominate the political discourses promoted by the state and the various schemes that supported community-based initiatives. Muralism, which used to be deterred when not openly fought through the removal of undesired graffiti and depictions, has been in fact at the heart of such initiatives, aimed at creating new 'symbolic landscapes' within the context of globalization (Hocking 2015). Whereas these interventions have mainly (and appropriately) been studied in relation to the need to foster a new image of Northern Ireland more accommodating to tourists, less attention has been paid to how they can act as a form of social forgetting within the space of the communities.

Mural painting in Northern Ireland was for a long time a pro-state practice, "even if not directly commissioned or funded by the state" (Rolston 2012, p. 448). Since the first murals were exclusively painted by and for the Protestant/unionist communities, whose dominance in the province was clear, their presence was more than simply tolerated. Things changed when muralism was also appropriated by the Catholic/nationalist/republican communities, and consequently transformed. With the merging of conflict and muralism through its use as

political propaganda, no artist or art commentator "was to praise murals from that point on" (Ivi., p. 449). More in general however, the entire art establishment in Northern Ireland simply avoided to address politics and conflict-related issues for decades, as if that was not the painful reality in the province. This meant that, as Rolston remarks, muralists were not recognized as artists; their ambiguous position, however, was not necessarily regarded as a problem, since that could mean their non-alignment with the establishment, as the disgust towards the word 'artist' felt by Danny Devenny, the most famous republican muralist, seems to suggest (Devenny in Ibid.). And yet, muralists' political commitment and their desire to be representative of the communities' feelings make of their work a form of full-fledged (political) art, as the same Devenny affirms in a different context (Ivi., pp. 449-450).

Nevertheless, it was not until 2009 that the Arts Council of Northern Ireland launched the Troubles Archive, a digital resource that finally recognized (at least partially) the contribution made by the arts to a better understanding of the conflict and its impact on the same art system[32]. In spite of the will to acknowledge the work of previously marginalized artists, little or no space was actually given to muralism (p. 451). And yet, around the same time, the Arts Council had already launched a program involving artists and people from the communities in 're-imaging' (or re-imagining) their own spaces through the replacement of sectarian representations with more welcoming images. The series of schemes for peacebuilding through the arts that followed in Northern Ireland, which also included funds from the European Union's programme for Peace and Reconciliation, show the great attention that is paid to the visual space of the communities (and not only). In particular, with regard to muralism, these state initiatives have been targeting those loyalist murals depicting frightening figures like the famous hooded gunmen, more numerous than in the nationalist/republican murals. Violent images of paramilitary soldiers are in fact discouraged and, whenever possible, removed, in an attempt to 'domesticate' working-class muralism and its link with the conflict.

Although some interventions by the state for controlling the images painted at the local level took already place between 2003 and 2005, it was in 2006 that a more ambitious scheme was launched. The three year *Re-imaging Communities* program, led by, among

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[32] In the same year, the Ulster museum of Belfast reopened with an exhibition dedicated to the Troubles, now a permanent collection of the institution. Largely criticized for its lack of material culture and interpretations of the conflict, the exhibition was later enlarged and enriched, thanks also to the contribution from the Heritage Lottery Fund in 2015 (see Logan 2019). The official website of the museum also emphasizes the importance given to the arts of the Troubles, with a collection of a variety of artworks representing the conflict. See the link at: https://www.ulstermuseum.org/stories/troubles.

others, the Arts Council and the Executive of Northern Ireland, aimed at supporting community-based projects for the regeneration of more vulnerable areas affected by sectarianism and racism. The program obviously included the possibility to replace controversial murals with 'neutral' imagery, occasionally involving ex-paramilitary groups. It appears evident how such initiatives may be regarded by the communities as a 'mechanism of control' not only of the images produced, but also of the memories conveyed by them. The state, in a way not different from the disregard or hostility towards muralism that have characterized its previous attitude, attempts in fact to retrieve pre-conflict memories or to forge more or less abstract identities. As already mentioned above, the celebration of the industrial past of the country, for example, is not only ambiguous because of the sectarian implications involved (see chapter 3), but also because of its inability to address the contemporary concerns of a post-industrial society that have mostly affected the working-class people.

The predominant refusal to promote a politically engaged imagery in favor of a politics of 'sanitization' of the urban landscape has been largely analyzed by many scholars (see, among others, Rolston 2012; Hocking 2015 and Radford 2017). However, what seems to be overlooked is how this strategical move by the state is affecting (and to what extent) muralism in Northern Ireland. The promotion of a different image of the country for the sake of economic development and tourism seems to have identified in the murals an arena where to fight back those (re)emerging narratives that threaten the peacebuilding process and the amount of social forgetting it entails. In this context, the existence of muralism as a system of memory is both affirmed and negated, since its ability to convey collective memories is equally exploited by the re-imaging programs promoted by the state, while these latter are simultaneously implemented as deterrent to the transmission of conflict-related memories. To sum up, the previous politics aimed at the more or less systematic removal of graffiti and murals has been replaced by, or rather goes hand in hand with, the appropriation of muralism by the state as an attempt to 'subvert it from the inside'.

Within this logic, to eradicate the figures of the hooded gunmen from the spaces of the communities also means to wipe out their problematic memory, as well as their decades-long influence over those same communities. Moreover, not only are these images and the memories attached to them been replaced by less contentious ones (historical themes, scenes of vibrant community life, etc…), but also by increasingly globalized cultural references, more suitable for the outsiders than the local people. Murals or works of public art celebrating the Titanic or the Belfast-born writer C.S. Lewis originate not only from the

industrial past of Belfast and the glory of the author, respectively, but also from the international success of the 1997 movie *Titanic* by James Cameron (see chapter 3) and the series *The Chronicles of Narnia*, which relaunched Lewis's novels. These references, even if rooted in the history of Northern Ireland, are at present perceived more as a globalized cultural heritage than an expression of local reality[33].

Part of the contemporary commodification of much muralism in Northern Ireland, it is not surprising that the globalization of an increasing number of representations also involves spaces other than the working-class areas where muralism has developed. One of these spaces is Belfast's Cathedral Quarter, a recently regenerated area close to the city center. The district was named after the stunning Cathedral Church of St. Anne that lies at its heart; known as the cultural center of the city and for its lively atmosphere, the Cathedral Quarter has also been relaunched as a cosmopolitan area thanks to the implementation of various works of street art. This more 'innocuous' imagery differs in a significant way from the political murals of the working-class neighborhoods of Belfast, and keeps away from a space for consumption any traces related to the conflict. The memory of it, however, subsists through its commodification, since it re-emerges in an unexpected space, that of the courtyard of what is probably the most famous pub in Belfast, the Duke of York. Located in a tiny alleyway known as the Commercial Court, the street is decorated with panels, murals and other items, like the colorful umbrellas, that make of it a picturesque corner in the heart of Belfast. The courtyard is painted with a series of murals celebrating the city and Northern Irish life through a complex and self-referential imagery. Landmarks like the silhouetted Cavehill (the rocky hill overlooking the city) or the Albert Memorial Clock stand close to the images of the Harland & Wolff cranes, the remains of the industrial past of Belfast, while fictional and real characters within both a local and international context are juxtaposed (Figure 1.2).

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[33] Moreover, major productions like *Titanic* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* are usually realized by film studios located in the Unites States, starring by an international cast, shot in different locations and, obviously, released worldwide. The eventual connection with a certain geographical or historical reality is, as a consequence, largely missed.

Figure 1. 2 An example of the commodification of muralism in Commercial Court, Belfast (artist Ciaran Gallagher); picture taken by the author in 2018

Figures linked to the conflict also appear, as a closer inspection of the mural paintings reveals: for example, there are references to paramilitary soldiers and the Black Taxi Tours in the working-class areas. This latter, in particular, brings out the self-referentiality of the image, since it includes a representation of the famous political murals, with the figure of 'King Billy' on his iconic white horse winking to the tourists (they may be both those standing in front of the mural as well as the vicarious ones represented in the 'referenced' painting). The general impression that this fragmentary and complex imagery raises in the viewers is that of a certain disorientation, due to the juxtaposition of very different representations and references apparently evoking disparate narratives connected to the past and present of Northern Ireland (and beyond). An example is given by the controversial figure of an Orangeman[34], symbol for many Catholics of the Protestant/unionist long-standing dominance over them, which stands close to a Playboy bunny in an ironic and surreal scene, in turn a caricature of the very famous Beatles' *Abbey Road* album cover.

The high level of complexity displayed by the murals of Commercial Court requires a spectator familiar with the history of the conflict and the culture of Northern Ireland, what

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[34] The Orangemen are the members of the *Loyal Orange Institution*, more commonly known as the *Orange Order*, a Protestant fraternal order named after King William of Orange, founded in County Armagh (Northern Ireland) in 1795.

semiotics has defined as a Model Reader (Eco 1979), able to grasp the meanings and references of these images. This is particularly evident with the big mural that alludes to the working-class neighborhoods of Belfast through the depiction of the typical red brick houses characterizing those areas of the city. Very different scenes of community life (where 'hypothetical', fictional and famous characters are mixed) are shown through the open windows of the fictitious building, telling stories of violence, resilience and pride (Figure 1.3).

Figure 1. 3 Mural representing the *Belfast Windows*, realized by the artist Ciaran Gallagher in Commercial Court, Belfast; picture taken by the author in 2018

In this last example of mural painting, the local communities become themselves a promoted heritage, in a strange mixture of strangeness, exoticism and surrealism, as shown by the head of an elephant looking out of a window. Whereas the representation (ambiguously) 'celebrates' community life, it evokes at the same time the places where muralism and political tourism have developed in Northern Ireland. This move may appear as a strategic appropriation of the same practice through which the communities have historically expressed themselves and transmitted their own memories. In short, muralism in Commercial Court is evoked and converted into an instrument of heritagization, where history, local memories, social issues and advertising can be indifferently mixed in the same space for consumption. If the conflict or other controversial aspects of the political life of

Northern Ireland are referred to, they are nonetheless commodified for the benefit of the outsider, even if this means to 'sell out' the traumatic and violent past of the country.

The celebration of the people of Belfast and the transformation of the image of the communities across time are evident in the contraposition between the aforementioned mural and the painting that is above it. This latter highlights its historical character with the choice of the monochrome, in opposition to the colorful scenes depicted in the mural below. But it is in particular the different image composition to capture the attention: while the old community of Belfast appears as an almost uniform group of people that meets in a pub (giving the opportunity to advertise the Guinness?), the community of the present is represented as a much more fragmented body. The inhabitants seem many solitary monads, unable to communicate with each other since everyone is immersed in his/her alienating existence. The sense of being part of a community seems to shift from a more coherent and inclusive collectivity to an internally fragmented one. In addition, the stories represented within the latter reflect a variety of issues that make the Northern Irish communities representative of any possible neighborhood in the world, thus turning a local reality into a transnational portrayal of multiple and disconnected *tranches de vie*.

This example of commodification of muralism and its simultaneous heritagization, however, did not concern only 'neutral' spaces like the Cathedral Quarter, but also the working-class areas of Belfast. Well before the implementation of the various re-imaging programs mentioned above, another scheme had already been enforced during the Troubles, in an attempt to deter the growing appearance of graffiti and murals in the nationalist/republican communities. The state initiative, known as *Operation Spruce-up* and led by the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) and the Belfast City Council (BCC), was launched in 1976 (Rolston 1991; Hocking 2015). Students of the Art College were engaged in completing two murals to be subsequently exposed in different places of Belfast; also in this case, the choice to adopt muralism as an instrument for disseminating alternative narratives trying to oppose the emergent political messages appears quite emblematic. Apparently, the state was already conscious of the importance muralism was acquiring in the communities. Given the (alleged) success of this first program, another scheme was implemented between the years 1977 and 1981, immediately before the republican muralism boom. It once again involved the Art College students, who

> were paid to paint murals in working-class neighbourhoods during the summer months. The
> murals, executed after consultations with pre-selected residents' groups, were placed on gable

walls. These were sometimes designed or painted with the help of local youth, and were intended to provide a more attractive aesthetic for the city's deprived areas (Hocking 2015, p. 11).

Overall, 42 murals were realized in different areas of the city, in an "attempt to improve Belfast's visual environment" (Hill and White 2012, p. 78). As remarked by the two scholars, these representations completely avoided any reference to the ongoing political conflict, preferring an apolitical imagery that included references to circus and jungle (Hocking 2015, pp. 11-12). Whereas the reaction from the local population was mixed (Ibid.), the prevailing feelings were that of rejection and alienation towards the murals, unable to represent the communities (Clark 2019). The criticism towards the imagery promoted by the scheme is well summed up in the words of a community activist, Des Wilson, reported by Hill and White (2012, p. 79): the man affirms how the murals were mostly perceived as insulting and accused of lack of sensitivity, an aspect that is reflected in the series of amendments and additions to the images made by local children, their "comments on the artists", as stated by Des Wilson.

The lack of sensitivity towards the local communities that had characterized the first state initiatives for re-imaging muralism did not disappear with the subsequent schemes. Hocking (2015) devotes an in-depth analysis to a 2009 project implemented at the Cupar Way Peace Line, one of the oldest to be erected in Belfast (in 1969) at the beginning of the Troubles. The peace line, which divides the nationalist Falls Road from the loyalist Shankill Road, offers an ideal surface for the creation of murals and graffiti; considering its position, at the crossroads between two opposing communities, it is not surprising that most of the representations that have been appearing were (and are) sectarian in nature. In order to promote the values of tolerance and self-esteem in the area, a program was then launched for the realization of murals depicting alternative visions from and for the local loyalist community. Among the works realized by the program there is the mural painting *Hewitt in the Frame*, which celebrates the local-born poet John Hewitt. The idea behind the project was in fact that of encouraging the loyalist community of Shankill to express itself through different symbols and models, replacing the paramilitary soldiers still present in many murals with more positive figures like that of Hewitt.

The program involved artists, schoolchildren, youths and other local people in a series of workshops that led to the creation of the final mural (Figure 1.4).

Figure 1. 4 Mural part of the *Hewitt in the Frame* artwork, 2012, Cupar Way (Shankill), West Belfast; picture by Tony Crowley, from *Murals of Northern Ireland Collection*, The Claremont Colleges Digital Library

Hocking (2015), who followed some of the activities that took place in 2010, notes how the concepts of community and identity at play were differently perceived by the participants. For example, there were attempts to include in the mural images of flags, a highly controversial subject in Northern Ireland (Bryan and Stevenson 2009), or references to the conflict and the paramilitary soldiers, all immediately discouraged by the project leaders. In short, the symbolism employed was largely controlled in order to forge a certain image of the community, apparently more appealing to tourists than local residents, according to the main goal of advertising an anti-sectarian image of Northern Ireland. Hocking (2015, pp. 101-103) insists in particular on the negotiations between the project leaders and the local community as illustrative of the different understanding of space and identity: "the Hewitt artwork expanded to include images of actual community artwork after workshop participants insisted that their artistic creations be featured in, as opposed to merely influencing, the final mural, as had originally been planned" (p. 102).

The day the mural was unveiled, few people were attending, testifying the general disaffection with programs that were mainly perceived as a form of 'intrusion' into the communities' space. Instead of celebrating Shankill and its people, the mural soon turned out into an anonymous surface where tourists leave their signatures and messages of peace and hope for a brighter future for Belfast. As is often the case in Northern Ireland, these places recently converted into a globalized space coexist with the resurgence of sectarian feelings, as the "Kill Republicans" graffito appeared in the mural in 2011 shows (Ivi., p.

104). The graffito exemplifies how public space may be eventually claimed back by the communities through 'local tactics', to follow the terminology used by De Certeau (1980); it stands as a response to the 'appropriation' of muralism by the state through programs like the *Hewitt in the Frame*. But more in general, it is public art to be conceived as a strategic tool in the shaping of a 'new' Northern Ireland. Programs like *The Building Peace Through The Arts – Re-imaging Communities*[35] use sculpture, public art and muralism to counteract persistent sectarianism in the landscape. And yet, in spite of their claim to represent the communities or bring back to life their past heritage, (Hocking 2015; Abdelmonem and Selim 2019), these programs end up highlighting the ambivalent role played by the state in controlling how contemporary Northern Ireland is representing itself in a growingly transnational context.

The city center as a place of amnesia

To sum up the observations made above, the heritagization of contemporary muralism can be seen as a way to reshape the social and political space of Northern Ireland within a transnational dimension where the past and present of the province are mobilized in the name of neoliberalism. Considering how space and memories are intertwined (Crinson 2005), the control exerted on the landscape comes to mean the attempted regulation of the local memories inscribed in the space. This also applies to the same communities and their management of memory: the old imperative (especially for the republicans) to quickly change the graffiti and murals according to the ongoing events, has been partly replaced by the opposing desire to repaint them from time to time. This process of memory-making that muralism materializes in the landscape highlights "the choreography of mutually supporting and codependent structural and relational tensions between internal and external participants in the mural 'business'" (Radford 2017, p. 269). The participants mentioned by Radford include on one side the muralists, residents and funding bodies (with their schemes for urban regeneration), while, on the other side, other external actors who found themselves involved in muralism, like tourists, academics, activists, etc... This heterogeneous set of people and institutions is regarded by Radford as the combination of *memory entrepreneurs* with regard to Northern Irish muralism.

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[35] The program was funded by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and the European Union's programme for Peace and Reconciliation (PEACE III).

The fact that the scholar also includes tourists as actors able to influence the development of contemporary muralism in Northern Ireland is extremely interesting, and represents an aspect that should be further analyzed. Nevertheless, it is always complicated to assess to what extent communities are really (and actively) involved in muralism. If it is true that many people feel the desire to remember and bring justice to the memory of the victims, it is equally true that such collective memories emerge through negotiations that imply an unequal balance of power. In this regard, Elisabetta Viggiani (2014) makes the distinction between *memory makers* and *memory receivers*, whose mutual relationship is characterized by an essential asymmetry of power which goes in favor of the former.

Before the need arose to remember the history of the conflict, representatives of the communities claim the right to commemorate those who lost their lives, thus raising the question of how individual memories of loss and grief could find their place within the larger narrative of the Troubles. If commemorative murals and other memorials that began to dot the territory of the working-class areas reflect the individual and collective desire to remember, they are nonetheless subject to a logic of their own, which is largely imposed by (ex) paramilitary groups. Their role at present is not always marginal: many political murals still celebrate paramilitarism and its bravery, and their presence in the commemorative landscape of the communities is still significant. Ex-prisoners may retain some influence when it comes to painting a new mural or set up a memorial. As Viggiani remarks, this is largely due to the absence of state-sponsored memorials to the conflict and its victims, an aspect that, as it is here suggested, can be thought in terms of a *memory void* which says a lot about the dilemma opened by the post-conflict phase.

Reflecting upon the complexity of commemorating the conflict's victims in Northern Ireland, John Nagle (2008) underlines the general sense of alienation from it shown by the state. A feeble attempt to handle the legacy of the conflict, however, was done immediately after the formal end of it, in 1998, with the *Bloomfield Report* commissioned by the Northern Irish Secretary of State: "alongside suggesting that 'practical help' should be offered to victims, the report promotes projects to create a non-physical memorial scheme and a physical memorial project" (Nagle 2008, p. 31). The latter was never realized, since profound disagreements emerged from the many suggestions proposed by the public, which reproduced the internal divisions and lack of understanding afflicting the province. In particular, it was unacceptable for many people to see civilian victims placed alongside paramilitary casualties, since these latter were largely regarded as those responsible for much of the violence suffered by the country. Considering such divisive feelings, it is not

surprising that nationalist/republican and unionist/loyalist communities have pursued their own forms of commemoration.

Coming back to the asymmetry of power in the commemorative landscape of Northern Ireland, Sara McDowell (2008a) remarks that only a minority of civilian casualties (around 30% some 8 years after the end of the conflict) were actually commemorated in public space, with memorials or murals. On the contrary, paramilitary soldiers were already extensively commemorated, highlighting their influence upon the local population and the imposition of a male-dominated iconography within the communities. If these spaces manage memory in a *tactical* way in relation to the power of the state, following de Certeau (1980) terminology (see also Mitchell and Kelly 2010), it can be said that certain groups (especially ex-prisoners and paramilitary soldiers) adopt in turn a *strategic* attitude in relation to their own communities. To control and manage memory means in fact to them to dominate the narratives of conflict both inside and outside the communities. This entails the treatment of specific memories as history materially *produced* and displayed in the murals, through the selection of who or what (and how) should be commemorated. Again, it is complicated to assess to what extent may these representations reflect the communities' feelings and vision of the past. People have often been frightened to oppose paramilitary groups (Viggiani 2014), so that the presence of a certain imagery is often more due to fear than a shared view of the events commemorated.

While the situation has partly changed in recent years, some examples are indicative of the control exerted by ex-prisoners in their own communities: former combatants had a voice with regard to the realization of the Hewitt mural described above, but this symbolic authority may turn into violent behavior, as the attacks carried out by (ex) paramilitary groups in Derry/Londonderry, where they act as vigilante gangs, show (Hocking 2015). Other examples include the presence of paramilitary-related traces left on the walls in the form of graffiti, mainly by dissident groups (Goulding and McCroy 2020). But more revealing is the case reported by McDowell (2008a) of some paramilitary soldiers who showed up at the funeral of a young boy (aged 17) killed in an explosion, claiming he was in the IRA and trying to impose their own burial rites. The mother of the boy resisted the intrusion into the commemoration of her son, who was in the end buried in a private ceremony. Later, however, she was not as successful in controlling the public image of her son and the way it was used. Some years after, in fact, an IRA memorial was built close to the woman's house: it included her son's name along with those of other combatants killed in the name of the "republican cause", as claimed by the memorial. It had been erected

without any requests for permission to the victims' relatives, as it often happens in Northern Ireland, weakening their power to control the images of their beloved ones. As summarized by McDowell, this issue concerns the "conflict of interest between private and public grief" (Ivi., p. 346), which ultimately illustrates the lack of power of many 'memory receivers' in Northern Ireland (especially when it comes to women).

In light of these observations, who are actually the memory makers in Northern Ireland? Whereas the communities prove to be an active actor in the memory-making process, the reality shows an internally fragmented scenario where certain groups within them influence that same process in a significant way; communities, or the concept of 'community', are then at best instrumentalized, leaving more vulnerable individuals (women, immigrants, etc…) on the sidelines (see the following chapter). In turn, however, the same communities in their entirety try to assert themselves against the marginalization to which they are subjected by the state and its re-imaging programs, since they see in their own management of memory a possible way to resist the process of institutionalization brought by state-sponsored commemorations and the historical discourse.

This is well evident, for example, in a certain historical revisionism (especially typical of the 1980s and 1990s) centered on the idea that Irish people are obsessed with history, an aspect that ultimately would explain the cause of the conflict (Rolston 2010). According to the scholar, this trend in Irish historiography "rested on the belief that the Irish were cursed with a surfeit of what they called history, but which was little more than disguised popular prejudice, in short, myth" (p. 287). Rolston, however, rejects this belief, raising the suspicion that it conceals or negates any responsibility on the part of other actors involved in the long history of violence in (Northern) Ireland, especially with regard to the British state. Faced with the discrediting of their own narratives, marginalized groups (i.e., the communities) in the province had no other alternative than to mobilize local memories in support of their political cause.

The historical revisionism described by Rolston, however, also seems to reiterate the old prejudice against Irish people that represents them not just as (pathologically) obsessed with memory and mythology, but also fundamentally 'irrational'. This belief was rooted in the opposition between the 'Irish race' and the British one, and claims that the former is characterized by foolishness and backwardness, against the rationality and progressivism that define the latter (Downes 2014). According to this idea, the mythologizing of history by Irish people and the relevance of cultural memories in defining their own identity would reveal the fundamental 'otherness' that distinguishes them from British people, reviving the

figure of the Irish as the Other and its 'exoticism' (grounded on racial bias). Within this frame, the historical discourse and its rationality are mobilized as the authentic repository of the past, following a mechanism that has been highlighted by Greimas. According to the semiotician, in fact, "the historical discourse projects into the past a present 'reality' and then trace it back again in the present, but enriched for this occasion with an authority whose founding criterion is the *Truth*: this game is nothing but an '*ideological machine*'" (Greimas 1976, p. 25; translation and italics mine).

The attempt to marginalize certain groups and their practices of memory through the mobilization of the historical discourse is one among the strategies adopted on the institutional level for isolating them. And yet, as shown by Greimas, the historical discourse is not alien to ideological reasons, which fall within a politics of memory: this latter extends to include also what Evershed (2015, p. 27) defines as the "depoliticization of space and of discourses" enacted by the state in Northern Ireland after the end of the conflict. According to Evershed, controversial ceremonies like the loyalist parade that took place in 2014 in Ormeau Road, Belfast, for the commemoration of two paramilitary deaths illustrate how "particular commemorative forms are seen as (potentially or actually) injurious to the ongoing project of neo-liberal 'peacebuilding' […] – the simultaneous pursuit of political reconciliation *and* finance-led economic growth, predicated on the ideological assertion that they are mutually constitutive" (Ibid.; italics in the original). But a clearer example of the contraposition between institutional and collective memories in Northern Ireland can be seen in the 2013 proposal for a *commission of historical clarification*. The project, launched by the *Arkiv* group (composed of several Northern Irish historians), claimed to work towards a delimitation of the historical narratives circulating in the country, with the clear aim to establish a certain (official and authoritative) version of the past. Beyond the group's declaration of objectiveness, it is evident here the exploitation of history with the purpose of 'controlling' the production and circulation of memories, as well as the political fallout that comes with it.

Mural painting should be reframed within this wider politics of memory. In this sense, murals are a local response, that manifests itself as an overproduction of memory, not only to the politics of re-imaging seen above, but also to those attempts, made at the institutional level, to marginalize, silence or discredit vernacular narratives of the past. In this regard, Northern Ireland is an example of society that, at community level, deals with memory and trauma through hypervisibility instead of silence and amnesia, even if, as already seen above, this entails a significant power imbalance within the same communities. The hypervisibility

of conflict-related narratives and representations in these spaces is in contrast with their invisibility in the city center of Belfast, defined by Switzer and McDowell (2009) as a "lost space" in this respect.

Following the necessity to implement peace through "normalization strategies" (Ivi., p. 338) that inevitably entail forgetfulness and amnesia, the space of the city center has been reshaped over time. Due to the IRA bombing campaign targeting commercial activities located there, the so-called *ring of steel* was erected in order to protect a space that had become extremely vulnerable[36]. Entrance was allowed only through steel gates built around the city center; whereas these security measures had a profound impact on the local economy, affecting the daily life of people, they also influenced architecture. For a long time, for example, the use of glass as a material of construction was widely restricted because of its transparency and fragility (Abdelmonem and Selim 2019). As the scholars remark, in fact, architecture and space tend to 'preserve' some traces of the events occurred (they talk both about a *spatial* and an *architectural memory*). It becomes then clear how subsequent processes of reconstruction and restoration, especially in the case of post-conflict societies, tend to subjugate space and architecture to the politics of reconciliation or, more pragmatically, of normalization of the country (Mazzucchelli 2010). In the case of Northern Ireland, this has translated into the invisibility of conflict-related memories inscribed or readable in the space/architecture of the city center, including the absence of murals, except for the commodified representations in Commercial Court analyzed above.

Following these considerations, it is possible to assimilate the presence of murals to a disturbing element of the architectural space that retrieves the memory of conflict against its suppression. While, however, the absence of murals in the city center may not be surprising, more remarkable is that of other forms of memorials commemorating conflict-related victims. More than 70 people lost their lives in attacks that took place in the city center, and yet these victims are not commemorated or remembered through any memorials, plaques or other forms of permanent signs, turning the city center into an *unmarked* space of remembrance (Switzer and McDowell 2009) with regard to the Troubles. Some of these victims are eventually commemorated there, but in non-public spaces, while others are remembered elsewhere in Belfast, according to a "process of displacing memory", as defined

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[36] The 12-foot-tall steel, concrete and barbed wire barricades known as the *ring of steel*, erected from 1972 by the British Army, was only removed between 1994 and 2002. In order to pass through it, people had to be searched by army personnel, a measure that deeply affected the lives of those working or travelling to the city center.

by the scholars (Ivi., p. 346). In this lost space, only national or transnational memories (as in the case of the Titanic memorial described in the third chapter) can be commemorated. They ultimately appear in accordance with the neo-liberal policies of urban regeneration that characterize post-conflict Northern Ireland (Nagle 2009b; Baker 2020), even if unable to really provide a unified and shared narrative of the past.

In other words, the city center fails to turn into a *memoryscape*, i.e., a space where past and present meanings and memories are inscribed in it "but may be 'reworked' or reinscribed", transforming into palimpsests which are simultaneously real and imaginary (Dawson 2016, p. 157)[37]. This shift has not yet occurred in the city center of Belfast, where amnesia has prevailed over the remembrance of the victims of conflict, and the architectural transformation of the space during the Troubles survives only in the mental maps or personal recollections of people. To read the city center of Belfast as a failed memoryscape in the terms stated above, confirms once again the state's inability to deal with the legacy of conflict; such a failure has opened up a void that encourages other memory-makers (at the local level) to manage the 'memory capital' offered by the legacy of conflict, in the direction of its heritagization and conversion into a form of political tourism.

Political murals are thus not only alien to the space of the city center because of their origin in the working-class communities, but also because of their fundamental *incompatibility* with the globalized and neo-liberal vision of Northern Ireland that is promoted by the state. Despite the ability of muralism in 'reinventing itself' in the post-conflict society, it remains largely associated with sectarianism and controversial narratives which, on the other side, are also the reasons behind its tourist success. In the 'sanitized' space of and around the city center, murals can only be evoked in the commodified and appealing form of street art that has been emerging in recent years, particularly in the area of the Cathedral Quarter (Figure 1.5).

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[37] The concept of *memoryscape* in Dawson's article is derived from De Jong and Rowlands (2008), who underline the interconnection between space, memory and affect; the concept of *(urban) palimpsest* derives instead from Huyssen (2003).

Figure 1.5 The *Belfast Phoenix*, 2014, on the North Street Arcade, in the Cathedral Quarter of Belfast (artist Andy Council, Bristol); picture taken by the author in 2018

To sum up, if on the one hand the historical discourse has been mobilized in order to oppose the spread of collective memories at local level, on the other hand a more radical politics of amnesia has been implemented in some spaces of Northern Ireland, like Belfast city center. Between these two possibilities, however, another alternative emerged, i.e., that of appropriating mural painting through its conversion into a form of street art that ultimately deprives it of any local connotation or political significance.

To conclude, the production and circulation of collective memories in Northern Ireland, being them conveyed by murals or through other means, are controlled in three possible ways, that are here summarized: through their *isolation* with respect to a dominant historical discourse; through their *erasure* from public space and, lastly, through their *translation* into commodified representations in which the communities and conflict are evoked in a superficial way, as the example of the murals in Commercial Court shows. These three possible strategies should be framed within the political geography that still characterizes Northern Ireland, and the city of Belfast in particular, with its dialectic between a neo-liberal center and the still segregated spaces of the working-class communities. The growing multiculturalism of Belfast, reflected in anti-sectarian celebrations like civil rights campaigns, St. Patrick's Day or the May Day parade, also derives from a redefinition of the city center that moves towards transnational and globalized ideals (Nagle 2009a). Nevertheless, it would be necessary to reflect on the fact that such multiculturalism has established itself at the price of erasing any traces or memories of the events that occurred there during the conflict. If on the one hand it offers an alternative to persistent expressions of sectarianism, on the other hand it avoids dealing with the legacy of past violence and its

remnants. A spontaneous question arises then regarding whether a shared commemoration of the Troubles and its victims could be sacrificed to a 'shared future' so insistently promoted.

The unconfident attitude towards the legacy of conflict displayed by the state in Northern Ireland has resulted in a politics of forgetfulness that has affected, wherever possible, a spatial dimension deeply linked to memory. Behind the mask of ideological neutrality, such a politics has occasionally mobilized history in its favor, in the attempt to counteract the hypervisibility and overproduction of local memories; a different historical approach should be encouraged in the future, able to reconcile with the dynamic and social dimension of these memories:

> Thinking of memory in association with the history of mentalities invites the scholar to give memory a certain anarchic quality that will take it beyond the sphere of ideas, ideology, and state and public representations, and into the ways people acted, shaped, internalized, and changed images of the past. An anarchic quality that locates memory not only in monuments and museums, but also in *the ways people make it part of how and why they act in the world*. This kind of history sees its task not simply to explore how people remember the past after the fact, but how memory structures behavior and thoughts (Confino 2008, p. 81; italics mine).

The genuinely semiotic approach to memory proposed by Confino may show a fourth way through which dealing with the plurality and contraposition of collective memories in Northern Ireland, challenging the three ways illustrated above (isolation, erasure and translation). Through the acknowledgement of the dynamic nature of memory and its ability to reflect, even if in a deformed manner, the social fabric of a community, the future politics in the province may finally come to terms with the ghosts that still haunt it in the present.

Conclusions. The *iterability* of muralism

The concept of muralism as a dynamic system of memory that has emerged from this chapter allows to study the practice of painting murals in Northern Ireland and the dynamics internal and external to it (marking of the territory, commodification/heritagization, commemoration, etc…) in relation to each other. As previously said, this means to adopt a broader perspective on the murals that encompasses their increasing complexity and the variety of functions/trends currently underpinning them. The theoretical models illustrated throughout the chapter, from the recent developments of the semiotics of memory to the re-

elaboration of Luhmann's theory by Esposito (2001; 2008), have highlighted the interconnection between permanence and change that are key to understanding the unitary nature of muralism across time and beyond its internal diversification. In particular, Luhmann's model shows how a system only exists through the constant (re)production of elements that (re)creates it, a mechanism that Esposito has introduced in the study of social memory and that can be extremely inspiring for comprehending muralism in the systematic way proposed by the present work.

The coexistence of permanence/repetition and dynamism/change can be regarded as an expression of that function/logic of *iterability* that, according to Pinkerton (2021), governs commemoration in Northern Ireland. Iterability, that the scholar derives from Derrida, "ties repetition to alterity" (Derrida in Pinkerton 2021, p. 472), since any new 'text' (in the very general sense attributed to it by semiotics) produced, repeats or 'cites' (a) earlier text(s) while simultaneously creating a new singularity. This allows both for the future readability and re-interpretation of the new text in the absence of its (originally) intended audience and the ultimate *undecidability* of the meaning(s) of the text. Pinkerton's observations, made with reference to the Enniskillen memorial and the performances of remembrance held at the site[38], capture however the essence of muralism in the province as a practice that revives the tradition of mural painting through each new mural realized, while at the same time ensuring its transformation and re-interpretation over time and in relation to internal/external changes.

The iterability of muralism and its interplay between repetition and alterity have been analyzed in this first chapter in connection with the two functions/trends of commodification and heritagization. They are largely responsible, along with the politics of re-imaging described in the previous paragraphs, for the redefinition of muralism within a visual culture in transformation, where enduring narratives coexist with more 'appropriate' imagery and a globalized street art scene. These aspects, which are affecting the permanence and political nature of the murals (see Fillis and Lehman 2022 and Chapter 4 here), can however be better understood within and in relation to the politics of memory that, in many respects, come into conflict with their need to get rid of the past or instrumentalize it. If the present chapter ended with some considerations on the politics of amnesia promoted by the state, the two following chapters will deal with the management of memory by the communities not through the analysis of muralism per se, but through that of the dynamics of memory which renovate it within an increasingly transnational dimension.

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[38] The Enniskillen memorial (Enniskillen, County Fermanagh, Northern Ireland), was unveiled in 2017 in honor of the 12 victims who died as a result of an IRA bombing attack on November 8, 1987.

Chapter 2. The transnational dimension of the nationalist/republican murals

While the previous chapter focused on muralism as a (dynamic) system of memory and on the recent development of two of its internal functions, i.e., those of commodification and heritagization, the present and the following chapters deal with the dynamics of memory within it. This entails a shift from muralism per se to some of its internal articulations, that are here regarded as expressions of the commemorative function performed by murals towards a growing transnational dimension. Transnationalism may be understood as a specific function/aspect that characterizes contemporary muralism in Northern Ireland as well as the common denominator underpinning it: if commodification and heritagization are already dependent on the promotion and conversion of muralism within a transnational dimension (the tourist market), the dynamics of memory at play in the murals are no less influenced by transnationalism or, better said, should be reframed in relation to it. This is even more true, as chapter 6 will show, with regard to the digital and archival dimension in which muralism exists, a dimension that is less and less local or exclusively ruled by the communities.

Coming back to the present chapter and its focus on the dynamics of memory put into play by nationalist/republican murals, it certainly appears surprising to frame them within a transnational dimension. This is mainly due to the fact that political murals and their imagery are rooted in sectarianism or are painted in support of nationalist claims. Nevertheless, as the previous chapter has attempted to show, contemporary muralism reveals a much more fragmented landscape: its precarious existence between re-imaging and political tourism, the plurality of the memory makers in post-conflict Northern Ireland and the disputes over the use of murals for commemorating the past/victims provide a more accurate picture that blurs the link between muralism and sectarianism. Within this context, transnational dynamics play an increasingly important role in redefining what used to be a community-based practice; and yet, such dynamics are not new to (republican) muralism. If it is true that memory, on a collective level, is shaped by texts, discourses and practices (Demaria 2006), the transnational dimension underpinning many nationalist/republican representations originated (at least) in the discourses of the civil rights protestors who took the streets of Northern Ireland in the 1960s. This transmission and mediatization of memory across time, in accordance with the theoretical model described in the previous chapter, also highlights the dynamic nature of muralism as a system of memory that (re)converts previous narratives

and temporalities in the present. From a transnational dimension mainly derived from the pressures exerted by external factors, there is then a shift in focus to the transnational dynamics internal to muralism and its imagery.

In light of these considerations, the following paragraphs will start analyzing the emergence of the narratives that established the transnational parallelism between the Catholics of Northern Ireland and the Afro-American people in the United States, in the context of the international civil rights campaigns of the 1960s. It will then be analyzed how murals have (re)framed these parallelisms starting from the Blanketmen protests that in the 1980s determined the explosion of muralism within the Catholic/nationalist/republican communities, which were ready to convert it into a form of political propaganda. After this historical excursus, the focus will shift again to contemporary muralism, questioning the possibility to talk about political activism in relation to some of the transnational representations recently appeared in nationalist/republican murals, especially those on the famous International Wall of Belfast. In spite of some positive indications in this regard, however, many are the subjects/issues still not addressed or poorly represented, an aspect to which the final reflections of the chapter are devoted.

Civil rights movements, anti-racism and the figure of the *White Negro*

The wave of the civil rights protests that broke out across Europe also involved Northern Ireland, and particularly the two main cities of Belfast and Derry/Londonderry. Because of the political marginalization Catholics claimed to suffer at the hands of the Unionist government, they seized the opportunity to protest against it in order to gain an equal status with the Protestant/unionist/loyalist population of the province. Inspired by the civil rights movements led by Afro-American people that were shaking the United States, the Catholic communities of Northern Ireland identified themselves as *white negroes* (Maney 2017; Ó Dochartaigh 1994), reversing a derogatory term into a positive self-representation[39].

The appropriation of the figure of the white negro and the parallelisms with the situation of the Afro-Americans did not only reinforce an internal discourse of self-legitimization, but also responded to the need of receiving a favorable media coverage outside of the country (Maney 2017). At first, the civil rights movements in Northern Ireland did receive general support from the international media, giving visibility to the situation of Irish Catholics in

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[39] The derogatory term *white nigger* or *negro* emerged in the nineteenth century in North America and was used against Irish people as well as against other immigrant groups.

the province; but things were destined to change very soon with the explosion of violence in the streets, which eventually led to the outbreak of conflict. Media coverage began to decline, becoming less and less favorable towards the protestors, who found themselves struggling for making their voices heard internationally. Already in 1969, also because of the rising level of violence, different narratives of the protests began to monopolize the interpretation of the events in Northern Ireland, overshadowing the internal parallelisms with the condition of the Afro-Americans.

The protests were reframed in accordance with other master narratives, which established the connection with the student demonstrations in other countries or, especially in the North American and British press, with socialist and communist uprisings. With the explosion of the armed conflict in 1969 then, another narrative centered on internal sectarianism finally prevailed over the previous discourses and frames focused instead on transnational parallelisms with other civil rights movements. The exceptional nature of the situation in Northern Ireland compared to other European countries eventually led to a state of isolation that only the emergence of the *Peace People movement* in 1976 succeeded in (partially) breaking off, bringing the international attention back to narratives other than those about the armed conflict (Smithey 2017). And yet, the transnational frame and parallelisms developed by the Catholic/nationalist/republican communities were destined to rise again with a different meaning a few years later: the protests led by the Blanketmen, in fact, determined the appropriation of these narratives by muralism starting from the 1980s, reviving and expanding the former identifications with struggles/movements occurring around the world.

A fundamental difference between the civil rights movements in Northern Ireland and the campaign in support of the Blanketmen lies also in the centrality given to visibility by the republican prisoners, who had to fight against the censorship imposed by the British press and government. Within this context, the appropriation of muralism as a form of political propaganda and a mean to gain visibility became the response given by the nationalist/republican communities to the discrimination and injustice they claimed to suffer in the province[40]. In short, murals were conceived as an extension of the protest out of the Long Kesh/Maze prison in order to reach an international audience that could witness what

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[40] On the relation between muralism, visibility and censorship during the Troubles see also the lecture given by Tony Crowley, 'Why do People Write and Paint on Walls? Reflections from the war in Northern Ireland', at the Pitzer College (California), in 2018. The video is available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JTxZooLokJ8&ab_channel=PitzerCollege.

the Blanketmen (and the communities from which they came) were enduring. Thanks to the culture of solidarity prompted by the protest campaign, a renovated transnational frame was again able to assert itself, establishing a wider anti-imperialist narrative sympathetic to past and present struggles for freedom and independence. Such a narrative was certainly strategic and not alien to political exploitation, as Rolston (2009) points out; and this was already true in the past. In spite of the sincere admiration for Irish anti-imperialism from many campaigners for human rights and the abolition of slavery, republican international solidarity in Ireland and Northern Ireland has been traditionally ambiguous, or, as Rolston suggests (p. 449), partly based on opportunity.

More recently, it has been the US South, with its discourses and iconography, that has fueled the Northern Irish imaginary of both unionist/loyalist and nationalist/republican communities (Clukey 2017), even if with significant differences between the two. Unlike the former transnational solidarity, this southern imaginary appeared later, after the end of the conflict, and probably as a consequence of the uncertainty left by it and the global economic crisis. The fear of immigration in Northern Ireland, particularly (but not exclusively) among loyalist people, is partly responsible for the adoption of "symbols of US white supremacist culture, particularly neo-Confederate iconography" (Ivi., p. 62). On the opposite, a certain nationalist/republican propaganda is reviving the long-established self-identification with Afro-Americans (this time of the South). With regard to this latter, Clukey highlights how the process of 'appropriation' of the history of black people in America is based on a (often strategic) misinterpretation of the historical facts, as well as on a selected amnesia of some aspects of the past. In this direction goes for example the self-identification of many republicans as white negroes seen above, but also the manipulation of history that exaggerates the (real) racism against Irish people while silencing their own responsibilities in maintaining a system of social inequalities and discrimination. As Clukey (p. 75) remarks, "the failure to acknowledge Irish involvement in American slavery and racism in the past—including how hard they worked to assimilate into a Southern culture founded on white supremacy—masks white privilege and racism in the present".

The biased or, as defined by Rolston (2009), opportunistic use of transnational solidarity testifies the ambiguity of many republican narratives and representations. Based on some alleged similarities, almost a form of *isotopy*[41] (in the language of semiotics), a uniform

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[41] The notion of *isotopy* was introduced in semiotics by Greimas (1966) to designate the semantic redundancy produced as a consequence of the repetitions of semantic categories allowing for a uniform reading/interpretation of a text.

narrative emerges, indifferent to the significant divergences in terms of circumstances, socio-political conditions and time period. The shift from the figure of the white negro that dominated the civil rights movements of the 1960s to the subsequent transnational solidarity with other countries or regions is based on their reframing within a wider and undifferentiated struggle for freedom or justice. Murals in support of Palestine, the Basque Country or Catalonia that appeared very soon in the republican communities should be read in this direction. In the attempt to disrupt an interpretation of the conflict focused exclusively on (internal) sectarianism, these murals establish a series of external references that challenge other narratives and the state of isolation in which Northern Ireland found itself for a long time.

Whereas the wider interpretation of the conflict promoted by the nationalist/republican side proved successful, the same cannot be said of the narratives of the civil rights movements in Northern Ireland. This is basically due to two reasons which are closely related and partially overlapping. The first one is the general disregard towards the protests, which only recently have been 'reevaluated' both in the national context and in relation to contemporary events around the world. Nevertheless, a unitary (not to mention a national) memory of the protests and of 1968 is still missing in Northern Ireland (Reynolds and Morin 2022), contrary to the influential role assigned to them in other countries. The second reason is connected to internal sectarianism, since the protests took place within, and not beyond, the ethno-sectarian divisions characterizing the province. This in turn determined both the divisive memory of the events in Northern Ireland and their subsequent assimilation within the dominant frame of the armed conflict. Most of those who participated in the protests, in fact, tended to reframe them in connection to it, preventing their future remembrance within transnational narratives (Reynolds 2017) which had instead emerged at an earlier stage. To sum up, the parallels with the Afro-American civil rights movements (the external reference) have been largely replaced by a collective narrative that made of 1968 the prodrome of the Troubles (the internal reference).

More recently, however, as highlighted by Reynolds, the transnational dimension of 1968 has been partially restored in Northern Ireland. This is evident for example in the attempt made by the Ulster Museum in Belfast (in collaboration with the same Reynolds) to broaden the view of Northern Ireland's 1968. The aim was that of widening "perspectives within the Museum galleries so as to break out from the insularism that has so often defined representations of the past in Norther n Ireland, as was evidenced by how the period of 1968 had hitherto been represented in the museum" (p. 7). This and other initiatives have certainly

contributed to reframe the memory of 1968 within an international context; as an institution, the Ulster Museum has then 'legitimized' a different interpretation of the events that partially restores the republican narratives circulating before the outbreak of the Troubles, when the Catholic population of Northern Ireland used to identify itself with the Afro-American people protesting for equal rights.

Nevertheless, the question remains whether the transnational frame recently rehabilitated by the Ulster Museum is more dependent on the 'success' enjoyed internationally by the cultural memory of 1968 than on the recovery of former narratives already circulating in Northern Ireland. In addition, Reynolds (2017) completely neglects the republican international solidarity that resurfaced with the Blanketmen campaign. While not addressing the civil rights protests and 1968, it may however have had a role, albeit for completely different reasons, in the more recent emergence of a 'transnational turn' through which the protests leading to the conflict have been reinterpreted. In a way, muralism had already anticipated a certain understanding of the events which only later would have gained some recognition. In this light, it seems quite surprising that the civil rights movements of the 1960s are virtually absent from post-conflict muralism. Despite the common representations of black activists like Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela or Frederick Douglass[42], the civil rights protests of Northern Ireland appear to be struggling to gain the status of cultural memory. Apart from the well-known mural depicting the civil rights protestors in Derry/Londonderry (Figure 2.1)[43], the very few others connect the events to the violence of the imminent conflict, proving the difficulty in establishing a celebratory narrative of that time as occurred instead in other countries.

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[42] Frederick Douglass was an Afro-American abolitionist and politician. During his life, he visited Ireland, where he delivered some public speeches and was influenced by the Irish nationalists, particularly by Daniel O'Connell, the leader of the movement for Catholic emancipation.

[43] The mural is part of *The People's Gallery* mentioned in the previous chapter. It is important to note that Derry/Londonderry was, along with Belfast, the center of the protests, also because of the high number of Catholic residents. In a way, the mural stands as a monument to the memory of the events that took place in the city, marking the significance of the space.

Figure 2.1 *The Civil Rights Mural*, The Bogside Artists, 2004, Rossville Street, Derry/Londonderry; picture taken by the author in 2018

The connection between the civil rights protests and the armed conflict emerges for example in another mural realized by the Bogside Artists in Derry/Londonderry, the famous depiction of the dead body of Jack (Jackie) Duddy carried by a group of men led by the Catholic priest Edward Daly waving a white handkerchief at the British soldiers (Figure 2.2).

Figure 2.2 *Bloody Sunday Mural*, The Bogside Artists, 1997, Rossville Street, Derry/Londonderry; picture taken by the author in 2018

This dramatic representation of Bloody Sunday tends to relegate the civil rights protests to the background, since they are mostly referenced through the banner in the distance and the people marching in the streets, as well as through the other banner that lies on the ground, symbolically stepped on by a British soldier. Moreover, the words "civil rights" inscribed in the banner are stained red from the blood of the victims who died or were injured that day (it is the only color in an otherwise monochrome painting). What the mural seems to suggest then, is that the time of the civil rights movements in Northern Ireland has already been absorbed into the narrower narrative of the conflict, which makes of it an experience peculiar to Northern Ireland and consequently distinct compared to that of other countries.

In order to find a transnational reference to other civil rights movements, one has to turn to a mural that appeared after the events of the Holy Cross school in Belfast. In 2001, a violent dispute exploded in Ardoyne, an area in the north of Belfast, over a Catholic school for girls, the Holy Cross, located in an overwhelmingly loyalist part of the district. For several months, loyalist residents protested and rioted against the Catholic children and their

parents, who were forced to walk to the school through their area. In turn, loyalists were claiming that they were often harassed by the Catholics living in the southern area of Ardoyne. British soldiers and police were employed for allowing the children and their parents to enter the school, but that did not prevent numerous civilians and security forces to be injured in the attacks that followed. The events were almost immediately compared by several nationalists to the segregation and racism suffered by Afro-Americans in the United States at the time of their struggle for school integration in the 1950s (Clukey 2017). A transnational frame resurfaced then once again, relating internal issues to an external historical episode. But the identification of Irish Catholic with Afro-Americans found expression not only in the words of nationalist people and politicians, but also in a mural realized in Ardoyne, extremely receptive to the narratives that were circulating about the events of the Holy Cross school (Figure 2.3).

Figure 2.3 The Holy Cross School mural, 2001, Ardoyne, North Belfast; picture by Tony Crowley, from *Murals of Northern Ireland Collection*, The Claremont Colleges Digital Library

The mural, representing in the center a mother who walks with her two children in a disturbing landscape, recreates a historic patina with the choice of the black and white, also typical, as will be seen further on, of many of the murals realized by the Bogside Artists. The only color used is the red of the children's sweaters, as to solicit an emotional response

from the observer[44]. The parallelism between the events of 2001 in Ardoyne and the protests that took place in the Unites States in the 1950s is given by the two pictures on the sides of the central scene, realized as photographic images: the one on the left represents the young activist Elizabeth Eckford walking to Little Rock Central High School, Arkansas (1957)[45], while the one on the right is a close-up of the screaming face of one of the Ardoyne schoolgirls. Both images are based on real photographs, an aspect that is common in Northern Irish muralism, which often refers to or incorporates other media (see in particular chapters 4 and 5). This game of references became even more complex few years later, when the mural was reproduced on the International Wall in West Belfast and the central image replaced by a different representation. Along with the references to the events of Ardoyne in 2001 and those in Arkansas in 1957, the mural added a depiction (again as a photographic image) of an immigrant family accompanied by the words "South Belfast '09", the latter referring to some attacks against immigrants that occurred in Belfast at that time (Clukey 2017). The transnational frame was then not only widened through the inclusion in the mural of people who are alien to the traditional binarism of Catholic/nationalist/republican and Protestant/unionist/loyalist, but also through the reference to contemporary racism in Northern Ireland.

This example shows that there are representations which, while used for (republican) propaganda, may potentially give some visibility to groups or issues that are usually absent from muralism. Whereas the limits of such observations will be discussed later on, there is an aspect that is important to underline. The dynamism of memories that is implied by the transnational dimension of some murals comes not only from the references to external events, but also originates from the very use of the murals. In the terms of that dynamic system described in the previous chapter, in fact, muralism reproduces itself through the constant re-conversion of the same surface into a space where multiple messages and representations follow one another, in dependence on changing circumstances (both internal and external). The very famous "you are now entering Free Derry" mural in the Bogside area of Derry/Londonderry provides the best example of this. Painted already in 1969, the mural

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[44] The choice of the red sweaters is probably evocative of the very famous red coat worn by the Jewish little girl in Spielberg's *Schindler's List*. This unexpected identification could then trigger another transnational frame of reference, definitely less obvious but not completely unusual; see for example Armstrong (2021) for an analysis of how the World War II has been used (especially in poetry) as a metaphor for the Troubles.

[45] Elizabeth Eckford was one of the nine black students to be admitted to the formerly all-white school of Little Rock (the group is known as the *Little Rock Nine*). Similarly to what happened in Ardoyne in 2001, she was attacked by a white mob which successfully prevented her from entering the school; this is exactly the moment recorded by the photograph on which the mural is based, and that showed the event to the whole world.

is strongly linked to the civil rights movements in the city; it marked the entrance to the nationalist area of the Bogside, mimicking the use of murals made by loyalists. And yet, it is not only a mere trace that recalls the protests of the 1960s, since it is used to connect that historical time to other episodes:

> in November 2014, Free Derry Corner was painted in response to a grand jury's refusal to indict police officer Darren Wilson on murder charges for shooting and killing African American teenager Mike Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. Artist Ray Mond painted the mural during a "solidarity vigil" held by the Bloody Sunday March Committee on November 29th, 2014. This version features the silhouette of a soldier pointing a rifle at three figures with raised hands respectively labeled "Derry," "Palestine," and "Ferguson" with the protest phrase "Hands up DON'T SHOOT" (Clukey 2017, p. 64).

This 'adaptation' of the Free Derry mural connects for example Bloody Sunday with the similarly unjustified use of violence against Palestinian people and Afro-American citizens by Israeli soldiers and police officers in the United States, respectively. Even if Clukey insists upon the predominantly ideological nature of these representations, it should be acknowledged that they can, at least potentially, encourage a sincere feeling of solidarity towards the suffering of others. Relatives of the victims of Bloody Sunday and other activists openly showed their support to Mike Brown's family, proving the more general consensus behind the message conveyed by the mural. More recently, following the wave of international protests led by the Black Lives Matter movement, a mural in support of George Floyd was painted on the International Wall of Belfast in 2020. The depiction offers another example of the dynamics of memory that are currently at work in contemporary muralism in Northern Ireland, in line with the narrative of transnational solidarity with anti-racist struggles that the nationalist/republican communities of West Belfast has long championed.

And yet, this does not mean that this dominant narrative is never questioned. The mural of George Floyd was in fact vandalized shortly after its realization with white paint covering the face of the victim. This gesture tells us different things: first of all, it shows that racist feelings are not uncommon in Belfast (apart from Clukey 2017, see at least Knox 2011 and McVeigh and Rolston 2007). Secondly, it should be placed within the long-established practice of vandalizing unwelcome representations, which is 'another side' of the history of muralism in Northern Ireland (Kirkpatrick 2021). Lastly, the gesture of covering the face of George Floyd with white paint is indicative of the permanent political nature of murals, which coexists with their commemorative function. The message conveyed by the George

Floyd mural overlaps in fact with the need to commemorate the man represented; in the very end, these two dimensions converge into a single cause that the figure of George Floyd exemplifies in the eyes of the Black Lives Matter movement. In any case, whatever the ultimate meaning of the mural is, it appears certain that its transnational message clashes with forms of local resistance.

However, apart from considering the racist nature of the attack to the mural (which curiously 'appropriated' techniques similar to those employed by the Black Lives Matter protestors against statues and monuments), the focus should be placed on how external memories are currently received and retranslated by muralism. If this latter was previously mostly concerned with reframing the conflict within a larger narrative that could legitimize it, at present muralism is also appropriating and commemorating events 'from the outside'. It appears then natural to wonder, within this context, whether a sectarian, or eventually national, frame is really appropriate for understanding such dynamics of memory; the following paragraphs will deal exactly with this question.

Travelling memories in and outside Northern Ireland

When memory studies originated as a more or less defined subject area in the 1980s, especially with the work of Pierre Nora *Les Lieux de mémoire*, published between 1984 and 1992, the main frame of reference was given by the nation. Within this context, memories were generated, or eventually "invented" (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) in order to forge a national identity that was rooted in the recurrence of certain symbols, traditions or rituals aimed at reviving the past and origin of a certain nation[46]. As remarked by Astrid Erll (2011), there was in the beginning a general tendency towards the reification of the notion of culture, which was usually reduced to *that* specific culture, coinciding with a certain national identity and its practices of memory. The nation appeared then as the 'natural' frame to be taken into consideration, thus shifting from the question of memory in culture (as broadly conceived) to that of memory in cultures, which translated almost exclusively into national memories. Based on what the German philosopher Wolfgang Welsch named the *container-culture*, the theorization founded on the nation was essentially articulated in the three elements of social homogenization, ethnic consolidation and intercultural delimitation.

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[46] See also Smith (1986; 1999), whose work places at the center of reflection the notions of nation and nationhood, on which collective memories and a shared vision of the past are based.

Simplifying this theoretical framework, the first element should be understood as the reduction of the complexities on the social level, the second as the identification between culture and a certain folk/ethnic group, while the third suggests the comprehension of culture as a monad. What Erll underlines, is that the former understanding of memory as essentially based on these three elements, in turn constituting the essence of the national character, can no longer reflect the complexities of the contemporary world. Her proposal of the more comprehensive concept of *travelling memories* goes in this direction. In a globalized and fragmented reality like our current one, in fact, memories tend to increasingly travel from their 'original' place of creation to other contexts, giving rise to an international audience that potentially commemorate the same events with the same or similar practices.

This theoretical premise is important in order to reconfigure what has been illustrated in the previous paragraphs through the examples of transnational murals in the nationalist/republican communities. If these latter have been mainly regarded as an expression of ideological propaganda (Clukey 2017) or a form of historical misrepresentation (Rolston 2009)[47], it is yet possible to add another level of interpretation that makes of them the manifestation of travelling memories in and outside of Northern Ireland. The dynamic nature of muralism that has been so frequently highlighted, finds then here a new declination through its ability not just to change across time in order to adapt itself to both internal and external pressures on it, but also to develop a multiplicity of references, connections and allusions to global events. Moreover, while transnationalism was previously mobilized with the primary purpose of legitimizing an aggressive bombing campaign which claimed to share similarities with other struggles around the world, it is at present driven by a sincerest effort to incorporate memories from the outside. This migration of common images and themes tends towards the creation of a connective memory, in the sense given by Erll (2014) of an encounter between different memories which are re-translated at the local level.

As described in the previous chapter, the processes of translation and filtration are, from a semiotic perspective, at the center of the generation or transmission of collective/cultural memories. These forms of (altered) repetition, which also include the migration of more complex schemes or patterns, are equally at the base of the transnational representations through which the nationalist/republican communities 're-invent' their own memories in

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[47] However, it should be added that, contrary to Clukey (2017), Rolston seems to be more inclined to acknowledge the 'progressive' character of many of the transnational representations found in nationalist/republican murals.

relation to other experiences of struggle and resistance. This particular dynamic character of contemporary muralism is described by Murray (2016) with regard to the creation of what he calls "open communities". According to the author, there is some potential in the transnational representations that have been appearing on the International Wall of Belfast for moving the communities beyond sectarianism, but also for affecting social justice campaigns at the domestic as well as external level. The mobility of memories reflected by muralism may then translate into a potential social mobilization that attempts to create "the space for the more fluid and open notion of community necessary for social transformation" (Ivi., p. 61).

Whereas Murray probably neglects the persistence of more controversial representations that reiterate divisive narratives, he is one of the few scholars to capture an aspect that, so far, has been largely overlooked. This aspect concerns the possible connection between muralism and political activism, which in Northern Ireland originated at least with the aforementioned Blanketmen campaign in the 1980s. Certainly, the use of murals and graffiti for spreading political messages is not exclusive to Northern Ireland: the Arab Spring of 2010-2011, for example, was accompanied by numerous slogans and depictions realized on the walls of the cities involved in the wave of protests (Miladi 2018). Their subversive nature within a space occupied by people forced the governments to remove them as quickly as possible, engaging police in an urban guerrilla warfare against the graffiti/street artists. The protests in the Arab countries and the use of the walls in the political struggle are somehow reminiscent of the situation in Northern Ireland during the campaign in support of the Blanketmen. In both cases, there was the same need for international visibility, because of the strong censorship exercised by the governments; it is within this context that the use of murals and graffiti with the purpose of mobilizing people and raise awareness outside should be understood, being it in a struggle against dictatorial regimes (the Arab Spring) or in a campaign for the re-introduction of the status of political prisoners (the Blanketmen in Northern Ireland)[48].

The central role played by muralism as a form of political propaganda is well evident in the adoption of the practice inside the same HM Prison Maze, which was made possible only after the end of the protests. Described by Rolston (2013b) as an expression of internal

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[48] The protests organized by the Blanketmen inside the HM Prison Maze aimed at the restoration, articulated in five demands, of their political status. They included: the right not to wear the prison uniform; the exemption from prison work; free association among the prisoners (with the right to self-organize their own education); the right to receive one visit/letter/parcel per week; the complete restoration of the remission lost throughout the protest. For the history of the Blanketmen and their protests, see at least Feldman (1991) and Taylor (1998).

resistance to the prison regime, that the author re-defines as a *liberated zone*, these murals could also perform a more explicit form of political activism. Indeed, while affirming a certain ethno-sectarian identity or being use for commemorating dead comrades[49], these prison murals could eventually reiterate the message of resistance and freedom that were to be found in the nationalist/republican communities[50]. It is worthy to note in this regard that there were transnational representations even inside the inaccessible space of the prison, testifying how transnationalism and its culture of solidarity had already been assimilated within the republican imagery[51].

But transnational solidarity also manifested itself through the 'migration' of the example and memory of the Blanketmen out of Northern Ireland, influencing other protests/campaigns. This was largely due to the strategic use of the body made by the prisoners, evident both during the so-called dirty protest and the subsequent hunger strike that tragically ended with ten prisoners dead; these actions showed what Feldman (1991) defines as the *political technology of the body*, i.e., its use as a tool for resistance against the prison regime. The ability of the Blanketmen to come out from the political invisibility to which the British government had submitted them was then the result of both the instrumentalization of their own bodies and the external campaign they had started, which wanted to offer a different understanding of their struggle to the international audience, moving beyond their image as terrorists[52]. This also included the establishment of links to other political movements and civil rights campaigns, already mentioned above; in the end, the experience and political maturity gained by the Blanketmen was to prove extremely important for changing the course of the conflict in the subsequent years.

By 1978, the condition of the Blanketmen inside the HM Prison Maze had already gained international attention. An article published by Jack Anderson in the United States bitterly condemned the prison regime (O'Hearn 2017) and, shortly after, activists from the US and Europe started to show their support for the Blanketmen, contributing to the international resonance of the campaign. Bobby Sands, the leader of the protest and the first Blanketman

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[49] This reflects (in part) the plurality of functions performed/displayed by muralism (see the previous chapter).

[50] On the murals of the HM Prison Maze/Long Kesh see also Purbrick (2011).

[51] Among the images depicted on the prison walls, that of Che Guevara seemed to be particularly common among the nationalist/republican prisoners; see Rolston (2013b), in particular p. 161.

[52] The first public images of the Blanketmen appeared only in 1980, in a video of the *BBC Newsnight*, while the protest had been going on for 4 years already. Apart from the obvious reasons that led the British government to censor it, there was also concern for the safety of the prison guards, who were very frequently the target of attacks by paramilitary soldiers. The aforementioned video of the BBC is available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p078l4nb.

to die in the 1981 Hunger Strike, shortly after his election to the British Parliament, was fully aware of the importance to organize a huge propaganda machine in favor of the prisoners and their cause. He was the one who "suggested chain letters, pirate radio stations, school boycotts, industrial strikes, demos at sporting events, an H-Block flag, and an International Committee headed up by a team of sympathetic priests" (Ivi., p. 157).

While the solidarity movement organized by the Blanketmen successfully 'travelled' out of Northern Ireland[53], the memory of the event proved able to last far beyond. O'Hearn talks about the "movement of experiences across time and space" (Ivi., p. 160) when referring to the appropriation of the lesson bequeathed by the Blanketmen to subsequent prison protests. An example is given by the interracial initiative that gave rise to the *Short Corridor Collective*, grouping prisoners inside the Pelican Bay State Prison, California, mentioned by the same O'Hearn. These men were directly inspired by the Blanketmen protest, and they eventually adopted the hunger strike as a technique for forcing the authorities to change the conditions inside the prison and end the isolation to which many detainees were subject. Their action also led to a campaign against racial violence both inside and outside California jails, giving birth to a movement with humanitarian and social ambitions.

The transnational dimension of the Blanketmen protest is also celebrated in Northern Ireland by the nationalist/republican communities, through murals that depict the circulation of the prisoners' memory and how it influenced other struggles. One example is given by the representation of Sevgi Erdogan, a Turkish activist who starved to death on a hunger strike in 2001 as a protest against the condition in which prisoners were kept inside the F-Type-Prisons in Turkey[54]. The mural was realized shortly after her death, in 2001, and encouraged at least three levels of reading: the first is the direct call to support the Turkish hunger strike (which at that time was still going on); the second level concerns the commemoration of the woman, thus introducing her memory in the Northern Irish memorial landscape; finally, the third level addresses the connection between the Turkish protest and that led by the Blanketmen, since the mural tells us that Sevgi Erdogan "was inspired by

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[53] It is important –yet- to be cautious when talking about the 'success' of the protest: if it actually gained an international visibility and a longstanding reputation, testified by a critically-acclaimed movie such as *Hunger* (2008), it could not prevent the death of ten prisoners. In addition, only in October 1981 some of the original five demands made by the Blanketmen were finally granted to the prisoners, slowly leading to the end of the protest.

[54] The F-Type-Prisons are high security prisons which began to operate in the 1990s in different locations in Turkey. Since 2000, several incidents and deaths occurred in many of these prisons, leading to a huge hunger strike that started in October 2000. The struggle of the Turkish prisoners, however, is regarded by O'Hearn (2017) as an example of failed strategy, due, among other reasons, to the inability of the inmates to create a wide support through a propaganda campaign *before* the start of the hunger strike.

Bobby Sands" (Figure 2.4). Also in terms of iconography, the depiction, which derives from a photograph, privileges the representation of a suffering body that emphasizes Sevgi as a victim, and is reminiscent of many of the images of the Blanketmen that appeared in murals or posters[55] (Alcobia-Murphy 2008; McGaughey 2009).

Figure 2.4 Mural representing the Turkish hunger striker Sevgi Erdogan, 2001, Divis Street, Falls, West Belfast; picture by Tony Crowley, from *Murals of Northern Ireland Collection*, The Claremont Colleges Digital Library

The complexity of the mural is then also given by the merge of different temporalities, since the support to the Turkish hunger strike at the time of the mural appearance directly evokes the Blanketmen protest, while simultaneously reviving the memories of both Sevgi Erdogan and Bobby Sands as martyrs and political activists. The reminiscence of the past is thus mobilized in the present in the form of political activism, which is also responsible for the process of resemantization of the same memory of the Blanketmen. This latter lies in fact in the remembrance and future re-appropriation of the protest and its significance by the (nationalist/republican) communities of Northern Ireland and beyond. The present production and circulation of the iconic images of the prisoners and their connection to subsequent events constitute indeed the driving force for the transformation of their memory and the role it can play in current political activism. Here the dynamic nature of muralism is fully exploited, allowing for the shift from the previous phase of political activism that

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[55] The representations of the Blanketmen generally place emphasis on victimhood, and are characterized by the strong influence of Christian (and Christological) iconography.

animated the Blanketmen protest to the memory activism (Wüstenberg 2021) that its present-day remembrance enables.

The attempt to mobilize the memory of the Blanketmen in the present, linking it to contemporary events, allows for the formation of what Jenny Wüstenberg calls the *memory protest*, which occurs when the pre-existing *memory work* is turned into a contentious form of remembrance. According to the author, *memory work* occurs when the act of remembrance is not able, because of different reasons, to produce memories alternative to that or those established at the institutional level; it is only when *memory work*, carried on by groups of activists, finds the right conditions for imposing itself that it can finally open up the space for transforming the "dominant mnemonic norms" (Ivi., p. 270). At present, however, the memory of the Blanketmen remains mostly inscribed within a sectarian frame that connects it to past (Irish) struggles against British rule, making of it a (exclusive) cultural legacy of the nationalist/republican communities. In spite of the attempts to transform it into a transnational memory of resistance, it remains in fact unable to challenge this dominant narrative in Northern Ireland, where the protest is perceived differently based on the ethno-sectarian identification(s) of a certain group. If the Blanketmen campaign was able to impose itself as, borrowing the terms used by Wüstenberg, a *transformative event* outside of Northern Ireland, this interpretation would be more controversial inside the province. And yet, it is undeniable that its comparison with external events and memories projects it into an unpredictable memorial landscape, where it can be reworked in other directions, as the mural of Sevgi Erdogan exemplifies.

In the past, the strategic use of the murals that accompanied the Blanketmen protest had been central for reviving a previous memory of resistance, i.e., what Wicke (2021) defines as the memory *within* the movement. Subsequently, muralism and other cultural artefacts have been deployed for producing what the scholar calls the memory *of* the movement, which depends on the public narratives and memorial practices that mediate it. Adopting this terminology for describing the transformation of the memory of the Blanketmen, it can be said that the memory *of* the movement resulted in the affirmation of a narrative continuity that emphasizes the suffering of the people of Ireland. Lastly, Wicke identifies a third type of memory, that *by* the movement, which "constitutes the convergence of memory *within* and *of* the movement, emphasizing the agency of leading movement members in historical

cultures and especially in the way their movements are remembered" (Ivi., p. 149; italics in the original)[56].

The memory *by* the movement suggested by Wicke could be adopted and extended to also include other actors alongside the movement members, like activists engaged in the commemoration of the event or, in the case of Northern Ireland, muralists, who contribute to its visual persistence in the landscape. The mobilization of the Blanketmen protest across time and space then, mostly falls within the memory *by* the movement, which, as remarked by Wicke, tends in turn to transform the same memory *of* the movement and its future remembrance. Whether and to what extent this memory work, largely done at the community level, will eventually be able to turn into a form of memory protest remains uncertain; what is sure, however, is that this transformative event can only occur from within the communities, which once again are called to make of their own past a resource for the future and no longer a burden to bear.

The transnational dimension of Bloody Sunday: a missed opportunity?

The (re)mediation of memory exemplified by the cultural legacy of the Blanketmen protest in and outside of Northern Ireland has highlighted how muralism promotes certain dynamics of memory and their eventual transnational meaning. Another example, given by the remembrance of Bloody Sunday, offers some more reflections on these dynamics, especially in the light of its ability to 'dominate' over other (previous, contemporary or subsequent) events in Northern Ireland:

> Bloody Sunday from the get-go became the subject of intense mnemonic investment in multiple
> media and genres. Bearing in mind the scarcity principle[57], one might speculate that there was
> only 'room' in the mnemonic economy of Northern Ireland for one major site of memory relating
> to the killing of un-armed civilians by members of the British army (Rigney 2016, p. 80).

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[56] In the specific case of the Blanketmen protest, the memory *by* the movement may also include conflicting narratives about the campaign and the way it was conducted. The most famous example in this regard is probably the book published by Richard O'Rawe (a former Blanketman) in 2005 (*Blanketmen: An Untold Story of the H-Block Hunger Strike*), which questioned some aspects of the dominant narrative of the protest. But other controversial issues also regard the way the memory of the Blanketmen has been subsequently 'appropriated' by Sinn Féin and other leading figures within the Irish Republican movement, giving rise to the emergence of dissident positions, including those expressed by the relatives of Bobby Sands. For the conflict internal to the republican movement see Hopkins (2017).

[57] The *scarcity principle* is derived from Foucault and is used by Rigney in reference to the importance of media in shaping memories through processes of selection that privilege not only certain events to be remembered, but also certain figures or details over others, which are treated as emblematic of the event itself. For an analysis of the scarcity principle in the construction of cultural memories, see Rigney (2005).

The scholar also remarks the role played by the controversial Widgery report[58], which absolved the British soldiers of any guilt, in making of Bloody Sunday a symbol of the violation of justice that will lead to a long-lasting campaign for a new inquiry that gained international resonance. According to Rigney, Bloody Sunday was almost immediately reframed in connection to a tradition of civic massacres that had characterized the advent of democracies in Europe (a fact also evident in the recurrence of the expression 'Bloody Sunday' for several other tragedies). While rooted in the sectarian conflict that was going on in Northern Ireland, then, the event was simultaneously regarded as evocative of other previous massacres, a parallel that contributed to reframe it within a wider narrative. To sum up, Bloody Sunday was read within a transnational frame well before its memory started to circulate.

Whereas the civil rights movements from which Bloody Sunday originated had established links with the Afro-American protests through the figure of the White Negro, the violence of the event encouraged another transnational frame, this time centered on sufferance and victimhood. Memory activism was largely separated from political activism. The transformation of the event into what Rigney defines as a *figure of memory*, able to travel across times and different geographical contexts, occurred without that intense work of propaganda that was at the base of the success of the Blanketmen campaign. Whereas the latter directly involved the communities in 'exporting' the protest out of the prison, Bloody Sunday did not lack visibility. This may offer a partial response to the scarcity of murals dedicated to the event and its victims, especially out of Derry/Londonderry; despite its relevance to the nationalist/republican communities, in fact, Bloody Sunday tends to remain closely linked to the city and the area of the Bogside in particular[59]. In addition, the transnational dimension of the event is mostly the result of its circulation through other media than muralism, even if the representation of the death of John "Jackie" Duddy analyzed in the previous paragraphs is no less famous than the photograph from which it derives. The role played by cultural media in the creation of the meaning and memory of the

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[58] The Widgery report was the first inquiry into the events and deaths that occurred on January 30th 1972 and was held some weeks after the incidents; only in 1998, also thanks to the perseverance of the relatives of the victims and their campaign, another inquiry was finally opened, whose outcome, the *Saville Report*, was published in 2010. It acknowledged the responsibilities of the paratroopers in the deaths and their unjustified use of violence against unarmed civilians. For an in-depth analysis of the events of Bloody Sunday and their legacy see Dawson (2007).

[59] With great caution, it is possible to talk about an internal 'rivalry' between Derry/Londonderry and Belfast with regard to the significantly lower attention given to what has been occasionally defined as *Belfast's Bloody Sunday* (not to be confused with the homonymous but more famous massacre of July 1921) which occurred on the 9th July 1972 in the Springhill estate in West Belfast, where five Catholics were killed by the British Army and two others severely wounded.

event (Spillman and Conway 2007) has also been crucial for reframing it within a transnational narrative that could last over time.

The significance of the event emerged "against an explicit background history of intensive organization and of various and sometimes competing discursive frames" (Ivi., p. 91) which include the political activism of those years in Northern Ireland. As acknowledged by some of the people interviewed by the authors, the ultimate meaning and remembrance of Bloody Sunday are the result of a certain narrative that came to dominate over others, overshadowing for example the memory of the contemporary civil rights movements. In spite of originating from a peaceful march largely inspired by those taking place in many other cities across the world, these references have been mostly neglected in favor of the tragedy of the fourteen people killed that day. This is clearly visible in the mural representing the faces of the victims realized by the Bogside Artists in 1991, on the occasion of the annual Bloody Sunday Commemoration. The dead, inscribed in a red circle, are completely isolated from any other references, their commemoration relying exclusively on the identity revealed by the face, which privileges their singularity over the collective history of political activism that united them (Figure 2.5)[60].

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[60] The transnational narrative of Bloody Sunday and its link to the civil rights movements –yet- did not disappear, despite its inability to develop a proper iconography through muralism or other visual media: in 1992, on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the event, Gerry Adams talked about the international dimension of Bloody Sunday in connection to the contemporary civil rights struggles fought in many other countries in the world (Dawson 2007). Although a clear propaganda move aimed at reaffirming Bloody Sunday as an event to be read in continuity with previous nationalist/republican struggles, it is worthy to note that the memory of political activism was still active in relation to Bloody Sunday twenty years after the event took place.

Figure 2.5 Mural dedicated to the Bloody Sunday victims, The Bogside Artists, 1991, Westland Street, Derry/Londonderry; picture by Tony Crowley, from *Murals of Northern Ireland Collection*, The Claremont Colleges Digital Library

Even the connection of the memory of Bloody Sunday to previous massacres emphasizes trauma and victimhood instead of the dimension of political activism that is the background to the event. As already mentioned, this is also due to the bitter feelings of injustice that arose with the Widgery Report and the consequent need for a new Inquiry. Until recently, the commemoration of the victims has been closely linked to the struggle for the emergence of the truth about their death and the real responsibilities of the British paratroopers. It is then in this context that the two most influential memory entrepreneurs, NICRA and Sinn Féin, emerged (Spillman and Conway 2007)[61]; it is they that played an active role in forging the meaning and dominant narrative(s) of Bloody Sunday in the years to come. While NICRA partially maintained the original link with political activism in the commemoration of the victims, in the attempt to remember Bloody Sunday within a wider frame, Sinn Féin, which played the strongest role in re-shaping the meaning of the event, re-inscribed it within

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[61] NICRA (Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association) was the main organization involved in the civil rights campaigns of the 1960s and 1970s in Northern Ireland. It was formed in Belfast in 1967 and largely inspired by the Afro-American civil rights movements active in those years.

the predominant republican narrative of anti-imperialist struggle against British rule and its violence.

To sum up, it seems that the dominant narrative centered on trauma and victimhood is largely dependent on, on one side, the feelings of outrage aroused by the Widgery report[62] and, on the other, the influence exerted by Sinn Féin as the strongest memory entrepreneur in relation to the legacy of Bloody Sunday. And yet, the larger significance of the event did not remain unchanged: on the contrary, some of the commemorative marches organized over the years addressed other issues, trying to revive the climate of political activism that animated the protestors. As one march organizer interviewed by Spillman and Conway (2007) remembers, when the commemoration of Bloody Sunday was mobilized in support of the Birmingham Six, he had the feeling of doing more than just remembering the victims[63]. Even if often ignored by the dominant discourses on Bloody Sunday, then, these alternative memories of political activism and the few attempts to re-inscribe the event within a different frame of remembrance demonstrate its dynamism over time. As a consequence, the transnational dimension of Bloody Sunday does not only lie in the immediate necessity to evoke the memories of previous massacres of civilians in order to 'make sense of it', but also in its subsequent mobilization in support of other (internal and external) political causes.

Nevertheless, as already remarked, muralism has not been involved in these latent but significant dynamics of memory that can lead to an alternative iconography of Bloody Sunday. This reflects the persistence of certain figures or narratives of memory in Northern Ireland, but also the controversial and one-sided legacy of Bloody Sunday, that in fact 'precludes' the unionist/loyalist communities from identifying themselves in the event and its significance. This is an issue that has already emerged in the analyses dedicated to the memories of the civil rights movements and the Blanketmen campaign discussed above; in short, Bloody Sunday too is intertwined with the history of conflict and sectarianism in the province that affect its memory as well as its transnational interpretation at the domestic level[64]. If this offers a partial explanation to the predominance of themes related to trauma

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[62] On the controversial nature of the Widgery report and its role in further alienating the already disaffected republican communities in Northern Ireland see, apart from the already mentioned Dawson (2007), the 1992 documentary *Remember Bloody Sunday* realized by Peter Taylor twenty years after the events.

[63] The Birmingham Six were the Irishmen charged with life imprisonment for the 1974 Birmingham pub bombings. The case became highly controversial because of the lack of clear evidence of their guilt, and only in 1991 the men were found innocent and released. Their conviction and the trial had a great resonance and were largely regarded as an embarrassing case of injustice.

[64] A partial exception is given by the Museum of Free Derry briefly analyzed in the first chapter. In its space, Bloody Sunday is included within the history of political activism of the 1960s and early 1970s;

and victimhood in the representation of Bloody Sunday, these aspects can in turn be related to that difficulty to imagine the future addressed by Andreas Huyssen already in 2000 (Rigney 2018). According to Huyssen, the obsession with the past and the backward-looking approach that derives from it, are the consequence of the crisis of the grand narratives that collapsed with the end of communism in 1989.

The inability to look to the future with optimism and the fragmentation of the grand narratives seem then to be responsible for the lack of confidence that characterizes contemporary thinking. If optimism is no longer possible, hope can however be revived: recovering the distinction between these two concepts proposed by Terry Eagleton, Rigney (2018) encourages to (re)appropriate hope as a central notion through which an alternative understanding of memory in relation to future becomes possible. Contrary to optimism, whose logic lies in a limited dimension,

> hope has an anticipatory logic, one that is not based on inevitability, but on mere possibility. It is life-affirming and future-oriented in a minimalist way: it indicates an enduring attachment to something of value in face of its present absence and past denial. It is precisely the uncertainty associated with it that invites action (Ivi., p. 370).

The observations made by Rigney with regard to hope, and her invitation to develop studies on memory that can move beyond a dominant framework centered on trauma/victimhood offer an interesting alternative for the future remembrance of Bloody Sunday. This goes in the direction of the 'rehabilitation' of the memory of political activism and its democratic values that inspired the protestors, possibly *re-opening* the meaning of the event for future generations. This move can eventually, and the Free Derry mural is an example in this regard, trigger that *memory in activism* that Rigney describes as the way in which "the cultural memory of earlier struggles informs new movements in the present" (Ivi., p. 372). As already remarked, this aspect has not been completely absent in the commemoration of Bloody Sunday, which has gone through significant changes from at least the 1990s. An example is the memorial to the victims, built already in 1974 from an initiative by NICRA[65], that partially restored the memory of the civil rights protests through its reference to democracy as the value for which the victims died in 1972 (Conway 2009).

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moreover, despite its closeness to republicanism and the Catholic population, the museum tries to propose a cross-community narrative that places itself within a transnational frame through the establishment of links with international partners.

[65] The *Bloody Sunday memorial* is located in Rossville Street, in the Bogside area where the tragedy took place.

Nevertheless, the memorial remained in poor conditions and almost forgotten for a long time. It was only in the 1990s, and particularly with the 1994 IRA ceasefire that changed the course of the conflict, that the memory of political activism partially conveyed by the memorial could finally re-emerge in a more effective way. The changing context allowed in fact for the (re)appearance of marginal memories of Bloody Sunday able to challenge the previously dominant narrative of the event promoted by Sinn Féin. This is well reflected in the renovated attention received by the memorial in the subsequent years: a new plaque was added to it, in order to reframe Bloody Sunday within a transnational context. The death of the victims was resemantized in connection to past and contemporary injustices suffered by people in the world, thus reviving the memory of political activism while projecting it into an international frame of remembrance. While a space for hope in the terms stated by Rigney (2018) is still fragile, the transformation of the memorial towards a transnational memento is certainly an encouraging step in that direction.

Nevertheless, the conclusions reached by Conway (2009) with regard to the supposedly more consensual commemoration of Bloody Sunday since the 1990s remain problematic, and the inability to develop an alternative iconography of the event clearly illustrates it. Moreover, most of the murals evoking Bloody Sunday or the civil rights protests that led to it, have been painted in Derry/Londonderry between the 1990s and the early 2000s, at a time of significant change but still linked to narratives centered on victimhood. The treatment of these murals as quasi memorials to be preserved by the Bogside community shows on one side the slowness with which the dynamics of memory in Northern Ireland may evolve, while on the other their permanence is indicative of the relative autonomy of muralism on the temporal level, already addressed in the previous chapter. A partial exception in this regard is represented by two more recent murals, realized in 2004 and 2008 in the Bogside, which move towards a transnational and more positive remembrance of the recent past of Derry/Londonderry, leaving some space for hope. The first mural, emblematically known as *The Peace Mural* (reproduced in the previous chapter in Figure 1.1), represents a stylized dove on a background of colorful mosaic tassels, while the second artwork pays homage to four figures united by their concern for justice, peace and equality: it represents the portraits of John Hume, Martin Luther King Jr, Mother Theresa and Nelson Mandela joined together by the image of the Brooklyn Bridge (Figure 2.6).

Figure 2.6 *A tribute to John Hume*, The Bogside Artists, 2008, Rossville Street, Derry/Londonderry; picture taken by the author in 2018

The second mural in particular, in its depiction of leading figures involved in civil rights movements or humanitarian actions, contributes to the restoration of the memory of political activism so important for the Catholic people of Derry/Londonderry; moreover, it does so within a transnational frame that places John Hume along with internationally renowned activists/missionaries[66]. Through the creation of a space of remembrance dedicated to peace and the memory of political activism then, the focus shifts from trauma and victimhood to an affirmation of confidence in the future that allows for the (re)emergence of that memory of hope called for by Rigney (2018). Although Bloody Sunday is not directly evoked in either of the two murals, their location in Rossville Street and their thematic connection with the other surrounding artworks invite the observer to 'interpret' them almost in a 'sequential'

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[66] Hume, to whom the mural is dedicated, was a politician and civil right campaigner native of Derry, and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize (exactly like the other people represented in the mural) in 1998 for his role in the peace process in Northern Ireland.

way, as the climax of a long process that moves from the civil rights protests to the contemporary peace-making efforts.

This is, however, only part of the truth. Between *The Peace Mural* and *A Tribute to John Hume*, in 2006, another painting was realized by the Bogside artists, titled *The Runner*. It is dedicated to the memory of Patrick Walsh, who braved British fire to retrieve the body of one of the victims of Bloody Sunday. Remembering the use of tear gas against protestors, the mural returns to the more traditional iconography centered on trauma/victimhood that reiterates the collective shock caused by the conflict[67]. Ultimately, the memorial landscape still appears affected by the traumatic memory of the past, and the shift towards more positive images/narratives still struggling to impose itself. If it is true that Bloody Sunday has become a transnational memory early on, travelling outside of Northern Ireland through songs, movies and books, it is equally true that an alternative iconography of the event and its full resemantization still remain to be accomplished. The use that has been occasionally made of the Free Derry mural indicates a possible path in this regard, towards the mobilization of the memory of Bloody Sunday in connection to contemporary (and external) events. It is a use similar to that made of muralism on the International Wall in West Belfast, which is the focus of the following paragraphs.

Between political activism and the re-imagining of space: the case of the International Wall of Belfast

The International or Solidarity Wall is located in West Belfast, more precisely in Divis Street, and stands among the most famous landmarks of the city. The existence of the wall dates back to the end of the nineteenth century, while during the Troubles it was still employed for advertising purposes[68]. It went almost completely unused for a long time, and only starting from the 2000s the first murals began to appear on the wall. Representations of international struggles and the support given to them became very soon a distinctive feature

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[67] The mural includes also the portraits of Manus Deery and Charles Love, two boys who died in tragic accidents, the first in May 1972 and the second in 1990. The death of Charles Love, in particular, is highly controversial, since it occurred unintentionally during a Bloody Sunday commemoration march as a consequence of a bomb exploded by the IRA, which was originally intended to kill security force members. The presence of Charles Love in the mural, considering that he was actually killed by the IRA, suggests a more ambiguous narrative of victimhood and innocence compared to that propagated by dominant republicanism, which made of Bloody Sunday a crucial example of the violence used by British soldiers against Irish and Catholic people.

[68] For the history of the International Wall see the link: https://extramuralactivity.com/the-international-wall-divis-street/.

of the wall, even if local issues or the tourist promotion of the Black Taxi tours in West Belfast are not absent. The dynamic nature of muralism is, in the case of the International Wall, fully exploited, since murals are updated according to changes taking place at the domestic and international level. Although being a space 'controlled' by the nationalist/republican communities of West Belfast, the International Wall is then simultaneously the material result of the travelling of transnational memories in contemporary Northern Ireland.

As questionable as it may appear, the establishment of forms of transnational solidarity exemplified by the wall represents a very interesting case of strategic mobilization of external events/memories, often, but not exclusively, with the aim of retrospectively justifying the conflict (from a nationalist/republican perspective) or reframing it within a wider narrative. In this sense, the International Wall is certainly a perfect example of that recognized ability from republicanism to set up effective propaganda in support of its own operations. And yet, its murals disclose something more than just ideological propaganda. The way in which the past is re-imagined in connection to external events/struggles works in fact towards the projection of memory into the future, following a series of dynamics that can be put in relation with the concept of *prememory* proposed by Guy Beiner (2016). Prememory "refers to the anticipations and expectations of those who are committed to predetermine how history will be remembered" (Ivi., p. 21).

Beiner coined the term in relation to that of *postmemory* (Hirsch 1997), which refers to the transmission of memories to the generations who have no direct experience of the events remembered. Whereas postmemory entails a projection that moves from the present to the past, and the eventual interference of the past in the present, prememory addresses how the future was imagined in the past, moving from it towards the present. Moreover, Beiner remarks that prememory is also referred to those latent and hopeful memories that could not materialize the way they had been imagined before the actual event took place. Prememories are thus a sort of virtual repository that can eventually re-emerge at later stages, when the event they are connected to is re-evoked. This play of different and overlapping temporalities is 'enhanced' by muralism, which may retrieve those lost hopes of the past in the support of contemporary struggles or social movements.

From a nationalist/republican perspective, this may also mean the achievement of a united Ireland, especially considering that the Troubles ended without a definitive 'solution' to the causes of the conflict: if it is true that the British troops left the province with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, it is equally true that the united Ireland called for by mainstream

republicanism did not materialize, leaving the future of Northern Ireland open to different possibilities. Such a sense of uncertainty, which was perceived by unionist/loyalist communities in terms of a betrayal of their loyalty to a British identity (see the following chapter), has simultaneously prepared the ground for a 'rediscovery' of lost or future-oriented memories of hope. An example of this is the famous mural that portrays the smiling face of Bobby Sands, painted in 1989 in Falls Road, West Belfast. It contains two sentences pronounced by the republican Hunger Striker, one of which says "Our Revenge Will Be the Laughter of Our Children", a statement that projects a brighter tomorrow for the people of Northern Ireland directly into the future (Figure 2.7). Many other slogans reproduced in murals or posters relate to a future time that manifests itself as a form of prememory. More controversial because of their difficulty in addressing the future in authentically positive terms appear on the contrary the common slogans "we will remember them" and "lest we forget" reproduced in several unionist/loyalist murals. In these cases, the future-oriented prememory that they display is rooted in a static process that reiterates the same frames of remembrance, undermining the (re)emergence of hope or alternative scenarios.

Figure 2.7 Portrait of Bobby Sands, 1989, Sevastopol Street., Lower Falls, West Belfast; picture taken by the author in 2018

Coming back to the International Wall, it appears evident how many of its murals trigger the formation of prememories as well as, in more general terms, of transnational memories whose temporalities appear ambiguous. This happens not only at the level of the individual mural, but also through a 'sequential reading' of the depictions. Past and contemporary events can coexist or refer to each other, overcoming both spatial and temporal barriers; the juxtaposition of domestic and external events/situations contributes to the emergence of new significations and dynamics of memory through which ideological demands, historical revisionism and political activism are equally expressed. While the past is commemorated, bringing with it positive memories and awakening long-forgotten hopes, it is simultaneously mobilized within a contemporary and transnational narrative that projects itself into the imminent future (at least potentially).

Viewed in this light, the murals of the International Wall call into question the observations made by several scholars on the close connection between mural painting, political geography and ethno-sectarianism that used to be (and still widely is) the dominant frame within which Northern Irish muralism is studied (see the previous chapter). Following this line, Selim and Abraham (2016, p. 208) affirm that "the Murals can be viewed as a means of control and security, signifying to the outsider that within the area there is a closed community of people with strong political beliefs, so much so that they are willing to wage war in order to stand by their political views". This view is limited, and remains so even taking into account the location of the International Wall in an area where Catholic/nationalist/republican and Protestant/unionist/loyalist communities are in close proximity and clashes between them are not infrequent.

The International Wall has become in fact over time a space where an imaginary or utopian geography has established itself, and where transnationalism as a value is manifested both in the form of dynamics of memory circulating through the murals and in that of international tourism (being the wall among the must-see attractions of Belfast). With the concept of 'imaginary geography' we mean a re-imagining (and re-imaging) of the place occupied by Northern Ireland in an international context, as well as of the role the province can play within it. Once again, it is important to highlight that this process of re-imagining reflects solely the perspective(s) of the (broadly defined) nationalist/republican communities, which, for example, contemplates the possibility of the future reunification of Ireland mentioned above or the desire to 'inspire' other countries through their own experience of struggle and resistance. This also implies to challenge, at least on an imaginary level, the state of isolation experienced by Northern Ireland in relation to both United

Kingdom and the international context. In this respect, it is possible to recall the observations made by the semiotician Algirdas Julien Greimas (1976) on urban space and the secular mythologies that surround it. As the author remarks, the city tends to be charged with euphoric investments that manifest themselves in the form of metasemiotic productions over and about it, which are responsible for the creation of what Greimas calls the *global imaginary referent* into which the city itself tends to turn. Metasemiotic productions refer to all those discourses, narrations and various representations that shape a certain imaginary of the city, acting as a second-degree level of signification upon an already significant urban 'text'. In Northern Ireland, muralism can be considered as an example of metasemiotic production that contributes in its own way to fostering the city as a global imaginary referent. If up until now it has done so mostly in connection with dark tourism and the political geography of Northern Ireland, the International Wall can represent a new trend of muralism that favors the circulation of transnational memories and the pertinence of political activism.

Nevertheless, these conclusions should not overshadow the fact that changes in contemporary muralism are slow to establish themselves. Although an increasing number of paramilitary-related representations have been replaced with different and less contentious images over time, many of them are the result of those community-based initiatives described in the previous chapter. In addition, as already remarked, even the international murals are not alien to a strong ideological connotation and biased perspective, reflective of mainstream republicanism (which also tends to prevent dissident views). More than resulting from a politics of memory, the dynamics at play on the International Wall can be regarded as an expression of *disremembering*, a concept introduced by Beiner (2017) into Irish Studies. Based on the model of collective remembering formulated by Maurice Halbwachs, the notion of disremembering reintroduces the importance of the *cadre sociaux* theorized by the French sociologist, but, instead of in relation to memory, with regard to *l'oubli* (forgetting). In short, just like remembering and collective memory are dependent on certain socio-historical structures, disremembering is equally determined by them, and restores a political dimension of memory that underlies the dynamics of remembering and forgetting.

Within this framework, it becomes relevant to consider not only what is actually represented in the murals, but also what is omitted, erased or simply underrepresented, since absences are as significant as what is present when it comes to understand the socio-political circumstances in which certain depictions arise. Apart from the aforementioned difficulty for the unionist/loyalist communities in identifying themselves with such depictions, some considerations should then also be made on the underrepresentation or substantial absence

of certain subjects, especially women and migrants. These considerations are essential for partially moderating the observations made above on the international murals and their ability to break up with sectarianism or previous dynamics of memory. Overall, these depictions, and more generally nationalist/republican murals, tend to give more visibility to women, with the inclusion of representations of female figures engaged in active resistance against injustice and violence. This is well exemplified by the portrayal of the less famous (compared to the Blanketmen campaign) prison protest led by some detainees in the Armagh Women's Prison in 1980, and particularly of the figure of Mairéad Farrell[69]. Also the Maghaberry mass strip search of 1992, when all the female prisoners were subjected to this degrading and highly criticized operation, has been occasionally portrayed.

Although nationalist/republican murals and their attention to a transnational dimension have favored a greater presence of women in muralism, equal treatment is still far away. Because of the long conflict and the gendered separation that it fostered (Rolston 2017), men were generally depicted as manly figures, privileging in particular the image of the paramilitary soldier, while women were mostly relegated to the role of the victim. This is also evident in the previous iconography that used to represent the nation as a woman, and especially as a young girl to be protected (Jarman 1997), and that muralism has occasionally revived[70]. When looking at more recent depictions, it is still possible to remark how the figure of the female (and helpless) victim tends to persist, in spite of the active involvement of many women in the conflict, both in terms of military and political engagement (only sporadically valued). Moreover, the victimization of women is always represented from an exclusively republican perspective which ensures that all the responsibilities fall upon the 'other side' (British government, unionist/loyalist paramilitaries, etc…). The sufferance inflicted upon women by republicans, in the form of sexual harassment, killings or

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[69] Mairéad Farrell was among the female prisoners who were on the dirty protest at the time of the Blanketmen campaign in the HM Prison Maze. Following their example, she and other two prisoners also went on hunger strike later. Mairéad Farrell is still a highly controversial figure, since she was one of the three IRA volunteers who were shot dead in the famous and contentious killing that occurred in 1988 in Gibraltar, where they had been sent for planting a car bomb.

[70] Another typical image of woman was that of the so-called *Mother Ireland*, assimilating femininity, motherhood and nationalism in the representation of Ireland as a female figure that both offers protection and is in need of it. The myth of Mother Ireland was relaunched already in the XVIII century in nationalist circles, and circulated in images as well as in Gaelic poetry. Along with Virgin Mary, a symbol of the suffering country during and after the Great Famine of 1845-1852, it embodied the values of sacrifice and fortitude Irish people were called to endure in their struggle for freedom from the British yoke. For the image of Mother Ireland and the opposition to it from many women fighting for emancipation in Ireland and Northern Ireland, see the documentary *Mother Ireland* realized by the Derry Film and Video Workshop in 1988.

marginalization, is therefore never represented, clearly revealing the propagandistic nature of such murals beyond their claim to widen the perspective and make it universal.

In the apparently 'progressive' space of the International Wall there is then still no place for memories of the conflict *seen* from a woman's perspective. The broader issue concerns then not only what is actually present in the murals, but also, and perhaps above all, the viewpoint from which events are looked at, and which only rarely coincides with that of women. This may appear surprising considering that the origins of republican feminism date back to the early twentieth century, and that it played an important role in the process of independence for Ireland. But the disremembering of the past also concerns more recent episodes, like sexual harassment (also from within the community) or the gaze of the British soldiers of which women were often the object (O'Keefe 2017). Furthermore, the strong influence exerted by mainstream republicanism in mural painting has ensured that the memories of body punishments inflicted by IRA paramilitaries to 'betrayers', often aimed at publicly degrading local women, were not reproduced. The practice by which "women were tied to a lamp post in plain view and literally tarred and feathered as punishment for 'fraternizing' with British soldiers" (Ivi., p. 176), is one example of those 'forgotten' body punishments.

Although practices such as tarring and feathering, which was not exclusive of Northern Ireland alone, were imposed also to men, it is clear how they acquired a sexual connotation when inflicted on women, a connotation that falls within that body politics described by Aretxaga (2001) in relation to the aforementioned Maghaberry mass strip search. Recently, however, there have been attempts to partially restore the memory of these marginalized stories of violence that occurred during the Troubles, as Pine (2020) shows with reference to Irish theater. These initiatives have nevertheless concerned more confined art forms, while a genuinely popular and community-based practice like muralism seems to still struggle to question more 'comfortable' narratives of the conflict. Only occasionally has the marginalization of women in muralism been publicly acknowledged. The mural of the Bogside Artists representing the death of Jackie Duddy on Bloody Sunday, already analyzed above, was openly criticized by the Derry journalist Nell McCafferty for the marginal position occupied by women, relegated to the background in the portrayal of the event (Conway 2008). The image was explicitly accused of offering a gendered representation of history that did not reflect the key role played by women in the civil rights movements of those years.

The accusations made by McCafferty can be partially mitigated by the centrality given to women in other murals realized by the artists, like that commemorating the death of the 14 years old Annette McGavigan, shot by a British soldier in 1971, or the one portraying the civil rights activist and ex-politician Bernadette McAliskey. And yet, when looking more widely at the traditional iconography of muralism, it appears unquestionable that women are a marginal presence. This may also be due to the "unnaturalness", as Rolston (2017) defines it, of the figure of female combatants in the conflict-related imagery that prevailed in former muralism, to which is added the criticism towards them from other women's associations, such as the Peace People. The gendered view of paramilitary activity, associated exclusively with manhood, and the prejudices prevailing in the portrayal of Irish women, were indeed common in many (fictional) narratives of the Troubles. The stereotypical images of women as mother, whore or villain (with this latter, in particular, regarded as a form of aberration) were in fact the dominant female characters in many novels about the Northern Irish conflict (Rolston 1989).

These well-rooted prejudices and, more generally, the history of marginalization of women in Ireland and Northern Ireland, inevitably influenced muralism, which has always been a male dominated practice in the province. On the other side, the greater recognition and celebration of women combatants in republican murals, compared to their almost complete absence in unionist/loyalist depictions, simultaneously overshadow other forms of active intervention of women in Northern Irish society. In this sense, to avoid the dichotomy between victimhood and the 'virilization' of the female body means to open up to new ways of representing the plurality of roles played by women in Northern Ireland both in the past and at present time. Through access to global memories and their circulation on the International Wall, where they enter into dialogue with transnational images of female combatants and victims of injustice, representations of women may renew themselves, triggered by worldwide discourses of feminism and its transformation across time.

Underrepresented or forgotten narratives of women can thus be 'rediscovered' thanks to the transnational dimension in which they come to exist in muralism, where past and present merge into a multidirectional memory (Rothberg 2009). Looking at the case of the so-called *comfort women*[71], Ushiyama (2021) observes how their remembrance slowly turned into a

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[71] *Comfort women* is the name given to those women and girls exploited as sexual slaves by the Imperial Japanese Army since the 1930s and up until the end of the WWII; most of them were from Korea, but many others came from other occupied countries such as China and the Philippines. For a long time denied by the Japanese government, the public memory of the comfort women was officially recognized only in the 1990s, along with the commitment from Japan to compensate some of the victims, an act yet open to doubt and

global memory of the violence of war, thanks especially to the discourses, representations and memories promoted by feminism and other related civil rights movements. This memory work, to recall again the concept used by Wüstenberg (2021), which is done by political activism in relation to the position of women in society and their silenced experiences, has ensured that the narrative(s) of the comfort women could be rediscovered and remembered in the present. This re-emergence of the past through the contemporary memory work represents a clear example of that *liquid time* (Hirsch and Spitzer, in Ushiyama 2021) in which collective and social memories are formed, develop and eventually die out. The statues dedicated to comfort women that appeared in places other than those where the events occurred, such as the cities of San Francisco or Berlin, testify how their memory has become global and largely dependent on the development of feminism over the decades.

The example of the memory of comfort women in other countries sheds some light on the dynamics of remembrance in their relation to contemporary socio-political discourses; whether and to what extent these latter will be assimilated by muralism in Northern Ireland, affecting the future memory of women, remains an open question. While the links established with transnational events, as seen in this chapter, have contributed to the transformation of local memories of conflict and to their projection into the future, it seems that their impact on contemporary Northern Ireland is still limited when it comes to their actual political fallout. If this is true with regard to women and their role in the society, it is even more true in relation to those groups which do not identify themselves as Protestant/unionist/loyalist or Catholic/nationalist/republican. In spite of the long-established parallel with Afro-American people and other populations, then, how are ethnic minorities and migrants really represented in Northern Irish muralism?

Northern Ireland, and the city of Belfast in particular, have been until recently renowned for a number of racist attacks against ethnic minorities which led the province to be "dubbed the hate crime capital of Europe" (Clukey 2017, p. 61). In a context traditionally characterized by high levels of violence and geo-political sectarianism, it may not appear surprising that groups perceived as 'alien' to local identities are regarded as a threat or a possible source of insecurity. While racist attacks tend to be more frequent in unionist/loyalist neighborhoods, they are not absent in nationalist/republican areas, an aspect that curiously contradicts the long-established claims of transnational solidarity with other countries and peoples. Racist feelings have occasionally manifested also on the walls, in

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criticism with regard to the genuine intent of the government to commit itself to this process of restorative justice.

graffiti such as that appeared in 2014 in south Belfast, which was addressed to Romanians ("Romanian house breakers beware") and that followed a series of attacks against them occurred in the previous years[72]. In particular, south and east Belfast were the areas where most of these incidents took place.

As illustrated above, occasional references to these events and the more general issue of racism have been addressed by murals in the recent past: this was the case for example of the representation of an immigrant family placed alongside the images of the events in Arkansas in 1957 and in Ardoyne in 2001, already mentioned in this chapter. Even in that mural, however, the depiction of an ethnic minority in Northern Ireland was mostly instrumental in supporting the narrative of mainstream republicanism, which juxtaposed the condition of Afro-American people in the 1950s and of contemporary immigrants to that of the Irish community in Northern Ireland. This example reflects a fundamental aspect, i.e., the greater ease with which nationalist/republican murals deal with past events and memories instead of present ones; since the current situation of Catholic/nationalist/republican people in Northern Ireland has undergone a profound transformation, they cannot any longer be represented in terms of marginalized or disempowered groups. While at present solidarity links are still established with 'external' populations, and especially with Palestinians, the more challenging connections with 'internal' migrants remain largely unaddressed by muralism. In this regard, the International Wall may represent an interesting space with regard to current dynamics of memory and their transnationalism, but it does not fully reflect the changing society of Northern Ireland, at least in terms of its more heterogeneous population.

If women are still underrepresented in muralism, and their own perspective on both past and present overshadowed by a male-dominated one, migrants and other ethnic groups are more radically ignored in most of contemporary depictions. The visual landscape remains dominated by the Protestant/unionist/loyalist and Catholic/nationalist/republican dichotomy and, when invoked, transnationalism is mostly exploited in connection to the past and with the purpose of 'reinventing' it in accordance with propagandistic narratives. The mobilization of memories and events within a transnational frame risks then to become just a sterile practice if it is not accompanied by the appropriation of more inclusive representations focused on internal ethnic groups other than the 'traditional' ones. This is especially important considering that the exercise of memory in future Northern Ireland, as

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[72] The picture of the graffito and a short list of other racist attacks in Belfast can be found at the following link: https://extramuralactivity.com/2014/05/11/romanian-housebreakers-beware/.

everywhere in the world, must necessarily deal with the increasing number of immigrants who may feel alienated from local memories and traditions. Some absences in contemporary muralism are thus reflective of a society that, while still struggling to come to terms with the legacy of conflict, is called to acknowledge and legitimize its own internal transformation, re-defining the previous transnational solidarity links inward instead of outward.

Conclusions. The limits and contradictions of nationalist/republican transnationalism

The examples of the travelling memories of the Blanketmen, Bloody Sunday and on the International Wall analyzed in the present chapter show how nationalist/republican transnationalism is affected by a well-defined politics of memory. Contrary to the emergent street art in Belfast, which is the result of the dynamics of globalization, these cases illustrate a different form of muralism that maintains a strong link (as controversial as it may be) with the local communities while connecting them to a more or less imaginary transnational dimension. The significant omissions and the propagandistic nature that still characterize contemporary muralism, however, prove that the future of memory is still (largely) imagined within a sectarian perspective. This seems to confirm the observations made in the previous chapter with regard to the self-determination of muralism on the temporal level, which, following Rossi-Landi (1978), has been described in terms of temporal slippages. The travelling of domestic and external memories and their projection into the future, with the aim to inspire subsequent political movements, attempt in fact to 'anticipate' their remembrance, while the inability of muralism to represent the internal changes affecting Northern Irish society manifests its 'delay' compared to the present. In short, it is possible to affirm that, as it often happens, the dynamics of memory do not coincide, or only partially, with the social dynamics at play.

If it is true that, as the theoretical models proposed by Alice Cati (2013) and Elena Esposito (2008) suggest, collective/social memory (re)produces each time the past instead of simply describing it, then devices such as murals are actively involved in the creation and maintenance of not just that specific memory, but also the same frames of remembrance, inevitably affecting how events will be remembered in the future. The relative independence of muralism as a system of memory does not yet mean its complete separation from external circumstances: the International Wall, for example, emerged only in relatively recent times and *after* the conflict, suggesting that its transnational imagery may be partially the result of a more positive climate in Northern Ireland. On the other hand, it 'recovers' the tradition of

building transnational solidarity links that distinguishes the nationalist/republican communities from the unionist/loyalist ones; the connection between muralism and political activism that was established in the 1980s is therefore renewed in the present, despite all the limits and contradictions that have been here briefly illustrated.

If the appropriation of muralism by the nationalist/republican communities had already changed the practice in a significant way, the more recent rediscovery of the transnational dimension in which the dynamics of memory 'travel' can lead to a further change in muralism in the near future. Paradoxically, this can take place through the process of 'turning inward' instead of looking outward, converging the past of memory and its projection into the future in a present in which transnationalism is no longer (only) an imaginary dimension, but a reality in progress. This move may finally transcend the ideological use of the transnational frame that has so far characterized the nationalist/republican representations, encouraging a more positive future of memory where hope can find space and possibly prevail over victimhood and trauma.

Chapter 3. Local memories and global events: the troubling transnationalism of unionist/loyalist murals

The previous chapter has analyzed the long tradition of establishing links with other struggles/events across the world that has characterized republicanism in Northern Ireland since at least the 1960s. If transnationalism can be recognized as a central dimension of much of nationalist/republican muralism, the same cannot be said about unionist/loyalist representations, which on the contrary seem mainly to reinforce local or 'national' identities, from the claim to British citizenship to the more controversial identification with the province of Ulster. Transnational links have only occasionally emerged, as the solidarity with the State of Israel shows[73], but they have never been as relevant as those characterizing Northern Irish republicanism, and they certainly appear far less frequently than in nationalist/republican depictions. In an article dedicated to the murals painted during the conflict, Goalwin (2013) confirms the view of many other scholars who highlight the smaller range of symbols to be found in unionist/loyalist representations compared to the greater variety of contents that distinguishes the nationalist/republican ones. Because of their political and geographical position within Great Britain, unionist/loyalist people have mostly felt the necessity to use murals as territorial markers through which expressing that feeling of being constantly 'under siege' (a slogan that frequently appears on many walls across Northern Ireland)[74]. This has certainly undermined, or at least limited, the affirmation of a less 'reactionary' iconography through which exploring a transnational sense of identity or the possibility to integrate 'external' memories reproducing similar experiences of sufferance and political commitment.

Nevertheless, it is the aim of this chapter to analyze both the potential and controversial aspects of some of the most common unionist/loyalist representations in relation to their (suppressed) transnational dimension. More specifically, two historical events will be considered: the 1916 Battle of the Somme, in which thousands of soldiers of the 36th Ulster Division lost their lives, and the construction of the Titanic by the Harland and Wolff

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[73] See for example the tribute to Israeli soldiers realized on laminated panels in Northumberland Street, Belfast, as part of a wider representation of the WWI (mentioned also in note in chapter 4).

[74] The reference is to the historical episode known as the *siege of Derry*, when in 1689 the King James II besieged the city of Derry/Londonderry with his army, demanding its surrender. The city yet resisted for 105 days, when the siege ended with its liberation and the victory of the Williamite troops (i.e., the army of King William III, who replaced James II as King of England). The episode is celebrated annually by the unionist/loyalist communities, and in Derry/Londonderry its commemoration is organized by the Apprentice Boys, a Protestant fraternal society founded already in 1814.

shipyard in Belfast, an almost exclusively Protestant industry. Both events have a transnational dimension, in spite of being commemorated only in unionist/loyalist areas. The Battle of the Somme was fought by battalions coming from different countries, from Canada to Australia, and above all it took place in France, not in Northern Ireland; on the other side, though the Titanic had been built in Belfast, it gained an international status both before and after its sinking, which occurred during its journey towards New York. In addition, the fame of the ship was relaunched by the Hollywood colossal directed by James Cameron and released in 1997, a production whose success contributed to the 'rediscovery' of the long suppressed memory of the Titanic in Northern Ireland.

The analysis of these two examples of transnational events, which transcend the boundaries of the province, will yet reveal how they have been re-imagined on a local level, on one side rehabilitating vernacular memories (the sacrifice of the soldiers of the 36th Ulster Division, the labor of the working-class men who built the Titanic), while on the other suppressing more controversial aspects, like the contribution of Irish soldiers who fought in the Battle of the Somme or the discrimination against Catholics in the shipbuilding industry. As it will be demonstrated, the transnational dimension underlying both cases has not been exploited by the iconography produced in the murals, which privileged a reinterpretation of the events focused exclusively on the experiences of the unionist/loyalist communities. The memories of the Battle of the Somme and the Titanic, then, represent a failed opportunity to reimage these historical episodes beyond their local impact, undermining thus their transnational potential. In short, they can be regarded as clear examples of that difficulty for the unionist/loyalist communities in 'projecting' themselves into an international framework able to challenge the ethno-sectarian narratives in which their identities are rooted.

The memory of the Battle of the Somme. An example of misappropriation?

The (re)emergence of the memory of the men who fought in the Battle of the Somme gained an increasing prominence in the years following the end of the conflict. Parts of the unionist/loyalist communities found in it a proud expression of their devotion to British identity, an aspect well evident in their representations, which are often accompanied by the depiction/display of national flags. The murals dedicated to this highly dramatic episode of the WWI commemorate almost exclusively the 36th Ulster Division of the British Army, a unit consisting for a large majority of Protestant men who had formed the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) in 1913. This paramilitary organization, born from the Ulster Volunteers led

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by Edward Carson and created to block the passage of the Third Home Rule Bill in Ireland (see chapter 5 for more details on this episode) was thus a Protestant and unionist militia, an element that played a central role in the re-appropriation of the historical event by the unionist/loyalist communities. More controversial is yet the expropriation of the militia's name by the paramilitary group founded in 1966 with the aim of fighting Irish republicanism and its guerrilla campaign in Northern Ireland; the overlapping (explicitly anachronistic) of the two paramilitary organizations and conflicts (WWI and the Troubles) has been occasionally represented in some murals, further enhancing the same narrative of victimhood and endurance[75]. The re-appropriation of the name and insignia of an almost legendary militia proves the observations made by Zerubavel (2003) on the importance of language, and specifically names, in establishing effects of historical continuity or discontinuity, for example through the recurrence of the same label for different historical phases.

The Battle of the Somme is then incorporated into a Protestant/unionist tradition of glorious struggles through the establishment of symbolic links and imaginary affinities with previous historical episodes that are regarded as cornerstones of a 'mythical' past. On the other side, it is equally mobilized as a paradigm through which making sense of the Troubles, and its (re)emergence in commemorative murals that increasingly appeared after the end of the conflict seems emblematic of the necessity to find an appropriate model of remembrance. This process follows the dynamics of transculturality described by Lucy Bond (2014), who identifies at least three possible models through which memories are transmitted in a given culture: the *analogical*, the *typological* and the *allegorical*. The analogical model is based on the comparison between two paradigms, one of which acts as a model for the other; the typological affects directly the present, which is 'negated' in itself in order to be shaped on the model of a glorious past; finally, the allegorical is equally based on a comparison between two or more memories, but preserving the differences and specifics among them. While Bond focuses more on the transnational dimension of these dynamics, it is possible to detect them also on a local level, where they reveal the internal movements of (re)appropriation and reiteration of certain models that help to frame the present circumstances.

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[75] Other superimpositions have been created between the Battle of the Somme, the 1689 Siege of Derry and the 1690 Battle of the Boyne, the last two among the most prominent events of the Protestant/unionist history. As highlighted by McGaughey (2009, p. 10), "according to the Julian calendar, the first of July corresponded with the 12th", this last being the date in which the Battle of the Boyne was fought, thus establishing an unexpected relation between the two episodes in the collective imagination of the Protestant/unionist communities. On the other side, the legend has it that the soldiers fighting in the Battle of the Somme shouted the famous battle-cry 'No Surrender', the same cried out by the Apprentice Boys of Derry while defending their city under siege, suggesting another connection between these central episodes that strengthen an exemplary narrative of bravery and self-sacrifice.

The use made of the Battle of the Somme in many of the unionist/loyalist murals across Northern Ireland seems to obey to the dynamics identified by Bond in her models, particularly the analogical and typological ones. The (mis)appropriation of the UVF name and insignia shortly before the beginning of the Troubles collapses the time (and the very differences) between the WWI as a global event and the local reality of the Northern Irish conflict. A single battle, because of the prominent role played in it by a largely Protestant division, is 'extrapolated' from the broader context of a worldwide war and elected as the exemplary model of unionist bravery and spirit of sacrifice. Its complexity is consequently reduced in order to fit the needs of local communities looking for a frame in which the later paramilitary men who lost their lives in the conflict can find their place into a single narrative of fighting[76]. These dynamics are explicitly visible, as already anticipated, in those murals in which paramilitary men are commemorated in relation to the soldiers of the Battle of the Somme or to symbols that are associated with it, like the red poppies. An example is a UVF mural appeared in 2012 in Castlereagh Road, East Belfast, representing three masked gunmen on red background (Figure 3.1). Two lines of red poppies are placed on either side of the UVF emblem, while a reference to the older militia is made through the quotation of the 1912 Carson's declaration of eagerness to fight against Sinn Féin.

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[76] It is emblematic in this sense that, in his digital collection (see chapter 6), Tony Crowley has classified most of the murals/plaques containing references to the Battle of the Somme or the WWI as loyalist murals (i.e., paramilitary), while very few of them are classified under the subject 'Somme, 1st Battle of the, France, 1916'.

Figure 3.1 UVF mural with red poppies, 2012, Castlereagh Road., Willowfield, East Belfast; picture taken by the author in 2018

But the Battle of the Somme had already become a unionist/loyalist commemoration in the years between 1920s and 1930s (Jarman 1999); the first mural celebrating the battle seems to have appeared in Northern Ireland already in 1919, a year after the end of the WWI. Reflecting on the internal dynamics of change in which muralism is involved, Jarman (p. 183) underlines how:

> Murals have often been likened to territorial markers, defining the boundaries between loyalist and nationalist areas, but they are more readily understood as part of an internal debate, within the community, and are used to rephrase traditional symbols and icons to changing circumstances. In the same way as band parades have stepped outside Orange constraints, the wall paintings have become a medium in which the paramilitary groups redefine the loyalist tradition to suit their own claims.

Jarman's observations echo what has been said in the first chapter, when muralism has been theorized as a dynamic system that 'adjusts' itself according to external demands that affect its internal transformation. The dynamics of memory described by Bond (2014) may then be regarded as relevant "changing circumstances", to use Jarman's words, through which murals (re)appropriate and accommodate pre-existing narratives, securing a historical

continuity beyond the diversity of contexts. In this sense, while acknowledging their internal dynamics, loyalist murals remain essentially within a nationalist or ethno-sectarian tradition that renews itself over time but is unable to integrate a transnational dimension. This internal movement has been described by Forker and McCormick (2009) as an example of *mythomoteur*, a combination of myths and symbols through which the nation is forged[77]. Derived from Anthony Smith's (1986) work on ethno-symbolism, the concept of mythomoteur can be defined as what "provides the driving force for group identification and formation" (Forker and McCormick 2009, p. 428), thus underpinning the same production of collective memories. In their analysis of the use of mythomoteurs in Northern Irish muralism, Forker and McCormick interestingly reveal the same mechanism at the base of both unionist/loyalist and republican/nationalist murals: similar myths, values and opposing categories tend to recur in their depictions, an aspect that the scholars seem not to expand in direction of a possible transcultural trend.

More specifically, myths built on the suffering endured by the Irish/Catholic and Protestant people are more than recurrent in murals, along with narratives of victimhood as those described in the previous chapter in relation to Bloody Sunday or the celebration of heroism and manhood (even if this latter is predominant in loyalist depictions). Forker and McCormick acknowledge also a mimetic desire, a mechanism at the basis of human behavior theorized by René Girard, that underlies many narratives reclaiming exclusive possession of mythical figures like Cú Chulainn, a nationalist hero recently re-appropriated by loyalist alternative accounts (Goalwin 2019)[78]. The use of mythomoteurs in the creation of nationalist identities reveals then at least two fundamental aspects: the first is that the complex of myths and symbols that constitutes those identities is highly dynamic, since it re-translates previous narratives into new ones. The second aspect to highlight is that, though these myths/symbols are predominantly internal to a certain group's culture, they cannot be fully understood independently from those transcultural dynamics mentioned above. Whereas loyalism has traditionally failed to establish links with external memories/events or to integrate them into its own history, it has forged its own identity to a great extent in relation to the British one, as well as in opposition to other groups' identities (as Catholic,

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[77] The notion of 'mythomoteur' (a blending of the words 'myth' and 'moteur', 'engine' in French) was coined by the Spanish historian Ramon d'Abadal i de Vinyals, but it established itself in Smith's work on ethno-symbolism and nationalism.

[78] See also the analysis made by Downes (2014) on the diametric oppositions through which Irish and British have historically built their own identities, reversing the (mythological) image of the other while reinforcing their mutual dependence.

republican, nationalist, among others). This transcultural dimension of unionism/loyalism has been largely overlooked in favor of analyses almost exclusively focused on its internal dynamics, an approach that has characterized also the study of the reproductions of the Battle of the Somme.

To better understand the reasons behind the appropriation and re-interpretation of the Battle by unionist/loyalist communities it is necessary to consider the interactions between, on one side the exclusion of its transnational/transcultural dimension, and on the other side the political demands internal to these same communities. These two aspects are strictly related, and whereas republicanism has legitimized itself within a (also propagandistic) transnational frame, unionism/loyalism has opted, in diametrical opposition, for its removal. As already said, the Battle of the Somme became very soon an event commemorated only by unionist/loyalist communities. The narrative of the 36th Ulster Division and its heroic fighting against the German troops imposed itself on a much more complex historical reality, which included the presence on the Western Front of Irish soldiers. Ireland has only recently 'rediscovered' its own contribution in the Great War, after decades in which it was practically not commemorated officially. Committed "in seeking to establish its own sense of nationhood during the postwar years" (Kildea 2008, p. 245), Ireland considered the soldiers who participated in the Great War more like a source of embarrassment than heroes to be celebrated. Having fought along with British soldiers instead of against British rule, they were 'ambiguous' and difficult to place within the narrative of the new Irish Free State.

The nationalistic interests of Ireland and its complicated relationship with Great Britain were then certainly among the causes that favored an exclusive appropriation of the WWI narratives (included that of the Battle of the Somme) by unionist/loyalist groups. In addition, 1916 is an emblematic year also for nationalist/republican people, who celebrate the Easter Rising against the British State[79]. The Easter Rising, an Irish insurrection that started on April 24, 1916, in Dublin, soon became one of the most celebrated event in the nationalist/republican communities. The myth of fierce resistance to the British yoke that the executed rebels were able to arouse imposed itself as a parallel narrative, ultimately irreconcilable with that of the Great War and the participation in it of Irish soldiers. The (political) amnesia that fell upon it, overshadowing the contribution to the Battle of other armies like the 16th Irish Division which fought at the Somme, is then largely due to the emergence of the opposing narrative of the Easter Rising. In this sense, the representation of

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[79] It should also be highlighted that the rebels received their rifles and guns by Germany, the nation against which the Allies were fighting.

the Battle of the Somme as a unionist/loyalist event is partially determined by its opposition to the Rising, an element that sheds some light on the political pressure internal to the communities. If nationalist claims underlie both the narratives of the Battle of the Somme and Easter Rising, it appears yet clear that they enter into a mutual relationship that influences their way of being remembered, following those intercultural dynamics introduced in the previous paragraphs.

Moreover, these two events share many similarities in terms of symbolism, as well as on the iconographical level. Commemorating a paradoxical "triumph of defeat" (Beiner 2007) that seems to uncover comparable mythomoteurs which are employed in communities' representations, the Battle of the Somme and the Easter Rising are united by a common celebration of sufferance, virility and victimhood. While comparing the two events, Beiner points out the re-appropriation of previous narratives/iconographies that characterizes both of them, a mechanism that the scholar regards as an example of *deep memory*. And yet, Beiner seems to neglect the significance of the reciprocal influence the two memories exerted on themselves, i.e., the proper transcultural dimension against the background of which their nationalistic claims asserted themselves. A speculative exercise would then be that of wondering if the memory of the Battle of the Somme would be the same if the Easter Rising had not taken place. Whereas the recurrence of certain mythomoteurs largely derives from former memories or schema that re-emerge over time, i.e., from within an internal tradition, the significance of an event may be in the end no less determined by external or diametric oppositions.

Another cause of the (mis)appropriation of the Battle of the Somme in Northern Ireland can be identified in the internal fragmentation of unionism, an aspect highlighted by Graham and Shirlow (2002). Within this frame, the direct connection to the event instituted by the UVF would have been created in order to establish, or question, a certain loyalist identity that mainstream unionism failed to represent[80]. The re-emergence of this historical episode after the end of the conflict is then not only the consequence of the necessity to find representations alternative to paramilitarism, but it responds also to the need to contest the official memory of the Battle promoted by middle-class unionism. According to this interpretation, "resistance is not merely predicated around the otherness of Irish republicanism but also against a political economy in which working-class protestants have

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[80] On the emergence of a different (and working-class based) loyalist identity in the aftermath of the conflict, see the analysis made by Finlayson (1999) on the rhetoric and ideology employed by some political parties.

been exploited and their loyalty unrewarded" (Ivi., p. 891). Once again, these feelings were concretely expressed through muralism, which became the main means to challenge the narrative(s) conveyed by 'institutional' monuments like cenotaphs or the Ulster Tower located in Thiepval, France, and managed by the Somme Association of Belfast[81]. To sum up, different elements and causes should be taken into account for understanding the place occupied by the Battle of the Somme in contemporary Northern Ireland. Those mentioned above, which encompass internal and external oppositions, help to reframe the commemoration of the event within a transcultural context in which multiple issues are at play. While Graham and Shirlow (p. 893) acknowledge the process of self-legitimation enacted by UVF murals and the parallel expression of an alternative loyalism (working-class based), they also suggest the possibility to see in the representations of the Battle of the Somme "a potential symbol of reconciliation between protestants and Catholics" (Ibid.).

The large majority of murals and memorials dedicated to the Somme or the Great War, however, have been privileging either the continuity between these historical episodes and (UVF) paramilitary actions (McAuley 2021) or the claim of ownership made by working-class loyalism. The third way introduced by Graham and Shirlow, i.e., that of making the Battle of the Somme a mythology shared by both unionist/loyalist and nationalist/republican communities, has practically been ignored by muralism[82]. Once again this latter reveals the politics of memory that are active locally, often in opposition to parallel changes on a national or transnational scale. Starting from the 1990s Ireland began to (re)discover the suppressed memory of the WWI through the erection of national memorials and a greater participation in the annual commemorations; these changes, however, have not been reflected in nationalist/republican murals in Northern Ireland, proving the difficulty in challenging well rooted memories on a local level. Over the years, little has changed, and at present the memory of the Battle of the Somme remains a (controversial) loyalist heritage in Northern Ireland, in spite of the different attitude towards the Great War shown by the Irish State.

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[81] The Ulster Tower was erected in 1921; although a Northern Ireland's National War Memorial, it retains a strong link to the 36th Ulster Division, and more in general to unionism (Switzer 2013), evident in the explicit commemoration of the role played by the Orange Order, the famous Protestant fraternity, in the Battle. The Somme Association is a charity organization established in 1990 to research and preserve the memory of the people from Ireland and Northern Ireland who participated in the Great War.

[82] Although acknowledging the ultimate failure of this shared mythology, Graham and Shirlow conclude their article asserting that the appropriation of the memory of the Battle of the Somme by the UVF and the fragmentation of unionism it reflected may be possibly regarded as an 'encouraging' move toward more hybrid identities in Northern Ireland, a conclusion that years later still remains problematic.

The analysis of the internal and external dynamics that led to a certain representation of the Battle of the Somme in Northern Ireland risks however to overshadow the transnational dimension that it preserves beyond the UVF appropriation or the claims made by a loyalism in need of a different identity. The possible development hoped for by Graham and Shirlow towards a shared heritage of the Great War in the future is limited to the emergence of a transcultural dimension that would yet remain internal to Northern Ireland, i.e., within a national frame of remembrance. Such development would still fail to grasp the Battle of the Somme and, more largely, the Great War, as a global event, both in its historical reality and contemporary commemoration. Following the proposal made by Neiberg (2008) for a transnational history of World War I, more attention should be paid to those elements which transcend a national or nationalistic memory of the event, including the volunteers' reasons and international political visions that Neiberg gives as examples. Within this framework, the abovementioned mythomoteurs of martyrdom and victimhood that dominate the representations of the Battle could be reexamined on a transnational level, as paradigms that (re)emerge and circulate within the Western culture(s):

subject to "an increasingly conventionalised form of memorialisation," it would appear that "remembrance of the Somme battle conformed in many ways to a more general European myth." Comparing remembrance of World War I across Europe, George Mosse´ identified a "Cult of the Fallen Soldier," which overrode actual war experiences and propagated instead a "Myth of the War Experience" that was founded on adoration of the virility of youth and on a reverence of sacrifice that likened death on the battlefield to the Passion and resurrection of Christ. These attributes can be found in the public memory of the Somme, which disregarded the more realistic private memories of grieving veterans' (Beiner 2007, p. 381).

Interestingly, the values celebrated through the memory of the Battle of the Somme that George Mossé regards as the foundation of national myths, are those to be found in murals reclaiming a working-class narrative of the Great War. Whereas some depictions may 'individualize' the memory of the Somme through its association to paramilitary men who lost their lives during the Troubles, Christian mythomoteurs are equally common in many working-class murals of Northern Ireland; apparently, certain myths are embraced also on a local level, an aspect that should yet not overshadow the fact that they may be as propagandistic as it is their use in public memory. In this sense, the very common image of black silhouettes of soldiers against the background of an orange/red sky (Figure 3.2)

represents an example of the adoption of a transnational iconography by (sectarian) murals[83]. The typical image that can be found in UVF depictions privileges the depersonalized figures of soldiers "immortalized on a […] timeless and aspatial battlefield, crouched in trenches or marching to their death over the top of a hill, similar to the original depictions of the Battle of the Somme" (Viggiani 2014, p. 137).

Figure 3.2 Mural celebrating the Battle of the Somme, 2010, Kilburn Street., The Village, South Belfast; picture by Tony Crowley, from *Murals of Northern Ireland Collection*, The Claremont Colleges Digital Library

The large space occupied by the sky, which further increases the effect of timelessness produced by these images, is derived from the real experience of the soldiers, who, because of the long time spent in the trenches, were often able to only see the sky above them (Helmers 2009). The figure of the sunset or starry sky recurs in several poems written by volunteers, since it was for long times "the only landscape that was directly accessible to the combatants" (Ivi., p. 86). This transcultural image that comes from poems, writings and previous paintings of the Battle of the Somme is then part of a collective experience of the Great War that transcends national boundaries and can be found in a cultural memory shared by many countries. International symbols may then coexist with territorial counter-narratives that often undermine them, compromising the transnationalism of the event. More specifically, a transnational iconography is adopted at a community level, which, through

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[83] Although the image of soldiers' black silhouettes is very common, this specific picture seems to derive from the cover of Pat Barker's novel *The ghost road*, published in 1995 (Graham and Shirlow 2002, p. 893).

the connections established with local history, is converted into a territorial imagery, because of the its exclusive use in unionist/loyalist murals and the location of these latter within the political geography of Northern Ireland.

Whereas republican murals have been actively integrating 'external' memories into their own narrative, largely within a post-imperial frame, unionist/loyalist murals tend to 'extrapolate' a well selected portion of history from its broader context, preserving only traces of its transnational dimension. These traces can be mainly detected, as already said, in the iconography of the murals, which is common to that adopted by European, or more generally Western, depictions of the Somme. They usually celebrate the masculinity of the soldiers, which was already common in the popular press that circulated during and in the years following the end of the WWI (McGaughey 2009). The propaganda posters to recruit soldiers were based on a series of universal themes and iconography which were partially 'adjusted' to the national or local contexts to be more effective (Johnson 2003). The mythomoteurs of virility and bravery were mobilized through a certain 'construction' of the body of the soldier as a warrior that, while deriving from "the popular mythology of Ulster's sacrificial blood-debt" (McGaughey 2009, p. 7), is part of a broader iconography. More specifically, McGaughey (p. 9) traces in the medieval romanticism revived by Victorian culture the (re)emergence of the masculine hero or the "perfect knight", a transcultural figure of sacrifice and purity.

As already anticipated, another popular iconographic reference is represented by Christianity, or what McGaughey defines as "muscular" Christianity, an image in which religious fervor is combined with the physical vigor of the soldier. Again, these ideals are part of a transnational culture, although they may be declined locally and thus mean something different according to specific circumstances. However, it should be questioned how and to what extent these mythomoteurs, revived by muralism in the recent years, are still significant for the contemporary unionist/loyalist communities. This inherited iconography, completely uncritical of the historical reality of the Great War, may reappear in fact either as a form of nostalgia for an imagined "golden age" of loyalism (Brown 2007) or the evidence of deep feelings of uncertainty towards the future of the same loyalism.

Also Brexit may have played a role in this regard, further exacerbating the tensions internal to unionism, which had already led to a series of feuds among paramilitary groups between the end of the 1990s and the first 2000s. It revived old worries related to the possible reemergence of a hard border, strongly rejected by nationalist/republican communities, while at the same time awakening the worst fear of unionist/loyalist people, i.e., a united

Ireland. The feelings of betrayal that arose already with the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985[84] has since resurfaced in several representations, renovating the narrative of (militaristic) resistance to whatever may appear as a threat to loyalism. This is visible for example in a pro-Brexit graffiti spotted in 2019 (Armstrong et al. 2022) that reiterates the old motto 'no surrender' ("no surrender to the E.U."), once again inscribing the present into a historical continuity that dates back to the Siege of Derry[85]. Brexit points out how for a section of loyalism to imagine a transnational identity is still difficult, and how the feelings of uncertainty deriving from it are often translated into a well-established narrative and iconography, with the risk, however, to be increasingly perceived as empty. The same can be said about the mythomoteurs that are renewed in the representations of the Battle of the Somme, which can be regarded as *schemes of memory* that recur over time and through which present circumstances are understood.

Whereas complex sets of myths/symbols can travel from national to transnational settings, the opposite is equally possible, when for example global events are subsequently remembered within a national frame, or as founding myths of the state. Iconic battles that took place during the Great War played exactly this role, like the Battle of Vimy Ridge (Pas-de-Calais, 1917) for Canadians or the Gallipoli campaign (1915-1916) for Australians and New Zealanders (Neiberg 2008). In these cases, the transnational dimension of the events and the fact that they occurred far away from the home country are all elements which are rejected in favor of alternative remembrances of those same events. To sum up, there are cases in which it is what can be defined as a *principle of integration* that operates at the level of collective memory, through the assimilation of national/local mythomoteurs into a transnational frame. This is what has been illustrated in the previous chapter, that analyzes the nationalist/republican adaptation of the Irish mythology/iconography to the international politics[86]. Other cases –yet- offer an example of what is here defined as a *principle of reduction* or *subtraction* that operates in the foundation of memory, through the rejection of the more complex structure and its re-translation into familiar schemes. In these cases, the (re)emergence of political activism and that memory of hope theorized by Rigney (2018) are

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[84] The Anglo-Irish Agreement was a treaty between Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland which marked the beginning of improved relations between the two countries, and above all recognized an advisory role to the Irish State in Northern Ireland's affairs.

[85] The graffito was placed emblematically beneath a mural celebrating the International Day of Peace, located "in an interface area of west Belfast" (Armstrong et al. 2022, p. 7), as to highlight the refusal of a transnational dimension and the assertion of an exclusively British identity.

[86] Cases of assimilation of external memories into national/local schemes/paradigms equally fall within the principle of integration, as republican muralism well illustrates.

seriously undermined, since the trauma which is linked to the original event is reiterated in subsequent representations of it. The Great War as a shared experience and a truly global event, the desires and beliefs that motivated many volunteers and the hope for the future in the aftermath of the conflict are then among the aspects that are suppressed in a remembrance of the WWI rooted exclusively in victimhood and sacrifice.

To sum up, the use of the Battle of the Somme and its related mythomoteurs in loyalist murals is not very different from the way this same event and other famous battles have been treated in the previous construction of national public memories. For a long time, the Great War was the repository of values and ideals that shaped the collective memories of entire nations, too often overshadowing the single and much more controversial experiences of the soldiers, as well as their difficulty in reintegrating into society. More specifically, the incorporation of the unionist/loyalist memory of the Somme into a national frame was well evident in the first pilgrimages to the site of the battle and to the recently built Thiepval Tower. The overwhelming majority of ex-soldiers who attended these commemorations was Protestant/unionist, and pro-unionist symbols were exhibited on the spot (Switzer 2013). Moreover, the almost contemporary independence of Ireland from Great Britain (1921-1922) made even more difficult for former Irish soldiers to participate in those pilgrimages, where the king and the British empire were largely celebrated.

It was only afterwards, when later generations showed interest in the places where the War was fought, that a more open form of commemoration became possible. As Switzer highlights, the great success enjoyed by contemporary pilgrimages to the Western Front favored the emergence of a different memory of the WWI, in which the former mythomoteurs of glory and virility have been largely replaced by a search for the meaning of the event[87]. Whereas many people may be driven by the personal interest to rediscover their own family background in places where their forefathers fought or eventually lost their lives, other aspects of this 'dark tourism' should not be overlooked. The (re)emergence of the transnational dimension of the conflict in more recent years is in fact due also to the memory tourism of the Great War (Pocecco 2020, pp. 114-115): "over time, a broader and disenchanted view of the conflict has allowed a memory narrative that also contains counter-memories and meets the different needs of visitors, in which the practices of commemoration

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[87] Switzer (chapter 7) underlines how contemporary pilgrimages to the sites of the Great War are also driven by the desire to somehow 'experience' them, reintegrating those landscapes of war (or *warscapes*, as Switzer, p. 70, defines them) into the present memory of the conflict. The notion of *warscape* derives from Osborne (2001), 'In the Shadows of Monuments: the British League for the Reconstruction of the Devastated areas of France'.

and the duty of memory aspire to a universalist dimension". More specifically, it may be added that war-related tourism has encouraged a new *displacement* of the memories of the WWI, which after having been (re)inscribed within national frameworks, have been increasingly re-projected into the landscape of war, but with a very different spirit compared to that which inspired the first pilgrimages.

This fragmented, but simultaneously more accessible memory of the Great War that tourism contributed to foster has been partially integrated at national level. In Northern Ireland, the commemoration of the WWI, as already mentioned above, is definitely more inclusive compared to the past, so that the rejection of this emerging transnational dimension by loyalism may be explained also as a consequence of it. Loyalist commemorations on the occasion of the Decade of Centenaries in Ireland and Northern Ireland served in fact "as a counterpoint to the state rituals which frame and bolster the current political and economic settlement and its imputed 'shared' historical narrativization, all of which have been largely evacuated of their properly political content" (Evershed 2015, p. 32). This implies that the official and national mythomoteurs mobilized to commemorate the Great War are both preserved and rearticulated at a more local level and in response to the contemporary transformation of the memory of the Great War. Muralism is directly involved in this process, as the brief analysis of the iconography adopted in the representations of the Battle of the Somme has revealed.

It is therefore no surprise that the transnational memory of the WWI emerges only in those murals which have been realized outside the control of ex-paramilitary groups or more uncompromising unionists. An example is the mural commissioned by the West Belfast Athletic and Cultural Association in Northumberland Street, Belfast, already mentioned in note in the introduction to this chapter. A memorial to British Army Lt. Col. John Henry Patterson, who led the Jewish Legion in WWI, it commemorates the contribution of Jewish volunteers, while linking the event to present-day Israel and its contemporary soldiers, represented by a woman in uniform and the Israeli flag in the background (Kappler and McKane 2019). This attempt to integrate a neglected memory of the Great War into the British narrative clearly 'subverts' the established representations of the WWI to be found in many other murals in the loyalist areas of Belfast; claiming the transnational dimension of the conflict as well as of the British Army, the depiction replaces the national framework in the name of (a no less controversial) historical truth.

Another example that concerns directly the Battle of the Somme is reported by Keenan (2022, p. 118). As part of a series of art projects realized at a community level in North

Belfast in 2007, there was a sequence of laser-cut metal panels representing some scenes from the WWI from a very different perspective compared to the ethno-nationalist view prevailing in loyalist murals. In the words of the community leader responsible for the projects, the aim was that of exploring the different religions and races that were involved in the Great War, in order to challenge the widespread assumption that only the 36th Ulster Division had a major role in the conflict. After a trip to the places were some great battles had been fought, including the Somme, the group in charge of the projects was committed to realize more inclusive depictions of the Great War, acknowledging the multicultural dimension of the conflict (and, finally, the presence of Irish volunteers). Although the notion of transnationalism is not mentioned neither by the community leader or by Keenan, who privilege that of "inclusivity", it is clear how these projects can foster another memory of the WWI, recognizing it as a global event.

From the short analysis made by Keenan it is yet difficult to understand if and to what extent these depictions are actually *perceived* as adequate by the local communities, since they are often the result of programs aimed at re-imaging some long-established representations. As such, they are not really integrated into the collective memories of unionism/loyalism, and at present it seems unlikely that they may significantly affect the traditional iconography of the Great War and the Somme, whose shallow transnationalism (at institutional level) has not prevented the loyalist appropriation of the events. In addition, it should not be forgotten that the WWI panels were part of a regeneration program taking place in a loyalist area of Belfast, an aspect that, in spite of the commitment to rethink the Great War within a transnational framework, maintained its 'continuity' with loyalism[88].

Both examples illustrate that sporadic attempts to rehabilitate the global dimension of the WWI occurred in Northern Ireland as part of projects which are fundamentally 'external' to the dynamics underlying unionist/loyalist traditional muralism. Ex-paramilitary soldiers may be consulted in this respect and local communities involved in the projects, but their eventual consent does not really tell much about their real perceptions and feelings. The fact that non-sectarian depictions of the Battle of the Somme are often realized as laminated panels instead of 'traditional' murals, altering a long-established artistic expression, is then revealing of their estrangement to community-based muralism (on the growing presence of

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[88] This perception may occasionally give rise to vandal attacks against murals or memorials dedicated to the WWI or the Battle of the Somme, still regarded as part of the 'loyalist heritage' by many nationalists/republicans. An example is the paint attack on a mural of the Battle of the Somme, part of the Somme Memorial on Avenue Road, Lurgan, in 2019, treated by the police as a sectarian act (Harte 2019).

laminated panels see the following chapter). Although they try to replace a still sectarian narrative of the Great War with a more inclusive and possibly transnational one, they may be regarded by loyalist communities as just another form of commodification that ultimately deprives them of a mythomoteur through which they have been searching their own identity. Paradoxically, these projects and their re-imaging philosophy risk to end up as just another (re)appropriation of history unable to avoid new feelings of exclusion.

The revival of the Titanic

The previous section ends up with some considerations about the interventions made at community level for renovating, and eventually changing, some of the traditional depictions through which unionism/loyalism has represented itself. Part of that culture of *re-imaging* (Hocking 2015; Keenan 2022) already discussed in the first chapter, interventions of urban renewal have characterized Northern Ireland, and particularly its capital city, Belfast, since the 1990s and the aftermath of the 1994 ceasefire that started the negotiations leading to the Belfast Agreement. A "visioning process" (Neill 1999, p. 271) was advocated by a private sector whose ambition was that of positioning Belfast among the European top cities in the short future. To re-image a space associated almost exclusively with violence and conflict became then the priority of the government, and opened the way for neoliberal politics and inward investments aimed at "regenerating" the city (Nagle 2009b). These premises are essential for introducing and framing the second case study to be considered here, the relaunch of the Titanic as one of the symbols through which contemporary Northern Ireland has attempted to re-image itself. The memory of the ship, and more in general of the shipbuilding industry, has been in fact exploited in support of a neoliberal agenda that has appropriated what used to be a 'loyalist heritage', although highly controversial. The construction of the Titanic museum, or, more precisely, 'visitor center', inaugurated in 2012, and the regeneration of a large area where once stood part of the Harland and Wolff shipyard (rebranded as *Titanic Quarter*) should then be framed within this context.

As already anticipated in the introduction to this chapter, the shipbuilding industry, which flourished in Belfast between the second half of the XIX century and the first half of the XX, employed almost exclusively Protestant working-class men. Catholics were largely discriminated, and this history of inequity is among the reasons behind the sectarian appropriation of the historical heritage left by the shipbuilding industry in Belfast. As a consequence, the same memory of the Titanic, built by the Harland and Wolff shipyard, is

usually not commemorated in the nationalist/republican communities, in spite of the new significance attributed to it as part of a rebranding campaign that attempted to avoid any sectarian claims. Sectarianism then

> lies at the core of the Titanic struggle over memory. Significant tensions exist, roughly following the Catholic/nationalist, Protestant/unionist contours that form the main cleavage in Ulster politics. Sectarian discrimination at H&W shipyard – both real and imagined – has deep historical roots and strong contemporary cultural resonance. Motivated by a potent mix of political and economic anxiety, expulsions of Catholic workers from H&W occurred at several points in the company's history, most recently in 1970. The 1920 expulsions became the stuff of Belfast folklore, nowadays reproduced in the narratives of those with no direct memory or connection to the event (Hodson 2019, p. 227)[89].

These narratives of exclusion and discrimination experienced by Catholics are suppressed in the regeneration projects that gave birth to the Titanic Quarter. Somehow, they are equally repressed in the contemporary testimonies given by ex-workers, who are likely to neglect this history of sectarianism internal to the shipyard. However, whereas the social memory of the shipbuilding industry has been largely built on the erasure of the experiences of Catholics/nationalists, its contemporary significance derives mainly from its opposition to the economic decline and consequent deindustrialization that affected the industry since the 1960s. It was this process that ultimately led to the realization of the Titanic Quarter, which, while regarded with indifference by the nationalist/republican communities of Belfast, is mainly rejected by working-class loyalism, and especially by those who have some direct link with the shipyard. In a way, loyalist communities of East Belfast, where the H&W shipbuilding industry was located, have found themselves to reclaim what they perceive to be their own historical past, which has been appropriated by a neoliberal agenda that turned it into a commodified heritage.

The symbol of this process has become the Titanic, to which the new quarter is dedicated, in the wake of the global success of James Cameron's 1997 film. Hodson (2019) underlines how the Titanic became a global story that the city of Belfast was eager to exploit for economic profit, reversing a former memory that identified the ship and its tragic destiny with a mix of pride and shame (Foster in Neill 2006, p. 114). The Titanic had already gained a transnational dimension well before its recent relaunch by the Hollywood industry, when

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[89] Hodson (Ibid.) reports also how socialist Protestants who worked in the shipyard had been expulsed along with Catholics as a consequence of the violent sectarian rioting occurred in 1920.

it was regarded as "the greatest of all 20th-century symbols of human *hubris* and the lost confidence of modernity" (Ibid.; italics in the original). Its conversion into a commercial brand through which Belfast re-images itself after decades of conflict could not reconcile to neither the dramatic destiny of the ship or the history of sectarianism that characterized the shipbuilding industry in Northern Ireland. The Titanic needed to take on a different meaning as a fully global symbol easily accessible to an international public; the ship is nowadays no longer the greatest achievement of working-class loyalism, or at least it is not remembered this way in the Titanic Quarter, which, like many other landmarks in Northern Ireland, has lost any 'authentic' connection to the territory and its previous history (Hocking 2015).

Feelings of exclusion from a regenerated area that remembers the industrial splendor of Belfast only on a very superficial level emerged clearly in the words of many working-class people[90]. Plans to involve ex-workers of the shipyard in the tourist experience offered by the Titanic Belfast, the visitor center dedicated to the history of the ship, were not implemented, and raised many concerns among them (Hodson 2019). Criticism towards the proposal to employ the workers as curators or guides providing information to the visitors and stories of the shipyard was widespread, since it appeared as a way of "selling" the working-class heritage of the shipbuilding industry to tourist consumption (Ibid., p. 238). For Hodson, the regeneration projects that gave birth to the Titanic Quarter and the Titanic Belfast are an example of what he calls a *heritage memory*, opposed to the *social memory* retained by the ex-workers. Whereas the first selects and rearranges episodes of the past in order to accommodate them to a future-oriented and uncontroversial narrative, the second is usually more ambiguous and tends to reclaim its ties with the territory and the local culture, even if it is not devoid of its own 'selective' omissions. This social memory, in East Belfast so deeply attached to the shipbuilding industry and, more recently, to the renovated image of the Titanic, is reflected in the murals that celebrate this glorious, and yet defunct, past. They offer the space in which another narrative of the shipyard and its most famous ship can emerge against the grandiosity of the Titanic Quarter.

The most famous mural dedicated to the memory of the Titanic is probably the monochrome painting realized in 2005 in Dee Street, East Belfast (Figure 3.3). The mural claims to commemorate all the victims and survivors of the shipwreck (men, women and children alike), as well as the people who built the Titanic. Curiously, however, the painting represents only male figures, an aspect that is common to unionist/loyalist murals, and what

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[90] Particularly revealing in this regard is the refusal from ex-H&W workers to adopt the name of *Titanic Quarter*, preserving instead the former denomination of Queen's Island (Hodson 2019, p. 235).

is actually commemorated is not the shipwreck mentioned in the written text below the image, but exclusively the shipyard workers and the industrial past they evoke.

Figure 3.3 Titanic Mural, 2005, Dee Street, East Belfast; picture taken by the author in 2018

The portrayal of the Titanic in the center, overlooked by the figure of Edward Smith, captain of the ship, is then celebrated not for its tragic fate, which is what made it a global symbol, but as the greatest achievement of a prosperous shipbuilding industry. The 'real' subject are then the working-class men who are portrayed in the foreground, whose work gave birth to the Titanic, which, as clearly stated in the mural, was "built in Belfast"[91]. Contrary to the representations of the Battle of the Somme in which the loyalist appropriation

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[91] The focus on the industrial past is made evident by the representation of the shipyard in the background, although the date commemorated is April 14th 1912, when the ship sank in the North Atlantic Ocean (far away from Belfast). An aspect to note is the historical inaccuracy of the mural, which depicts the two famous cranes known as Samson and Goliath, nowadays converted into a well recognizable landmark; in spite of symbolizing the memory of the shipbuilding industry of Belfast, in fact, the cranes have only been erected in 1969 and 1974, so that they could not have been part of the landscape when the Titanic was built.

of the episode is made clear, this and other murals dedicated to the Titanic appear then far less 'political'. It is necessary to know the strong connection between the shipbuilding industry and the Protestant working-class men to read the mural as a unionist/loyalist representation that is likely to appear more controversial to the nationalist/republican communities.

For this reason, murals dedicated to the Titanic or the shipbuilding industry have been encouraged for replacing paramilitary depictions, since they are regarded as representations of a loyalist heritage and not as sectarian re-appropriations that reiterate the previous history of discrimination against Catholics. Different is the case with murals of the Battle of the Somme, whose sectarian claims are more evident, also because of the connection established between the UVF militia and the later paramilitary group, an identification that failed to emerge in Titanic themed murals. Only occasionally more explicit links with a loyalist identity came out in some murals, which emblematically relate the memory of the shipyard with the Great War, and particularly with the Battle of the Somme. A laminated panel placed at the Connswater Community centre in East Belfast commemorates the working-class men who left the shipyard and fought at the Somme; the panel was realized after the 2013 play called *From The Shipyard To The Somme* that was staged by the 36th (Ulster) Division Memorial Association[92]. Another example is the mural realized in 2015 in Tigers Bay, North Belfast, which illustrates some events that occurred between 1912-1918; again, the Battle of the Somme, portrayed in the center of the mural, is visually linked to the shipyard workers, here represented while on strike in 1917 (Figure 3.4).

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[92] A picture of the panel and a brief description of it can be seen at the following link: https://extramuralactivity.com/2022/06/24/from-the-shipyard-to-the-somme/.

Figure 3.4 Mural representing events of 1912-1918 at Home and at the Front, 2015, Mervue Street., Tigers Bay, North Belfast; picture by Tony Crowley, from *Murals of Northern Ireland Collection*, The Claremont Colleges Digital Library

In both cases, it seems that, along with celebrating the working-class people, the focus is on their sufferance and sacrifice, which culminated in the Great War but did not spare those at Home, including workers and women whose lives were affected by the conflict (as the mural states in the explanatory plaque). Although very rare, these connections between the memory of the shipyard and that of the Great War seem to confirm the observations made by some critics, who "have categorized the popularity of the myth of the Somme as part of a characteristic strain of defeatism in contemporary Northern Irish Protestant culture, also evident in local reverence for the *Titanic*" (Beiner 2007, p. 384; italics in the original). According to them, the tragedy of the shipwreck came to symbolize the loss of faith in progress and a sense of ending (Hadaway 2013) that the Great War materialized in all its horror; and yet, the Titanic is not evoked in either of the depictions analyzed above, in which it is instead the shipbuilding industry and its loyalist workforce to be celebrated. In addition, the 'culture of defeatism' symbolized by the Titanic is certainly part of the Protestant narrative, but at the same time it belonged to an entire era and generation well beyond Northern Ireland. In short, the Titanic and the concept of defeatism associated to it represented not only the anxieties internal to unionism, but a transnational trauma that soon would have broken out.

Neill (2011) identifies two key moments that made the Titanic a timeless myth before Cameron's film in 1997: the first is its sinking, while the second is the publication in 1955 "of Walter Lords book *A Night to Remember*, which spoke to new post-war concerns of foreboding" (p. 71). The Titanic myth that arose from the ship's tragic end and, in retrospect, its symbolic re-interpretation(s) determined its definitive entry into popular culture, consecrated by Cameron's movie that made the Titanic also an aesthetic product. As Neill underlines, it "can be appropriated for all sorts of claims" (Ibid.), an aspect that while revealing the process of symbolization the Titanic has gone through over time illustrates also its simultaneous transformation into a global myth that does not really belong to anyone[93]. As such, it became difficult for loyalism to appropriate it, in contrast to the history of Belfast's shipyard which is strongly perceived as part of the loyalist culture. This may explain why most of the murals dedicated to the Titanic emphasize the fact that it was built in Belfast, shifting the focus on the ship's construction and the time before its sinking. These latter do not only represent the obvious pride in having built what is very probably the most famous ship in the world, but also the euphoric dimension of the Titanic's myth. Murals tend, therefore, to celebrate it over the dysphoric dimension related to the ship's fate and its subsequent symbolizations, even when the date of the sinking is commemorated, as in the first mural described above.

For the loyalist communities of East Belfast, this is the only way to claim some 'ownership' over a myth which is otherwise perceived as foreign because of its global circulation. It may be true that the Titanic comes to be for loyalism another myth rooted in the triumph of defeat that Beiner (2007) identifies as characteristic of the Protestant culture in Northern Ireland[94]; and yet, the Titanic's resurgence in the province is unlikely to be explained exclusively as an 'internal' phenomenon. More probably, the global success of Cameron's *Titanic* has been instrumental in relaunching the myth of the 'unsinkable' ship also in Belfast, which only eventually has been re-inscribed within the local culture of defeatism. However, it should be highlighted that the identification of East Belfast with the Titanic remains problematic and limited when compared to the wider memory of the shipyard. As already said, for a long time the memory of the Titanic was almost suppressed, and the fate of the ship regarded as a shameful event by the shipyard's workers and Northern

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[93] This did not prevent the myth of the Titanic to be interpreted in different ways in relation to the place and group of people who adapted it according to their own experiences and internal affairs (see Brown, McDonagh and Shultz 2013, particularly pp. 605-606).

[94] Moreover, the interpretation given by Beiner and other similar readings do not explain the long oblivion into which the memory of the Titanic fell, and why it has been resurrected only relatively recently.

Ireland in general. If (eventually) a previous 'identification' between the ship and the Protestant working-class men existed, it completely changed after the sinking; for Belfast's shipyard, "the catastrophic failure of its single greatest achievement was a devastating blow to Protestant pride" (Brown, McDonagh and Schultz 2013, p. 606).

According to John Wilson Foster, who wrote some remarkable works on the myth of the Titanic, the ship came to symbolize "nothing less than the "thwarted nationhood" of Ulster Protestants" (Ibid.). It was then Northern Ireland itself and its uncertain fate to be identified with the Titanic, especially after the partition put an end to British dominion over most of the island. The political situation in the province, then, may be partially connected to the amnesia that for a long time prevented the Titanic to be remembered, making it complicated, especially for the working-class people of East-Belfast, to develop a positive identification with it. More recently, in addition, the sense of alienation generated by the transnational dimension gained by the ship on one side, and, on the other, the unscrupulous use of its image made in the area of the ex-shipyard, have engendered a feeling of dispossession toward the memory of the Titanic. Unlike the transnational murals realized in the nationalist/republican areas, which largely determine and control the meaning(s) of the events represented, loyalist murals fail to dominate the myth of the Titanic; the only way to (re)appropriate it is then that of avoiding as much as possible the memory of the shipwreck, which is exactly what determined the 'immortality' of the Titanic[95], recovering instead its link to East Belfast and the shipyard. This also guarantees that the working-class men who actually built the ship are remembered and commemorated as central actors in relation to the Titanic, a position usually occupied by the victims of the shipwreck.

The conflict of memories around the Titanic and the shipbuilding industry that emerged between loyalist groups and the regeneration plans from which the Titanic Quarter arose is reflected also in the different commemorations of the ship's history. On Donegall Square, next to Belfast City Hall, stands the Titanic Memorial, built already in 1920 and, since 2012, placed in the Titanic memorial garden opened for the centenary of the sinking. Originally, it commemorated only 22 men from Belfast (whose names are inscribed on the sides of the plinth) who died in the sinking, including the Titanic's designer Thomas Andrews. With the

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[95] Murals that contain some reference to the shipwreck or remember it, more than once address it indirectly, through the representation of a newsboy reporting the news of the Titanic's sinking, a character visible also in a panel below the main image of the mural shown in Figure 3.3. A more direct reference to the tragedy seems to be found in a series of murals representing the survivors of the sinking in the lifeboats, realized in 2012 in Beechview Park, West Belfast. This anomalous location for the presence of Titanic-themed depictions can be explained by the fact that the murals have been funded, among other partners, by Belfast City Council, and are therefore not community-based representations in the 'authentic' sense.

renovation of the memorial in 2012, when the small garden was opened, bronze plaques were added behind the main sculpture, listing the names of all the victims of the tragedy (more than 1500 people). From a local memorial dedicated exclusively to Belfastmen, it was then turned into an inclusive one, i.e., a transnational monument to the victims of the Titanic's sinking, a transformation that seems to reflect the global dimension that the episode has acquired. What is commemorated in the city center, then, is the sinking of the ship and all its victims, and no direct references are made to the history of the shipyard that built the Titanic; in short, it is the tragic aspect that made it a transnational myth to be commemorated, even if the shift from a local to a global memorial in the recent years has significantly reshaped its meaning.

The allegorical representation of the sinking, the classical style of the sculpture and the focus on the catastrophe are all elements that stand in contrast to the Titanic Yardmen sculpture erected in 2012, again for the centenary of the sinking, in Newtownards Road, East Belfast. A community-based memorial realized as part of the East Belfast Partnership's Re-Imaging Newtownards Road project, the bronze sculpture depicts three yardmen from Harland and Wolff, dressed as the shipyard's workers from the early twentieth century. Although a Titanic memorial (the panel behind the sculpture is titled *Titanic people*), it celebrates the memory of the ship through that of East Belfast's shipbuilding industry and its workers; the historical heritage of the Harland and Wolff shipyard is then not only recovered, but also reintegrated inside the space of the communities. Whereas the connection between the shipbuilding and the working-class people of (East) Belfast is undeniable, more controversial appears the attempt to make this heritage an inclusive one, as the explanatory plaque seems to suggest with its allusion to a generic "people of Belfast". Unsurprisingly, no reference is made to the history of discrimination against Catholics that makes it difficult for them to identify themselves with the shipyard (and consequently the Titanic). Moreover, the local dimension of the sculpture is both affirmed and denied, as the reference to the Titanic in the plaque as both "worldwide history and romantic myth" makes clear. On the side of history, then, stands the shipbuilding industry as (East) Belfast's heritage, while the Titanic is evoked as history which has grown into myth, and whose transnational dimension ("worldwide" in the plaque) coexists with the local memory of its construction.

Contrary to the Titanic memorial in the city center, then, the Titanic Yardmen attempts, even if in a questionable way, to re-establish the link between the ship and its myth on the one hand, and the space and history of the shipyard on the other. The euphoric aspect of the Titanic's construction, i.e., the time preceding the shipwreck, is then what is recovered and

commemorated by the memorial, and not the global myth that was developed on the disaster. The spirit of the sculpture is closer to that animating the surrounding murals dedicated to the Titanic, in which, as already seen, the link with the historical memory of the shipbuilding industry prevails on that of the shipwreck. The global relaunch of the Titanic and the 2012 centenary of its sinking favored the 'rediscovery' of the ship also in that same city in which it was proudly built and later almost repudiated: and yet, its transnational dimension has simultaneously alienated the working-class communities, and particularly those of East-Belfast, from what was previously perceived as their own heritage. To the estrangement that has traditionally surrounded the Titanic in the Catholic communities, is added the alienation of the loyalist ones, which struggle for re-appropriating it. Again, transnationalism proves to be challenging for loyalist culture, since in Northern Ireland the myth of the Titanic has been largely determined by the recent neoliberal policies in which the Titanic Quarter arose, overshadowing the history of the shipyard and the traces it left in the landscape. In short, the Titanic risks to be a cumbersome memory for the loyalist communities of East Belfast, more suitable (as it often happens) for re-imaging projects that involve local murals as well as deindustrialized parts of the city.

If Titanic-themed murals have been regarded as successful examples of a global myth reintegrated into the local memory of the communities, to what extent is this claim true, in the light of what emerged in the paragraphs above? The re-establishment of the link between the most famous ship in the world and the Protestant/loyalist legacy represented by the shipbuilding industry is as evident as it is silenced. The well-known Protestant ownership of the shipyard and the consequences of deindustrialization after its progressive dismantling are never affirmed in the murals: on one side, the sectarian history of the shipbuilding industry in Belfast hides behind the reference to a generic working-class community, while on the other side these representations look backward to a glorious past, avoiding any allusion to the very different present of decay that affects the former site of the shipyard. Ultimately, these murals attempt to re-claim ownership of the Titanic reviving its link with Belfast's former shipyard, transforming both of them into a local heritage to be proud of. As such, these depictions reveal a nostalgic memory of the shipyard's past and glory, eventually emphasized by the monochrome of the image. The focus on the construction of the Titanic and the time preceding its sinking appears then as a way to resist the transnationalism of the ship's myth; the Titanic is then evoked as the greatest achievement of the working-class men employed in the shipbuilding industry, and not as the ill-fated ship commemorated all around the world. This is partially due, as already mentioned, to the fact that the transnational

dimension of the Titanic has ultimately alienated the (loyalist) working-class communities and their memories of the shipyard, leaving to them no other alternative than that of re-appropriating the ship as a source of local pride.

To sum up, many doubts remain on the extent to which Titanic-themed murals or memorials like the Titanic Yardmen are really able to 'return' the memory of the ship to the local communities, especially those of East Belfast. Although they may be regarded as alternative representations that, contrary to the neoliberal spirit of the Titanic Quarter, are focused on the shipyard's workers, in the essence they are equally involved in that same process of re-imaging the space in which the branded Quarter arose. As Etchart (2008, p. 37) highlights with reference to this latter, the

> process of 'imagining a place' entails a selection of items from existing identities. And this process is obvious in the TQ when the planners focus on one aspect of local history at the expense of many others. They single out the items of local history related to the 'industrial past' that will contribute to creating a positive, dynamic image. […] Here, the 'third cultural way' (as opposed to the two traditional nationalist and unionist identities) is clearly economy oriented and aims at establishing an innocuous local identity that will attract outside visitors.

The celebration of a glorious past, the lack of references to sectarianism against Catholics and the avoidance of the more recent history of decay that affected East Belfast are all equally silenced in the Titanic Quarter as in the surrounding murals and occasional memorials. The local identity that is evoked is always that of an unambiguous working-class community, certainly related to East Belfast but never explicitly Protestant/loyalist; moreover, it is always a working population from the past, unable to really represent the present-day communities. It is therefore no surprise, as already stated, that Titanic-themed murals are usually encouraged, since the local identity they portray is largely innocuous, although their geographical location and the still rooted memories of sectarianism underlying the shipyard tell a different story. Finally, it should not be forgotten that the wave of murals dedicated to the Titanic has been determined by the centenary of its sinking in 2012, an event commemorated internationally. This means that they did not appear as a consequence of an 'internal' drive to revive the memory of the Titanic in a landscape dominated by paramilitary depictions, but that these murals were largely influenced by demands essentially external to the communities' concerns. In short, the Titanic has been used as a theme for community-based murals exactly because of its international allure, which has sensibly undermined the possibility to identify it with the loyalist dominance on the shipyard. This explains why, in

our opinion, Titanic-themed murals should not be considered in opposition to the regeneration plan that led to the Titanic Quarter, but *in relation* to it.

Whereas much of the research on East Belfast has focused on the conflicts that different memories inscribed in the landscape have generated (Bryan 2012; McAtackney 2017), more attention should be paid to the influence exerted on that same landscape by external dynamics like the international relaunch of the Titanic, built in the former shipyard. In the case of the Titanic Quarter, a place in which the local heritage has been 'reinvented', this is particularly evident: therefore, "it is not only the selection of landscapes and landscape features that has affected the appearance of Titanic Quarter […]. It is not unexpected that the globally renowned Titanic story should be selected by tourist and government agencies as Belfast's, and indeed Northern Ireland's story; it circumvents other, more difficult heritages" (Garden 2012, p. 37). The re-emergence of the Titanic as a brand in Northern Ireland is then largely due to a 'process of reconversion' that originated outside the province and beyond the control of the communities. In the end, if the Titanic Quarter has been correctly described as a failed regeneration plan with respect to East Belfast residents, the Titanic-themed murals equally fail to represent the actual feelings of these communities, and avoid to reflect a significantly different present. As a symbol whose transnationalism is the result of dynamics from the outside, the Titanic can no longer be appropriated by the loyalist communities of East Belfast: the local memories of the shipyard risk being definitely overshadowed by an emblem that has become too burdensome.

Conclusions. Towards a new (loyalist) identity?

Despite its limitations, the present chapter has tried to illustrate the difficulty for unionist/loyalist communities in producing representations that may trigger or reflect alternative identities capable of relating to an international dimension. The concept of 'identity' is especially relevant in the case of Ulster unionism/loyalism, since it may be one of the possible keys through which understanding why for these communities it is more complex to 're-image' themselves. Because of their political and geographical location within Great Britain, unionist/loyalist communities have often found themselves in the position to 'defend' their Britishness, not only against nationalist opposition but also, paradoxically, against the same motherland. The suspicion towards Northern Irish unionism that has characterized at different stages the British media, particularly during the Troubles, is underlined by Butler (1991, p. 115; italics in the original):

The unionists on the other hand appear to be *men of no nation*. Viewed from Britain, the Protestants of Ulster defy understanding. Their behaviour and attitudes seem antediluvian. Their outlook, in spite of noisome claims to the contrary, is rudely un-British. Yet, they reject Irishness. They are, in other words, hard to make sense of, and therefore difficult to sympathise with or assimilate to the British way of life.

As stressed by Butler, then, the British identity of unionists/loyalists in Northern Ireland must be constantly claimed, and murals play their role in this sense. Contrary to the Irish nationalists, who have built their own identity within the frame of (and in opposition to) British imperialism, unionist/loyalist people have been forced to turn inwards, fueling that 'siege mentality' that often resurfaces, not least with Brexit and the Northern Ireland Protocol[96]. Obviously, the issue of identity and the uncertainties it raises are only one of the possible reasons why unionist/loyalist communities find it harder to introduce or establish in their own representations transnational links to other events. The two examples analyzed in this chapter, i.e., the Battle of the Somme and the relaunch of the Titanic, are certainly not exhaustive and, in addition, they represent very different cases of failure to embrace or actively promote transnational narratives through muralism. Whereas the Battle of the Somme has been appropriated by a paramilitary group and consequently retained as the preserve of (a part of) loyalist communities, the re-emergence of the Titanic as a transnational symbol has been determined by external dynamics that in the end have alienated the local communities and their memories of the shipyard. What both these cases highlight –yet- is that unionists/loyalists are still struggling to find their own identities, further undermined by internal fractures; to turn their gaze outwards, therefore, becomes the crucial step to take in the near future.

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[96] The Northern Ireland Protocol states that certain goods need to be checked at Northern Ireland ports to be allowed to travel to the Republic of Ireland and, consequently, to the rest of Europe (Edgington and Morris 2021). The Protocol, actually, enforces a de facto border for the movement of goods placed in the waters of the Irish Sea, strategically non-visible and yet effectively existent; this solution has been rejected by unionists in Northern Ireland, since it is regarded as just another symptom of the different treatment of the province with respect to the rest of Britain.

Chapter 4. Muralism as an expression of material culture

Before introducing the notion of archive that will be central to the next chapters, some reflections should be made with regard to muralism as an expression of material culture. The previous analyses focused on the growing transnationalism of murals, from their heritagization/commodification in an international tourist industry to their circulation as images in the digital realm (see chapter 6), should not overshadow the fact that murals are, first and foremost, material artefacts. They exist in concrete spaces, on the gable walls of people's houses or on the sides of 'peace lines' that mark the political geography of Northern Ireland. To understand this material dimension of muralism means thus to regard murals as something more than mere images painted and repainted in the public space, which in turn is solicited to promote certain meanings/feelings by their very presence. The material essence of muralism, beyond the visual representations it conveys, was already addressed by Neil Jarman (1998), who considered murals also in terms of objects, and suggested to regard them as artefacts even more than an expression of (public) art[97]. Jarman observes how, as images, murals are open to multiple interpretations, but as artefacts they are also open to different (re)uses and eventual abuses.

This reading is semiotically interesting. It suggests the existence of at least two levels on which sense is articulated: the first one deals with murals as images, and falls into a semiotics of the text (Marrone 2011) that substantially isolates the artefacts from context and is focused on the dynamics of sense internal to the representations. Content is privileged over both the form and materiality of the image, and the interest in the meaning(s) conveyed by the mural is predominant. Most of the research on the murals of Northern Ireland has been focusing on this level and on the connotations of the image; although the importance of the location of the mural is almost always acknowledged, such spatial dimension tends to be subjected to the type of representation in the mural and the feelings of sectarian discrimination it may raise. On the other side, it is impossible to deny that the very existence of murals in a certain space does contribute to the perpetuation of sectarianism *also* in relation to what is actually depicted in them. A broader perspective, however, opens when one considers a second level on which sense is articulated. It falls into a sociosemiotic approach which encompasses also the (dynamic) lifespan of a mural in its materiality. Such an approach recovers the importance of context, and aims to grasp the emergence of sense in the interaction(s)

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[97] For a similar position, which highlights the nature of murals as artefacts, see also Young (2015).

between the given object and the circumstances that affect (and are affected by) it. In the case of muralism, this translates into an understanding of murals as artefacts produced in connection to a (geographical, political and social) space, but also as the result of a practice inscribed in the local culture, which in turn constantly renovates itself through any new mural painted. Finally, this second level of signification also involves, as will be shown below, the way in which people interact with murals, both in everyday life and during parades or tourist tours, reviving the meaning(s) and perception of the representations. It is exactly to these series of aspects that the rest of the chapter is dedicated.

The (material) life of a mural: from its multiple meanings and uses to its 'death'

The dynamics of memory internal to muralism, described in the previous chapters, rest upon a subtler form of dynamism of the system which largely depends on the daily interactions with murals as well as on the different interpretations/uses they are subject to. Within this context, the material condition of a mural can tell a lot about its 'history' and current perception. Much has been said about the recent transformation of muralism in Northern Ireland and its tendency to renew itself; the actual lifespan of a painting cannot be predicted, and while some murals last for a very short time (during the conflict some republican murals and graffiti could last for only few hours before being erased), others are repainted and preserved from their natural deterioration. On the other hand, however, less has been said about what is *actually* implied when a mural is replaced by a new one or, on the contrary, it is maintained. Its good condition can in this sense be indicative of the durability of certain narratives that 'materialize' in the public landscape, while its deterioration can, on the opposite, be indicative of their decline, and the mural persisting only in the form of a trace that bears testimony of the *(figurative) struggle* that is fought on the walls. From this, it follows that decaying murals, or the very act of erasing a depiction from the public landscape, can be in themselves as significant as their preservation when it comes to make sense of the dynamics of memory internal to muralism.

This very material aspect has been grasped by McCormick and Jarman (2005) in their analysis of the 'death' of a mural[98]. The decision to remove or to neglect a certain depiction is interpreted by the scholars as an act largely determined by a political choice, and not always dependent on the community's feelings towards the image. They propose seven

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[98] The material existence of murals is also connected to urban development, since the demolition of buildings often implies the disappearance of the murals painted on them.

possible categories through which the lifecycle of a mural can be analyzed: retirement, redundancy, recycling, redevelopment, reclamation, remonstration, and restoration. These categories sum up very different conditions and types of intervention on a mural; if with 'retirement' McCormick and Jarman mean the natural process of deterioration of the artefact, the other categories cover instead intentional acts, from that of whitewashing the mural (redundancy) to its actual recovery (restoration), which often signals its 'legitimation'. Moreover, while 'recycling' and 'reclamation' entail some kind of replacement in order to, respectively, update the representation and meet the demands for another type of image, 'redevelopment' and 'remonstration' do not necessarily imply the subsequent emergence of a new mural. The acts of demolition and vandalism that cause them, respectively, intentionally target in fact a certain representation, and it is the superimposition of the destructive gesture that is meant to be highly significant per se[99]. Reflective of the tensions and conflicts that occasionally arise around the creation and interpretation of a mural (Mendelson-Shwartz and Mualam 2021)[100], acts of demolition or vandalism tell a lot about the discourses, narratives and perceptions that often accompany the lifespan of a mural. Because of "the multiplicity of stakeholders involved in the lifecycle of murals" (Ivi., p. 696), disagreements concerning the expected lifetime of a mural may frequently arise, especially in spaces more prone to internal conflicts.

Murals as artefacts and their material alterations are discussed also by Solleder (2016), who proposes another possible typology for exploring the lifecycle of a mural. Inspired by McCormick and Jarman, he introduces eight categories: restoration, defacement, abandonment, relocation, replication, modification, erasure, and replacement. As for the second category, Solleder states that "the *defacement* of a mural offers the actors the opportunity to underline the importance of a mural either through restoration *or* through abandonment" (p. 67; italics in the original). In few cases, the act of defacement has been 'memorialized' by the muralist, who put a plaque to the destroyed mural in order to remember (and accuse) the gesture made by the RUC or the British Army.[101] The two very

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[99] The analysis proposed by McCormick and Jarman could fall into a semiotics of the sign destruction like that suggested by Francesco Mazzucchelli (2017a) as the reversal of Eco's theory of sign production (1975). To suspend the process of signification (semiosis) proves to be impossible, since sense rises again from the same gesture of destruction aimed at suppressing it.

[100] The range of possible conflicts arising from and around murals are summed up by the authors in six themes: Rights and Ownership, Belonging, Representation, Artist-Audience Relationship, Temporary Nature of Murals and Governing Formal (Sanctioned) and Insurgent Murals. See in particular table 1 at page 687.

[101] The RUC (Royal Ulster Constabulary) was the police force of Northern Ireland, founded after the partition of the island and replaced by the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) in 2001. An overwhelmingly Protestant body, it was repeatedly accused of sectarian violence against Catholics and collusion with loyalist paramilitaries, an allegation that was frequent in nationalist/republican murals.

similar processes of 'relocation' and 'replication' are distinguished by Solleder since when murals are replicated they somehow 'travel' across both time and space, reappearing subsequently in another place, often in a different version that attests the dynamics internal to muralism in a significantly different way than in the case of their relocation. 'Modification' covers instead those cases in which a mural is maintained because of its relevance, but with some changes for adapting it to a new socio-political agenda (which concern especially paramilitary-related images).

> Such a modification of a mural demonstrates that murals should not be interpreted in isolation from *past* murals. The interpretation of a modified mural should not only be based on what it depicts after modification. Rather, its symbolic "content" after modification is as well constituted through what it does not depict anymore (p. 69; italics in the original).

Finally, 'erasure' and 'replacement' are distinguished on the base that the first does not necessarily imply the substitution of the damaged mural, at least not in the immediate future. Within the category of 'replacement' fall instead also the depictions promoted by programs like *Re-imaging*, analyzed in the first chapter; such category, contrary to that of 'modification', which includes murals that are 'spontaneously' renewed by the communities, refers to depictions that are replaced as part of funded programs aimed at regulating the production of images in the public space. As remarked by Solleder, "the meaning conveyed by a replacing mural is as much dependent on the replaced mural as it is on its own "content"" (p. 71), highlighting the dynamic nature of muralism as a process in which representations unfold in time and not only in space. It should also be added that funded schemes like the aforementioned *Re-Imaging Communities Programme* actually contribute to the acceleration of the rhythm of change of murals; whereas they are 'naturally' temporary in their materiality, and tend to undergo a more or less regular process of change/substitution, the pressure exerted by external factors (meaning not intrinsically inherent to muralism per se) alters this very same process.

The analyses made by McCormick and Jarman on the 'death' of a mural and by Solleder on how murals disappear and eventually re-appear in the public space bring back the focus on their materiality and on the way in which memories in Northern Ireland find expression within a rich material culture. Murals are among the multiple forms and processes through which collective memories are staged and performed in a province where countless parades are held each year, especially as part of the unionist/loyalist tradition. Defined as examples

of *material conflicts* by Jarman (1997), parades and other symbolic displays prove how memory in Northern Ireland is largely performed or eventually embodied; and yet, while the centrality of the body in the parades is easily recognized, the same cannot be said of muralism, since the material creation of a mural and its subsequent condition/uses are practically ignored in most of the research dedicated to murals. The materiality of the practice, in fact, does not only concern its modes of effacement, which are often indicative of ongoing spatial and political transformations, but also the emergence and subsequent 'use' of murals in the performance of memory.

The body is involved in the same act of painting, and after their creation murals are not only looked at, since in many cases they turn into a space of commemoration, or their existence is 'reactivated' by the act of parading, which converts images that are largely ignored in people's daily routes into representations with which to interact. The relevance of murals lies thus not only in what they display or in politically 'marking' the territory, but also in their ability to 'trigger' a certain agency, especially in relation to the practices of memory. To acknowledge the nature of murals as objects/artefacts is thus not enough, since the performances they trigger materialize memory also in the form of practices that in turn dynamize muralism in subtler ways. If murals cannot be fully understood out of context, following the sociosemiotic approach introduced above, nor can they be understood separately from the performances that mobilize their material existence and the imagery they display. To state that parades are processes while murals are products (Santino 2001) means thus to miss a fundamental point, since in spite of acknowledging the materiality of murals, such conclusion isolates them from their uses, an aspect that only few scholars like Jarman (1998) have suggested, and which has never been actually explored. Nonetheless, even Santino recognizes that the elements that form a certain symbolic landscape need to be read in combination, since they relate to each other or modify the sense of what is next. Each element should consequently be examined "both atomistically and holistically" (Ivi., p. 57), an understanding that widens the context without, however, really moving beyond the connotative level (or, in the terms stated above, a semiotics of the text).

Beyond the use of murals as identity and spatial markers, which has been extensively studied in previous research, other uses have been emerging in relation to the transformation of murals into commodified artefacts, their renovated visibility in the performances of memory and, above all, their mobilization within political activism at the community level. The material existence of murals and what they are actually 'driven to do' in a given culture are fundamental aspects for understanding the social relationships at play. Murals mediate

and materialize them, modulating the rhythm of production and change of the vernacular culture:

> The mural, as both material artifact and social process, is a powerful example of vernacular culture shaping civic ideology. Murals are embodiments and emplacements of myth markets. Murals have existed in a state of revision since their inception, with pieces being repaired, refreshed, replaced and retired over time (Downey and Sherry 2014, p. 282).

Whereas they may be 'adjusted' in order to comply with the socio-political change they are required to mirror, murals should not be understood as passive representations, since, according to both Rolston (2003b) and Downey and Sherry (2014, p. 284), they are "agentic in their own right". Through their temporariness, murals both reflect and act upon the rhythm of social transformation, as well as the current ideologies and dominant memories in contemporary Northern Ireland. In this sense, and given also the fundamental role played by commemoration and remembrance in relation to Northern Irish murals, these latter are not really different from other places of memory like museums or heritage sites in their ability to *afford* specific practices of remembrance (Bareither 2021). In particular, when murals gain visibility during a parade, and are thus actively involved in the performance of memory, they play their own role in what Bareither calls the "*enacting of emotional experiences*" (p. 580; italics in the original), that the scholar connects to the material space of heritage sites and museums. Murals do not only compel people to *do* things or stage memories, to borrow an expression used by da Silva Catela (2015), but they also encourage to *enact* the emotions triggered by their presence.

The ability of objects and things to preserve memories becomes especially crucial in those cases in which the person for whom the object/thing stands for has disappeared, and her/his memory can only rely on the material artefact that survives the lost body. The images and photographs of the Argentinian *desaparecidos*, in this regard, acquired a powerful significance; not only did they impose a political dimension on the private mourning of the relatives of the victims (Violi 2017), but they also came to embody the material trace of the missing person, thus gaining much more than a representational function. Unsurprisingly, the use of photographs of the victims in the public performances of memory has often caused problems related to the ownership of these images and the difficulty in dealing with the double (private/public) dimension of grief (da Silva Catela 2015), in a way that echoes the controversies that may arise around the representation of people in murals in Northern

Ireland, illustrated in the first chapter (McDowell 2008a). In semiotic terms, the photographs can be regarded as *transformative devices* (Violi 2017, p. 43), to be understood as semiotic shifters between private and collective forms of commemoration, with the latter charged with political significance. As Violi underlines, the dimensions involved in both forms of remembrance are multiple, since they entail at least a conceptual/semantic frame along with the emotional and pragmatic ones. Images imply then different acts and practices of commemoration, and consequently cannot be regarded as static representations conveying only denotative/connotative meanings.

Similar observations with regard to photographs have been made on the importance to understand their existence first and foremost in material terms, i.e., as objects as well as images (Edwards and Hart 2004). Following the so-called material turn in anthropology, the renovated attention paid to the social life of artefacts has prompted a resurgence of interest in the "process of production, exchange, usage and meaning" (Ivi., p. 4) in which they are involved. Specifically with regard to photography, but the same can be said about other types of images, two different forms of social biography can be identified: these are what the authors define as the social biography of image content and the social biography of a specific photograph. While the first one concerns the changes of the material form of the image (prints, formats, etc…), the second one involves the social afterlife of a photograph when it is eventually turned into an institutionalized object or simply recognized as iconic. It is easy to see how these forms of social biography may be useful for fully understanding also the nature of muralism, in light of the unpredictable lifespan of a mural described above.

The example of the use of photographs in Argentina or the proliferation of murals in Northern Ireland during and after the conflict respond also to that need to materialize trauma and loss that Erika Doss (2010) has defined in the terms of a *memorial mania* that characterizes in particular our age. Not only is public space increasingly invested with signs inviting the observer to (re)discover marginal memories, but, more significantly, it is remarkable how these latter are externalized in objects (flowers, personal items, pictures) that make public the private grief and integrate it into the community. The common bonds created by these forms of externalized remembrance, in spite of the concern they can eventually arise, tell a lot about the importance of material culture in the society:

> insufficient attention has been paid to the way in which material forms come into being and the
> extent to which things are interstitial to the process of social reproduction. […] How people act
> on objects and how objects can be considered to affect social actions are paramount concerns. In

order that we understand social reproduction, we need to know how it is that people engage with objects and how, and in what manner, objects are used to mediate for people. […] Not only 'how societies remember', but also how things help societies remember (Jones 2007, pp. 4-5).

The broader perspective proposed by Andrew Jones can be regarded as a significant theoretical framework to be adopted also outside the field of history/archaeology, in order to investigate how objects are invested with our personal memories, especially at times of loss and grief. As the author notes, to read the object as a vehicle for a meaning to be interpreted, represents an approach that seems to derive from Saussurean semiotics, which downplays the significance of matter in favor of the arbitrariness of culture. The object/thing is substantially reduced to a sign already inscribed into a given cultural system. This understanding poses problems when the dimension of memory is introduced, since it appears problematic, within this framework, to explain how objects may convey other possible meanings/values beyond those culturally codified. On the other hand, a different approach that derives from Peircean semiotics leads to an indexical reading of the object, which treats it as a trace conveying its past temporalities and uses. Acknowledging the existence of the object world, Peircean semiotics allows for, according to Jones, full recognition of the material properties of the artefact, implementing those cognitive processes of abduction through which material culture is ultimately interpreted[102]. Introducing the idea of an archaeology of traces, Jones suggests that objects and artefacts can be better understood within an indexical analysis that he derives from, as already said, Peircean semiotics.

The passage from an understanding of the object based (exclusively) on the cultural conventions from which it derives its significance to the indexical analysis suggested by Jones in his introduction to material culture, adds a fundamental aspect to the comprehension of Northern Irish muralism. This aspect concerns the temporalities that muralism as a dynamic system encompasses *in its materiality*, and thus beyond the dynamics of memory investigated in the previous chapters. With reference to Alfred Gell's identification of the temporal dimensions of an artwork[103], Andrew Jones underlines how "by drawing on preexisting artworks the artist embodies, in the new artwork, elements of what has gone before. By materialising the artwork in physical form, the artist projects his or her intentions forward in time in the form of the artwork" (Jones 2007, p. 20). According to Gell, artworks

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[102] The concept of 'abduction' refers to a type of inference that is neither deductive nor inductive, and through which new hypotheses can be developed.
[103] Jones is referring to Alfred Gell's book *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, published in 1998.

'retain' (like traces) the human agency that created them, an agency that is still able to have an influence in future gestures, uses or practices stimulated by the artworks.

With regard to the temporal aspect, this means that an artwork does not only 'preserve' the (original) act and intentions of the creator (as a trace of the past), but that it also projects other possible interpretations/uses into a time to come (it becomes a paradoxical trace of a future time). This second temporal dimension of artworks somehow 'marks' the transition between the domain of the artist/creator and the social sphere, in a way that recalls the definition of murals as, as seen above, a form of *embodiment* of social relationships (Downey and Sherry 2014). If the previous paragraphs have insisted on how murals are able to enact or afford certain practices of remembrance, Gell's understanding of the relation between artworks and human agency in indexical terms seems to strengthen this line of interpretation. This implies also that memory is not simply stored or contained in the artefacts, but that it is re-created in the same process of interaction between humans and objects, both in the act of their (original) creation and, subsequently, in that of their future perception.

The considerations made by Jones and Gell can yet be further implemented; it is possible to suggest in fact that there are cases in which the same production of a new artefact both re-creates and preserves the memory of a preexisting one. With reference to muralism, this means that the social memory it constantly (re)produces (see chapter 1) is actualized by every new mural appearing, being repainted/replicated or removed as part of that politics of preservation or erasure introduced at the beginning of the present chapter. Not sufficient attention has been given to this aspect, which is responsible for the growing self-reference that characterizes contemporary muralism. The following paragraphs will offer a brief analysis of it and the related concepts of intertextuality and intersemiotic translation.

From intertextuality to curatorial processes: the growing complexity of muralism

The growing complexity of muralism over time is an aspect that had already been addressed by Bill Rolston (1991a) with reference to depictions realized when the conflict was still ongoing. Since the end of the 1980s at least, some murals began to make allusions to pop culture along with more traditional themes. In particular, pop music and album covers began to be perceived as a source of inspiration for the development of a new and more sophisticated iconography. This trend is nonetheless more visible in murals realized in more recent years, with Northern Ireland enjoying stability and peace that allowed for the exploration of a broader and definitely less sectarian imagery. As already remarked, tourism

played an important role in this respect, since it fostered a stronger interest in the murals from people coming from outside of the country (Crowley 2015a) who may have trouble in understanding their content and references; this is another aspect that has encouraged the recent developments of muralism towards its greater complexity and self-reference. This is certainly not always the case, and even if a progressive transition towards murals which are more elaborate in terms of style and composition is noticeable, more traditional depictions or rough graffiti are far from disappearing. Leaving apart the references to transnational events that have already been analyzed in the previous chapters, other aspects of such complexity of contemporary muralism should be searched in its intrinsic character and material transformations that are the expression of different and multiple dynamics.

The increasing self-reference of contemporary murals is mostly evident in their self-promotion: as previously mentioned, some of them, especially in the nationalist/republican areas, are painted with the specific purpose of advertising themselves. These representations both contain and refer to other, existing or pre-existing, murals, thus coalescing in one image the same practice of muralism per se and reinforcing its previous memory. This more explicit form of self-reference represents only one possible expression; others may emerge, for example, in those cases, illustrated at the opening of the chapter, in which murals are repainted or restored. The right of the depiction to exist is in these cases re-affirmed, and the same act of restoration takes on the meaning of a self-referential assertion, especially with respect to the highly dynamic nature of muralism, in which change is the norm[104]. But self-reference manifests itself more openly when a mural is relocated, i.e., according to Solleder (2016), when it is repainted elsewhere and not on the same spot. In this case, it re-affirms its material existence but from another place, establishing a reference to its previous version(s) when this latter does no longer exist. As a sort of trace, the relocated mural points to the pre-existing one, but breaking the conventional relationship between sign and space that is characteristic of the trace, since it does so from a different location.

More complex forms of self-reference emerge yet when pre-existing posters are subsequently turned into murals, some examples of which are reported by Crowley

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[104] An interesting case is reported by Crowley (2022) with regard to a Ballymurphy mural representing IRA volunteer Tommy 'Toddler' Tolan and his comrades eating and drinking in a house with two older women. The mural was modified eighteen months after its original creation in 2002, replacing the 'militarized version' of Tolan in the foreground with a civilian one; later, in 2014, the mural was repainted again, this time transforming it into a message of peace whose link with the original version was mainly ensured by the figure of Tolan preserved in the foreground. This example clearly shows how the reference of a mural to its former version(s) may vary over time, to the point of being, in some cases, barely recognizable.

(2015a)[105]. In these cases, self-reference is expressed in the form of *intertextuality*. Introduced in the field of literary studies (Kristeva 1969; Bernardelli 2000), the concept of intertextuality refers to the influence exerted by a text upon other cultural productions, or to the connections they establish in relation to it. With reference to Northern Irish muralism, this translates into the incorporation of former texts/artefacts into murals, with varying degrees of complexity as well as for different purposes. The examples of integration of pre-existing visual artefacts like posters mentioned by Crowley can be regarded as a form of intertextuality in which the reference to the artwork(s) is displayed in the mural: this can be seen in the mural portraying Irish volunteer and former Blanketman Kieran Nugent surrounded by a series of images of republican political prisoners made in the style of monochrome posters (Figure 4.1). This example of intertextuality is not only motivated by aesthetic reasons, since it is clearly evident the treatment of the images of posters as almost 'historical traces' of the events represented in the mural. The choice of the monochrome, compared to the bright colors of the portrait of Nugent, goes also in this direction.

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[105] There were also less frequent cases in which posters were based on pre-existing murals, whose lifetime tended to be very fragile during the conflict, since they became easily the target of the censorship policies exerted by the British troops in the province; the circulation of certain images previously reproduced on the walls was then much easier through posters, and their revival in murals eventually possible at a later stage.

Figure 4.1 Portrait of Kieran Nugent surrounded by posters from the H-Block and Armagh campaigns, 2008 (original version), Divis Street, International Wall, West Belfast; picture taken by the author in 2018

The use of the monochrome in murals that incorporate other media like photographs or still images from movies or documentaries is quite common. If its ideological use in relation to memory and history will be analyzed in the following chapter, it is yet important to remark here that photographs are frequently at the basis of murals in Northern Ireland, often triggering a broader circulation of certain images that eventually gain an iconic status. Photographic images may be directly reproduced in the mural or used as a reference model for it, usually with some 'adjustments' compared to the original picture, in order to conform it to the ideological message conveyed by the mural. To retrace the more or less explicit forms of intertextuality that characterize some murals can be often demanding: as underlined by Crowley (2015a, p. 63), this work of interpretation "entails a considerable range of reference across a number of different popular cultural media – film, television, photography, and street posters".

The growing complexity of muralism that intertextuality exemplifies, can also be understood as an expression of transmediality, or, in semiotic terms, of *intersemiotic translation*. This concept was introduced by the linguist Roman Jakobson and defined as "an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems" (Jakobson quoted in Dusi 2015, p. 182). In the case of Northern Irish muralism, it translates into the visual rendering of circulating narratives/memories, but above all into the incorporation and re-translation of other nonverbal cultural expressions (photographs, movies, paintings/posters, etc…) into a mural painting. This particular form of intertextuality triggered by the intersemiotic translation is expressed by Gérard Genette (in Dusi 2015) in his concept of *hypertextuality*, which highlights the 'derivation' of the final text from its chosen model(s). Again, processes of intersemiotic translation are not (only) motivated by aesthetic reasons; they may in fact trigger certain dynamics of memory trough the re-circulation of affective images that condense the meaning(s) of emblematic events, working as aide-mémoire able to arise bonds of solidarity within a community/nation. To re-translate certain images into different media means then not just to acknowledge their importance, but also to possibly accelerate the rhythm of their social circulation, often determining their permanence over time.

But processes of intersemiotic translation may also contribute to the transformation of memory: the image is not simply transposed from one medium to another, but in this same process it may be used for suggesting other keys to interpret the events represented. This second aspect is then strictly related to a third one, which can be summarized as the change of status of the image. Whereas for example a photograph or a poster may primarily convey information, their incorporation or translation into a mural alter the way the image is perceived, marking the transition from a predominantly informative source to an aesthetic product. An affective patina is thus added to the event represented, a patina that, while not necessarily absent from the 'original' image, was nonetheless secondary (at least in some cases). Such observations should be put into relation with the obvious consideration that the significance of any image (and its perception) changes over time, independently from its eventual re-translation in the present.

The mural appeared in Ardoyne, that juxtaposed the sectarian attacks that occurred in Belfast between 2001 and 2002 with the racist riots in Arkansas in 1957 (see chapter 2) exemplifies how the memory of these events could be perceived and understood differently through the interpolation of a historical photograph. The image, put into relation with sectarian struggles in Northern Ireland, acquires an unexpected signification that transcends

that of the events represented. But beyond the trivial technique of juxtaposing the images, it is the very translation of the photograph into the mural, in a space and time distant from the United States of the 1950s, that *re-founds* the image and makes of it a perennial sign standing for the injustice of racism. In addition, it should be noticed that subtler forms of intertextuality are at play in the mural, with its calculated use of red in an otherwise monochrome representation, a reference (maybe a little pathetic but still efficacious) to Spielberg's *Schindler's List*. And yet, in spite of the evidence of the increasing sophistication of muralism and its growing assimilation of pop culture (Rolston 1991a) that such examples reveal, these aspects still remain largely overlooked. Research on the change in style or on the cultural references contained in many murals, especially from a diachronic perspective, are practically absent, despite their significance for understanding the evolution of muralism over time.

In addition, the change in style and the different techniques used by muralists often reveal a lot about that politics of memory entailed by the decisions to preserve, erase or repaint a mural with which this chapter opened. With regard to the creation and renovation of more recent murals in Northern Ireland, Kappler and McKane (2019) talk about an actual *curatorial process* that underlies them, not dissimilar to that put in place in museums or heritage sites. In this regard, it can be seen as particularly relevant the recent emergence of murals that, instead of being painted directly on the wall, are "digitally-designed and printed on laminated hoarding panels fixed securely to the wall" (Ivi., p. 7). In contrast to traditional murals, these laminated panels are generally more resistant to time and weather, as well as being anti-graffiti, thus opposing the temporary and fragile nature of the painted-on-the-wall murals[106]. While emulating the way artefacts are exposed and protected in institutional sites like museums, the panels alter the rhythm of renovation/preservation of the murals as well as their process of decay, as a consequence of the different curatorial choices that are at the basis of the distinct material employed. Moreover, this peculiar type of murals tries to impose an alternative way of looking at them. Rich in historical sources integrated into the panels, in the form of photographs and detailed descriptions of the events represented, laminated murals require in fact a different fruition. The observer needs to come closer to the depiction in order to read the historical explanation to the image(s), in a way that

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[106] The different choice of material for the realization of these murals did not prevent however acts of vandalism against them. One of the works analyzed by Kappler and McKane (2019), the mural dedicated to the memory of Lt. Col. John Henry Patterson and his Jewish Legion in WWI (Northumberland Street, Belfast, 2015), mentioned in the previous chapter, was put on fire and partially damaged in 2016. The act was attributed to Irish Republicans motivated by antisemitism, as a printed sign added to the mural after the attack declared.

resembles how artworks and objects exposed in a museum are looked at. The more distanced and usually 'distracted' vision implied by traditional murals is consequently negated in favor of a more receptive observer wishing to learn something from the text/images displayed, i.e., seeking for an informative experience.

The example offered by the recently introduced images printed on laminated panels is interesting also because it proves how the innovation in the style/technique adopted by muralism may have direct implications on the materiality of the artefacts. The politics of memory in which these latter are involved are therefore strictly dependent on the interconnection between the 'management' of the lifespan of the murals, the evolution of the styles/techniques at the base of their creation and the social consequences that such material transformations entail. Instead of looking exclusively at the change in the themes portrayed in the murals, as it is usually done, the different dynamics involved in the materiality of the artefacts, and how they are affecting/transforming their lifespan, should finally receive more attention. The politics of image which is central in Northern Ireland, both during and after the conflict, is revealed then *also* by the material transformations of muralism, which may be regarded as another form of what Latour (2009) defines as *Iconoclash*. Contrary to acts of vandalism that target images, and fall within the traditional category of iconoclasm, iconoclash is more ambiguous, leaving open the question of the desire and motivations that drive the iconoclast.

In a complex and subtler way, to leave a mural decay or to replace it with a different image can disclose either indifference or apprehension toward it, revealing yet always the (often suppressed, unconscious or simply unintentional) desires that lie behind the act of neglecting or changing an image. As Latour (pp. 308-309) underlines, iconoclash is also when the image is erased for making space to another one, so that the iconoclastic gesture does not aim at suppressing the picture, but, on the contrary, it opens up to what the author calls a *cascade of images*, that reveals once again our attachment to them and their ultimate unavoidability. Northern Ireland, with its long-standing conflictual relationship with images, often censored, erased from the walls or replaced by more 'appropriate' ones, seems to represent the perfect example of a place where iconoclash is a daily reality, and where images are obsessively claimed. Besides, the interventions from the state aimed at re-imagining local depictions are driven by a 'radicalism' which is not inferior to that motivating the gestures of vandalism against a mural belonging to another community or against images which are rejected.

In any case, the 'truthfulness' of muralism cannot but be sought in the ultimate infiniteness (Solleder 2016) that lies in its materiality, which significantly modulates its imagery in relation to a changing environment and to social transformation. Recent innovations exemplified by the growing presence of laminated panels instead of traditional murals are then not only altering the rhythm of change of these material artefacts, but, more importantly, represent an attempt to *preserve* them for a longer time. In short, such innovations try exactly to contrast the infiniteness of muralism, i.e., its most intimate truth. There is moreover a substantial difference between the forms of iconoclash deriving from vandalism, decay or replacement (all dependent on social dynamics) and those imposed by extrinsic factors (funded schemes, commodification/heritagization, etc…). While both affecting the lifespan of a mural, these distinct forms of iconoclash imply different politics of the image/memory, but also a different awareness of the relevance of muralism in Northern Ireland. These aspects become central when dealing with murals as images more than artefacts, i.e., when reflecting on their *afterlife*, being it as photographic pictures or in an archive. In the end, may it not be that the archival image is just another form of iconoclash that replaces the living image (or, in this case, the living artefact) with its specter, its remnant?

Conclusions. The necessity to preserve memory: muralism and the archive

A leitmotif that emerged in the previous chapters, and which constitutes an indispensable key for understanding contemporary muralism in Northern Ireland, is its repeatedly emphasized dynamic nature. More specifically, the various cases illustrated have revealed a specific manifestation of such dynamism, i.e., the growing transnational dimension that characterizes many representations and their present-day consumption within the tourist industry. From artefacts placed within the socio-political landscape of Northern Ireland, passing through their commodification/heritagization to their mobilization in relation to multiple dynamics of memory, murals prove to be closely linked to social change, evolving in dependence on it, but also partly determining it. And yet, the transnational dimension of an increasing number of murals, as one of the consequences of the dynamic character of muralism, already entails an early form of detachment of the image from its support, which, so far, has been however examined from a material perspective that this chapter has fully highlighted.

If to emphasize the transnational dynamics internal and external to the murals leads in the end to their inevitable reduction to images (photographic, digital and finally archival), the question arises whether images alone are able to restore the complexity of the multiple processes and changes that are the basis of muralism as a material practice. Images *of* murals are after all only their traces, and very often the only traces that remain and testify of their existence. And it is here that documenting murals becomes necessary and, simultaneously, *fails*. Solleder (2016) reflects on how the practice of archiving murals attests of their creation, their coming into existence in time and space, but almost never of their fate. The practice of archiving is ultimately unable to restore the meaning(s) of a death of a mural (McCormick and Jarman 2005), with the result that the social tensions that often determine its fate are lost. In short, it is precisely the dynamics that affect the life(span) of a mural that are missed. Despite having been collecting pictures of murals for more than forty years, Tony Crowley (2022) is very aware of these issues. The meaning(s) conveyed by the image of a mural can be more or less grasped in its content, but, according to the author, in order to make sense of the artefact per se, other traditional skills are required, that ultimately defy the archive. One can add to these observations that the archive can only retain the (visual) remnants of the socio-political processes from which murals originate and acquire their sense. But what about their uses, and the practices in which they are involved, as suggested in this chapter?

The material life(span) of murals appears ultimately *anarchival*, but, above all, it may tell us something about another desire of preservation which is yet different from that animating the archive. The other side of the dynamic nature of muralism is in fact the drive to commemorate or remember, especially after the end of the conflict, when the use of murals as memorials or for historical representations has intensified[107]. A landscape marked by death and violence that could not be perceived as before was invested by the need to remember, that contributed to a further development of muralism in relation to memory. The paradox in which, in a certain sense, murals find themselves, is that of 'asserting' their own 'authenticity' through their temporary nature (and the finiteness that derives from it) while at the same time aspiring to record and preserve the past. Before becoming archival images,

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[107] As already seen, these different uses or functions of muralism do not follow each other, but largely coexist in time; from the beginning, murals in Northern Ireland were also painted for commemorating events of the past that were central to the unionist/loyalist identity, and also later, when murals began to be used in the political struggle by nationalists/republicans, their commemorative/memorial function did not disappear, as the depictions dedicated to dead comrades or victims show (but consider also the example of the memory of the Blanketmen analyzed in the second chapter).

then, murals themselves are already an impossible archive in their own material existence. The following chapter goes precisely in this direction, introducing the idea of muralism as a form of paradoxical archive whose reliability lies on the (always problematic) power of images to witness history.

Chapter 5. Muralism, history and testimony: towards a living archive?

The second chapter has highlighted the importance for the nationalist/republican communities of Northern Ireland to gain international visibility at a crucial time of social and political struggle. That visibility represented a temporary and ephemeral achievement whose wider significance should be understood in relation to a history of censorship exercised by British authorities on the province since its foundation in 1921 (Moloney 1991), as a result of the partition of Ireland. The control exerted by British media intensified with the outbreak of the Troubles, when several programs in the province were banned or closed in order to repress the flow of news and their circulation. The climax was probably reached when the so-called *Broadcasting ban* came into force in 1988 (on October 19), marking a further turning point in a long history of repression[108]. In a very general way, resolutions like the Broadcasting ban or the more trivial gestures of erasing republican murals from the walls can be reframed within a single line of interpretation that emphasizes the relationship between conflict, visibility and media coverage (Grandi and Demaria 2008). Such relationship was grasped and exploited to their advantage especially by nationalists/republicans, contributing to the transformation of the conflict and, through it, of muralism.

Within this context, murals and graffiti acquired a strategic and political dimension not very different from that of traditional media, to the point that it becomes possible to wonder if and to what extent their representations can actually claim to witness history in its making. If the control of media and images, particularly in the context of conflicts, has been mostly analyzed from the perspective of the elites in power (and especially the state), the strategic use of muralism by nationalists/republicans represents on the contrary an interesting case of how images can be equally mobilized in support of communities claiming to be in a marginal position[109]. There is then another level of significance through which murals can be interpreted starting from their use(s) in the 1980s, a level in which the two aspects of violence

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[108] The Broadcasting ban was intended to forbid any interviews and dissemination of statements (on TV and radio) released by paramilitaries or whoever supported (openly or not) their actions. The ban, however, ended up targeting especially nationalist/republican voices, including the main political party Sinn Féin and its representatives. Withdrawn in 1994, the ban worsened an already compromised freedom of speech that jeopardized the lives of many journalists (see also Rolston 1991b).

[109] Apart from murals, other media, especially videos, were employed in order to produce independent representations of the communities and life in Northern Ireland. Among the various community-based or non-profit projects that arose, one can mention *Northern Visions* (1986) in Belfast [which later became *Northern Visions Television* (*NVTV*)] and the *Derry Film and Video Workshop* (*DFVW*) in Derry, which lasted from 1983 to 1990; see also McIlroy (1998) on the representation of the Troubles in the media.

and vision grasped by Allen Feldman (1997) converge in an emblematic way. Producing images can be an extremely sensitive matter in Norther Ireland, and this was true well before the creation of undesired murals opposing the presence of British troops; violence was in fact already implicit in the gesture of taking photographs, or possessing potentially compromising pictures. In order to understand the 'danger' of images within a context of (post)conflict and their relation to history and testimony (a real *politics of visuality*), the following paragraphs will start with some reflections on photography, before exploring the ambiguous relations and parallelisms that muralism establishes with it and its archival impulse.

The testimonial value of photography

The trivial gesture of taking a photograph in present-day Northern Ireland (think about the large number of tourists photographing murals during their tours) has not always been so obvious. Crowley (2015b) remembers the difficulty and danger in photographing graffiti and murals when he started this practice in 1979, with the conflict already at an advanced stage. Paramilitaries were very suspicious of the interest shown by Crowley in these neglected images located in working-class areas, even if (generally) the difference in attitude between nationalists/republicans and unionists/loyalists towards his activity was significant. As highlighted by the scholar, unionists/loyalists tended to be more aggressive towards anyone entering their areas, especially if with the 'excuse' of capturing images of murals, which seemed to them odd. On the contrary, nationalists/republicans were generally more sympathetic towards Crowley's interest in their depictions, an aspect that is (also) revealing of their different understanding of muralism in terms of a strategic (and political) weapon. But equally unpleasant could also be the reactions of some locals, who were sensitive to the act of taking pictures, which they tended to associate to violence and military control of their space.

Nevertheless, the eventual removal or destruction of the photographic film was more frequent when Crowley was stopped and searched by British soldiers or the Royal Ulster Constabulary, the police force of Northern Ireland until 2001. Moreover, if the simple act of photographing was regarded as suspicious per se, to take or be in possession of pictures of nationalist/republican murals was far more ostracized by the security forces. Their spread and circulation was primarily prevented through the direct erasure of graffiti and murals from the walls and, secondly, through the hostility and eventual prohibition to preserve

images of them, for fear of their possible political influence. The experience of Tony Crowley as an amateur photographer of murals and the different reactions to his activity reveal that images do matter, especially when they turn into an instrument of *counter-narrative* against the dominant power. The danger of taking photographs in working-class neighborhoods during the conflict has been acknowledged also by Allen Feldman (1997, p. 26):

> The photo lens of the aimed camera is considered equivalent to both the gun sight and the pointed rifle. The British Army, the Royal Ulster Constabulary, even the Belfast fire department react angrily and precipitously if they find a camera pointed at their bodies and activities. The police and army have been known to rip film out of cameras and arrest foreign photojournalists. […] Visual depiction is feared to the extent that it interdicts role distancing, collapses the space between public and private lives, and spreads terror and violence into the everyday recesses of government functionaries.

The use of images for recording conflict-related activities was thus feared primarily by the Army personnel and police force, but security reasons are only part of the truth. The connection established by Feldman between image and death, already explored by authors like Barthes (1980) with regard to photography, may in fact take on a literal sense, since very often to be seen (i.e., to have one's own identity revealed) meant to be close to death. The regimes of (military) visibility imposed on the population through visual surveillance and covert photography reveal the centrality of images in the context of war/conflict, what Feldman defines as *scopic regime*, adopted in turn by the paramilitaries. However, this did not preclude the emergence of an alternative, as well as unexpected, visuality (Hanna 2020), through which photography discloses another (and potentially subversive) gaze on reality. It is a space where photography inaugurates a *counter-visibility* whose effects manifest themselves in a time to come, when the deadly threat of its eye is turned into a statement from the past. During the Troubles, photo albums were frequently kept hidden under the pillow of the sofa or armchair (Ziff 1991) for fear of them being confiscated by the British Army. Their testimonial value was already understood, since they could reveal paramilitary affiliations or republican sympathies, as well as be used as judicial evidence. More importantly –yet- photographs could witness, intentionally or not, their time, making the personal/family memories conveyed by them a more controversial repository for a collective memory of the Troubles. In the future, a photograph reveals itself as a trace in the

'archaeological' sense (more than in the investigative one it subsumes in the present), with all the interpretative uncertainties arising therefrom.

As Trisha Ziff highlights, the testimonial value of photography is also disclosed by the absences in a family album, where the non-presence of a member may signify his/her death or imprisonment, consequently 'erasing' his/her figure from it. These silent and yet visible absences tell also of the historical moment and circumstances that caused them, in a sort of testimony *in negative* that unveils an entire social structure in which ceasing to exist as an image often had political implications. Along with the void left by the absent photographs of family members in private albums, another form of meaningful emptiness is given by what Ziff defines as *structured absences*, i.e., those un-visible events that the camera fails to capture, despite (or often exactly because of) their significance. The more 'ordinary' violence suffered daily, especially by women and children during the Troubles, largely escaped the camera's eye; but it was above all those 'extra-ordinary' episodes like the Blanketmen protest to be structurally absent from public visibility, since images of the protestors remained inaccessible to people for a long time. As already seen, the struggle for regaining the political status was also, if not mainly, a struggle for visibility, and it was the impossibility for photography to record the Blanketmen protest that actually prompted the circulation of images in the forms of posters and murals produced on a community-based level.

In the same act of making visible the inaccessible event, it is clear the desire to allow the communities to witnesses it, reversing to their advantage that politics of hypervisibility they were subject to. Images such as those produced by surveillance cameras and military photographs were tackled with the implementation of a similar politics of visuality that found expression in an unexpected use of muralism that irritated the British Army. The large production and circulation of images of the Blanketmen certainly proved fundamental for establishing a future memory of the prisoners, not only because to their otherwise unfamiliar names were attributed faces (especially in the case of the dead hunger strikers), but above all because of the ability of images per se to convey memory. Something similar can be seen in the role played by the photographs of the Easter Rising martyrs after their failed rebellion in 1916 (Baylis 2017). The episode, a total failure from a military standpoint which received little sympathy from many Irish nationalists (McGarry 2010), was only later recognized by them as a founding event (Higgins 2016), thanks also to the emotional response that the death sentence of the rebels triggered in the public. In this context, the photographic portraits of the insurgents acquired a special value for the Irish (nationalist) community, which

attached a quasi-religious meaning to the images. Through the manipulation of the original photographs, these portraits highlighted the faces of the rebels and the meaning of their martyrdom; as remarked by Baylis (2017), while the portraits per se were not political, their possession, use or circulation charged these images with specific meanings, particularly in relation to a certain social environment. To sum up, the photographs proved to have a (dynamic) life of their own, while their perception over time was subject to certain social and material uses/readings of them.

Photography did not only testify of the existence of the rebels and their faces, but contributed to the actual forging of the memory of Easter Rising as a central event in the history of Irish nationalism. Images are directly involved in the process of remembering, since they bear trace of the events recorded in the form of materialized snapshots, but they are equally dependent on the interests and cultural attitudes that guide the gaze of the observer/community interpreting the image (Goodwin 2003), ultimately making its reading an ambiguous act. This aspect was particularly evident when photographs were used as evidence during the re-opening of the judicial process (the Saville Inquiry) investigating the deaths of the fourteen civilians killed on Bloody Sunday. In contrast to the Widgery Process, the Saville Inquiry recognized the testimonial value of photography, and relied on images along with oral evidence for reconstructing events that had taken place more than 25 years before (Barcat 2014). The interpretation of photographs, however, proved to be more complex than expected, since the identification of people/objects in the picture was not always possible or clear. For example, the gunman saw by Daly, the Catholic priest, was identified in a man recorded in a photograph, but this conclusion raised much controversy, and the probable author of the picture, Fulvio Grimaldi, was ultimately unable to confirm the interpretation given by the Inquiry.

Grimaldi, who at the time of Bloody Sunday was a freelance photographer, was among the many journalists and reporters present that day in Derry/Londonderry. He and Gilles Peress gave oral evidence during the first judicial process, despite their testimony was given little attention, when not sharply rejected as in the case of Grimaldi, who accused the British Army of having repeatedly fired at him. Once again the connection between photography (or more generally images) and death re-emerged, even if the regime of visibility imposed on Northern Irish population risked to be reversed, frightening the British government and its version of events to be discredited. It was however necessary to wait for almost 30 years before photographs taken on Bloody Sunday and the oral evidence given by photographers were really taken seriously. In the meantime, the investigative quality of these images had

begun to overlap with their 'archaeological' one, since, as noted by Barcat, some photographs were used for reconstructing the places of the events, which had changed over the years. This interpretation of photographs as traces in relation to space and memory is part of an archaeology of the landscape that reveals its transformation over time, as well as the demilitarization that followed the end of the conflict[110]:

> Saville and his team examined hundreds of photographs and maps, considering them alongside thousands of witness statements in an attempt to recreate that particular geography. Such has been the extent of change in the Bogside that virtual reality software was specially designed for the Inquiry. Senior developer for the Northern Ireland Council for Curriculum, Examinations, and Assessment, Malachy McDaid, stated, "Our brief was to rebuild the city as it was . . . and create a memory jogger" (McDowell and Switzer 2011, p. 89).

Photographs are involved in the process aimed at 'unearthing' a memory of the landscape, entering into an urban archive made of different texts that bear witness of its previous appearances. This archival function of photography in the restoration of lost spaces represents a contemporary trend in Northern Ireland (Graham 2005). The way in which the conflict has affected the territory or, on the contrary, it has been erased from the landscape prompted interest in its 'excavation' through the lens of photography, in an attempt to document an already disappearing space[111]. Trying to resist the inexorable process of change any place is subject to, the photographs of John Duncan analyzed by Graham insist on disclosing fading traces of the past, transforming photography itself into nothing more than an ephemeral trace to be grasped by an imminent archival gaze. Referring to the observations made by Emmanuel Levinas on the concept of trace, Graham identifies in the unintentionality of the latter its real nature, since it is in the gesture of wiping out the traces that other accidental traces are left, thus revealing the full significance of evidence. The spectrality of both the trace/past and photography is then realized, or paradoxically made

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[110] Demilitarization implies very often a simultaneous decrease of visibility (from the state), as evidenced by the removal in 2005 of an army watchtower used during the conflict for monitoring the Catholic community of the Bogside.

[111] Among the many examples, the photographic record of the HM Prison Maze (County Down, Northern Ireland) made by the Northern Irish artist Donovan Wylie between 2002 and 2003 stands as a particularly remarkable case. The photographer was granted permission to enter and document the abandoned buildings, which played a pivotal (and symbolic) role during the conflict. The archival function of Wylie's work was fully revealed some years later, when in 2007 the prison was in large part demolished and the photographer obtained again the permission to record it (in pictures and video). For a short introduction to Wylie's documentary work, see the link https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/727610 and Rava (2021) on the connection between architecture (and its traces) and memory.

visible: the specter of the conflict returns in the form of unintentional traces that persist within the processes of urban regeneration and their political attempt of denial.

This use of photography, so emblematic in the years following the 1998 Belfast Agreement, echoes the material ephemerality of murals seen in the previous chapter. The connection between death, trace and temporality that post-conflict photography in Northern Ireland brings out, reiterates the vain attempt to convert the landscape into a memorial to the past, by stopping the transformation dictated by economic interests and social and demographic change. The archival gaze that drives the photographic recording of a vanishing Northern Ireland on one side, and the commemorative murals fading on the walls before their ultimate disappearance on the other, testify to another face of memory, that of what is rejected, abandoned and ultimately forgotten. The *Archive_Belfast* Project launched in 2004 by the German photographer Claudio Hils followed a similar logic, collecting images of the rejected or from what Graham (2005, p. 578) calls "marginal" archives, like minor organizations/museums in Northern Ireland. The essence of the project is well described by Graham (Ibid.):

> Hils has carefully researched and constructed a semi-underground material existence for the leftovers of the Troubles, places where the cultural artefacts of the conflict are squirreled away out of sight of the new Northern Ireland that is emerging out of the 1990s and first years of the twenty-first century. These are museums or rooms that are, as the photographs make obvious, either rarely visited or falling into disuse. Yet the fact of their continued existence (and their new status as photographs) means that their significance is not entirely washed away. *Archive_Belfast* asks whether Belfast can be archived, whether its multitudinousness and the depth of its 'troubles' can be classified and contained.

Existing against as well as along institutional archives, these neglected places rehabilitate their material presence in the form of historical traces, while to photograph them establishes in turn another archive, an archive of archive(s) revealing the partiality of any repository and its dependence on time[112]. It appears then curious that photography and muralism have rarely met, and that murals have remained for a long time a marginal phenomenon in and outside of Northern Ireland. Apart from the interest shown by isolated individuals like Tony Crowley, Bill Rolston, Neil Jarman and Jonathan McCormick, artists and photographers did

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[112] The website of the artist Claudio Hils presents the project as a form of recontextualization and transformation of objects into historical artefacts (as a process of history-making). See the link https://www.claudio-hils.com/en/photography/documentary-photography/archive-belfast/.

not generally pay great attention to the production of murals, which were refused the recognition of works of art (Rolston 2012). And yet, murals could constitute for photographers a more than relevant evidence, marginal in the eyes of the state, of the way in which communities organize their own spaces and memories of the conflict. The excessively ideological connotation of muralism, and the consequent lack of that 'ambivalence' of the trace photographers look for, are certainly one of the causes of the little interest in these images that until recently has prevailed in Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, as already seen above, murals do change over time, as they bear the signs of aging or survive for some time as fading traces of a disappearing imagery, thus revealing much more than their (original) ideological meaning.

Even before turning into remnants with the passing of time, murals are, along with monuments and memorials, already traces in the landscape (McDowell and Switzer 2011). The need to visualize the events commemorated in connection to space underlies many of the murals painted after the end of the conflict; the almost testimonial value of these images is acknowledged by the two authors, who stress the implication in terms of resistance to urban change that murals try to (temporary) impose on the landscape. If then the photographic gaze investigates the city in search of unintentional or marginal traces, murals 'create' premeditated ones, providing in their own way testimony to past events and deaths occurred on the spot where they stand or nearby. The link with space is pivotal to the construction of 'authenticity' murals attempt to convey, since, in the absence of other material traces, they represent the only visible evidence that recovers the past, even if from a partial perspective[113].

This example of spatial memory (Abdelmonem and Selim 2019), so central to post-conflict Northern Ireland, falls once again into a politics of visibility through which the communities try to get out of the sense of alienation towards the processes of normalization that followed the signing of the Belfast Agreement. By reclaiming a certain space and the memories inscribed in it, commemorative murals represent a desperate attempt to preserve a vanishing landscape, by superimposing a haunting past onto daily life. In this sense, they may reveal an *archival impulse* (Foster 2004) that, so far, has not been investigated. Nevertheless, whereas associating photography to the notions of trace, authenticity and testimony appears as a legitimate act, in spite of all the ambiguities it raises, to question the

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[113] For a brief introduction to the concepts of trace, authenticity and archive in relation to Northern Irish muralism see also Rava (2022).

ability of other types of images to witness reality may appear much more problematic. To what extent are murals, and images in general, able to testify?

The archival impulse of muralism, or how images bear witness to the past

The role played by photographs as evidence of violence and injustice in judicial processes has been briefly addressed in the previous paragraphs, specifically in relation to Bloody Sunday and the two inquiries that followed the event. The difficulty in interpreting what these images showed was, more often than not, the norm, and yet they represented an opportunity for the disempowered communities to provide another perspective on the conflict. Far from offering a definite clarification of the events under scrutiny, photographs depend on the viewpoint from which they are taken, as well as on their adherence to the memory of the witness (Hanna 2015). While problematizing the use of photographs as sources, Hanna also underlines how the Widgery inquiry interpreted them according to deeply rooted stereotypes about Irish people, as well as conventions in the media representation of war. This was also the case with the pictures taken by photographers who sympathized with the protestors, and who focused more on individual victims than the crowd, a choice that, according to Hanna, influenced the investigative procedures. What the scholar seems to suggest, is that the ambiguity of the image was not fully exploited, thus limiting a wider interpretative process around the events, at least on an institutional level and until the opening of the Saville Inquiry.

Hanna's reflections on the use of photography in the first judicial processes on Troubles-related 'incidents' tell also that images depend on the narrations/discourses that accompany them. Images alone appear too ambivalent to witness reality, and despite the always questionable nature of verbal accounts given by witnesses, these latter are generally considered more reliable than images in this regard. Both judicial processes and truth commissions rely primarily on oral testimonies, even if images as evidence are used, whenever possible. The privilege of the word over other forms of witness appears as a legacy of the Western tradition, which tended to associate it to the Truth; despite the importance that material culture has acquired in recent decades, so, oral evidence and its video recording still are at the heart of the language of testimony, as is evident in the case of Holocaust survivors or in that of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Nevertheless, there is always something that the oral summary per se is not able to convey, or, more precisely, there is always something beyond it.

Acknowledging the ultimate ambiguity or unreliability of any witness, testimony has been increasingly regarded for its value in terms of trace of the events it reveals and that is called to preserve for future generations (Hirsch and Spitzer 2010). This means that the importance of testimony for reconstructing the dynamics of events historians search for, represents only part of the relevance of the oral evidence given by the witness; all that exceeds, is what can be called the *ontological* status of testimony, in the sense of a permanence of the event through remembrance. Hirsch and Spitzer talk about the return of memory through the figure of the witness alongside the historical reconstruction of the past. More specifically, this means to recognize the testimonial value revealed by those emotional and psychological aspects of memory that are unnecessary in order to prove the truth, but which nevertheless disclose the unspeakability of the event. Referring to the concept of *homme-mémoire* prosed by Annette Wieviorka (1998), Hirsch and Spitzer reintroduce the dimension of the body in relation to memory (the embodiment of memory) and its power to witness beyond the bare oral summary.

The reintroduction of the body in testimony opens up to a more radical ambiguity that erodes the 'rationality' traditionally attributed to the word. Witnesses can resist and eventually reframe the conventions set up by institutional apparatuses, as well as refusing the exclusive role of victim that is often imposed on them. The act of witnessing is always charged with political implications that makes it anything but transparent, as highlighted by Allen Feldman (2004, p. 178) with regard to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission:

> The production and reception of the witness discourse were not monolithically determined by official commission protocols, or by psychologized theories of trauma expression, but were frequently mediated by in-place Africanized institutions—particularly church rituals of witnessing, pre-Christian beliefs concerning the ancestral status of the dead, even of dead children, as well as various political ideologies. The witnesses were not deculturalized, depoliticized, and medicalized victims of violence.

What Feldman suggests, is that many of the witnesses were well aware of their political role at the trial, and that they were 'inheriting' what the scholar calls a *political memory* rooted within their communities. These feelings were shared by the relatives of the victims who, after a long campaign, achieved the reopening of the investigation on Bloody Sunday in 1998. But the political significance of witnessing in post-conflict Northern Ireland goes well beyond the need to reconstruct traumatic events or restore justice. It also involves the

dimension of memory, or more specifically of the future remembrance of the Troubles; witnessing and bearing memory largely overlap, especially since no truth and reconciliation commission was set up at the end of the conflict in Northern Ireland, and a public memory of the Troubles proved impossible to be established. Within this context, the space for testifying the collective trauma of almost 30 years of violence has been practically appropriated by the communities, even if on an unequal basis, since the narrative of events is still ideologically dominated by certain groups over others.

Favoring the process of political reconstruction of the province and the principle of parity of esteem (Graham and Nash 2006), the Good Friday Agreement disregarded in the early years after its implementation the development of a shared political memory of the Troubles. Only in 2014 the Stormont House Agreement set out the terms for the creation of a *Commission of Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition*, as well as for the establishment of a *Historical Investigations Unit* and an *Oral History Archive* (Coulter et al. 2021)[114]. While trying to solve issues related to identity and culture, the Agreement undertook to address the past and its controversy, investigating unsolved cases and, with the project of an Oral History Archive, collecting people's experiences of the conflict. This interest in the collective trauma left by the Troubles and its testimony by local population represents an attempt to reassess its legacy within the institutional framework, a promise that still remains largely unfulfilled. What it tells, however, is that witnessing is anchored in verbal expression (and its video recording), to which is attributed the mark of authenticity, while other forms of witnessing through images, like muralism, are dismissed. Moreover, the project of an oral history archive follows the trend of many other similar programs in which testimonies are gathered and handled at institutional level, as in the case of the already mentioned truth commissions or state archives (Hamber and Kelly 2016).

Following the suggestions made by Schwartz and Cook (2002) on the relationship between archives and power, Hamber and Kelly reflect on the ambivalence of any archive, always capable of turning into a *site of resistance* depending on its future uses[115]. As seen with the photographic collections of rejected or forgotten archives realized by Claudio Hils,

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[114] The Stormont House Agreement was finalized on December 23, 2014 with the aim of finding a common settlement to the many issues which remained unresolved within the terms of the Good Friday Agreement. These included the legacy of the Troubles and, more in general, the recognition of the collective experience of the conflict and its future preservation.

[115] One of the best examples of the critical use of the images or materials offered by archives is their re-editing in filmmaking, as done by Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi, who use archival images for denouncing the atrocity of war and colonialism (see Acquarelli 2021 for an analysis of these archive films). The original image and its significance is completely reversed through the process of re-editing and its reception in the present, showing how the archive can become a repository of potentially infinite manipulations and resemantizations.

these latter may reveal over time an unexpected ambivalence, or carry the memory of a past that was not necessarily intended to be preserved (or worthy to). This unintentional form of witnessing disclosed by some archives and solicited by a different gaze cast upon them is one possible way of rejecting 'official' narratives of the past. Another possible direction is that of gathering testimonies at a local level, promoting marginalized narrations/perspectives on the past, and thus creating micro-archives that coexist with institutional ones. Post-conflict Northern Ireland has experienced several local projects aimed at collecting and preserving people's memories of the Troubles (Hamber and Kelly 2016), mostly in the form of audio-visual recordings, often uploaded on websites created for making these micro-archives publicly available.

The importance that these initiatives have for Northern Irish people reveals the centrality of witnessing in the establishment of both individual and collective memories. Apart from their involvement in the processes of restorative justice that often follow the end of conflicts or in the reconstruction of past events, witnesses become then key figures also in the management of memory. Whereas then the relation between photography, archive and memory has been widely acknowledged, it is not surprising that the projects described by Hamber and Kelly privilege the verbal expression; the testimonial value of images remains largely unexplored both at the institutional and local level. In spite of the long tradition of muralism in the working-class neighborhoods of Belfast, murals have not been directly involved in the creation of (micro)archives or in the testimony of the Troubles. On the other hand, the systematic way with which the first nationalist/republican murals and graffiti were wiped out by the British Army is indicative of their perception as traces that inscribed in the landscape the reality of the conflict; this latter was ultimately visualized in the form of unstable images or slogans whose disturbance went well beyond their political content.

Nevertheless, the testimonial value of murals fully emerged only after the end of the conflict, with the growing need to remember who died, the injustices suffered and the events that have marked the life of the communities. In their own way, murals started to bear witness to the Troubles, the long conflict that was slowly turning into a historical event. However, where the oral testimony relies upon the promise that the witness *was really there*[116], images obey to a more nuanced ontological truth, even if they can claim some documentary status even when they are created posthumously (i.e., when they do not bear witness to the

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[116] This amounts to a double statement: not only is the event witnessed asserted in its truth (the *ça-a-été* upon which the ontological status of photography relies, according to Barthes (1980), but also the simultaneous act of seeing through which the testimony is 'ensured' is affirmed.

'original' event). Obviously, things are usually more complex, and also oral testimonies can be re-inscribed within fictional or semi-fictional frames without abandoning their claim to truthfulness. This is the case with documentary theater (Pine 2020), where true testimonies are often staged by professional actors instead of the victims, or where a real setting (like the city of Dublin and its alleys) becomes the stage for fictional representations which are however based on reality[117]. In all these cases, the oral testimony is still perceived as 'authentic' in its own way, despite the occasional replacement of the victim by an actor or the combination between reality and fiction.

Coming back to the testimonial value of images and their relation to memory, Andreas Huyssen (2009) supports the importance of creating (new) images of the past in order to remember it and fight oblivion. This commitment becomes crucial when no (or very little) photographic/video recordings of the events exist. Among the examples of such *missing archives*, there is the case of post-dictatorship Argentina, considering the very little 'traces' left by the military regime and the public use of photographs made by the relatives of the victims to supply that void (as seen in the previous chapter). Huyssen is well aware of the privilege that has been traditionally granted to the verbal expression over the image[118]; nevertheless, he recognizes in the media and visual production of testimonial memory its very essence, that mark of dynamism that causes what he calls a *palimpsest of memories and representations*. According to Huyssen, such dynamism of the testimony over time has something to do with the repetition compulsion which, for the scholar, underpins both the trauma reenactment and the cultural industry. Traumatic memories are then grounded on the return of the image, both mental and external, a fact that makes problematic to exclude the visual realm in connection to testimony.

The proper ability of images to witness is explored in a work by Peter Burke (2001) that investigates the ambiguous role played by images as historical evidence. Analyzing different kinds of pictures, from paintings and photographs to cinematic images, Burke reflects on their usefulness in historiography, considering their marginal position compared to oral and written sources. The scholar believes that images should be taken more seriously, since they can reveal information that written sources do not mention, especially with regard to social aspects. Treating images as historical evidence brings about issues not dissimilar to those

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[117] Moreover, Emilie Pine regards both the performers and audience as witnesses to the events put on stage, 'equating' the experience of the victims and perpetrators who bear testimony to the events to the viewer who listen to their stories.

[118] This privilege is directly linked by Huyssen to the old conception that wants history and language as arts/techniques of time, while memory and images would be instead arts/techniques of space.

raised by other sources, like the rhetorical aspects or the stylistic conventions that undermine the 'authenticity' of what is recorded. If most images, especially paintings made on commission, then cannot be taken as reliable sources for a better knowledge of historical events, they can yet bear testimony to the conventions of a certain era, as well as of the ideologies underpinning them. Moreover, the ambiguity of images leaves open their ultimate interpretation, since, according to the way they are looked at, they can disclose a more critical, or eventually satirical, gaze on reality.

The observations made by Burke with regard to the ideological nature of images are particularly relevant for understanding Northern Irish murals in relation to their environment, not because of the banal consideration that they are ideological representations, but because this remark addresses the issues of authenticity and witnessing from a different perspective. It would be too easy to dismiss murals' representations as simply false or fictional, and this for a series of reasons. Against the alternative of reading images as a direct reflection of society or, on the contrary, a sign system closed in on itself, Burke proposes a third way that puts the image within the socio-cultural context in which it was produced and originally received, along with the context in which it is received *at present*. Murals have not always had the same significance for the communities, especially when one considers their close relation to political events. This means that their eventual testimonial value depends only partially on what they represent. The Christian and Christological iconography characterizing the depiction of the Blanketmen since the onset of their prison protest was clearly read by the nationalist/republican communities as a rhetorical convention. However, it did not undermine a certain truth of the image, which bore testimony to the real sufferance the prisoners were enduring while on the dirty protest. The power to witness to the contemporary events that those murals had, is however lost now, even if new representations of the Blanketmen are still driven by the desire to remember the protest and the Hunger Strikers who died as a consequence of it. It follows that images are perceived differently over time, and that their testimonial value changes according to it.

Despite refusing what Burke defines as an "eyewitness style" in favor of a narrative one, many of the Blanketmen murals tried to offer some images of a historical event that, in its making, was almost completely *un-visible*. It was not uncommon in the past that painters were required to give a representation of contemporary or recent events, anticipating de facto the figure of the war photographer; muralists in Northern Ireland did something similar when they painted on the walls that un-visible event that the Blanket protest was before the first

(and very few) 'real' images of the prisoners started to circulate[119]. The same intertwining of visibility, witnessing and the production of images characterized the activity of the *Taller de Gráfica Popular* (People's Graphic Workshop, hereafter TGP), founded in Mexico by the artists Pablo O'Higgins, Leopoldo Méndez and Luis Arenal in 1937. This art collective specialized in the production of flyers, posters and other typologies of images aimed at denouncing the violence and atrocities committed worldwide as well as against Mexican workers (Ristovska 2018). Inspired by the ideals of the Revolution that had taken place in the country in the years between 1910-1920, the collective produced for example the first images (outside of Europe) of the Jewish Holocaust, making publicly visible the crimes perpetrated by the Nazi regime. In a historical moment when images of the persecution of Jews were extremely rare, it is easy to understand how important it was to secure testimony about those contemporary events; despite being 'fictional' in comparison to photographic images or video recordings, TGP's artworks proved to be equally able to witness history with a certain authenticity. In the words of Ristovska (2018, p. 218):

> What is significant about TGP's work is how witnessing is deeply engraved in the articulation of activist impulses. The visual here sustains witnessing although it goes beyond the indexical relationship with the depicted reality emblematic of photographic technologies. Through printmaking, TGP implicitly insists on the importance of bearing witness to events that have destroyed a common sense of human dignity, sanctioning interpretations of them as politically relevant and worthy of attention.

On a smaller scale, the activity of (republican) muralists in Northern Ireland echoes what the TGP did decades before, and discloses a very similar understanding of the testimonial value of images. Following Burke (2001, p. 159), it can be said that both TGP's artworks and republican murals "were in a sense historical agents, since they not only recorded events but also influenced the way in which those events were viewed at the time". It could be added that they still influence the way those events are viewed at present, even if differently. This means not just that images are, as suggested above, directly involved in the creation of memory, but also that they themselves are marked by temporality. This is reflected in the words of John Tagg (1988) about photography: "photographs are never evidence of history: they are themselves the historical" (Tagg in Burke 2001, p. 24). A remark that could be

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[119] In a certain way, murals bore testimony to the event through the production of 'fictional' images before photographs, and later cinema, did the same, anticipating the future memory of the Blanketmen (see again Huyssen 2009 for the role of media and images in the creation of memories).

equally applied to the murals in Northern Ireland, because of their close relation to the conflict that makes them almost a historical residue of the Troubles.

As repeatedly stressed, murals in Northern Ireland existed well before their 'appropriation' by nationalists/republicans, as part of the unionist culture; and yet, it is hard to imagine that their significance and relation to the history of the Troubles would have be the same in the absence of the use of muralism made by the nationalist/republican propaganda. Crowley (2022) reports the existence of rare unionist murals painted for commemorating contemporary events, acting (following Burke) as historical agents shaping a Protestant version of history. These are examples of the testimonial use of images in relation to events; nevertheless, these murals (the images of which have all been lost) did not lead to a significant change in the way muralism was perceived. It needed the nationalist/republican communities to 'reinvent' it in the beginning of the 1980s for changing its public reception. If tourists nowadays come to Northern Ireland to visit the murals and their aura of 'authenticity', this is largely due to their perception as *the historical*, i.e., as representations bearing witness to the conflict, regardless of the fact that they were in many cases created only recently.

Within the space of the working-class areas, murals are thus involved in the construction of a certain memory of the Troubles that tries to present itself as authentic (see also chapter 1). Authenticity, or better said, the effect of authenticity, strongly depends on the discourses through which it is built, which determine in their turn the public perception of what claims to be authentic (Jones 2014; 2017). Witness testimonies rely upon authenticity: and yet, as remarked by Huyssen (2009), new (documentary) images bearing testimony to the past are constantly created, making the concept of authenticity even more ambiguous. Sara Jones (2017) highlights how this latter should be reframed in terms of "a social process negotiated between production and reception" (p. 137), especially in relation to mediated representations of testimony (as in the case of documentary films or memorial museums). Introducing the notion of *mediated immediacy*, Jones reflects on the inevitable undermining of authenticity implied by any form of mediation of testimony, which, on the other side, ensures its reproduction and circulation for the generations to come. The mediation of testimony enters in fact that process of transgenerational transmission of the past which preserves the direct experience of it, beyond the individual memory of the witness.

Northern Irish murals pose further problems in relation to authenticity, since they do not mediate some testimony, but more radically re-create the past in the form of images that assert their documentary value. The memories 'recreated' by murals share some of the

properties of the so-called *prosthetic memories* (Landsberg 2003; 2004): like these latter, they derive from mediated representations (the murals themselves) and (often) do not depend on real or singular experiences, but on genuinely collective ones[120]. On the other hand, however, the memories conveyed by muralism differ from prosthetic memories because of their link with the territory and the communities; if they open up to a more public (and transgenerational) past, above all through their digital circulation, the memories embodied by murals remain largely integrated into the landscape, an aspect on which relies the 'authenticity' of several representations. As already noted, murals dedicated to civilians or paramilitaries who lost their lives during the Troubles owe much of their testimonial value to the fact that they have been painted on the spot in which the death occurred, or close to it. In Norther Ireland, also because of its political geography, space plays then a pivotal role in witnessing the past, authenticating the events represented.

The importance of space is also due to the fact that working-class murals are located in the areas that suffered most of the violence, so that their presence on the spot acquires a specific significance. In a sense, murals are involved in the production of that *authenticity of affect* (Jones 2017) which, along with the authenticity of the witness and that of experience, constitutes one of the modes of what Jones calls *complementary authenticities*. Defined as "the genuine emotional response to the violence experienced by others" (p. 147), the authenticity of affect becomes particularly relevant when images are placed where the events occurred, as in the case of many commemorative murals. It is then clear that the concept of authenticity is not univocal, and that it is defined in dependence on other factors beyond the truthfulness of the events, including the willingness to believe from the audience. The anchoring of the images to the space where the conflict was most violent is certainly crucial in the production of a collective witness of the Troubles in a way that differs significantly from more 'traditional' forms of testimony like oral evidence or video recording.

To sum up, the testimonial status of political murals in Northern Ireland comes mainly from the visibility they give to the collective (and community-based) experience of conflict and from the reciprocal dependence between images and space that characterizes many of

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[120] The concept of *prosthetic memory* acknowledges the importance of images (in the form of mediated representations like photography or cinema) for the preservation of the past, 'breaking' the generational bond that is still central in the notion of *postmemory* coined by Marianne Hirsch (2012). The importance of the memories inherited by the generation(s) who did not experience certain traumatic events in Northern Ireland is explored by Dutka (2016) in relation to Bloody Sunday, through a case that, however, is mostly focused on oral testimony as a way of transmission of memory.

the murals. Whereas they are certainly not 'traces' in the way photographs can be thought of, murals often claim their reliability, although not possessing their quality of historical evidence. Nevertheless, a clear separation between photography and muralism in relation to their testimonial value becomes more ambiguous in those cases in which murals derive from photographs, as already seen in the previous chapter. Can these images simply be dismissed as fictional representations? And what is their status with regard to witnessing to the events portrayed? The archival impulse of photography explored in the previous paragraphs is re-appropriated by muralism through its inclusion of pre-existing images that are projected into the landscape, reviving a troublesome archive of conflict.

Muralism and testimony: towards a different *status of truth*

Muralism in Northern Ireland has traditionally made reference to, or directly incorporated, other types of images, like posters, photographs or, eventually, pre-existing murals. This trend, previously described in terms of intertextuality and intersemiotic translation, clearly shows the level of complexity muralism is able to achieve, as well as its belonging to a wider visual culture. When it comes to incorporating specific images like photographs, however, another aspect emerges along with those mentioned above: it concerns what could be called the *status of truth* that murals acquire from their derivation from indexical images like photographs. This aspect has a direct effect on the final picture which, although not possessing in its turn an indexical nature, inherits from the 'original' image part of its 'authenticity'. The ambiguous status of these murals makes them particularly interesting examples of the testimonial value of images, adding a third dimension, along with the already explored aspects of visibility and spatial location, to the analysis of the ability of murals to witness history. The choice to frequently reproduce photographic images cannot be regarded solely as a form of 'recycling' more or less iconic pictures already circulating in the public sphere: it seems rather to suggest that murals are conceived by (part of) the communities as a way to testimony to the conflict through the re-appropriation of 'real' images at the collective level.

It is needless to say that, if the photographic image already raises questions when used as evidence, with its translation into a wall picture the testimonial status of the image becomes further questionable. The dependence on the ideological assumptions of the observer and on the discourses surrounding the image that characterize photography (Hanna 2015) are nonetheless at the core of muralism, which is based on a certain political view. The

intertwining of the reality of the events represented and their political interpretation is central to (most of) the murals realized by the Bogside Artists, for example. As already seen in the first chapter, these muralists claim their artworks to be rooted in the history of political activism of Derry/Londonderry while, at the same time, defending the supposed 'neutrality' of the events depicted. The ambiguity of their statements is reflected on the visual level in the choice to reproduce photographs in some of the murals they painted between the late 1990s and early 2000s. The most famous example is certainly the reproduction of Fulvio Grimaldi's iconic photograph showing the body of dying Jackie Duddy, reproduced and described in the second chapter. The image, part of that "visual economy" (Side 2018) which was central to the conflict in Northern Ireland, circulated widely, to the point of almost 'embodying' the memory of Bloody Sunday in the future (Dawson 2007). It is not surprising therefore that it was chosen by the Bogside Artists as 'The' image of that event.

According to the Bogside Artists' purpose to create a gallery of murals reproducing historical episodes of the Troubles, the photographic origin of some of their representations appears to reflect a treatment of the image as historical evidence. This does not mean, however, that the muralists are moved by a naïve notion of photography as an 'authentic' trace of the event. The changes made to the final image, which becomes an intentional accusation against the British Army, seem to exploit the already political meaning of Grimaldi's photograph; such interpretation of the image had already emerged in the Widgery report, but to the advantage of the legitimacy of the Army's intervention (Hanna 2015). The political accusation is strengthened by the Bogside Artists through the addition of figurative elements like the British soldier looking at the group carrying the body of Jackie Duddy or the bloody banner in the foreground, on which the inscription "civil rights" is visible (see chapter 2). Moreover, the setting is completely different compared to the original photograph, because where Grimaldi's image shows the group led by the priest Edward Daly isolated from the dispersed crowd of protestors, the mural reconfigures the image through the addition of a dense crowd in the background[121]. In summary, Grimaldi's photograph appears much more 'unadorned' when compared to the mural, leaving the interpretation of

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[121] The peaceful nature of the protest is further enhanced by the presence of another banner reading "Civil Rights Association" (absent in Grimaldi's photograph) that seems to emphasize the unnecessary use of violence from the British Army. The political understanding of the events is thus made clear by the Bogside Artists in a very conscious way, and through a careful manipulation of the original source. Side (2018, p. 79) suggests that the addition of the crowd situates "Duddy's death in the presence of eye witnesses", these latter occupying the same position of the viewer in front of the mural, who witnesses to the events through the image.

the events to an observer who needs to relate the image to other photographs, testimonies and traces to make sense of what is represented.

When looking at the significant changes made by the artists, it is pertinent to talk about an *appropriation* of a pre-existing image more than its reproduction. While its derivation from another picture is more than evident (even if their statuses differ significantly), the mural actually displays another history, where blame and responsibilities have already been clearly attributed[122]. It represents, in the end, a different testimony to history, and its origin from a photographic source does nothing but claim this testimonial status. Moreover, the location of the mural in the Bogside area, i.e., the Catholic neighborhood where the events of Bloody Sunday occurred, transforms the painting into a memorial to that day, a mark left among the many others to commemorate it (Conway 2010)[123]. The photographic origin of the mural, with its truth-effect, is furthermore tied to its spatial location, which anchors the image to the actual site of the tragedy. If Grimaldi's photograph bears witness to the previous topography of the area, an aspect that proved important when photographs were used as evidence during the Saville Inquiry (McDowell and Switzer 2011), it already detaches from the place it represents, existing as a bi-dimensional object (and later as a digital picture) that circulates well beyond the location where it was taken. On the contrary, the mural gains part of its significance (and testimonial value) from the place where it stands, although, as an image, it circulates no less than the photograph.

Despite bearing unequivocally witness to the death of Jackie Duddy, Grimaldi's photograph has certainly acquired its iconic status because of the image composition and the emotional intensity it awakens, all elements that are certainly emphasized by the mural (Side 2018), but not absent in the source image. There is an explicit *theatricality* in the photograph, mainly due to the dynamism suggested by the figure of the priest Edward Daly, who is leaning forward, carrying the almost central element of the image, i.e., the white handkerchief[124]. Such 'theatricality', largely unintentional, is however among the reasons why the photograph became so famous and was lastly chosen by the Bogside Artists as the source for their mural. While eventually bearing witness to the harmlessness of the

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[122] It should be highlighted that the mural was realized in 1997, i.e., one year before the British Prime Minister Tony Blair announced the reopening of the inquiry on the Bloody Sunday deaths and incidents (the Saville Inquiry).

[123] The feelings of attachment for the murals realized by the Bogside Artists by the community living in the Bogside area is evident in the actions taken by the residents in several occasions for preserving the artworks from projects of urban renovation involving their destruction or partial concealment; see McDowell and Switzer (2011).

[124] The handkerchief, as reported by Side (2018), became so emblematic to be included (as an image) in the book by Fintan O'Toole *A History of Ireland in 100 Objects* (2013).

protestors, the photograph cannot escape a cultural reading of the image, also due to the recurrence of what Coviello (2015) defines as *visual configurations* through which the event is interpreted by a community. Before turning into a mural, Grimaldi's photograph was already charged with meaning, a significance that goes beyond the factual information (the image as evidence) it conveys.

The iconicity of the photograph largely derives from the cultural and political appropriation(s) it allows for. This aspect had important repercussions on the remembrance of Bloody Sunday, starting exactly from its translation into a permanent mural in the Bogside area. Side (2018) reflects on the greater 'status' of victim that Jackie Duddy gained compared to the other 13 civilians who lost their lives. Along with reinforcing a narrative of victimhood that has overshadowed the civil rights campaign (see chapter 2), the image cannot escape that memory marketplace (Pine 2020) in which trauma and victimhood are 'praised' and exchanged like any other goods. The pure, objective dimension that the Widgery inquiry pretended to read in the photographs examined, failing "to acknowledge their emotional resonances" (Side 2018, p. 76), proves to be ultimately unattainable. After all, the absence of photographs in the final report seems to suggest that the ambiguity of images is feared, and that their ultimate significance remains unpredictable. Witnessing through images, photographic or not, does not prevent their 'emotional re-appropriation' on a community level or, eventually, within a transnational frame.

These observations are echoed by Carville: "the photojournalistic image has continued to serve the visual needs and desires of the public far beyond its intended use to graphically portray the events of Bloody Sunday through the rapid circulation and distribution of the global print media"[125]. His words apply to both Grimaldi's photograph (with its subsequent transformation into a mural) and to another photograph that inspired the 1994 mural painted by the Bogside Artists, titled *The Petrol Bomber. Battle of the Bogside*. The source image, taken by Clive Limpkin, shows a young boy wearing a gas-mask against the CS gas used by the RUC; the setting is the so-called Battle of the Bogside, a clash with the RUC that followed some demonstrations against loyalist marchers in August 1969. The photograph won the Overseas Press Club of America's Robert Capa Gold Medal in 1972 (as the best photographic reporting), gaining a no less iconic status than Grimaldi's image of the dying Jackie Duddy. The 'artistic quality' of the photograph goes hand in hand with its testimonial

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[125] See the online article by Justin Carville *Conflict Photography & Northern Ireland* at the following link: https://www.ucd.ie/photoconflict/casestudies/northernireland/. See also Carville (2011; 2020) for a more extensive research on the relation between photography and conflict in the context of (Northern) Ireland.

status, since it "circulated as both photo-reportage and as an after-image of the city's past of collective oppression and resistance", as Carville summarizes. The emotional impact of the image was then already inscribed in the original photograph well before it was chosen by the Bogside Artists as the source for their mural. As with Grimaldi's photograph, the treatment of the image as evidence does not eliminate its ultimate ambiguity, since its circulation opens it up to unpredictable re-appropriations.

Also the mural of the petrol bomber reframes the image from which it derives, adding some elements in the background[126]. Instead of showing the young boy cut off from the clashes around him, which is what the photograph does, the mural puts the figure in the heat of battle, as the smoke of the buildings under attack clearly reveals (Figure 5.1).

Figure 5.1 *The Petrol Bomber*, The Bogside Artists, 1994, Lecky Road, Derry/Londonderry; picture taken by the author in 2018

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[126] The boy depicted is Paddy Coyle, the cousin of the two muralists Tom and William Kelly. He revealed his identity (which was protected by the mask) only when the Good Friday Agreement put an end to the Troubles. The mural derives also partially from another photograph of Paddy Coyle, so that the final image is an adaptation realized by the muralists; for a brief description of the mural see the link: https://irishstudies.sunygeneseoenglish.org/the-petrol-bomber/.

Once again, the mural bears witness to the events represented in a different way, making the image 'more readable' for the viewer, as well as increasing its dramatic force. In this case too, there are important ideological implications resulting from the choice of this specific image among many others, and certainly the emotional impact of displaying a very young boy who becomes the protagonist of a violent clash did not play a secondary role. The figure embodies a much more complex episode of the history of the Troubles, becoming representative of it well beyond the original intentions of the photographer who took the picture in 1969. And yet, the commemorative function of the mural into which the image turned does not necessarily weaken its testimonial status, but simply claims a political standpoint from which the events are looked at. The re-use or re-appropriation of photographs by muralism represents in this regard a very interesting case in which memory, testimony and political commitment are strictly intertwined, highlighting the erratic afterlife of images.

The historical episode of the Battle of the Bogside returns in another mural painted by the artists, (*Bernadette. Battle of the Bogside*) representing a scene of the clashes and the figure of Bernadette (Devlin) McAliskey, with a megaphone in hand, addressing the rioters (Figure 5.2).

Figure 5.2 *Bernadette. Battle of the Bogside*, The Bogside Artists, 1996, Rossville Street, Derry/Londonderry; picture taken by the author in 2018

The mural, realized in 1996, does not derive from a previous photograph, but is interesting as it bears witness to some aspects of the conflict that are generally regarded as trivial. One is the representation of the bin lid used by women in Northern Ireland to alert the residents of an imminent raid by the British Army; the practice was common in Catholic neighborhoods during the Troubles as a sort of civil resistance tactic against what was perceived as a violation of their territory (Owicki 2010). The second aspect brought to light by the mural concerns the way the landscape was changing in relation to the events taking place in Derry/Londonderry: in the background, in fact, the Free Derry Corner, which appeared in 1969, is reproduced, documenting the creation of that self-declared autonomous area in the Bogside by the nationalist/republican community. Apart from this sort of 'metatextual' reference to another mural (one of the most famous of Northern Ireland), the Bernadette painting then also documents the appearance of murals and graffiti in reaction to the conflict in the streets, an element regarded as irrelevant for a long time. In this way,

images can fix in memory neglected aspects which, however, affected the daily lives of many people, and preserve their recollection in the future (Burke 2001).

Muralism, and more in general visual artefacts, can then witness at different levels. While murals, as already seen, may acquire a certain status of 'authenticity' for the viewer regardless of their source, certainly their derivation from photographs encourages this perception. But photography relates to muralism also in subtler ways: it can be imitated in terms of stylistic rendering, an approach that has been widely employed by many muralists in Northern Ireland. This choice is evident in *The People's Gallery* murals realized by the Bogside Artists, based on historical facts: most of these depictions are monochrome, and simulate the photographic image as well as the historic patina characteristic of old snapshots. Even when they do not directly derive from pre-existing photographs, these murals privilege a very realistic style of depiction, so that the influence exerted by photography remains evident also in this regard. A painting like *The Civil Rights Mural. The Beginning*, inspired by the civil rights marches of the 1960s, probably derives its composition from the video footage of the television crews that were present in Northern Ireland on those days, as remarked by one of the artist, William Kelly[127]. His words highlight the intention from the muralists to produce a descriptive illustration of the marches taking place at that time, a statement that reveals once again how their murals are conceived in terms of historical evidence, as much as photographs or video recordings.

A photographic style is at the basis of many other murals realized in Northern Ireland. Historical events like the Battle of the Somme are frequently treated with a photo-realistic rendering in many loyalist murals dedicated to it. The use of monochrome is again strategic in this sense, but an effect of authenticity may also be conveyed by the representation of the black silhouettes of soldiers, an image that became iconic through the circulation of photographs taken on the war front (see chapter 3). Occasionally, more complex artworks may appear, as when laminated panels replace the more common painted murals, as seen in the previous chapter. An example of this is given by a panel which reproduces the black silhouettes of the WWI soldiers on the battlefield, an image that fades into the photographic picture of a typical Belfast street with its red brick buildings along it (Figure 5.3). On this background, three photographic portraits of young men killed during the conflict have been incorporated, with their names and dates of birth/death added under each picture. This highly complex depiction, accompanied by some text which warns to remember who lost his/her

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[127] The reference is to the quotation cited under the photograph of the mural uploaded on the Bogside Artists section on the website CAIN, accessible at the link https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/bogsideartists/menu.htm.

life while fighting, represents an interesting example of how pre-existing images can be reassembled in order to produce a new picture whose 'authenticity' is claimed through the blend of photographs[128].

Figure 5.3 Laminated panel remembering paramilitary members and image of WWI soldiers, 2013, Frenchpark Street in the Village, south Belfast; picture taken by the author in 2018

Other representations may derive from different sources like paintings, as in the case of the popular image of King Billy that can be found in the unionist/loyalist areas (Rolston 1987). This latter originates from a Benjamin West's painting representing the king at the Battle of the Boyne, realized in the 18th century; before becoming one of the most prominent figures depicted on the walls of the working-class neighborhoods of Northern Ireland, the image had already been reproduced in popular postcards, exemplifying once again the dynamics in which pictures are often involved. Although not deriving from an indexical image, the standardized depiction of King Billy portrays nonetheless a historical leader protagonist of real events, so that in the end it appears as a "composite figure" (Jarman 1997,

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[128] The ideological message of the laminated panel is quite clear: the three men portrayed are assimilated (for their bravery and sacrifice) to the unionist soldiers who fought the WWI, and especially the Battle of the Somme. The photographic source is used here as evidence of a certain historical version of the past in which there is no substantial difference between the WWI soldiers and the loyalist paramilitaries 'defending' Northern Ireland from the nationalist threat.

p. 178). As the scholar notes (Ibid.) with reference to the image of King Billy displayed on the banners during loyalist parades (but the same also applies to murals):

> On many banners, KW3 [King William III] remains anchored and historicised by the references to the battles and events of the campaign of 1688-91: as such he is located as part of the historical narrative of the campaign whose seminal events are scattered randomly throughout the display. The vitality of the image emerges from this oscillation between the abstraction of the symbol and the concrete historicism of the heroic icon. He remains both a representation of empirical fact and an elusive symbol.

As the example of the figure of King Billy illustrates, the creation of a certain 'authenticity' in which muralism is involved depends on a complex web of images, discourses and beliefs in which memories are rooted. Something similar is also visible in another loyalist mural based on historical facts, and in which additional 'techniques' are employed to produce a representation of almost documental value (at least in the intentions of the muralist). The image is a composite picture where the men who will fight at the Battle of the Somme are marching towards their destiny, while in the background it is visible the Willowfield Unionist Club founded by Edward Carson, whose statue is represented on the right (Figure 5.4).

Figure 5.4 Mural dedicated to Carson's Volunteers, 2012, Carlingford Street, Willowfield, East Belfast; picture taken by the author in 2018

The club stands on the spot where in 1912 the men and women to whom the mural is dedicated signed the Ulster Covenant against the Third Home Rule Bill introduced shortly before by the British government[129]. This 'historical' mural, painted with a sepia-tone reminiscent of old photographs, pursues a realistic style of depiction in which the 'myth' of Carson's volunteers is mixed with the actual facts, the truth of which is stressed by the presence of dates and numbers both in the mural and on the plaque close to it. The use of these devices increases the authenticity-effect of the representation, which aims to present itself as an objective testimony of how things really went, not to mention of their ideological implications in the present (the old unionist firmness against the Home Rule for Ireland is the same that animates contemporary unionism in the face of (Northern)Irish nationalism. In this direction goes also the choice to represent the Battle of the Somme through a geographical map of the area, a convention commonly used by the historical discourse. What is clear in the end is that the narratives of memory produced by muralism can occasionally borrow techniques and styles from other domains, including that of photography examined at length.

A specific documentary value that emerges from many of the murals painted after the end of the conflict is instead connected to commemoration. As already outlined above, these murals often stand where the paramilitaries or civilians commemorated died, or close to the 'original spot', thus turning the space of remembrance into a trace of the tragic event (Violi 2014). While reproducing what may be defined as a map of the fatalities occurred during the Troubles, an aspect that 'anticipates' the creation of GIS maps of the conflict that will be analyzed in the following chapter, commemorative murals document some of these lost lives. Moreover, they do so by restoring to the victims their human face, which is portrayed in the mural and consequently made identifiable to the communities. A temporary, certainly far from exhaustive, archive of the dead is then created in the public space. The void left by the state, which has so far given up to the idea of erecting any official memorial to the victims, is filled by these very fragile remainders of the conflict, whose *material* precariousness has already been discussed in the previous chapter.

Apart from murals and some more recent initiatives implemented by technology, the only attempt made for collecting the complete list of the victims of the conflict is the 1999 book

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[129] The Third Home Rule was intended to grant to Ireland self-government within the United Kingdom, in order to accommodate the demands of the Irish Home Rule movement, born in the second half of the 19th century. The statue of Carson reproduced in the mural is probably the one which stands in front of the Parliament Building in Stormont, realized by the British sculptor L.S. Merrifield and unveiled in 1932.

Lost Lives: The Stories of the Men, Women and Children who Died as a Result of the Northern Ireland Troubles[130]. Gathering the names, ages and other details of the people who died throughout the conflict, the book does not distinguish between paramilitaries, British soldiers, RUC officers and civilians, offering to the reader a 'non-political' account of the fatalities. This is certainly very different from the perspective from which dead are commemorated in the murals in Northern Ireland, since the political/religious affiliation determines who should be remembered in a certain space. Leaving aside the disputes that may arise between private and public commemoration (McDowell 2008a), murals appear among the main devices used to honor the dead, providing very often their portraits (sometimes, as seen, a photographic image can replace the painting). The quasi documentary impulse behind these representations reveals the importance for the communities to restore the singularity of the victim, not just through his/her names/dates or other particulars, but above all through the face.

Very frequently, especially in unionist/loyalist murals, the portrait of the victim has an oval shape (eventually circular, above all when the figure is placed in the center), but larger representations are not infrequent. The desire to commemorate that broke out after the end of the conflict, and the cessation of violence itself, allowed for the replacement of the predominant figure of the masked man with these individualized depictions that 'humanize' a previously anonymous agent of violence (Feldman 1991). But very prominent are also the portraits of the Blanketmen, one of the most impressive being that of Raymond McCartney painted by the Bogside artists in 2000. The image is partially based on a photograph that, smuggled out of the Prison Maze during the Hunger Strike, bore witness to the experience of the prisoners on protest and their physical condition. Choosing to portray McCartney in one of the very rare images of the Blanketmen circulating at the time means to commemorate the event, which is the true subject of the mural, through a face that helps to restore the individual memories of the struggle within the larger frame of the Blanketmen campaign.

Portraits can however trigger an opposite trend, as it is visible in the case of the most famous picture of Bobby Sands in Falls Road, Belfast, reproduced in chapter 2. Although

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[130] The book is written by David McKittrick, Seamus Kelters, Brian Feeney and Chris Thornton. In 2019, a film based on the text was released in UK. It should be said –yet- that a previous attempt to collect all the names of the victims had been made by Malcolm Sutton since the mid-1980s. His work was finally published in 1994 [*Bear in Mind These Dead… an Index of Deaths from the Conflict in Ireland, 1969-93*] and the index was later uploaded on the CAIN website as a source for further research. On Malcom Sutton see also the article by Rory Carroll (2020) at the link: https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/one-man-s-solo-effort-to-document-every-troubles-death-1.4309059.

deriving from a photograph taken when Sands was in prison[131], the mural acquired over time such a status to paradoxically weaken the 'realism' of his face, turning this latter into an excessive icon in which the 'historical' Bobby Sands is actually lost (Rava 2021). Moreover, being the most prominent figure among the Blanketmen, Sands inevitably overshadows, in his individuality, the other prisoners and their memories, tending to assimilate in himself the essence of the protest[132]. What the Bobby Sands' mural exemplifies then, is that the use of the face as a device able to reactivate the individual memories of the actors/victims of the conflict is subject to unpredictable re-appropriations within the collective dimension of remembrance. The documental value of the face that re-inscribes individuality within the landscapes of memory (Violi 2014) coexists then with that iconicity of the image that ultimately restores its fundamental ambiguity. Private mourning may in the end come into conflict with forms of public commemoration that express themselves through the face and its 'adoption' at the community level. Regardless of the eventual indexical origin of the image (photographic or video) or its ambitions, the reliance on individual faces is not enough to ensure a more truthful testimony to the past.

Conclusions. Murals as ambiguous traces of the conflict

The techniques through which a mural can bear witness to the events depicted, from its derivation from photography to the use of the face explored above, lead back to the complexity of visual representations as testimony. And yet, it is undeniable that images occupy in Northern Irish culture a central position in the transmission of memory, aspiring to do more than simply reflecting certain narratives. Murals may claim to witness history, and much of the power of these images derives exactly from this assertion. The previous chapter ended with some reflections on the desire to preserve the memories of the conflict in the form of a material culture that muralism perfectly embodies: these memories rose up against the imperative to move on that the peacebuilding enterprise demanded to people. The continuous creation of new murals in the working-class neighborhoods proved however that the communities needed, and still need, to remember, and to bear witness to the trauma collectively experienced. This (over)production of historical images is not only a symptom

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[131] The photograph is at the basis of many other pictures that appeared in Norther Ireland, including other murals, posters, stickers or reproductions that were carried on during marches in support of the Blanketmen, as well as at the funeral of Bobby Sands in 1981.

[132] Obviously, the ten men who died from the Hunger Strike, Bobby Sands included, are all commemorated, usually collectively; other Blanketmen are occasionally celebrated in their individuality, most notably the IRA veteran Brendan Hughes.

of political backwardness, as has often been affirmed, but also an attempt to make sense of the events through their memory. To reframe muralism in this direction, means recognizing that the archival impulse at the base of most of the post-conflict photography has something in common with that which animates many commemorative murals. The obsession with memory goes hand in hand with archiving, coming into conflict with both the dynamism of memories and the perishable nature of the murals.

On the other hand, a set of discourses and narratives surrounding these representations determine to a great extent the ability of muralism to promote itself in the terms of a paradoxical archive in motion through which the history of the province (and not solely) is made visible. This is clearly the case with the photographs used as evidence of the events, but murals too derive (most of) their significance from the frame within which they are interpreted. The commodification of muralism for tourism purposes and its international reception have in fact contributed to an important shift in the way it is regarded at present. People come to Northern Ireland to see the murals driven by the desire to learn through them the recent history of the province, and consequently they are disposed to consider them as 'authentic' remnants of the conflict. Where murals may fail as historical evidence, they still remain faithful to the segregation and different political views that persist between the working-class communities. In this sense too, murals are undoubtedly traces.

Disregarded in their ability to bear witness to both past and contemporary events, murals are barely mentioned by McLaughlin and Baker (2010) in their work on the role played by media in fostering the peace-building process. The propaganda in which newspapers, television and cinema, among many other media, have been involved after 1998 testifies of the different representations of the paramilitaries, opening up to the possibility of considering them as political actors more than people driven exclusively by brutality or madness. Notwithstanding the effort to restore the complexity of the conflict, media, especially cinematic and television productions, largely failed to offer some valid alternatives other than consumerism or the retreat into the domestic dimension of family/love relationships. Within the context described by McLaughlin and Baker, the political engagement or the not infrequent criticism of the Peace Agreement shown by muralism is practically ignored; murals came to represent the other (embarrassing) side of post-conflict Northern Ireland, the resurgence of suppressed memories still haunting the landscape. The figure of the archive, evoked several times throughout this chapter, embodies the desires, aspirations (Appadurai 2003) and afterlives that these same memories conveyed by murals reveal. An archive which has been migrating from the materiality of the gable walls towards

the digital realm, which will be the focus of the next chapter. Completing the transformation of murals from material artefacts to images devoid of their socio-political context, digital archives enter a new dimension of the memory of the Troubles, which is not only transnational (this was made possible even earlier) but also 'rationalized' in a different way. Within this new framework, it is no longer just memories which one tries to preserve, since even the (digital) traces left by the creation of these same memories, i.e., the images of murals no longer existing, are ultimately archived. The focus shifts from the conflict of memories to murals in themselves.

Chapter 6. From material artefacts to digital images. An analysis of the archiving of murals

The previous chapters suggested some of the functions/trends characterizing contemporary muralism in Northern Ireland. While until recently most of the studies have focused on how murals tend to preserve sectarianism and feelings of hatred through the recurrence of certain representations, today muralism should be reconsidered within a more complex frame. The observations made by Sara McDowell (2008b) with regard to the political tours of the murals as a way to reiterate sectarian narratives of identity and space should then be partially rethought. Such narratives have certainly not disappeared, but the commodification/heritagization of muralism, along with the growing emergence of a different or transnational imagery, have changed it in a way that can no longer be ignored. Moreover, and this has already been anticipated above, murals do not exist merely as material artefacts underpinning certain practices of memory, but also as images that circulate well beyond the boundaries of Northern Ireland. The transnational dynamics of memory that have been previously analyzed are therefore accompanied by the conversion of muralism itself into a transnational phenomenon both for tourists coming to see these depictions onsite and for online viewers doing research on the Troubles or who simply come across their images while surfing on internet. This has consequences on the promotion of Northern Ireland as a tourist destination as well as on the transformation of the memory of the Troubles, which will be addressed below.

One of the few articles that takes into account the dimension of muralism beyond its material existence is a paper emblematically titled *Widening the frame* (Conrad 2007). Concerned with the reproduction of murals, mainly through photography, Conrad reflects on the way their existence in the form of images- and no longer artefacts- has direct implications for Northern Ireland and its international perception. Tourists commonly take photographs of the murals when visiting the province, especially when they participate in some of the walking or taxi tours organized by members of the local communities. But reproductions of the murals are common also in postcards or souvenirs, as Conrad highlights; however, nowadays they mainly circulate on the Internet, on online sites or disseminated by users. These de-contextualized images are not necessarily insignificant in their political dimension: echoing the observations made by McDowell (2008b), Conrad sees in their circulation the risk of reproducing the same stereotypical portrait of Northern Ireland as a land where violence and segregation persist. In this regard, Conrad's approach to muralism

seems still limited and mostly anchored to a history of photojournalism that represented the Troubles with very little sympathy for the political reasons behind it. In reality, the existence of murals as images also entails a transformative effect on both the perception of present-day Northern Ireland and on the memories of the conflict, which reach a wider audience not directly affected by it. Although understanding how this process triggers a shift in the control of the images produced on the walls, Conrad does not fully develop her insights, especially the growing complexity of muralism beyond a sectarian imagery.

In addition, murals can be photographed also for other reasons than, just to mention a few, tourism or the morbid interest (which often overlap) in places where violence occurred. We are interested in particular in the reasons behind the emergence of that archival gaze searching for traces of the conflict, which turns the photographic record of murals into a practice of preservation. This disposition is at the core of Tony Crowley's collections of photographs of the murals, an activity that he started already in 1979, with all the risks that it involved (see chapter 5). The photographic recording aims in this case to preserve murals per se, as very significant vestiges of the conflict; Crowley's precocious interest in muralism disclosed the historical quality of these artefacts, something that would have been recognized only years later. But the photographic recording of murals anticipates also the future systematization of their images, which enter a different dimension of meaning when they are collected and, eventually, properly archived. The digital existence of murals' images can then take various forms, and not simply that of pictures circulating randomly on internet, reiterating the same patterns of interpretation as claimed by Conrad (2007). Through the analysis of online collection like *Extramural Activity* and the digital archives *CAIN* and *Murals of Northern Ireland* (at the Claremont Colleges Digital Library), this chapter focuses on the implications that these projects may have on the understanding of the conflict and its future memory within a global framework.

When writing about muralism today (and the same should be said about street art, as will be seen) it is impossible to ignore its digital life and circulation. Almost nothing has been written about the existence of Northern Irish murals as digital images and the consequences of their collection/preservation in that form. It seems that a certain prejudice rooted in the supposedly greater 'authenticity' of murals/street art considered in relation to their original space of production still underpins their perception, even if the situation has rapidly changed with regard to street art. When it comes to Northern Irish muralism –yet- the lack of research in this direction is immediately apparent, with the exception of few considerations on the

digitization of muralism made by the already mentioned Tony Crowley; they will provide the theoretical core for the reflections that follow.

The digital life of murals and street art

When Crowley (2015b) started to take pictures of the murals as a young boy in Northern Ireland, he was already aware of the ephemerality of these artefacts. Driven by the desire to somehow preserve the images of those fragile traces, he considered them in the beginning just a personal record of the conflict. Although at that time Crowley ignored the loyalist tradition of painting on the walls, he soon realized that muralism was important for understanding the history of segregation in the province and the developments in the political situation. In short, Crowley anticipated the historical significance of the murals well beyond their propagandistic use; to preserve their images meant to preserve a varied and prolific visual evidence of the conflict. As was already said, murals' ephemerality gives a particular meaning to the practice of photographing them. These representations were not intended to last, and this aspect was probably fundamental for their 'truthfulness'[133], an aspect that muralism shares with street art, which equally used to build its own genuineness on the ephemerality that distinguishes it from other forms of art.

Born as an illegal practice in urban settings, in the form of tags and graffiti, street art eventually developed into a legal expression adopted for embellishing deprived areas of cities worldwide. Although usually not conceived to last over time, legal street art tends to reduce the extreme ephemerality of its illegal counterpart, tenaciously fought by public bodies. But the ephemerality of street art is challenged especially by the common practice of taking pictures of the artworks which are then uploaded online, where they enter the unlimited space of the digital. In many cases, the same street artists promote their creations through social media, in order to reach a worldwide public; this certainly alters the perception of the artwork and its exclusive link with the territory. Moreover, street art increasingly benefits from the attention given to it by websites advertising the best artworks to see, as well as from the eventual creation of virtual museums through which navigating the real spaces of street art (Razzoli 2017). Not that images of illegal artworks do not circulate online, but they are usually more difficult to spot, either because they can be erased

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[133] Obviously, this did not prevent the conservation of certain murals that after many years are still visible today, preserved and repainted from time to time. In general, it seems that when entering the circuit of memory/commemoration, overshadowing their political/propagandistic function (which, however, does not disappear), murals increase their chance to persist, although this is not a rule.

soon after (leaving aside that other tags/graffiti are often superimposed on them), or because they enjoy less visibility compared to sanctioned street art, which is nowadays largely promoted.

To distinguish between legal and illegal street art is not always that easy. This art practice is, more than any other, dependent on a social discourse (Dal Lago and Giordano 2016) that continually redefines the boundaries between legitimacy and illegitimacy, involving, along with public bodies and the audience, the press, art galleries and the critics. Photography, in this context, played a pivotal role in redefining the ambiguous status of street art:

> photographs of illicit works of street art were created and shared on niche blogs and photo-sharing social networks. The visitors and contributors to these blogs and networks appreciated the talent, politics, and/or courage of street artists, as well as the mystique nurtured by the precarious nature of the art form. Due to the fact that many works of street art were destroyed because of their illegality and the threat they purportedly posed to the moral order of their host communities, photographing works of street art left susceptible to the vagaries of street life became one of the most important means of archiving these ephemeral works (Brown 2017, p. 11).

Photographing illegal artworks then not only contributed to the worldwide promotion of street art, but also to its preservation, irremediably altering that ephemerality which was regarded as its distinctive character. Brown introduces the concept of *Digital-Social Photography* in relation to the practice of uploading and sharing on social media the pictures of street art works that users take during their trips. Echoing the observations made by van Dijck (2007), Brown reflects on the instant sharing of personal records and their larger circulation in terms of audience/space. Van Dijck remarks how (digitally) mediated practices, thanks to the increased rhythm of their dissemination, accelerate the formation of memories; on the other side, these latter tend to become progressively transient and ephemeral. This means that, while being archived on personal databases, photographs, like other media, are primarily regarded for their immediate sharing rather than as collections through which memory is stored and later retrieved. In short, for van Dijck the communicative function prevails over the formation of memories, although the latter does not disappear but tends to exist more at a potential than an actual level[134]. When applying these reflections to street art, it is possible to affirm that while the ephemerality of the

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[134] According to van Dijck, this is true in relation to digital photography as opposed to the analog one, but also when considering the different use/conception of photographs typical for the younger generations.

artwork may be affected by the digital existence of the image, this does not necessarily imply its future retrieval as memory.

The observations made by van Dijck may be declined in the direction of an unpredictability of the involvement of personal photographs in the formation of memory. The example that the scholar provides is that of the photographs taken by U.S. soldiers in Abu Ghraib prison, which went viral in 2004, generating one of the biggest scandal in recent history of the United States. Although taken as personal and macabre 'records' by the soldiers, the photographs nevertheless escaped their control, unexpectedly contributing to the formation of a collective (and transnational) memory of Abu Ghraib's tortures. The wider circulation allowed by digital photography raises more drastically the question of who actually controls the images produced, as well as of their future use/meaning for the generations to come. This was also the case with street art, which owes a lot to photography, analog and subsequently digital, since it gave a fundamental contribution not only to the shift in perception of this practice (Brown 2015), but also to its preservation as cultural memory. If the earliest street art nowadays exists as a cultural phenomenon which is part of our recent history, this is largely due to the personal initiatives of few enthusiasts who recorded these first artworks. Personal collections like these "may have been the only resource for new writers to learn about the history of their own movement" (Masilamani 2008, p. 7). In short, these isolated practices of documentation and archiving established the memory of street art first on a personal/restricted basis, and later as a global phenomenon that emigrated from the United States to other cities.

These brief observations made in relation to street art and its digital circulation clarify the similarities it shares with Northern Irish muralism. In both cases, a practice whose legitimacy often remains ambiguous has been deeply affected by its recording and consequent digitization, which made transnational what used to be local. The ephemerality and unpredictable durability of murals and street art is certainly challenged by their digital afterlife, as well as by the more recent curatorial practices increasingly surrounding them. Considering the lack of research on murals' digitization, looking at the studies on street art's preservation and documentation becomes very useful for understanding another aspect of contemporary muralism. These practices in fact alter the artwork's lifespan, eroding its 'authenticity' and, with regard to muralism, possibly radicalizing the memory of the conflict. The diversified temporal existence of street art/murals that derives from them overlaps with the moment of creation of the artwork, the time when it is photographed/uploaded online and that of its eventual erasure. Within this context, one wonders if the digital afterlife and

circulation of the artworks may "retroact and reconfigure offline practices" (Glaser 2015, p. 6) or change the rhythm of production of street art (MacDowall 2016).

These set of questions are shared with muralism and lay the foundations for rethinking control over images that are put into circulation on internet. Street artists and muralists are no longer the only actors able to regulate what gains visibility (although not durability) in the public space and how it is presented; the increasing reproduction of street art in the digital sphere, for example, needs the activity of photographers and bloggers who act as gatekeepers, selecting and promoting certain street art scenes or artists among others (Glaser 2015). Moreover, other actors may be involved in the documentation of the artworks, from anonymous collectors to professional archivists. Documenting and preserving are in fact not the same thing: while the safeguarding of artworks through their conversion into images to be stored is a common practice among aficionados[135], documenting requires a certain expertise, as well as the implementation of specific tools. In the recent years, a greater interest and debate have followed the creation of projects aiming at the preservation of street art in a more systematic way. The possibilities offered by internet and other digital tools certainly improve those offered by analog technologies: for example, artworks which were created by art collectives that arose during the political protests of the 1960s-1970s have been mainly lost (Cowick 2015), leaving an important void in the historical study of these events and their visual production.

However, the documentation of street art remains problematic for the institutions interested in it, not only because of the ephemerality of the artworks but also, as Cowick adds, because of the anonymity of many artists and the difficulty with tracking new pieces. Many images are stored in private collections and, above all, permanent criteria for documenting/archiving are still missing (Masilamani 2008). When it comes to surveying street art, photography is not enough. Reduced to two-dimensional images, the artworks lose both their material essence and their spatial anchoring: "this kind of representation, having photography as its main instrument, ensures a complete documentation of the work in its primarily aesthetic and visual aspects, but it often neglects the relationships between the mural and its surrounding space" (Caffio 2015, p. 76). Here lies what Caffio calls the paradox of documentation, on one side indispensable for preserving the trace of the artwork, while on the other 'betraying' the very essence of street art. Photography fails mainly to capture

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[135] There are also cases of photographs or related documents which had been produced for different reasons than street art's preservation, like the crime scene photographs taken by the police as judicial evidence, later converted into historical material to be eventually exposed in galleries/museums (Masilamani 2008).

the dialogue that the art piece often establishes with the location or the historical and sociopolitical environment in which it is placed. What Caffio suggests- is to implement other techniques of documentation along with photography, so that the context is not completely lost and the more complex meaning(s) of the artwork partially preserved. Among the techniques proposed by the scholar, are the creation of 3D models and online maps, that allow for the projection of the artwork into its original space; these solutions have been equally implemented in Northern Ireland for the visualization of the conflict within the landscape, as will be briefly illustrated below.

The challenges that street art is currently facing when it comes to its preservation/documentation are in many ways the same posed by the archiving of murals in Northern Ireland. Apart from the repeatedly mentioned issue of ephemerality, muralism is mostly a community-based practice in the province, so that the paintings are anonymous like most of street art, and no mention to the author is made when they are archived[136]. In addition, the importance to restore to some extent the reference to the location and the socio-political context is even more pressing in the case of Northern Irish murals, since most of their significance/function depend on these elements. The lack of tools and techniques for their precise documentation is then another aspect to consider, although some initiatives have been taken in this direction. Finally, there is the issue of the scarcity of metadata, these latter essential for an accurate preservation of the artworks produced. This question has been addressed also in relation to street art (de la Iglesia 2015), and is mainly due to the difficulty in retrieving information on the artworks. Very often, the exact location is missing, the date may be unclear (especially when it is not specified if it refers to the artwork's production or the moment in which it has been photographed) and information on the technique, style and dimensions may not be given.

In the case of Northern Irish muralism, the lack of certain metadata may affect a more systematic (and possibly historical) knowledge of its development, that intertwines with the evolution of the narratives and memories underpinning these representations. The difficulty in providing the necessary metadata of the images of murals is acknowledged by Crowley (2015b), who found it the most challenging aspect. For the creation of the archive for which

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[136] This remains true despite the prominence gained by some muralists like David Craig, Mark Ervine and Danny Devenny, this latter probably the most famous among them. Their link to the communities and the role they claim to play as their political voice remain indeed essential for them, which explains the persistent understanding of muralism as a collective practice. See also the very well made documentary *Art of Conflict: the Murals of Northern Ireland*, realized in 2012 by Valeri Vaughn, in which the aforementioned muralists are interviewed about the role played by their artworks in perpetuating certain narratives of the conflict.

Crowley is responsible, metadata are indispensable, not only because they provide information on each of the murals recorded, but also because they allow for the archive to be searched through different ways. Considering the poor attention which had been given to muralism in the past (Rolston 2012), it is not surprising that comprehensive metadata of older pictures are difficult to retrieve. As the scholar highlights, only in 2009 the Arts Council of Northern Ireland created a digital archive, the *Troubles Archive*, collecting a variety of artworks produced during or in relation to the conflict[137]. And yet, as already seen, community-based murals do not appear among the artforms archived on the website, despite the presence of a visual art category in which one would expect to find them. The archive seems to privilege more 'institutional' forms of art and an authorial approach that is alien to the collective character of muralism. Against this backdrop, the fact that the available collections/archives of murals were born from personal or academic initiatives then becomes understandable.

A very interesting project is the online collection *Extramural Activity*[138], the aim of which is telling the history of Northern Irish life through its murals, graffiti and street art. In spite of demonstrating a clear awareness of the differences between these art forms, the collection is often ambiguous when it comes to their actual distinction; moreover, posters and banners are eventually collected along with 'traditional' murals, when their political or cultural content is acknowledged. The classical mural of Northern Ireland is described on the website in six points that can be further summarized as: its historical-political (when not overtly paramilitary) content; its link to the community and consequent anonymity; its painting-like character; and its location on a wall. While remaining faithful to this general definition, the collection adopts, along with an archival-like approach, a historical one that better highlights the development of the murals over time. The *Visual Histories* pages in fact cover the evolution of murals from their Protestant/unionist/loyalist origin to the present, helping users to see how they have been changing in relation to the political events that have affected the province[139]. In addition, specific pages have been created on a thematic basis, or devoted to a certain street/location, offering a diachronic perspective from which the change in theme or style can be tracked.

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[137] The website can be visited at the following link: http://www.troublesarchive.com/.

[138] See the link at: https://extramuralactivity.com/.

[139] The year 1981, with the explosion of republican muralism in the wake of the Blanketmen protest, is regarded by the website's curators as a turning point in the history of Northern Irish murals, a perspective which has been adopted also in the present work. The related *Peter Moloney Collection – Murals* website (up to 2013) is available at: https://petermoloneycollection.wordpress.com/.

On the other hand, murals can also be searched by selecting month and year of production, or by one of the numerous available categories, which divide the murals according to their location, subject/identity affiliation and typology/material (mural, stencil, posters, etc…). In order to better navigate the site, a glossary guiding the user to the categories used for selecting and describing the images is available; finally, the *What is a mural?* section presents a summary of the history and evolution of muralism in Northern Ireland, defining a mural by the six points mentioned above and accompanying the text with a series of images. A map of murals, graffiti, street art and memorials then helps to visualize the past and present locations of these artworks; in this case also, a diachronic perspective is offered in the temporal sequence through which they are listed, and their photographs shown.

Extramural Activity is a freely available website and does not receive any financial support from academic or governmental institutions. There is the possibility to donate an amount of money for supporting the work done by the site, which eventually includes also a tour of the murals in Belfast for people interested in it. Another possible way to contribute to the site is that of sending photographs or providing information about murals/graffiti/street art that may improve the collection. This openness towards a more participatory archive is typical of the digital culture (Müller 2021), as will be discussed in the following, and reflects the desire of sharing a common knowledge as well as of adopting a bottom-up approach to it. The ambition of the website to become a valuable instrument for research and other artistic projects emerges from the care with which the artworks are collected, since these latter are not simply stored for preservation but also inscribed within the history of the province. A lot of information is generally provided about the artworks in the form of descriptive texts that support the users in understanding what is represented and the historical-political context of reference. In this sense, Extramural Activity is much more than a simple collection of murals and street art, and can be regarded as an extremely useful archive that looks not only at the past, since it is regularly updated with new artworks appearing in Northern Ireland.

The central role played by memory and history through the pictures uploaded on the website (their information value) is well evident in the detailed descriptions/information provided for the artworks, which are generally not valued per se. While the camera settings of each image are specified at its bottom, no other metadata concerning the 'real' artwork are given, except for its specific location. There are no information regarding the dimension/size of the artwork, the material/techniques employed or the exact date of its creation; it is clear that the main objective of the website as a murals/street art's collection is that of displaying the history of the province through public artworks made by anonymous

muralists or, more recently, popular artists. To sum up, more than documenting the evolution of Northern Irish public art per se (which is still possible), Extramural Activity documents the articulation of memories *through* public art[140]. This documental approach is manifest in the practice of eventually reproducing the same artwork in more images, enlarging the frame so to capture the artwork in its relation to the environment, partially preserving the architectural context in which it arises (Caffio 2015). The archival nature of this ongoing collection emerges exactly through its ability to capture portions of the environment, which visually witnesses its transformation over time. In a way, it is possible to talk about a form of *urban archaeology* disclosed by the serial vision of the pictures taken over the years in a certain area, an option that becomes available through the location-based search offered by the website. It is an unintentional archaeology that preserves images of the old streets, houses and shops, as well as no longer existing practices and obsolete objects (street games, old cars, etc…).

Projects like Extramural Activity- then- do more than simply put into circulation images of the murals on a digital platform, since they contribute to the creation and preservation of the memory of muralism and street art and, through them, to the way in which public memories are articulated in Northern Ireland. Images are not only stored and made available to the users of the website, but are also placed within the narratives of memory in a way that is different from actual digital archives like McCormick's *Mural Directory* and Crowley's collection analyzed below. In this sense, Extramural Activity performs a *mediatization of memory*, to use Brown and Hoskins' (2010, p. 96) notion, that "operates paradoxically in its simultaneous convergence (an accumulation and radical connectivity and integration) but also dispersal and diffusion (individuals increasingly curatorial of circulating digital content) of mediatized schema". The authors refer to digital platforms like Flickr, YouTube or social media services, but their observations may be equally valid for other websites like Extramural Activity, which, while openly sharing its content, also adopts an archival approach. On the one side, the increased circulation of digital material accelerates the formation of memory, thus altering the same temporality of the images, while, on the other, it allows for a growing curatorial activity of digital content from users. Here is where the difference between social media platforms and Extramural Activity lies: if Brown and

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[140] The practice of documenting in relation to memory is evident for example when the website uploads images of murals which have been repainted on the occasion of commemorative celebrations taking place where the artwork stands; as seen in chapter 4, what is preserved, cared for or, on the contrary, erased or replaced, is highly indicative of the development or permanence of memory practices/discourses.

Hoskins acknowledge the "hyper-archival" nature of the former, it is rarely actualized, leaving the formation of memory only as a potential. On the contrary, Extramural Activity presents itself as a digital collection that implements archival practices which consciously mediate memory. Van Dijck's (2007) reflections on communicative memory are echoed in Brown and Hoskins' observations on digitally mediated practices, raising once again the question of who is actually in control of memory and its formation.

Contrary to the view expressed by Conrad (2007), the increased reproducibility of murals' images allowed by digital platforms has more consequences than just commodifying the memory of the conflict on a global scale. The re-articulation of these images, especially when an archival approach is adopted by the collector, may entail different ways of interpretation by users, based on their personal searches on the website. In these cases, the history of the conflict is continually reopened, fully exploiting the dynamic nature of muralism which has been so often highlighted. To widen the frame then means not only to reach a potentially global audience that consumes murals as (digital) images, but more radically to include it within the process of interpretation of the memories articulated in the murals themselves. Extramural Activity actively participates in this process, adopting a curatorial method that already arranges the images in interpretative paths which do not necessarily favor a consumerist economy. It is then clear that digitization affects memory and the temporalities of its formation in meaningful ways: the global circulation of content enables the emergence of what Hoskins (2011, p. 271) calls *connective* memory, characterized by "the massively increased abundance, pervasiveness and accessibility of digital technologies, devices and media, shaping an ongoing re-calibration of time, space (and place) and memory by people as they connect with, inhabit and constitute increasingly both dense and diffused social networks".

As Brown and Hoskins (2010) remark, Luhmann's systems theory already anticipated some of the aspects that they regard as distinctive of connective memory, particularly the principle of autopoiesis described in the first chapter. The constant re-activation and re-generation through which the system assures its survival is renewed by digital communications and circulation, which largely exceed the potential reach of collective memory, based on socio-cultural affinity. While murals as artefacts can still be analyzed within the frame of local memories and their link to the communities, as (digital) images they are involved in a different form of memorialization. The connective turn that, according to Hoskins (2011), marks the advent of digital technologies and their mediatization of memory, determines at the same time the inadequacy of *collective memory* as a paradigm

for describing digitally mediated forms of remembrance. Recently, the scholar proposed the notion of *multitude memory* (Hoskins 2017) as a more adequate paradigm for analyzing how people remember within and through digital environments. Multitude memory emerges with the connective turn and its transformation of the way in which individuals remember and forget in networked spaces, where the opposition between private and public memory is transcended. Its inherently archival nature, moreover, re-enacts the past in the present in ways that were not possible before the advent of digital media, with the risk that the same notion of archive may fade into insignificance.

In reality, however, this may be true for those practices of *micro-archiving* described by Pogačar (2016; 2017), whereas institutional digital archives largely resume the 'rationality' that characterized the traditional archival knowledge, an argument that will be explored more in detail below. Nevertheless, it is clear that the notion of multitude memory proposed by Hoskins is more adequate for analyzing digitally mediated practices of remembrance; it enables to capture what collective memory fails to grasp, i.e., the "new individual-social-technological relations" (Hoskins 2017, p. 90) that arise in the digital realm. In short, multitude memory transcends the sense of belonging to a certain group (that eventually extends to the nation) on which collective memories are founded, encompassing an authentically global audience that can access or participate in the transmission of memory.

Coming back to the memories conveyed by Northern Irish murals as material artefacts, it still makes sense to think of them in terms of collective memories, due to their link to the communities and the landscape in which they arise. Much of the murals' significance derives from their location within the socio-political space of Northern Ireland, and this still holds true beyond the transnational dynamics explored above or the commodification of muralism. However, as (digital) images, murals become accessible to anyone, from a user who comes across them randomly while surfing on internet to the one who intentionally searches for them. If the memories disclosed by muralism as a practice are then still local memories, identity-based and geographically determined, they are nonetheless 'consumed' in a completely different way when murals turn into images. This does not mean, however, that users are limited to the only alternative of consumerism/commodification: they may be excluded from the active process of formation of memories in which muralism is implicated, but through a (potentially unlimited) access to images of murals circulating on the web, users may contribute to their future re-signification. The digital afterlife of murals renews the dynamism of the processes of creation-preservation-erasure which are in the essence of muralism; its temporality is not only disrupted by the conservation (as images) of murals

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which were painted over, but also by the meanings/uses that these images and their memories may have in the future. In this sense, digital archives and collections that store them are part of the multitude memory, and no longer of the collective memory, even if this latter remains a valid interpretative paradigm through which murals can be studied as artefacts.

These observations on the dynamic nature of digital interactions bring us back to Brown and Hoskins (2010), who acknowledge how Luhmann had already 'anticipated' some of the aspects that characterize digitally mediated memory. Their suggestion remains however largely unexplored. A notable exception is the work of Elena Esposito (2001; 2008) who, as seen in the first chapter, has grasped the potential of Luhmann's model for her theory of social memory. This memory only exists through its constant re-actualization, made possible by the social operations performed by individuals; as such, social memory is intrinsically dynamic and connective, in a way not dissimilar to the model of multitude memory proposed by Hoskins (2017). In short, anticipating the web paradigm, Esposito's social memory comes to exist through operations rather than the items/units that 'materialize' it. More specifically, with reference to the structure of the web and its relation to the articulation of memory, Esposito states how "the static model of data retention is replaced by the dynamic model of data construction, which are generated each time from the user's instructions. […] The search engines […] generate in each individual case a unique path of research, i.e., a new structure of memory" (Esposito 2001, p. 240; my translation).

It is clear how these observations may be equally valuable for understanding the different way in which digital archives re-articulate memory through the user's searches. As a consequence, the structure of memory described by Esposito is determined by a different temporality compared to that of collective memory. In the case of Northern Irish muralism, this means that the 'circulation rate' with which murals as images are accessed or accumulated in the digital realm is completely independent from the rhythm of change that underlies the actual processes of creation-preservation-erasure that regulate muralism as a practice. Following Luhmann's terminology (Luhmann 1990), this can be translated as the autonomy of the system's temporality (in this case determined by digital operations) from the temporality of the environment (determined by the complex and often unpredictable circulation of memories and the evolving socio-political circumstances). As remarked by the German sociologist, the environment is always much more complex than the system that interacts with it, since it lacks the (dynamic) stability of the latter. If muralism has previously been theorized, following Luhmann's model, in terms of a dynamic system, it can in turn be rethought as the environment of collecting/archiving systems like Extramural Activity and

the digital repositories analyzed below. They not only inevitably alter the perception of muralism well beyond the reaffirmation of sectarian narratives, but also affect the very structure of memory: remembering the Troubles through *digital remnants*, stored or circulating on the web, means transcending the conflicts between (antagonistic) collective memories.

The *Mural Directory* and *Murals of Northern Ireland* archives

The considerations made above on the preservation of murals as (digital) images and their digital afterlife led to the notion of archive; the perception of this concept has significantly changed with the emergence of more recent practices of digital conservation. But the memory of the Troubles, and of muralism, began to be archived even before the end of the conflict. The most important collection dedicated to it was created already in 1996: this archive, known by the acronym CAIN (Conflict Archive on the Internet), was then made available online a year later, in 1997[141]. CAIN is described as "a collection of information and source material on **'the Troubles'** and **politics** in Northern Ireland from 1968 to the present" (bold in the original). The archive is regularly updated[142], and has received funds from several organizations over the years. Located in Ulster University, CAIN is an institutional archive dedicated mostly to collecting and providing resources for the Higher Education sector in the United Kingdom, even if it can be accessed for free by anyone interested in the Northern Irish conflict, especially for research purposes.

The website offers a great amount of different materials, from information about the conflict to visual sources and bibliographic references. The materials are divided into six main sections, followed by other six ones; at the bottom of the homepage, the user can gain further information on the deaths, publications and "items on this day" (depending on the day in which the website is accessed) through three separate search paths. Finally, an additional link leads to the *Accounts of the Conflict* webpage, where the user finds an archive of personal accounts of the Troubles in textual, audio or audio-visual formats. As already seen in the previous chapter, the archival practice may intertwine with that of bearing witness, opening up to a more inclusive participation of the communities in the history-making process. *Accounts of the Conflict* provides a clear example in this sense. However,

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[141] The archive can be accessed at the link: https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/.
[142] In 2021, the Ulster University announced that CAIN "will be retained as a live and curated archive" thanks also to the financial support received, and the high regard it gained, from the academic community around the world; the statement can be read at the link: https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/cainfuture.htm.

CAIN also acknowledges the relevance of murals as historical evidence of the conflict, and that for this reason are worthy of preservation.

An article by Neil Jarman (1998) is provided on the website by way of introduction to the use and meanings of murals in Northern Ireland, while some books dedicated to them are referenced along with other publications and a list of websites about the murals. But the archive does not only provide information and links, since it also offers visual materials in the form of pictures of murals reproduced among conflict-related photograph collections, including the *Victims, Survivors and Commemoration* section, where images of commemorative murals are provided. Moreover, an entire webpage is devoted to the Bogside Artists and their artworks in Derry/Londonderry. Among these scattered materials, there is the collection curated by Jonathan McCormick, the *Mural Directory*, which contains pictures of murals which appeared in Northern Ireland since 1996; unfortunately, the collection only covers the years up until September 2006, and is therefore a useful but outdated source for the analysis of Northern Irish muralism. Moreover, and this represents a severe limitation when it comes to visual artefacts, the majority of the murals archived are not accompanied by a photographic image, so that users cannot actually view them[143]. A description of the mural is however always provided, but it is unable to efficaciously replace the missing image.

Along with a description, each mural is listed according to six criteria: the album number in which it is archived, its number in the collection, its location, the type of representation, the year and, finally, its status when it was archived[144]. The date shown does not refer to the month in which the mural has been painted, but to when it was last visited by McCormick (an aspect that once again highlights the difficulty of providing precise metadata when dealing with ephemeral art forms). As it is explained in the introduction to the Mural Directory[145], McCormick was initially interested in political representations, and only subsequently started to also collect other types of depictions, including examples of street art, graffiti or relevant posters. As in the case of the Extramural Activity website, it is therefore evident how muralism appears to be a category whose boundaries are unstable. All the murals have been listed in numbered albums: the original plan was to complete 100 of

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[143] Another limitation is that only one photograph for each mural is provided (it is possible to enlarge the image clicking on it), so that the mural can be viewed only from one perspective.

[144] The status of the artwork is described according to four instances: *still exists at location*; *no longer exists*; *deteriorated*; *not applicable* (this latter with reference to politically relevant symbols/insignia which are not murals).

[145] Available at the link: https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/mccormick/intro.htm.

them and then further update the collection with new murals/street art appearing in Northern Ireland, but in the end only 83 albums have been completed. They offer to users the easiest way to search for a mural (simply clicking on the chosen album number), even if, alternatively, they can use a separate search page that allows for more specific explorations, since it is possible to locate murals on the basis of the six criteria listed above (type, year, status, album number, location and description). Through these searches, murals can thus be filtered according to the users' need, as well as independently from the chronological order followed by the albums.

The greater flexibility that characterizes the digital archive in terms of users' searching options and navigability of the site is counterbalanced by the limited freedom of interpretation with regard to the collection. If some criteria may be regarded as more or less 'objective', as it is the case with the album/mural number, or the location and date when the artwork was visited, other criteria are definitely more ambiguous. The types of murals identified by McCormick, for example, are only four, and specifically: Unionist/Loyalist; Nationalist/Republican; Other/non-aligned; not applicable. It is clear how the need to restrict the possible typologies of representation to only four categories is at least controversial, since murals affiliated to the UDA, UVF or RHC (Red Hand Commando) are all included within the same Unionist/Loyalist type, in spite of the internal differences and rivalries that have defined these paramilitary groups. Similar concerns can arise in relation to the Nationalist/Republican type, and only the description of the mural provided by McCormick may eventually clarify the more specific affiliations referred to by a certain artwork. The other two types are even more vague, since they basically derive from the refusal to adopt more specific labels; in this sense, it can be assumed that the binary opposition between Unionist/Loyalist and Nationalist/Republican prevails over other possible categorizations, since everything that does not fall within one or the other is simply not labelled. However, the logic behind McCormick's classification becomes understandable if one considers the time span in which the murals have been collected, from the years immediately preceding the signing of the Good Friday Agreement to those when the peace-building process began to be implemented. In that context, most of the representations appearing in Northern Ireland were still linked to some paramilitary groups, a reality that only (partially) changed in more recent years, as was shown throughout this work.

In general, the archive tries to maintain an objective perspective on the collected artworks, an aspect that is equally evident in the descriptions provided by McCormick. Although they are not as detailed as those accompanying the images on the Extramural Activity website,

McCormick's descriptions are extremely useful for contextualizing the artworks, and offer important information concerning historical and socio-political circumstances, as well as biographical details of the individuals portrayed in the murals[146]. But the descriptions are also useful for establishing links between the murals collected, especially when a new painting replaces the previous one. This 'archaeological' perspective on muralism helps users to partially grasp its intrinsic dynamism, and possibly the recurrence or change of certain imagery. In conclusion, it is possible to affirm that the Mural Directory presents itself as a rigorous research tool, affected however by its outdated status, not only in terms of its content, but also of its form. Extramural Activity, for example, allows for a greater interaction from the user, who can like the content posted, share it on social media (thus fostering its digital circulation) or leave a comment- and, maybe most importantly, can send new information/photographs to the website in order to contribute to its development. Because of its older format, the Mural Directory does not allow for these forms of participation, and this may significantly limit its utilization beyond research.

Different is the case of another important digital archive, the *Murals of Northern Ireland*, curated by Tony Crowley and part of the Claremont Colleges Digital Library (CCDL), in California. The collection is described as follows:

> an archive of murals, street art, graffiti and memorials from Northern Ireland - Nationalist, Republican, Unionist, Loyalist and non-aligned - which appeared during the Troubles and the post-conflict period (1979-2020). The materials record the representation of history, the expression of political standpoints, the articulation of community concerns, the formation of collective memory and modes of ideological address. The images range from overtly political declarations, to brutal depictions of the conflict, to comments on peace and the peace process, to humour and irony[147].

Despite asserting to cover the period of time that goes from 1979 to 2020, the collection has been recently updated with artworks which appeared in 2021 and 2022; in addition, reproductions of images of murals/graffiti which date back to before the year 1979 can also be found there. As already said, the archive was born from the initiative of Tony Crowley and his personal photographic collection created over the years. While privileging the recording of murals, it also covers a large amount of graffiti, street art and memorials,

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[146] Links to other sections of the archive are also available, where the user can find more specific information on a certain event/individual portrayed in the mural, or to which/whom a graffito makes reference to.

[147] The collection can be accessed at the link: https://ccdl.claremont.edu/digital/collection/mni.

offering a diversified perspective on the public and commemorative art of Northern Ireland. Compared to McCormick's Mural Directory, Crowley's collection offers a much greater selection of possible subjects through which a user's search is made possible: the *mural painting and decoration* is by far the largest subject type, followed (unsurprisingly) by the *republican* and *loyalist* ones. A *non-aligned* subject type is also present, while *nationalist* representations may be searched as a category apart (the nationalist/republican overlapping is then abolished). Overall, the list of subjects allows users to choose according to (1) the political affiliation of the representation, (2) a certain theme (Irish language, prisoners, etc...) or (3) the typology of artwork[148].

It should be said that the abundance of subjects to choose from, might generate some confusion for users. A certain artwork can fall within more than one category, so that it (re)appears in more search paths; moreover, some subjects are not clearly defined, as it is the case with the *flags* type, in which images of 'material' flags and their reproductions in murals are treated as equal. Finally, it becomes clear that the list of subjects is strongly arbitrary, since it could be further extended as much as reduced. If McCormick's archive is certainly questionable in terms of its type of classification, it follows however the only logic of political affiliation (when an artwork cannot be classified as Unionist/Loyalist or Nationalist/Republican it is simply other/non-aligned or not applicable). The logic behind Crowley's list of available subjects is definitely less obvious in this sense, and this may affect the user's experience of the archive. Murals/artworks can however also be searched by date, a valuable option that allows to see the amount of material photographed in a certain year, and consequently to get an idea of the volume of production of new murals over time. If then a chronological search is given as a possible alternative, exploring the artworks on the basis of their location in Northern Ireland is definitely less immediate.

Some artworks are reproduced without specifying the place in which they were photographed, making it difficult for the user to evaluate the amount and variation of murals in a certain location. This once again highlights the difficulty in providing all the necessary metadata related to ephemeral artworks (de la Iglesia 2015; Crowley 2015b), which is one of the most challenging aspects of the curatorial process. In addition to the difficulty in contextualizing the artworks when the location is not specified, there is an occasional lack of descriptions of what is represented in the mural, or of the political/cultural reference of a certain graffito. In general, the descriptions provided by Crowley are less specific than those

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[148] As already stated in the description of the collection quoted above, the archive not only preserves murals, but also images of street art, graffiti and memorials, as well as of flags, banners, posters, arches and street signs.

offered by McCormick, but this may also be due to the fact that the Mural Directory is part of a larger archive of the Troubles, which allows for the creation of internal links that deepen the user's understanding of the represented events and symbols. On the other hand, however, a positive aspect of Crowley's collection is that, for each artwork, there is often more than one image provided, so that it can be viewed from different angles, also framing the surrounding landscape. Contrary to McCormick's Mural Directory, Crowley's digital archive definitely privileges the visual aspect of the artworks collected, since each of them is accompanied by at least one image. In this sense, it allows for an analysis not only of the evolution of themes/symbols across time, but also of the styles/techniques of muralism, to which the scholar pays particular attention in his articles (Crowley 2015a; 2022).

In conclusion, the *Murals of Northern Ireland* digital archive can be considered a better instrument for *visualizing* the multiple representations that have marked the landscape in the province, offering to users an important collection that records their transformation, as well as the recurrence of certain imagery, over the decades. As an updated source, the archive also covers more recent and contemporary artworks, whereas the Mural Directory is an outdated repository in this regard, even if probably more easy to navigate and generally more rich in information on the conflict. Having been created well after the end of the Troubles, the *Murals of Norther Ireland* archive reflects this in its wider and diversified approach to muralism, no longer limited to the traditional Unionist/Loyalist or Nationalist/Republican dichotomy. Although it started as a personal collection of pictures taken when the conflict was still going on, it evolved into an institutional source, primarily intended for undergraduate and graduate students, who have also been involved in the digitization of the images and the maintenance of the archive[149]. This rationale is also evident in the decision to avoid a descriptive title for the images collected, in favor of an accession number. As Crowley explains: "ascribing a title to works that are untitled often involves making an interpretation, possibly even an evaluation, of the content of an image, and that can lead to difficulties in a collection that attempts to present the materials, in so far as it is possible, without evaluative comment"[150].

The attempt to 'objectively' narrate the conflict and its aftermath through the images of thousands of artworks appeared in Northern Ireland seems then to be the main goal animating both McCormick's Mural Directory and Crowley's collection. Finally

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[149] See the presentation of the archive by Rebecca L. Lubas, Associate Dean of The Claremont Colleges Library, at the link: https://www.diglib.org/murals-of-northern-ireland-at-claremont-colleges-digital-library/.

[150] Crowley's words are quoted at the link above.

acknowledging the relevance of these artefacts after decades in which they had been largely disregarded, the two digital archives intervene in the formation of the future memory of the Troubles, but above all establish the memorability of muralism per se from a historical point of view. Entailing an accurate curatorial practice, a digital archive constitutes itself as a space in which the memories transmitted by the artefacts collected are reconfigured in new paths of meaning, retrospectively rationalizing a much more fragmented reality; but, at the same time, an archive also projects into the future its own *mediation* of the past, transcending local memories (as well as more marginalized ones) that may not 'survive' over time. These are some of the aspects with which the following paragraphs will deal, rethinking the archive after the digital shift and taking into consideration the implications that arise in relation to the future memory of the Troubles, in Northern Ireland and beyond.

Archiving muralism, part 1: the communities' loss of control over their representations

The concept of 'archive' has been undergoing a radical change with digitization. Its dependence on the structures of power and the ideological implications in relation to colonialism and its legacy (Burton 2005) have been largely challenged by the open access policy adopted by many digital archives/collections established in recent years, creating the utopia of a free sharing of knowledge. If the initial enthusiasm has been generally declining, it remains true that the archive cannot be thought of in the same way as it used to be. From a static repository in which documents, artefacts and other materials are stored, it has been reconfigured as a set of practices that, as Røssaak (2010) specifies, are in constant *motion*. The digital archive also encompasses the operations performed by users, which, through machine intelligence, rearrange the very structure of the archive, making it fluid and dynamic. Contrary to traditional archives, the digital one is configured as a database, which stands as one of the possible typologies of archive: more specifically, a database differs from its analog predecessors by the "inherent possibility for retrieval and filtering of data in multiple ways" (Paul 2007, in Sæther 2010, p. 97). According to Sæther, the database favors the emergence of highly transitory and precarious connections that each time (re)create new structures from data and materials. As a consequence, the user enjoys the (relative) freedom of establishing unpredictable paths of meaning, eventually 'subverting' the logic of the archive as a mere collection of data.

Nevertheless, as Sæther is well aware, the opposition between archive and database on the model proposed by Hal Foster is largely misleading[151]. Foster defines the archive as fundamentally tactile, based on human memory and the principle of singularity (of the items collected); on the other hand, the database is characterized by its low-tactile quality, and is based on machine memory and the principle of reproducibility. However, while exceeding human memory, a database still depends on a predetermined structure that allows users to establish connections through their searches within its limits. This is well visible in the cases of the digital archives of murals illustrated above, where types/subjects for searching are already provided to the user. Moreover, in both cases the chronological order (although not the only option) still seems to be the favored search criterion, mimicking the logic of the analog archive. Finally, as the Mural Directory and Murals of Northern Ireland collections show, databases are not only ruled by machine memory. More properly, this latter is inextricably intertwined with human memory, as it is particularly evident in those cases of community-based archives gathering audio-visual testimonies, but the same may be also true for less 'participatory' collections.

The Mural Directory and Murals of Northern Ireland archives were both born from the personal photographic collections of McCormick and Crowley, who, over the years, have crossed Belfast, Derry/Londonderry and other locations in Northern Ireland in search of murals/graffiti on the walls, often finding themselves in dangerous situations (see chapter 5). The images they have collected and later digitized, then preserve the memory of their experiences and encounters with the artworks, as well as the collective memories reflected in them along with a real 'archaeology of the landscape' occasionally captured by photography. In addition, the personal memories of users may revive through the archives and the, however limited, participatory approach adopted by them. Especially in the case of the Murals of Northern Ireland collection, users can eventually contribute to it by offering additional information on the artworks. Obviously, these suggestions need to be approved by the curators, an aspect which is not secondary and that once again proves the limitations in the creation and sharing of memory, even if they may considerably vary depending on the archive project.

As observed by Müller (2021), the greater 'democratization' of knowledge allowed by digital archives does not completely remove some form of control exerted on the past. New authoritative interpretations tend to arise even in the more fluid digital space, proving how

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[151] The reference is to Foster's article 'An Archival Impulse' (2004), *October* 110: 3-22.

the open access policy to the collections and the eventual possibility to freely download/use the reproductions of items may be insufficient.[152] This is also the case with community-based archives which have been increasingly emerging in recent years. Contrary to institutional/academic collections, these archives are established and maintained directly by the communities, which create their own space for telling their stories through a bottom-up approach. In reality, as Müller underlines, while certain narratives may find a space that did not previously exist, they are never completely free from some form of control that, in the end, will 'privilege' some victims/groups at the expense of others (see also Pine 2020). Moreover, in order to be preserved, an archive needs some curatorial practices that re-establish some authority and favor certain interpretations of the events recorded, in a way that, according to Müller (2021), brings the digital archive closer to a 'museum environment'.

These reflections on accessibility and democratization as the principles on which digital archives are built, are extremely relevant for understanding the collections of murals presented above. As already remarked, the Mural Directory and Murals of Northern Ireland archives are academic tools, not community-based archives. However, they collect and deal with community-based artworks that, and this should once again be highlighted, have for a long time been neglected, and are still contested at present. In short, although the artefacts preserved are a cultural expression of the communities that the archives are supposed to represent, those same communities have not been involved in the process of creation and maintenance of the archives. In this sense, if the digital circulation of images of murals already entails for the communities a first *loss of control* over their representations, their preservation in archives affiliated to institutions may represent a second form of loss. Murals remain an extremely controversial form of public art: on the one side, they are the proud expression of the identity and political affiliations of the communities, while, on the other, they too often represent the interests/narratives of stronger internal groups (see chapter 1). This fundamental tension may be completely lost when murals are converted into images collected in archives, since their classification is likely to further silence the controversial nature of a mural. Murals are then simply treated as historical traces whose value lies in their representational function, which turns them into just another research instrument deprived of the emotional layers that are part of the complex significance of muralism.

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[152] This is the case for example of the Murals of Northern Ireland collection, which allows users to freely download the materials or work on them (Crowley 2015b). Images can also be viewed in Mirador, an open-source image viewing platform that allows users to interact with the pictures in several ways.

The 'impoverishment' of the meanings of murals is reflected in the principles of objectivity and neutrality adopted by the archives. The choice made by Crowley not to give a descriptive title to the artworks collected goes in the direction of avoiding any sense or interpretation on his part, leaving users free to make sense of them. This approach is however typical of institutional/academic archives, caught in the "professional pretense of objectivity or the false sense of neutrality" (Caswell 2021, p. 18) that rule them. As Caswell highlights, this understanding derives from a certain interpretation of concepts that are central to Western archival theories, like that of *record*. According to these traditions, "the record was created as a "byproduct" of an event. The event is over; the record remains. The record, if preserved now, can be used in the future. There is a straight line between creation, archiving, and use" (Ibid., p. 35). The treatment of the images of murals in the two digital archives reflects exactly this attitude. Not only are they conceived as records, 'traces' of conflicts temporarily inscribed in the landscape, but they are also projected into a future in which they can be used for research purposes or in order to make sense of the conflict through the study of its visual expressions. This inevitably suggests an understanding of muralism in almost evolutionary terms, as if there was a chronological development through which it could acquire a single dimension, or from which it is possible to learn a 'lesson' for the future.

In reality, as emerged throughout this work, muralism is certainly highly dynamic, but it does not follow an evolutionary unfolding. It has developed over time an increasing awareness that is reflected in forms of self-reference (see chapters 1 and 4) that allow for a systematic approach to it, but this does not necessarily mean that it follows a coherent and linear evolution[153]. Crowley (2015a) is well aware of that, as when he remarks the (growing) reappearance of sectarian images after years in which less controversial representations had prevailed, prompted by the positive premises of the peace process. His more nuanced overview of the transformation of murals, however, is hardly reflected in his collection. It is true that some search paths allow users to detect the increasing or decreasing (re)appearance of sectarian representations, but they still remain anchored to an impression of a progressive evolution of the murals in which expressions of dissent appear to be an *aberration* with respect to their 'expected' development. The notion of *palimpsest* might be a more apt concept to understand muralism, since it rejects the idea of progressive development in favor of an internally diversified and fragmented reality. Through this figure, the scale of

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[153] This is true both with reference to the styles/techniques embraced by muralism (even if a certain evolution towards an increased level of complexity is noticeable, as pointed out by Crowley 2015a) and to its imagery/iconography.

conflicting representations that coexist in the landscape at any given moment may be restored in a more intuitive way.

This necessity is probably at the base of the implementation of digital and interactive tools such as GIS and Google maps. While allowing for a more immersive experience of navigation of the archive, these tools also seem to compensate for its static nature, rediscovering, in addition, its spatial dimension. Analog archives were associated with physical spaces, usually linked to power, though the temporal aspect entailed by the process of preservation has often prevailed over the spatial dimension. If digitization renews the spatiality of the archive towards the greater mobility and fluidity of users' interactions, it also renovates it through the implementation of geo-localization. In the section *Visualising the Conflict*, for example, CAIN provides GIS and Google maps, along with a virtual educational space that "allows users to interact with information and 3D models of physical memorials"[154]. More specifically, GIS maps locate the spots in which conflict-related deaths occurred, as well as where physical memorials to these victims can be found in public spaces. Google maps, on the other hand, display additional information on both the memorials and the circumstances of the deaths; moreover, a selected memorial can also be viewed in Google Street View[155]. Among the different types of memorials that have been geo-localized, there are also some commemorative murals, which are then included within the broader category of 'physical memorials'.

In their presentation of the project *'Remembering': Victims, Survivors and Commemoration in Northern Ireland*, Kelleher and Melaugh (2011) highlight how GIS and Google maps, along with the creation of virtual spaces, can improve the accessibility and comprehension of the data provided by CAIN. Having in mind the user's experience of navigation, the *Visualising the Conflict* section aims to enhance "ways of manipulating, visualising and interpreting the data" (Ivi., p. 5). To (partially) restore the spatial dimension of the memorials listed in the archive is then not the only purpose of the project, which is designed to offer a user-centered experience. What becomes clear is that the Model User, to paraphrase the famous notion of Model Reader by Umberto Eco (1979), is either a student/researcher interested in the Northern Irish conflict[156] or tourists wishing to know

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[154] See the webpage at the link: https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/victims/gis/index.html.

[155] In 2013, it was also released (on iTunes) the iPhone App *Northern Ireland Memorials*, which provides information, photographs and location of the physical memorials (from simple plaques to memorial gardens) to be found in Northern Ireland. For an overview of the App see the link: https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/cainapp/index.html.

[156] This is made clear in Kelleher and Melaugh (2011), who, in their conclusions, address specifically the student/researcher of the conflict as the one who benefits the most from the information provided.

more about it before or during their visit. Obviously, this does not mean that other user profiles are not taken into account by the project's developers, but simply that these model users are more likely to access and benefit from the data provided. Once again, the communities that created and look after the memorials in their own spaces are not mentioned or addressed, and they have not been involved or consulted when the project has been implemented.

Not different seems to be the case of the Murals of Northern Ireland collection. Its redevelopment included the addition of GIS and Google maps to locate the position of the artworks, and it is planned to also create "time capsules of the streets of Belfast using the image record"[157]. If implemented, the project will further engage students from Claremont University in its development (note also that the archive is located in the United States, not in Northern Ireland), strengthening its collaborative nature, which will be, however, restricted to the academic environment. In short, while digital technologies are able to restore in the archive a spatial and fluid dimension that improves the accessibility of data, issues of exclusion from their creation, management and interpretation remain. Reflecting on the changes in the production and circulation of traditional cultural memory triggered by digitization, Thylstrup (2018, p. 190) notes how "new forms of governance and authority" have been produced. The public and central institutions that were mainly responsible for the management of cultural memory are now only a part of much more complex, in the words of the author, "memory ecosystems". With reference to the observations made by Marianne Ping Huang, Thylstrup remarks how the

> shift from closed – and often publically funded – circuits to networked commercial channels is among other things illustrated by a new cultural memory discourse in which the concept of "resource" branches out into new "communities of practice," just as it is made evident by the new emphases on "new markets", "new stakeholders" or "new partners" for emerging "value chains" within in business plans for digital cultural heritage organizations (Ibid.)

It is our opinion that this reconfiguration of cultural memory and the vocabulary that accompanies it show an underlying politics that may be defined as *neoliberal* in its essence. While democratizing the access to knowledge and contributing to its increasing transnationalism, digitization also follows a public agenda in which for some groups the

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[157] As stated at the link: https://www.diglib.org/murals-of-northern-ireland-at-claremont-colleges-digital-library/.

control over their own cultures may be endangered, instead of ensured. More than transnational, many digital archives risk to appear as repositories in and through which a global memory, growingly alien to the communities' experiences and recollections, is practiced and lastly consumed. The two archives of murals analyzed above exemplify these aspects: designed according to the interests of academia, they basically follow a neoliberal model whose beneficiaries are mainly individuals unrelated to the cultural heritage curated by the archives. Again, the case of the Murals of Northern Ireland collection is particularly indicative in this sense: located in the United States, the archive is curated with the participation of students from Claremont University, who contribute to the shaping of muralism as a cultural heritage (through which the Northern Irish conflict is memorialized), in spite of them being unconnected with it.

Recalling the famous question asked by Hall (2023 [1999]), we are still left with the same doubt, "whose heritage"? Although this issue emerged in the context of postcolonial studies and in relation to the 'appropriation' of non-Western cultures by Western institutions, it is also central for understanding the politics of preservation of a cultural heritage that belongs to marginal groups. Hall traces the developments in the conception of heritage back to a growing political consciousness from excluded groups that gave rise to some fundamental shifts:

> A list of these shifts would have to include a radical awareness by the marginalised of the symbolic power involved in the activity of representation; a growing sense of the centrality of culture and its relation to *identity*; the rise amongst the excluded of a 'politics of recognition' alongside the older politics of equality; a growing reflexivity about the constructed and thus contestable nature of the authority which some people acquire to 'write the culture' of others; a decline in the acceptance of the traditional authorities in authenticating the interpretative and analytic frameworks which classify, place, compare and evaluate culture; and the concomitant rise in the demand to re- appropriate control over the 'writing of one's own story' as part of a wider process of cultural liberation (Hall 2023 [1999], p. 18; italic in the original).

These aspects are all central to the history of muralism in Northern Ireland. The strongly political nature of the representations, their relation to the identities of the communities (as controversial as they may be) and the necessity to tell their *own* stories are all constitutive elements of muralism. And yet, how much of this is really preserved when murals are collected and classified according to rigid criteria imposed by supposedly neutral archives? It should be remarked that murals are not *mute* artefacts: they have been narrating the stories

of the communities and their involvement in the conflict, while, at present, they reflect the concerns and expectations of a changing society. As outlined in the previous chapter, murals are in themselves a form of archive through which the communities find expression, a practice of resistance and (re)appropriation of their own place in history. If there might not be another way to preserve murals (and on the 'feasibility' of preserving ephemeral artefacts we will return soon), it is however necessary to reflect on the implications that their archiving and classification have with respect to the communities. Therefore, while transforming muralism into a cultural heritage, digital archives 'rationalize' the narratives conveyed by its representations, further mediating the transmission of the memories of the communities. In this sense, the same process of memory-making evolves alongside the establishment of canonical version(s) of the past (Müller 2021), that will inevitably influence how it will be remembered. Not even digital archives, in spite of their greater participatory approach, escape this vicious circle.

Partly different is the case of oral testimonies in which local people tell their stories directly to the viewer/listener. Community-based archives usually privilege this form of memory-making precisely because of its inclusiveness, since the past is remembered from different perspectives, avoiding an unnecessary claim to neutrality. Although these archives do not escape the curatorial processes and classification of the testimonies collected, they are able to retain a certain control over the transmission of memory beyond its wider circulation as a digital heritage. This is particularly true when the participatory approach also includes the collection of materials which are donated by people involved in the archive. The North West Film Archive (NWFA) offers an example of this typology of archiving. A collection of video footage from counties Derry and Donegal (Ferrario 2008), the NWFA has digitized a large number of personal and family videos provided by local people. The historical value of the archive is not only given by the recording of episodes of Irish history (such as a footage of De Valera's visit to Derry in 1951), but also by more 'trivial' (or vernacular, in the words of Keightley and Pickering 2014) amateur films bearing witness to the daily life of people in the villages. Unintentionally archival at the origin, these videos allow for a polyphonic narration and visualization of history which sees the active participation of the communities and the sharing of memories in their own terms, both basic elements for the definition of a community archive according to Caswell (2021).

Other valuable examples of cultural heritage created and managed directly from within the communities are the museums mentioned in the first chapter, the Museum of Free Derry and the Belfast-based Irish Republican History Museum and Andy Tyrie Interpretive Centre.

While their controversial nature and their involvement in the process of heritagization of the conflict have already been described, one should also consider that these spaces offer at the same time the opportunity for certain groups to speak for themselves. Unable to reach a global audience, since their materials have not been digitized and made freely available on websites, these museums prove however the ability to understand the interest in the conflict and its stories shown by international visitors. Certainly, the risk to 'canonize' some versions of history is well evident, since these collections are openly biased, but perhaps it is for this very reason (and the refusal to adopt a false neutrality) that they better represent the feelings and perspectives of certain groups. In addition, both the archives of oral testimonies/amateur materials and the community-based museums provide to the user/visitor stories, not only records (Müller 2021). Contrary to those digital archives in which artefacts are listed with metadata, community-based projects restore "a more emotionally engaging narrative format" (Ivi., pp. 179-180) that reflects the same involvement of the curators in their own collections.

To summarize the observations made in the previous paragraphs, the Mural Directory and Murals of Northern Ireland archives represent important resources (if not the only available ones) for the study of Northern Irish muralism. Nevertheless, preserving and collecting images of artefacts created by local communities inevitably raises the issue of whether, and to what extent, these archives, managed by academic professionals, can really represent the same communities and their material culture. As seen, the risk is that of subjecting them to the different rationality of the classifications imposed on the artefacts (and their significance), which are not only deprived of their original context, and on this point we will return later, but also of much of the narratives that surround them. Paraphrasing Hirsch and Spitzer (2010), these collections are likely to *erase the witness in the archive*. The treatment of murals as traces through which the (ongoing) process of the articulation of memories in Northern Ireland can be restored, obeys to a logic that privileges records over stories, as if the descriptions/metadata accompanying the artefacts may suffice to fully understand them. Entailing the communities' loss of control over their own representations, at least to a certain degree, the digital archives of murals may represent the final step towards a global and digitally mediated memory of the conflict and its legacy.

Archiving muralism, part 2: the alternative temporalities of the archive

The following paragraphs want to be a sort of 'provocation' around the (almost indisputable) idea that the past and its traces should always be preserved. The hyper-archivability that characterizes our contemporary societies (Brown and Hoskins 2010; Garde-Hansen, Hoskins and Reading 2009) seems to leave no room for forgetting; everything is recorded and eventually shared, even if the ultimate permanence of memory remains questionable and fragile. What is evident, however, is that digitally mediated memory is primarily affected on the temporal level, which, if on the one hand transcends the human ability to remember, on the other tends to 'fragment' into distinct temporalities which are no longer controllable by, or dependent on, human intelligence. As underlined throughout this work, the temporalities of muralism in Northern Ireland are both dependent on internal and external factors, such as the rhythm of change that underlies the processes of creation-preservation-erasure of murals or the socio-political circumstances that may affect them. However, when murals are converted into (digital) images, they enter a different regime of temporality that 'frees' them not only from their material lifespan, but also from other conditions that determine their existence. This does not mean that murals as digital images exist devoid of any meaning, but that the temporalities of these images are erratic and autonomous on the Web and in the digital archives that collect them.

With reference to digital memory, Wolfgang Ernst (2013) highlights how the different temporalities prompted by digitization establish veritable orders of reality: he proposes to name them *tempor(e)alities*, as to underline their repercussions on the 'ontological' level. Tempor(e)alities represent temporalities alternative to the historical discourse, which follows a narrative order of the events and, above all, is dependent on the human understanding of time. On the contrary, digital tempor(e)alities free the time itself from the exclusive domain of human intelligence, while simultaneously allowing for the emergence of other temporalities beyond those on which the chronological and narrative order are based. As a consequence, the generation of new memory experiences an exponential growth, since the present is almost immediately turned into the past and archived, in spite of its increasing fragmentation. The machine intelligence interferes in these processes to the point that it can no longer be separated from human operations: as Ernst (Ivi., p. 87) states with reference to digital archives, "the microtemporality of the data-processing operations (synchronization) is thus superimposed on the historical archive's macrotime".

As seen in the case of the collections of murals, the macrotime established by the archives through their ordering and classification of the artworks makes it possible to perceive muralism in its historical development in a way that would be impossible without such interventions. At the same time, user interactions (mediated by the machine operations) each time re-create and renew the archive's macrotime, allowing for the emergence of other temporalities of muralism, which, as already said, are independent from the actual rhythm of change that regulates the processes of creation-preservation-erasure of murals as material artefacts. Treating murals as records, the archives anchor them to a temporality that simulates that recreated by the historical discourse, missing however to a large extent the subtler temporal relations they had with the socio-political circumstances in which murals have been painted or left to decay[158]. In short, if user's searches and interactions within the archive constantly re-open its structure, they also give rise to alternative temporalities of muralism which are inherent to the archive as a digitally mediated system of memory.

The (digital) images of murals cannot be understood as simple reproductions of the material artefacts from which they derive, and this concerns something more than the 'ontological' nature of the image. Reflecting on the digitization of photograph collections, Joanna Sassoon (2007) remarks how these processes of translation cause the loss of the tension between the photograph, its materiality and its context, which determines much of the significance of the picture. While this is even more true in the case of digital reproductions of material artefacts, this is only one aspect of the problem. In reality, digital objects are constitutively different from the items from which they derive, and are subjected to autonomous temporalities compared to them. More specifically, they exist as processes more than actual items. In the words of Geismar (2018, p. 23), "digital objects should be understood as situated within a continuum of mediation defined by an ongoing process of translation and remediation and a fundamental capacity for lateral connection". This definition makes clear how a different understanding of digital objects is crucial, but it also reveals the implications it has for the generation of new memory. The same structure of the archive has been deeply affected by digitization (Ernst 2013; 2017), which replaced its static format with a fluid model in which the past is not simply retrieved but more radically re-produced. In the case of the archives of murals, this means that the collective memories

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[158] This is all the more true when the murals accessed in the archives no longer exist on the spot. Although information on the status of a mural/artefact at the moment of its recording may be provided (as in the case of the Mural Directory), such information may not be valid months (or days) after; in short, reflecting the actual status of each mural/artefact listed would require the constant update of the archive, an aspect that reveals the complexity of preserving ephemeral art forms such as muralism or street art.

conveyed by the communities' representations or the social memory of muralism do not coincide anymore with the digitally mediated and global memory of this practice instituted by the archive. Its autonomous temporalities favor the ultimate *displacement* of the narratives of the conflict, an aspect that coexists with the archive's macrotime as the legacy of the historical discourse and its 'rationality'.

The plurality and increased circulation of narratives emerging from interactions with the archive are made possible by that experience of the discontinuous that, according to Ernst (2013), originates from the microtemporality of its operations. Contrary to the historical discourse, defined by narrative time, digital archives privilege "selection over storage, addressability over sorting" (Ivi., p. 98), thus favoring an experience of discontinuity that affects the same perception of the past as well as the reproduction of memory[159]. The collapse of narrative time, which does not completely disappear, exposes to a greater extent the inevitable absences that are a constitutive element of any archive: in the words of Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995, p. 51), "silences are inherent in the creation of sources, the first moment of historical production".

Much of the research done in recent years on the concept of archive, especially within the field of postcolonial studies, has focused in particular on these 'silences', which mark the processes of a history-making dominated by Western civilization. This certainly remains a central issue at present; and yet, it may be interesting, in our case, to reverse the question and wonder instead about the *excess of the archive*. Coming back to the 'provocative' argument raised at the opening of this section, one may wonder whether our contemporary propensity to preserve almost everything is always the most appropriate approach to the past (and, increasingly, the present). Such question does not intend to deny the great utility of the digital collections of murals described above. They constitute fundamental repositories thanks to which it becomes possible to study the history and evolution of muralism in Northern Ireland; moreover, they finally recognize the relevance of this expression of visual culture for a better understanding of the formation and transmission of collective memories in the province. Our provocation aims rather at questioning the archives' position in relation to the ephemerality of murals, as well as the consequences that their politics of preservation

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[159] It may be said that a different temporality of discontinuity also characterizes muralism in its materiality, since the memories and historical events portrayed appear as 'scattered' in the landscape when considered together. While it is possible then to recover some narrative linearity within the single representation, this vanishes in the polyphony of the whole, where dissident voices, progressive perspectives and divergent accounts of the past coexist. Obviously, this temporality of discontinuity is completely different from that which emerges within the digital archive, since this latter is largely dependent on machine operations, while the other is still related to human agency.

may have for the future memory of the Troubles and the same muralism. The issue of the communities' loss of control over their representations analyzed above, represents therefore only one aspect deriving from the digitization of images of murals.

Reintroducing the notion of ephemerality after having discussed some of the consequences entailed by preservation in digital archives, allows us to raise the question of temporality from another perspective. The ephemerality characteristic of some art forms, such as street art and muralism, is rather ambiguous, since it is constitutive of them while, at the same time, it represents the main reason for their preservation in the form of visual reproductions. In the case of street art, the general approach towards its digital preservation and circulation has changed significantly, and many artists now promote their own artworks on digital media, thus contributing to the 'alteration' of their ephemerality firsthand[160]. With reference to the processes of digital archiving of street art, Greco (2017) reflects on the different perception of this art form on the temporal level: the digital reproduction of artworks does not simply imply their replication as images, but more radically their perpetuation, in the absence of the original, which comes to be "invested with a function of memory creation/selection" (p. 115, my translation). If the establishment of a cultural memory of street art is made possible by its photographic recording and subsequent digitization, it should be noted that such memory is increasingly global, or *glocal*, as Greco highlights. Also as a consequence of these alterations that invest the ephemerality of street art works, determining their permanence and ubiquity, the resulting glocal and archived memory is largely responsible for the creation of what Greco, echoing Ricoeur (2000), defines as a social place, in which the cultural distribution is spatially based (Greco 2017, p. 119).

The ephemerality of street art works and murals raises however a number of questions that involve much more than the issue of their durability. The alteration of the temporary nature and precariousness underlying these artworks caused by their preservation, also entails their quasi 'ontological' transformation, as a consequence of their dissociation from the original context and (expected) lifespan. Paradoxically, the preservation of ephemeral artefacts, while representing the only way to ensure their permanence, simultaneously

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[160] More complex may be those cases in which the preservation of the artworks is not carried out by photographic reproductions, but through an actual process of museification, which involves very different curatorial practices. See for example the case of the temporary exhibition of street art history by the Bologna museum *Genus Bononiae* in 2016 and the reaction to it by the street artist Blu, who erased or covered with paint all his artworks in Bologna as a protest to the museum's decision to remove them from their original context (Mazzucchelli 2017b).

reveals the unfeasibility of preservation per se and the ultimate *defection* of the archive. It is in this sense that becomes legitimate to wonder about the archivability of ephemeral artworks or, in a more provocative way, the *excess of the archive*, to be understood as a synonym of that hyper-archivability characterizing our contemporary era (Brown and Hoskins 2010).

Coming back to Northern Irish murals, their ephemerality is not only related to their materiality or the weather to which they are exposed, but also to changing socio-political circumstances that affect them. The deterioration of a mural, which often leads to its inevitable "death" (McCormick and Jarman 2005), is especially significant per se in Northern Ireland, where muralism is rooted in political commitment and the perpetuation of collective memories. Such deterioration, which is often indicative of socio-political developments in the province, manifests itself as another and subtler form of ephemerality that the archive largely fails to record; in spite of McCormick's attempt to document the actual status of each mural at the time of its recording, what we see (when an image is available) is a static picture that is likely to 'testify' to the previous or current existence of a mural without, however, being able to also convey its past or present socio-political relevance. The archive obeys then to a function of documentation of the trace as a record, permanently fixed in the accessible image, but unable to restore the wider socio-political framework in which a mural comes to exist, is eventually altered or 'dies'. In short, in Northern Ireland muralism manifests another form of ephemerality that arises from the temporality of its representations in relation to specific socio-political circumstances, as well as to the dynamics of memory at their base.

The practices of preservation adopted by the digital collections of murals follow a Western tradition "that assume the desirability and possibility of "fixing" a record to a particular moment in time with as little degradation as possible for perpetuity" (Caswell 2021, p. 96). Caswell, however, acknowledges how records change over time, just as much as their interpretation. In addition, she remarks that not everything is meant to be preserved or permanently safeguarded, since the communities/groups whose artefacts are collected may feel the desire to leave behind the memories conveyed by them. On the contrary, the conventional approach that is also followed by the digital collections analyzed above privileges what Caswell defines as *recuperative* and *representational* practices of archiving, whose limits become evident in the case of preservation of highly dynamic and ephemeral artworks. Such limits also concern the broader significance that artefacts acquire on the affective and political level.

As remarked at the end of chapter 4, Tony Crowley (2022) is fully aware of the issues raised by the archiving of murals. Although he barely addresses the question of ephemerality, he draws attention to the limits of the archive for understanding muralism in all its complexity:

> an archive is an archive; it is a repository of materials, shaped and forms in particular ways, whose meanings are not necessarily easily available. In order to make sense of those materials, murals in the case of *Murals of Northern Ireland* archive, it is necessary to apply the traditional skills of the humanities in an inter-disciplinary way. That is, to read the signs carefully, patiently, contextually, historically; to pay attention to detail and form; to grasp the significance of a single item in relation to a tradition; to grasp complexity and nuance (p. 116).

Nevertheless, Crowley seems to be especially concerned with the fact that the context of the artwork is lost in the archive, thus limiting its interpretation. As the scholar observes (Crowley 2015b), the location of a mural is often indicative of its political affiliation in subtler ways, which affect the choice to classify it in one way or another. Moreover, the context often provides that additional information which is indispensable for interpreting the content of a certain representation, or its value as a memorial when it commemorates individuals who lost their lives on the spot where the mural stands. In particular, the spatial and temporal dimensions become even more significant when photographs of older murals reproduce streets or architectures that are no longer existent, disappeared as a consequence of urban regeneration (an aspect already discussed in chapter 5). These images of lost spaces, indicative of a form of unintentional memory (the *mémoire involontaire* mentioned by Ernst with reference to sound collections, see Ernst 2013), are perceived and understood in a very different way when they are re-accessed long after they were taken[161]. This implies that they develop their own temporality (along with the temporality of the material, in the case of analog photography), which is as independent from urban change (the image as record) as it is from the ephemerality of what they reproduce, which may be long since gone (the image as trace). Finally, when archived, photographs of murals hold multiple layers of temporality: while tied up to the moment in which they have been taken, as pictures incorporated into a series they produce that macrotime (Ernst 2013) referred above, that is fetishized as the Past or History to which the archive aspires.

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[161] Crowley (2015b) also specifies how some material has been definitely lost over time, including relevant information/references to be incorporated in the descriptions of the artworks photographed.

Reflecting on the temporalities of images and how they alter the contemporary perception of the artefacts they reproduce, then, becomes necessary for understanding what are the consequences that digital archives may have on the future memory of the conflict and of all those expressions, such as muralism, related to it. The loss of the context in the archive addressed by Crowley, however relevant, is not the only issue at stake. Much of the significance of muralism also derives from its own rhythm of change, which each time determines, at least in part, what to preserve, what to renew and finally what to erase from the landscape. As suggested above, the ephemerality of murals should be rethought in a broader sense, which recovers their socio-political dimension and the temporality at its base[162]. Since the archive cannot record this further declination of ephemerality, and generate instead alternative and autonomous temporalities, it then collects images of murals, but it is ultimately unable to record muralism per se. The digitization and subsequent classification of the artefacts relegate them to a decontextualized environment in which their images reiterate certain representations of the conflict on a global scale, dissociating them from their socio-political dimension and its temporality, replaced by those of the archive. To sum up, the diversified ephemerality of muralism can only be preserved in that temporary, defective and partial form of urban archive described in the previous chapter, in which a mural *has the right to die*, to paraphrase again McCormick and Jarman (2005). It manifests itself as a *ruined archive*[163] (Chambers, Grechi, and Nash 2014), i.e., an archive in its dissolution, where the power relations become visible in their making and fading away, sometimes revealed by the violence of the removal of a representation or its 'violation' (a graffito superimposed on it, its defacement with paint).

Raising the issue of the actual *an-archivability* of muralism, this should be stressed again, does not aim to advocate for the rejection of its preservation. On the contrary, digital archives represent a fundamental resource for accessing the massive amount of artworks produced in the working-class areas of Northern Ireland over the decades. The purpose behind the provocation of wondering about the feasibility of archiving muralism is that of stimulating deep considerations on these curatorial processes, which are missing at present. The digital afterlife of murals as images and the implications of it should be finally addressed, especially

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[162] This is also true in the case of street art, for which the concept of ephemerality is central and often constitutive. However, the prevailing singularity of the artworks compared to the collective nature of Northern Irish muralism entails a significantly less and different dependence on the socio-political circumstances than that which characterizes the working-class murals of Northern Ireland.

[163] It should be noted that the authors take as an example of ruined archive precisely the landscape, with reference to the sentence pronounced by the Lebanese artist Akram Zaatari, "the landscape is the ultimate archive" (p. 12).

because muralism, like street art, is increasingly 'consumed' on or through digital devices, and no longer just as a tourist attraction managed at the community level. The activity of online users and archivists, who are responsible for the global circulation and accessibility of these artworks, is not neutral in this sense, and involves a series of issues that remain to be explored by future research. There may be the possibility that muralism as a community-based practice one day will disappear, and that the images retained by digital archives or circulating online will provide the only way to testify to the existence of murals. However, the digitally-mediated memory that these practices constitute, differs significantly from that social, emotionally charged and ephemeral memory that muralism as a material expression embodies.

At present, there are only few examples that show the actual impact of archiving on the production and perception of murals/graffiti in Northern Ireland. Tony Crowley (2015b) illustrates how some artworks have appeared in reaction to the collection of interviews with ex-paramilitaries by the Boston College archive[164], which went public in spite of the promise not to release them before the interviewees had died or given their permission to make them public. The episode became soon a legal case in 2011, and eventually led to the arrest of the Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams in 2014 as a consequence of the claims made by Brendan Hughes and Dolours Price (former IRA volunteers) about his involvement in the murder of Jean McConville[165]. The Boston College case certainly sheds some light on the responsibilities that come with the creation and management of an archive, especially for a country- like Northern Ireland, in which history is more alive than ever[166]. The streets and walls immediately reacted to the archive's attempt to unearth alternative versions of the past, and consequently provide other possible narratives of the Troubles: a new mural in support of Gerry Adams appeared on the Falls Road soon after his arrest, while graffiti with the slogan "Boston College Touts" spread on the walls of West Belfast[167]. But the criticism

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[164] The reference is to the Boston College Belfast Project oral history archives, which gathered ex-paramilitaries from both sides of the conflict with the purpose of recording their own stories and opinions as a possibly useful resource for future research on the Troubles. For a reconstruction of the events and the legal timeline see the link: https://bostoncollegesubpoena.wordpress.com/, while a more critical analysis of the case is provided by Kevin Cullen (2014) at the link: https://www.bostonglobe.com/news/world/2014/07/05/belfast-the-shadows-and-gunmen/D5yv4DdNIxaBXMl2Tlr6PL/story.html.

[165] Adams was subsequently released without being charged. Jean McConville was a Belfast woman abducted and killed by the IRA in 1972.

[166] It is particularly revealing, in light of the previous observations on the global dimension of the memory of the Troubles, that the case originated in the United States, not in Northern Ireland, though it had more serious consequences in the province.

[167] In his article, Kevin Cullen (2014) underlines the specifically provocative value of the word 'tout' in Northern Ireland, a local slang that denotes an informant with a very negative connotation.

toward the Boston College archive was also expressed in that particularly emblematic way which is the anarchivable manifestation of the socio-political dynamics underlying muralism, i.e., the defacement/violation of some representations. A mural celebrating Brendan Hughes in West Belfast was in fact vandalized as a result of his alleged claims about Adams' involvement in McConville's death, released in an interview collected by the Boston College archive.

These are only few examples of the possible interactions between the management and circulation of collective memories in the public space and the parallel 'handling' of historical sources in the archives. Nevertheless, they clearly show that the archival practice is never 'innocent', and that it can have unexpected, as well as threatening, political fallout. Although history-making based on oral testimonies is potentially more controversial than the preservation of material culture, of which muralism is an expression, the conflicting interpretations and contentious memories that may arise from its archiving and classification should not be underestimated by future research, which still has to develop a critical reflection on this matter.

Conclusions. The archive as a memory in progress

The analyses of the contemporary functions and trends of muralism made in the previous chapters, from its commodification/heritagization to the manifestation of transnational dynamics of memory, laid the basis for a reflection on the digital existence of murals, i.e., their permanence or afterlife as images completely detached from their original context. In a way similar to street art, an equally ephemeral practice that in recent years has found its place "on the internet" more than in the streets (Glaser 2015), muralism has reached an increasingly global dimension through its digitization and online circulation. Such process may certainly favor the perpetuation of certain narratives of violence and segregation even in the present, as suggested by Conrad (2007) in relation to the photographic reproduction of murals. The reality, however, appears much more complex, especially because of the growing involvement of an 'external' audience in the interpretative processes through which these images, and the same conflict, are made sense of. The preservation and archiving of pictures of murals, analyzed in some of its controversial aspects, reveal even more the growing influence exerted by actors who are from outside the communities. Beyond the difficulty in archiving muralism per se, an issue that has led to the provocative question of its actual feasibility, there are in fact a series of critical aspects that should be finally

addressed by research. The choice to only focus on the communities' loss of control over their representations and the new temporalities introduced by the archive is definitely limited in this sense, and further investigation is therefore necessary in order to better understand these aspects, as well as others involved.

What is evident, however, is that muralism can no longer be regarded only as an expression of material culture, and that the frame within which it is explored needs finally, to quote again Conrad (2007), to be *widened*. Murals are increasingly viewed or accessed as (digital) images, and very often people decide to visit Northern Ireland, and especially the cities of Belfast and Derry/Londonderry, after coming across their reproductions circulating on the web. But it is especially the preservation and archiving of murals and other related artefacts in amateur as well as professional collections that reflect the changed perception of them, shifting from being valued only by occasional observers, such as young Tony Crowley, to being acknowledged as artworks worthy of consideration. There is obviously an important difference between the online circulation of images of murals and their storage in digital archives: the reasons why this chapter has mainly focused on the second aspect and the fundamental (an)archivability of muralism depend exclusively on the author's decision, and cannot claim to be exhaustive. Nevertheless, beyond the criteria for classification and the curatorial processes that govern the formation/management of digital collections, it is the same dynamism of memory that is at play in both digitally mediated practices and archives. As summarized by Demaria (2012, p. 60), "the archive may then be understood as a metaphor of memory as a process always in progress, in the making: deposit of traces and active process of recall; figure that indicates a place, a textuality that always demands to be re-defined but that, at the same time, retains some traces, that is since ever testimony" (my translation).

Archive and testimony, the leitmotifs of this and the previous chapter, come together in the words of Demaria, thus emphasizing the ethical, and more generally political, dimension of the archive, a place from and through which the history of the present, and not only that of the past, is finally interpreted (p. 59). This aspect is crucial, especially in the case of digital archives, which imply an acceleration in the formation of memory and its growing fluidity, re-configuring it within the global non-place (Augé 1992) of the digital realm. Through muralism, the communities of Northern Ireland have been making sense of their past and present situation, finding a very peculiar expression that is now regarded as synonymous with the conflict. From that temporary and ephemeral archive which is accessed from the streets, murals have been migrating to the no less erratic digital space, from which they

continue to testify, in a very different way, to the communities' feelings and hopes, re-defining a cultural expression whose meaning is increasingly determined from the outside.

Conclusions. The multiple dynamics of muralism

The previous chapters focused on specific aspects of muralism identified in the introduction as five functions/trends: commodification/heritagization, transnationalism, commemoration, archival impulse and digitization. Analyzed as distinct functions that coexist in contemporary muralism in Northern Ireland, they clearly show that a narrow perspective, mainly focused on the sectarian nature of murals, is inadequate to illustrate the complexity and dynamism of this long-established practice. Certainly, sectarianism, both at the basis of the geographical location of murals and as the interpretative framework for many representations, does not disappear; but rather, it is incorporated into the fragmented landscape in which muralism is retranslated, where the different currents that animate Northern Irish society are ambiguously reflected. Focusing in particular on the dynamics of collective memory that have manifested themselves for decades through the murals, this work has tried to show that the single (and excessively static) framework of memory based on ethno-national identities needs to be expanded.

The theoretical model derived from the semiotics of memory and Elena Esposito's reworking of Luhmann's social systems theory has allowed the shift from the more generic 'murals' to the more specific 'muralism' of Northern Ireland, thereby allowing these artworks to be viewed as part of a collective practice definable as a dynamic system. Within this framework, which brings to light the internal consistency of this deep-rooted practice, emerges the relevance of the dynamic nature of muralism both for its own preservation/continuity over time and for its transformation. As seen throughout the work, this dynamism manifests itself on multiple levels: on that of the different functions played by muralism, simultaneously or over time; on that of the rhythm of change of the specific representations that appear/decay or are erased from the landscape; finally, on the level of the dynamics of collective memory that circulate through muralism, and being in turn largely dependent on external dynamics (political, economic, social, etc.). These various levels, however, should not be seen as separate, but rather as interconnected, if not partially overlapping in practice.

The dynamism manifested by the different functions of murals has been defined as the simultaneous coexistence of meanings, interpretations and uses of these artefacts in contemporary Northern Ireland. In this wider perspective, murals as (digital) images, and not only material artworks, are equally taken into account, given the relevance they acquired for promoting and preserving muralism itself. Rather than regarding the 'shift' from material

culture to the digital realm in terms of a process, it is more appropriate to consider them as simultaneous expressions of contemporary muralism, whose local dimension coexists at present with the transnational one. Transnationalism then, identified as one of the functions/aspects of muralism with regard to the memories it conveys, is at the same time a dimension underlying it in a more radical way- since it cannot be separated from the contemporary processes of commodification and heritagization on one side, and of digitization on the other. In a way, this latter may appear as the 'ultimate manifestation' of the transnational dimension of muralism, both at the level of its reception and at that of the memories it puts into circulation.

The level of the dynamics of memory, which transcends the single function of commemoration identified above, partially overlaps with the level of the different functions of muralism. The change in the memories that 'materialize' in the murals and the very way in which the dimension of memory is articulated by muralism are expressions of its functions, since they exteriorize the need for commemoration and the archival impulse that characterize post-conflict Northern Ireland. Moreover, the (re)emergence of certain memories in the landscape is connected to the growing transnational dimension of muralism, which already played an important role when the first republican murals appeared in the 1980s, as described in the second chapter. Later, with the end of the conflict, it was tourists' interest in the political murals on one side and the policies of reimaging on the other that drove, at least in part, the more recent processes of commodification and heritagization of muralism. Such processes affect in their own way the dynamics of memory, favoring for example, as widely seen in the first chapter, the erasure of the most contentious representations from the landscape or the 'rediscovery' of a certain (more palatable) version of the past.

While still relying on the well-established division between Catholic/nationalist/republican and Protestant/unionist/loyalist identities, the present work has highlighted how the dynamics of memory at play largely undermine this dichotomy. And yet, they remain inscribed in it: the transnational dimension of memory that is at the center of the second and third chapters (which reproduce in their structure the aforementioned division) emerges in a panorama that remains dominated by representations based on well-rooted ethno-national identities. The dynamism of memory does not necessarily imply an idea of 'progress', but it may lead to the resurgence of more controversial images and feelings depending on external influences. On the other hand, the reoccurrence of a certain imagery is precisely one of the factors contributing to the systematic nature of muralism and

its self-reflexivity, analyzed in particular in the fourth chapter. Rather than rejecting its rootedness in sectarianism and ethno-national identification, then, contemporary muralism is grafted onto this socio-cultural fabric. It is *within* this framework, not outside it, that divergent dynamics of memory may emerge.

To describe these, different concepts have been employed, in line with more recent theoretical developments in the field of memory studies. Notions like that of 'travelling memory' by Erll (2011), 'transnational memory' by De Cesari and Rigney (2014) or that of 'multitude memory' (Hoskins 2017), are more suitable for describing certain dynamics that involve the 'integration' of external memories into the murals or their different circulation and accessibility in the digital environment. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that unionist/loyalist murals, as clearly seen in the third chapter, show greater resistance to such dynamics of memory when compared to nationalist/republican representations. The (re)emergence of the Titanic as a consequence of the ship's fate featuring in hugely successful movies and books, moreover, appears to be more 'unwieldy' than constructive for loyalist communities. This suggests that the (re)integration of transnational memories into the local environment may also trigger unexpected dynamics, such as the need to reclaim exclusive 'ownership' of some events and their remembrance. The transnational dimension of certain murals, then, does not suppress the presence of latent (or still haunting) memories, whose (re)appearance is often unpredictable. More radically, it is possible to affirm that there are cases in which it is exactly the transnational 'allure' of the mural that encourages some form of resistance to its significance, from ignoring it to (re)producing alternative images.

Finally, the level of the dynamics of memory overlaps with that of the rhythm of change of the murals in the landscape. This, in turn, also depends on the policies of reimaging aimed at erasing/replacing certain representations and the memories they convey. As widely discussed at the end of the fourth chapter, this level of dynamism of the murals is largely missing with their transition from material artefacts to (digital) images. Despite the high significance of the actual condition of a mural in the landscape and its related lifespan, its preservation in the form of a digital image is at present unable to convey such information; if the archival impulse that already underlies muralism as a material practice tends to resist its intrinsic dynamism (on which its own continuity depends), it is the actual archiving of muralism that partially undermines its dynamic character. Whereas archives and digital archives do not represent the end point of muralism, they certainly started the process that is converting it into *history* in a way that is different from murals' (tacit) claim to *be*, in their own way, already history, in the form of 'remnants' of the past. Ultimately, this latter

dimension of muralism marks the transition into a future of memory that no longer concerns only the local communities, since it enters into global dynamics that contribute to its shaping and diffusion.

Muralism: a form of peace process at the vernacular level

The various levels of dynamism that have been identified above in relation to muralism exemplify not only its high complexity, but also its ability to become a 'distorted' or, following Rush (2022), 'cracked' reflection of the concomitant dynamics that animate Northern Irish society. This is still defined as a 'post-conflict' society, despite the Troubles having ended some twenty-five years ago and much having changed in that time. Recent research shows how contemporary Northern Ireland is seeing the rise of more plural or flexible identities, particularly among the younger generations (Coulter et al. 2021; McNicholl, Stevenson and Garry 2018). Whereas a 'crisis' of the more traditional identifications is well evident, it has not yet produced alternative political configurations able to replace the dominance of the two-community model (see Coulter et al. 2021, particularly chapter 5). But how does muralism, still largely regarded as evidence of political backwardness, fit into this changing context? The following paragraphs will answer to this question in the light of the analyses and observations made in the previous chapters. On their basis, some proposals will be formulated, through which muralism can be recast in relation to a society in transformation, caught between the need to remember and that of looking to the future.

A first answer lies in the perspective adopted by this work, which has highlighted the fragmented, dynamic and plural nature of muralism. More than simply an expression of sectarianism and its legacy in the landscape, muralism reveals different aspects and functions that, in their turn, depend on the changes taking place in society. Muralism cannot be isolated from them, nor be regarded as their outcome: it evolves in dependence from the socio-political circumstances but in its own terms and according to its internal dynamics and temporalities, as illustrated in particular in the first chapter. Muralism is not necessarily at odds with the peace agreement, since it may re-imagine it on a local level, being the latter exactly where reconciliation often goes into crisis. While it is common to talk about a singular peace process in Northern Ireland, it would be more appropriate to refer to more *peace processes* (Coulter et al. 2021), or at least to two different levels at which the process

is implemented: these are identified by the authors as the *institutional* and the *vernacular* levels.

The vernacular level is where the local dimension comes in, and the communities can potentially play their role in carrying out the peace process. It is suggested here that muralism lies in this sphere: it 'acts' on a local level (mainly the working-class areas of cities like Belfast and Derry/Londonderry), it is a community-based artform and, above all, it offers the space for questioning, or eventually 'resisting', the peace process implemented at the institutional level. When talking about the peace process, it is important to underline that this should not be understood in terms of linear or purely forward-looking progress. On the contrary, the process can occasionally experience crisis, encounter resistance or be questioned: at a local level, the peace process needs to be periodically reaffirmed (and re-enacted) in order to be effective. Muralism and other symbolic practices have often offered the space for responses to the peace process and its implementation at institutional level, whether they be in accordance with it or, conversely, regressive or contentious in relation to it.

An example of these forms of 'resistance' is given by Rolston (2020) with regard to the presence of commemorative plaques in the working-class neighborhoods of Belfast, which reproduce a form of counter-memorialization that rehabilitates the 'invisible' victims of the conflict. Acting as a manifestation of political activism, "local memory work as transitional justice from below holds out the potential of contributing at least as much as the state to conflict transformation" (Ivi., p. 338). Rolston's words emphasize the political weight of the various forms of commemoration and remembrance at a local level, even when they appear highly controversial or purely ideological. Political murals, like the plaques and community-based memorials that mark so many places in Northern Ireland, (re)affirm the plural nature, and ultimately the dynamism, of the peace process, as well as its need to recover the past for it to become truly *past*. Before "tackling these divisions" and "coming to terms with the past" (DeYoung 2018, p. 102), then, it is necessary to acknowledge these dimensions of memory and their place in the same peace-building process, which has favored the preservation of the two-community model through the imposition of a politics based on the principle of the 'parity of esteem'.

A second answer to the question of how muralism fits into a changing Northern Irish society comes directly from the observations made in the previous paragraph. If the peace process is plural in its nature, and it is implemented also at a vernacular level, it follows that its local and visual dimensions can no longer be neglected. Instead of focusing exclusively

on the deficiencies and crises of the institutional peace process, it is in fact equally beneficial to analyze its perception at the vernacular level, where it is actually enacted. This is in line with the local and visual 'turns' in the study of peace-building policies that have been recently addressed by Clark (2022) precisely in relation to Northern Ireland.

In this work, the importance of the visual dimension in its different aspects has been widely emphasized (see in particular chapter 5). In their commemorative function, murals bear witness to the past and give visibility to the victims that the institutional peace process tends to neglect or ignore; whereas this aspect has been analyzed mainly as a way of evoking the memory of the conflict, it also acquires a powerful political dimension in its aftermath, when visuality becomes a tool for 'authenticating' that same memory and preserving it from erasure at the state-level. Local and visual combine in a fundamental way in Northern Ireland, where the peace process often entails the re-imaging of the communities' murals and the abstract 'forging' of identity. Nevertheless, as noted throughout the work, murals have often been employed for (re)imagining local identities within a transnational framework well before the implementation of peace-building policies. As illustrated by Clark (p. 6) with reference to the political use of the famous Free Derry Corner (see chapter 2), visual signs are frequently employed at a local level "to express tensions coming about from social change".

Obviously, within muralism, these tensions also include (predominantly) critical attitudes towards the institutional peace process, as seen above. In any case, the re-evaluation of the local and visual dimensions of the peace-building policies helps to reframe muralism as a practice still fully integrated in the social fabric, and not a tradition alienated from reality that simply reproduces unwelcome memories and ideological narratives. This has become evident recently with Brexit and the conflicting reactions it triggered in Northern Ireland. Apprehension at the possibility of a new 'hard border' separating the province from the Republic of Ireland has been expressed mainly through the emergence of several new graffiti in nationalist/republican areas, while slogans against the Northern Ireland Protocol have appeared on the walls of unionist/loyalist areas. Perceived as a threat to the peace agreement and its commitments, Brexit on one side and the Protocol on the other have 'revived' in a significant way the characteristic political use of the walls in the province. Despite privileging the more immediate form of graffiti rather than that of murals, these signs of dissent also involve a potential revision of both existing and new murals, since contemporary events may promote a rereading of the recent past. In this sense, the (re)affirmation of a unionist/loyalist identity or, on the contrary, the evoking of a united Ireland, acquire a new

meaning *after* and *in relation to* Brexit or the Northern Ireland Protocol. Visualizing social change and the critical responses to it at a local level, the communities revitalize the peace process when they feel that it is under threat, even if this often entails further divisions.

These aspects lead to the third and final answer as to how muralism fits into a changing Northern Irish society. First, though it is necessary to make some reflections on the concept of 'post-conflict', whose imaginary has dominated the implementation of the peace process at the institutional level. As remarked by Murphy et al. (2017, p. 452)

> the description of Northern Ireland as a post-conflict context serves several purposes for the public sector: it helps to disguise the complexities of the sectarian and segregated society that Northern Ireland remains despite formidable investment at tackling these issues; it normalises the complexities of legacy issues such as victimhood and commemoration; it shifts focus from 'dealing' with conflict to transforming society.

'Post-conflict' appears then, according to the authors, to be an overused term that often masks the inability of the institutional peace process to address unresolved issues at the local level, i.e., those same issues that often emerge in contemporary muralism. It follows that, whereas the peace process has long remained anchored to a post-conflict imaginary and its related binary identity (Catholic/nationalist/republican or Protestant/unionist/loyalist), muralism tends, on the contrary, to (re)affirm an imaginary of (symbolic) conflict, or, according to Rolston (2020, p. 338) of *meta-conflict*. The distinction between a conflict and post-conflict imaginary in contemporary Northern Ireland has been proposed by Rush (2022). She adds a further dimension of *post-post-conflict* imaginary, implemented at the local level by community arts but with the exclusion of more parochial artforms such as political murals, graffiti or other expressions of ethno-sectarian identity. By post-post-conflict imaginary, Rush means a dimension that embraces those processes which aim to overcome the still dominant imaginaries related to the legacy of conflict, as well as those supposedly 'neutral' or anti-sectarian narratives which emerged within the post-conflict framework. The distinction between these forms of the imaginary, however, is not clear-cut: reflecting the fragmentary nature of Northern Irish society at present, they largely overlap, either because the post-post-conflict narratives coexist with persistent sectarian claims that revive the legacy of conflict or because they involve overcoming such legacy, which is exactly what the institutional peace process and its post-conflict imaginary have failed to do.

While Rush's observations regarding the coexistence of multiple imaginaries are valuable, it appears over-simplistic, in the light of what has emerged from this work, to assume that muralism is anchored exclusively to a conflict or post-conflict imaginary. More appropriate would be to affirm that muralism has been simultaneously advancing conflict, post-conflict and post-post-conflict imaginaries, revealing how Northern Ireland is currently changing as a society. In the absence of authentic transnational networks at the level of the institutional peace process and its policy (O'Dowd and McCall 2008), it is muralism that has been developing these in a number of ways, such as its conversion into a different form of material culture that engages with the tourist/outsider (the commodification/heritagization of muralism) as well as the incorporation of 'external' memories on a local level. But transnational networks are also developed on a global level, through the circulation and subsequent archiving of murals as digital images that contribute in their own way to promoting Northern Ireland as a tourist destination. The notion of post-post-conflict imaginary is definitely best suited to account for such transnational networks and processes underlying contemporary muralism. In particular, this notion suggests a shift concerning not only the temporal level (as a progressive orientation towards the future), but also the displacement of muralism, evident in its digital afterlife and archiving. In fact, as seen in the last chapter, these latter imply a dissemination of memories that involves more and more non-local actors, who are making an increasingly significant contribution to their re-articulation.

By contrast, the institutional peace process has privileged a neo-liberal agenda which ultimately proved unable to transcend a post-conflict imaginary built upon a shared future oblivious to the past. Unlike the plurality of functions performed by muralism, which reflect the heterogeneous dynamics that are currently shaping Northern Ireland, the institutional peace process has largely alienated the communities as a result of the stagnation produced on the political level, where the instability of the traditional identities is largely neglected. Providing a counterbalance to this impasse, muralism acts like those artforms that reassert "the insistent ghosts of other histories, voices and potentialities" that still "haunt the present moment's dominant discourses of progress and development in Northern Ireland" (Chan 2009, p. 167).

In the end, however, it is necessary to reiterate that muralism is still a reflection in a cracked mirror, to recall the image used by Rush (2022) and illustrated in the introduction of this work. Adopting this metaphor means acknowledging that the reflection it returns is partial as well as 'manipulated' on the ideological level. Northern Ireland is a society

currently going through dynamic change resulting from new tensions and a demographic shift toward an increasing number of people with no direct memory of the conflict (younger generations, immigrants, etc…). In order to reflect these ongoing changes and to involve groups which are currently not represented in it, muralism needs to further evolve in the future, taking on new functions as it has done in the recent past. Muralism, in short, needs to find a new place in a society in transformation. Its very survival (far from obvious) depends on it being able to shed its current conflict-related imaginary, that still affects its perception at present. This is a crucial step for muralism to take now and in the future; however, it must also remain true to its origins and 'authenticity', which make it stand out from other forms of public art that are becoming increasingly anonymous in nature.

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