Touring the Troubles in West Belfast: Building Peace or Reproducing Conflict?

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Touring the Troubles in West Belfast: Building Peace or Reproducing Conflict?

by Wendy Ann Wiedenhof Murphy

This article examines the development of tourism in West Belfast, Northern Ireland, and explores the extent to which tourism builds peace or reproduces processes of past conflict. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with tour managers and tour guides that include West Belfast in their itineraries and participant observations of tours conducted in West Belfast in the summer of 2007. The findings from this data suggest that while tourism there is reproducing some processes of past conflict, particularly territoriality, it has the potential to build cross community relationships.

This article examines the development of tourism in West Belfast, Northern Ireland, and explores whether or not tourism builds peace or reproduces processes of past conflict. While tourism is an important factor in the economic development of postconflict societies, it also has wider social and political implications for the tourist, the tour operator, and the community that the tour operator claims to represent. Some of these implications include: how tourism shapes the past, present, and future history of postconflict societies in regard to collective memory, how tourist operators attempt to sell their side of the conflict to win the sympathy and empathy of tourists, and how tourists are attracted to such places as an adventure in consuming conflict. Part of the attraction of tourism in postconflict societies is the immersion into past conflict, especially in terms of visiting commemorations of the victims and seeking witnesses who experienced conflict first-hand. Another aspect of these social and political implications is how they may serve to further some of the processes of conflict, such as polarization, segregation, and victimization.¹

The article begins with a review of literature on war and tourism, highlighting recent developments in conceptualizing their relationship. The next section provides a general overview of tourism in Northern Ireland and a brief history and urban geography of West Belfast in particular. The third section is an analysis of semi-structured interviews with tour operators and tour managers, as well as participant observations from tours taken by the author. The piece concludes with a discussion of whether tourism perpetuates processes of conflict or is a means of peace building and reconciliation in postconflict societies.
“WAR AS TOURISM” AND “DARK TOURISM”

“Warfare is clearly disastrous for tourism,” state Hall and O’Sullivan. Tourist infrastructure, including airports and hotels, is often a prime target during war, and individual tourists have been targets as well. However, this essay hopes to emphasize a particular angle of what is called the “terrorism-tourism relationship.” While this literature focuses on how both terrorism and tourism are international phenomena, it mainly addresses how tourists are targeted by terrorist groups to gain media attention. The angle I will elaborate is why “war as tourism” is an important conceptual category to understand because it emphasizes how memories of war, like battlefields and commemorations, are transformed into tourist attractions. As Smith has found, “war-related tourism attractions are the largest single category known.”

“War as tourism” can be problematic in terms of not only how conflict is remembered, but symbolically perpetuated. This provides a new dimension to how collective memory of war is reproduced through tour operators and tourists. Tourism has the potential to keep past conflict in the present and may constrain efforts at peace building. Indeed, tourism in postconflict societies has the potential to create new conflict, particularly if tour operators compete for tourists in order to sell their version of history. This can be contentious if one community feels that it is not attracting tourists or having its version of the history insufficiently acknowledged. According to Tarlow, tour operators in postconflict areas must ask themselves the question whether they hope to “arouse passion” or “create a sense of forgiveness” through their tours. Lennon and Foley concur and state that “tourism professionals may need to become sensitized to the presentation of ‘alternative pasts’ at their sites rather than offer only one view of the past.” This is particularly important if, as Hall and Tucker suggest, the central issues surrounding tourism are identity, contestation, and representation. These issues may have even more significance in the context of a postcolonial society, such as South Africa or Northern Ireland, where the “(re)discovery of previously marginalized or denied histories” is at stake. Another concern surrounds the issue of identity in a postconflict society where the conflict itself was the primary source of identity. “Each destination desperately attempts to mark and market itself as having distinction, an identity.” The question remains whether an identity marketed to the tourist has any relevance to local residents, or if memorials and commemorations are simply
there for tourists to consume.

According to Lennon and Foley, there is a growing tourist interest in recent death, disaster, and atrocity, or what they call “dark tourism.” The expansion of the global communication market, anxiety over modernity, and the commodification of death and disaster all play a role in producing and reproducing dark tourism. Hall and O’Sullivan suggest that war may spark a “curiosity” factor “whereby tourists are interested in seeing a place they may have seen or read about during a period of political instability and which is now safe to visit.” Monuments and other forms of commemoration are important for these curious tourists as they “function as landmarks, alerting visitors to an important event that has occurred there, thus enabling them to experience the spirit of the place.” However, these landmarks risk 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. But, according to Lisle, even though voyeurism and authenticity are the main tropes used to create a desire for dark tourism spots, this does not automatically position the tourist as a passive gazer. Indeed, she argues that the tourist can be an important political subject as he or she has the mobility to cross borders and possibly disrupt official as well as unofficial narratives of past conflict. This power of mobility can open access to locations that have been historically off limits to local residents in postconflict societies, and may even encourage them to explore areas as anonymous tourists where they were once targets of violence. Jarman suggests that tourism may have benefits for local residents if it “help[s] link up and reconnect many areas that have long been separated.”

Causevic and Lynch argue that dark tourism can be a factor for engaging local communities in tourism development, but as it stands now, most local communities do not benefit because they lack appropriate tourism infrastructure, such as hotels and restaurants. They construct the concept of “phoenix
tourism,” suggesting that like the bird rising from ashes, tourism can help conflict areas by assisting in the process of social reconciliation and urban regeneration through building infrastructure, creating a sense of pride, and helping small businesses. Causevic and Lynch use Northern Ireland as their case study for how phoenix tourism may develop and argue that tour operators from outside local communities provide only “sanitized versions” of past conflict. They suggest that these outside tour operators exploit local communities, which receive no economic or social benefits from their tours. Therefore, in order to fully realize phoenix tourism, local communities must be engaged in the tourist industry instead of treated like objects for the tourist gaze.

In sum, the literature on the relationship between tourism and conflict offers important insights as to how tourism can either build peace or reproduce conflict. I will return to several of these insights, including how collective memory is produced and reproduced through tourism, why contestation exists over who can legitimately narrate past conflict through tourism, and what potential tourism can provide toward building peace across divided communities. But first I will provide a brief demographic description of tourism in Northern Ireland and explain how tourism has been promoted there by different tour agencies over time.

THE “TOURIST EXPLOSION” IN NORTHERN IRELAND

The conflict in Northern Ireland in general and Belfast in particular undeniably inhibited the development of a safe and stable tourism infrastructure. The numbers of tourists hit a peak in 1967 at 1,080,00 and fell to only 321,000 by 1976. Tourist numbers remained stagnant throughout the 1980s and early 1990s; most (85%) were from the United Kingdom or the Republic of Ireland, visiting the North of Ireland to see friends and family. During the eighteen-month para-military cease-fire from 1994 to 1995, Northern Ireland witnessed an “unexpected influx” of tourists, which, according to O’Neill and Fitz, presented the weaknesses of the tourism industry, particularly the lack of professionalism and high-quality accommodations. In 1999 the Belfast Visitor Welcome Center officially opened, which worked with the Belfast City Council and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board to improve “the product” of Belfast. By 2006, tourist numbers reached a record 6.8 million, spending 324 million pounds and prompting the Belfast Visitor & Convention
Bureau and the Belfast City Council to claim tourism as “one of the City’s key economic generators.”25 Articles promoting Belfast as a peaceful tourist destination began to appear in popular international magazines and newspapers such as the Christian Science Monitor, the New York Times, and the Washington Post.26 The Lonely Planet 2007 travel guide proclaimed Northern Ireland a “must see” tourist destination, declaring that, “freed from the spectre of the gun by cease-fires and political agreement, it’s abuzz with life.”27 As seen in the tables below, visitors to Northern Ireland have increased significantly since the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, from 1.5 million in 1999 to 6.8 million in 2006. However, the majority of overnight tourists (90 percent) are from Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland, a pattern that has not changed from the 1980s (Tables 1 and 2).

It is clear from the demographic data that the increase in tourism is correlated with the peace process in Northern Ireland. However,

| Table 1 Total Number of Visitors and Total Expenditures of Visitors28 |
|-------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|                        | 1999  | 2000  | 2001  | 2002  | 2003  | 2004  | 2005  | 2006  |
| Total Visitors          | 1.5 m | 1.5 m | 1.6 m | 3.6 m | 5.3 m | 5.9 m | 6.4 m | 6.8 m |
| Total Spent             | £114 m| £114 m| £88 m | £316 m| £232 m| £262 m| £285 m| £324 m|

| Table 2 Country of Origin and Total Expenditures of Visitors in 200529 |
|------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|                        | Visitors (916 k%) | Spent (£126.2 m%) |
| Great Britain          | 672,000 (73)     | £82.6 m (65)     |
| Republic of Ireland    | 121,000 (13)     | £22.7 m (18)     |
| Europe                 | 35,000 (4)       | £3.5 m (3)       |
| North America          | 39,000 (4)       | £6.9 m (5)       |
| Elsewhere              | 49,000 (5)       | £7.5 m (6)       |
besides a decrease in violence, the data do not suggest further reasons why the number of tourists has increased. Nor do the data suggest how Northern Ireland is being marketed by the tourist industry. According to Rolston, three approaches have been used to promote tourism in Northern Ireland: 1) ignore the Troubles entirely; 2) highlight that Northern Ireland is not as bad as people think; and 3) acknowledge the curiosity factor, or that some tourists are attracted to Northern Ireland because of the conflict. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB), the government agency for promoting tourism strategies, historically used the first approach, attempting to mute the Troubles in its promotional campaigns by using rural images of Northern Ireland to attract tourists. Although the NITB predicted that there would be a “tourist explosion” after the cease-fire in 1994, it was not until 1998, the year of the Good Friday Agreement, that it began to recognize that “curiosity is what makes Northern Ireland tick.”

The official version of the Troubles is what prompted critics of the NITB such as Thompson to argue that the NITB’s main tourist strategy is to depoliticize culture so that it “can become a commodity which can be consumed—no questions asked.” In recent years the NITB has shied away from the curiosity factor, admitting that the Troubles are the “reason people have heard of Northern Ireland” but that this “doesn’t mean it’s the reason they necessarily want to visit.” However, statistics from the 2001 Belfast City Council Report claim that 43 percent of tourists came to Belfast out of curiosity over conflict.

If the NITB is not interested in selling the Troubles to tourists, other tour agencies are, including gotobelfast.com, City Sightseeing Belfast, Coiste, Failte Feirste Thiar, and a variety of black taxi associations (discussed later). Several of these agencies are located in West Belfast, and those that are not include tours of the area in their itineraries. Failte Feirste Thiar (Welcome to West Belfast), the tourist sector of the West Belfast Economic Forum, has appropriated the curiosity factor and claims that “West Belfast’s reputation creates a curiosity factor which can be harnessed by providing organized tours of its murals, and explanations of its political ideology.” But, as Thompson states, “If curiosity is ‘what makes Northern Ireland tick,’ then the encouragement of curiosity must be funded.” Funding is where contention is quite obvious, particularly if only tours that conform to the official version of the Troubles receive more funding. Under the Community Support Framework of 1989–1993, Northern Ireland received 34.1 million pounds from the
European Union earmarked specifically for tourism and has received another 58.3 million pounds since. Tour operators in Northern Ireland compete among themselves for public funding, especially European Union Peace Reconciliation money that has been designated for promoting tourism. As I discuss below, the fact that many tour operators in West Belfast are ex-prisoners or support ex-prisoners released according to the terms of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement causes tension with some tour operators who have never been imprisoned and who feel frustrated that they must compete for peace funds with former terrorists or political prisoners.

WEST BELFAST: THE FALLS ROAD, THE SHANKILL ROAD, AND THE “PEACE” LINE

West Belfast is an ideal location to examine whether tourism builds peace or reproduces processes of conflict as it provides plenty of examples of war as tourism, albeit not without contention. Between the years of 1966 and 2001, the number of British Army deaths in West Belfast was 107, second only to Armagh with 111. West Belfast ranks first in civilian deaths at 437, and first in the total number of dead in Belfast at 695, out of the total number of 1,664. Some of the most infamous areas during the Troubles, such as Andersonstown, the Falls, Ballymurphy, Whiterock, and Turf Lodge, are located in West Belfast, including Bombay Street in Clonard, where one tour guide claimed that the “ethnic cleansing” of Catholics triggered the beginning of the Troubles in 1969. West Belfast is the home of many Republicans, including current and former members of the Irish Republican Army, such as the president of Sinn Fein, Gerry Adams, who is the current member of Parliament for the area, and a large population of ex-prisoners, many of whom were imprisoned for para-military violence. Although West Belfast is considered a predominantly Catholic area, it is partitioned by the “peace” line, and a significant Protestant population lives across the divide along the Shankill Road. This line is not a continuous structure, but a jumble of concrete walls, metal fences, barbed wire, and steel gates that are physical representations of past violence and current sources of contention between local residents. Residential segregation between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland has increased since the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, resulting in the construction of more peace lines. These lines have become one of the “sights” that local and citywide tour guides include in their itineraries to visibly express that the peace
process is still being negotiated by communities living in interface areas. A few tours even provide the opportunity for tourists to write on a section of a peace line—thousands of visitors have permanently left their own “writing on the wall” to express their hopes for peace through personal statements, poems, songs, and drawings.

During the summer of 2007 the author conducted semistructured interviews of approximately one hour in length with a variety of tour operators, including one manager of a tour agency located in West Belfast (WB), two managers of an official citywide Belfast tour agency (CB1 and CB2), and one tour operator from an Armagh City agency that is attempting to include West Belfast in its itinerary options (AWB). Informal interviews were conducted with the operator of a local black taxi tour in West Belfast (BT) and a local walking tour guide in West Belfast (WT). Participant observations from one official citywide bus tour (CBT) that included West Belfast in its itinerary were also conducted. Informal commentary from tourists was included as part of the data collection, as well as content analysis of tourist brochures and marketing literature. In the following sections I explore the major themes that emerged from these interviews and participant observations as they relate to the potential to build peace and the reproduction of conflict through tourism.39

GLOBAL ACCESS, LOCAL CONFIDENCE

All of the tour managers and guides interviewed stated that the peace process has done much to boost tourism in Belfast, including the provision of public funding that has sustained the agencies they work for. WB, CB1, and CB2 pointed out that the increase of tourism further coincided with the introduction of inexpensive direct airline flights between Belfast, Great Britain, the Republic of Ireland, and Europe. According to CB2, “the cost and effort to get to Belfast a few years ago would have discouraged people.” A reciprocal relationship between the peace process and tourism was revealed as CB1 and CB2 viewed political stability as increasing the confidence of tourists to visit Northern Ireland, and WB claimed an increase in tourism created a “new confidence” in ordinary people from West Belfast as they learned that outsiders were interested in hearing their stories.

Although past conflict was expressed as one reason tourists
visit Belfast, most of the tour managers and guides, including CB2, believed that “intrigue instead of fear” has led to the development of mainstream tourism. The backpackers and "adventure seekers" that were first attracted to Belfast because of the history of the Troubles and political issues seem to have been surpassed in number by tourists who are attracted to the "vibrancy" that the urban city center has to offer (CBI and CB2). Many young adults seem attracted to the low prices relative to other destinations in the United Kingdom, which may explain why "hen and stag" parties are increasingly popular in Belfast. These parties are even advertised on a section of the peace line along the Springfield Road in West Belfast. Appropriating the armored police and military Land Rovers and Humber Pigs that symbolized aggression and violence in Belfast during the Troubles as a "stylish" means of transportation is one of several examples of the commodification of past conflict (Figure 1).

Another issue surrounding the theme of global access and local confidence has involved official tour agencies attempting to market aspects of Belfast's history over the Troubles. According to CBI and CB2, while official tour agencies advertise political walking tours and black taxi tours in West Belfast, most investment has involved marketing "literary" Belfast, "factory" Belfast, and "luxury" Belfast, all located in or near the City Centre. "Luxury" Belfast, in particular, depends upon the development of a strong evening economy, such as upscale restaurants, clubs, and boutiques, which is active after the
workday. This investment is evident to any tourist in Belfast as most of the City Centre area has been rebuilt in the past fifteen years due to the fact that much of this area was a target of bombs during the Troubles. Indeed, one can tour around the City Centre area from City Hall to the newly renovated Cathedral Quarter to the Queen’s University area and not be aware of the past conflict.\textsuperscript{41} Except for the Sandy Row Loyalist enclave with an imposing paramilitary mural that is visible from the central train and bus station, no commemorations or murals of the Troubles are displayed. This effort to erase the Troubles from the City Centre area is further captured in the 2008 Belfast Brand campaign established by Belfast City Council. The Belfast Brand, a logo with a B shaped as a heart containing the name Belfast with the slogan “part of it,” hopes to attract visitors to this “dynamic city with big personality” that is “proud of its heritage,” “alive with possibilities,” and “open to change—vibrant, energetic, exciting.”\textsuperscript{42} It remains to be seen what, if any, aspects of the Troubles become part of Belfast’s heritage and if this heritage can be realized in a nonsectarian manner. Attempts to promote the annual Orange Order bonfire on July 11 and parade/march on July 12 as “Orangefest”\textsuperscript{43} the past few years have met with opposition from Republicans, Nationalists, and Catholics, many of whom view the events as blatant displays of sectarianism, and from members of the Orange Order who do not view these sites as forms of “cultural tourism” but as expressions of “Protestantism” and “Britishness.”\textsuperscript{44} The lack of acknowledgment of the Troubles in the City Centre area is quite evident in contrast to West Belfast, where commemorative gardens, plaques, and murals dedicated to remembering the victims and the perpetrators of the Troubles visibly line the streets. The absence of reminders of the Troubles in the City Centre may signify that the area is a neutral space where residents of Northern Ireland and tourists can mingle, dine, and shop without regard to political, religious, or cultural identities. These various forms of identification are precisely what circumscribe local areas surrounding the City Centre, and as I discuss below, the ways of remembering the Troubles in these areas serve to reproduce physical and symbolic territorial boundaries.

“TELL THE TRUTH”: TERRITORIALITY AND MEMORY

The suspicion that “outside” tour guides distort history was expressed by several local tour guides from West Belfast. According to BT, only local guides from West Belfast could “tell
the truth” to tourists about what happened there during the Troubles. The sentiment was repeated by AWB, who suggested that tour guides should be from the communities where they are providing tours. On the one hand, this caution can be read as not wanting to step on the toes of other local guides. On the other hand, it implies a lack of confidence in being able to narrate the Troubles from another perspective and perhaps a fear of crossing the boundaries of what remain strongly segregated spaces. BT, a self-described Republican from West Belfast, said that he was hesitant to take tourists down the Shankill Road, but that he has started to do this in response to recent requests from them. However, he claimed that he would not get out of his taxi—or allow tourists to do so either on the Shankill. Nor would he provide a narrative of how those on the Shankill experienced the Troubles. Further-more, he did not think that any taxi tour guide from the Shankill would get out of his or her cab on the Falls Road, but he did admit that this was not an issue as he knew of no taxi tours that existed on the Shankill. The boundary between the two areas is physically demarcated by the peace wall, which has gates that open during the day to permit convenient passage, but the boundary is also socially differentiated through the movements of tour guides and tourists. For example, BT stated during his tour that the gates on the Springfield Road in West Belfast were permanently closed. This was simply not true, as the author had walked through them the day before. While it is not surprising that BT would be unaware of this given the strong segregation present in West Belfast, it is important to note that at least for tourists access to both sides of the peace line is open.

Tourist access between the two communities in West Belfast is facilitated by official tour guides, such as CBT. CBT markets itself as offering the “Official Tour of Belfast” and operates “Living History Tours” that include areas of West Belfast, including the Falls and Shankill Roads. Tourists sit atop a red double-decker bus listening to a tour guide through speakers. The bus stops periodically so tourists can take pictures, albeit from atop the bus as they cannot get off of it. The main trope of the CBT tour narrative is how Belfast has moved successfully from the “dark days” of the Troubles to the modern “glass facades” of the City Centre, signifying the end of violence. The most politicized part of the tour was given en route in West and North Belfast, including commentary on the “murder mile” or the “killing fields” of the Crumlin Road, an explanation of
the “no surrender” Loyalist paramilitaries on the Shankill Road, and a history of the 1981 hunger strike and the “Tiocfaidh ár lá” (our day will come) Irish Republican Army on the Falls Road. Much of this history was told through the various murals painted on house and shop walls along the route, providing tourists with ample opportunities to capture these images on film. While much of the tour seemed scripted and a bit contrived at times, it did introduce tourists to a rudimentary history of the Troubles. Six of the seventeen “stops” on the CBT tour are either on the Shankill or Falls Road, but other areas of Belfast are included. Given that the tour is only a little over an hour in length, guides do not have the time to engage in a detailed history of the Troubles.

This lack of critical engagement with the Troubles by CBT and other outside tour guides is a source of contention with local guides from West Belfast, such as BT and WT. However, it allows local guides to sell their own tours as authentic experiences from individuals who personally lived through the Troubles. The length of the tours, about two hours with BT and three hours with WT, provided ample opportunities for questions from tourists and first hand stories from the tour guides. According to BT, the routes of outside tours, like CBT, include an abbreviated journey down the Falls Road and cannot access the side streets into the local neighborhoods where much of the past conflict took place and is presently memorialized. WT expresses a similar sentiment and comments on how outsiders, whether from other parts of Belfast and Northern Ireland or abroad, would not necessarily be welcome to wander the streets and housing estates he guided us through. WT’s tours appeared to be overwhelmingly accepted by the local community. During the tour, countless residents waved at WT from their car windows; several residents who walked by our tour interrupted his commentary to say “hi” and to chat. This recognition and acceptance of WT’s tour by the local community is particularly noteworthy as two outside tour agency buses were attacked with bottles and stones when conducting tours along the Falls Road last November.46

The tours by BT and WT followed almost the exact same route. Commencing at Divis Tower near the lower Falls Road, both guides stressed that the British Army occupied the upper floors of the tower to conduct surveillance on West Belfast until recently. The tours next moved to Bombay Street, where both
Guides said the Troubles were sparked when loyalist paramilitaries and British armed forces burned the neighborhood down in 1969. WT remarked that the burning of Bombay Street initiated the formation of the Provisional Irish Republican Army, which like a phoenix rose from the ashes of the neighborhood, and is symbolized in the phoenix symbol on the gate of the Clonard Martyrs Memorial Gardens as shown in Figure 2.

This was one of three memorial gardens that BT and WT included in their tour itineraries, each of which lists the names of IRA volunteer soldiers and Catholic civilians who have been killed in each neighborhood since the official partition of Ireland in 1920. According to BT, these memorial gardens have been erected in the past ten or fifteen years; they are relatively new. Residents in the neighborhoods, including ex-prisoners, maintain the gardens. BT viewed the memorial gardens as a means of remembering and respecting the lives lost, not as violent or "in your face." However, a plaque at the Clonard garden "dedicated to the people of the Greater Clonard who have resisted and still resist the occupation of our country by Britain" suggests that a territorial struggle remains present. Territoriality was expressed

Figure 2. The phoenix guards the gates at Clonard Martyrs Memorial Gardens.
further by WT when he referred to the peace line behind the Clonard garden as a "wall of containment" that prevented residents on the Catholic side from gaining access to land that they needed due to increasing population.

From Bombay Street both BT and WT directed tourists down the Springfield Road into Ballymurphy, a Republican housing estate. Both pointed out the fortified Police Service of Northern Ireland station on the way, and WT noted that the police were watching and listening to us. Most of the tours by WT and BT consisted of explaining the many murals commemorating IRA volunteers that were painted on the sides of houses such as in Figure 3.
When asked if local residents were disturbed by the violent images of men in balaclavas wielding Armalite rifles, WT responded that the residents were proud of those who had died for the cause of a united Ireland and that during the Troubles, residents would leave their doors open for volunteers “on the run.” Both the taxi and walking tours concluded at Milltown Cemetery located on the upper Falls Road, which is the burial site of numerous Republican hunger strikers, including Bobby Sands, and volunteers. While the cemetery is where most of the Catholic population has been buried, both tours focused on the Republican grave sites and commemorations, which compared to the rest of the cemetery appear to have been recently remodeled and regularly maintained.

The tours by BT and WT were told from a Republican perspective, although this was not explicitly advertised by BT’s taxi company. Indeed, after a tour with BT, one tourist claimed that the tour was “left-sided” and that it was not clear to her until a bit into the tour itself that BT was a Republican. The brochure for BT’s taxi company states that one can “travel with the original taxi drivers who have worked on the famous Falls Road throughout the 35 years of conflict,” but one needs to know a bit of the history of the Troubles to interpret the Falls Road as Republican. During the Troubles, black taxis or “people’s taxis” were substitutes for official bus service in West Belfast and other areas where buses could not operate their routes due to bomb scares and violent attacks. Black taxis traveled along predictable routes where residents could hail them for everyday travel or paramilitaries could use them to escape from security forces. Taxi drivers were often targets during the Troubles as they were almost always from the area in which they provided their services, and thus easily identified as either Catholic or Protestant. Interestingly, BT’s taxi company has branched out to provide tours that are neither political nor limited to West Belfast, such as visits to Belfast Castle, the Antrim Coast, and the Armagh Planetarium, signifying a shift away from “people’s taxis” to “tourist taxis.” Another sign that black taxis are becoming legitimate for tourism purposes is that official tour agencies such as the NITB, as well the agency that CB1 and CB2 work for, have recently started to support them. The company that BT works for was invited to join a Community Partnership Board last year that is supported through funding from Belfast City Council and the NITB. Jan Nugent of the NITB recently stated that while she
“wasn’t too keen when the Black Cab tours started up” because she “thought [they] could almost be seen as terror tourism,” she now sees the tours as an “edgy thing to do” for tourists. These have also “given communities a real drive” to “spruce up their murals and their local areas.”

FROM CONFLICT TO HERITAGE: GAELTACHT QUARTER

While the Troubles continue to dominate the tour narratives of West Belfast, a move toward emphasizing heritage is starting to emerge. According to WB, the first wave of tourists to West Belfast was only interested in politics and the Troubles; now they are interested in the “Irishness” of West Belfast as well. Cultural heritage, particularly Irish language, music, and crafts, is an alternative image of the area that is being marketed and sold to tourists. This image, or what is commonly called the “Gaeltacht Quarter,” can be seen in the official tour literature on Belfast as well as local tour publications from West Belfast. Caoimhin Mac Giolla Mhin, a tour manager with the local West Belfast agency Coiste, stated in a television interview that Irish language and culture were unique selling points and that West Belfast should be promoted as a Gaeltacht Quarter akin to a Chinatown to attract tourists. According to Caoimhin, Belfast in general and West Belfast in particular should not be sold as a place that is the same as everywhere else in the world, but the reason for this difference should not just be about the sectarian past. Rather, culture should be emphasized, such as Féile an Phobail (The People’s Festival), which is advertised as the largest community festival in Europe. Taking place in West Belfast every August to remember the anniversary of the internment of Catholics in the community by the British government in 1971, Féile an Phobail started in 1988 as a “direct response of West Belfast to discrimination” and a way for the community to “take control of its own image.” While remembering the Troubles remains part of the week long festival, most events focus on Irish art, music, dance, theater, and sport.

The comments from WB and Mac Giolla Mhin suggest that a move away from exclusive dark tourism appears to be occurring. Yet, politics is not absent from Irish culture and heritage in the context of Northern Ireland, particularly if “Irishness” is expressed through the narrative of British colonialism and struggle for the reunification of Ireland. Changing the writing on
street signs from English to Irish, flying the Irish tricolor, promoting Gaelic Athletic Association sporting events, and playing traditional Irish music in pubs may be viewed by some not so much as an expression of Irish culture than Irish nationalism. Furthermore, the means of remembering the past, particularly commemorations and murals, may be interpreted as mechanisms that celebrate the perpetrators of violence.

CROSS COMMUNITY POTENTIAL

Though territoriality is strong, most of the tour guides and managers interviewed for this study agreed that tourism could be a means to build peace between the two communities in Northern Ireland and a way to foster a more constructive relationship between the North and South of Ireland. AWB stressed that cross-border and cross-community work could be helped by tourism, particularly if the tour guide could provide a neutral introduction to other religions and churches. Interestingly, AWB’s initial access into the Catholic area of West Belfast a couple of years ago was through the tour agency she works for. While she expressed that she probably would not feel comfortable going into this area by herself, her tour agency provided her the access to explore and appreciate Irish culture there. Furthermore, AWB thought that the expansion of tourism in Northern Ireland over the past few years has been a positive factor in “cleaning up” some of the violent mural images. Interestingly, this “cleaning up” of paramilitary murals could be problematic in that the “terror murals” of Belfast have become the United Kingdom’s “top tourist attraction.” In 2007 the British government commitment of £3.3 million to remove para-military images from murals was met with criticism from some tour agencies, such as Peace Line Tours, who claim that “the murals in Northern Ireland are under threat of being erased forever, please pre-serve them.” In an online survey conducted by Peace Line Tours on whether the murals should stay or go, the overwhelming majority of respondents stated that they should remain. Jeannie from Australia stated that “I am visiting your country this year mainly because I want to see your murals…. Please don’t remove them.” Steven from the United States wrote that “I believe some of the murals should not be removed because of their historical significance.” An anonymous Belfast resident responded that “I understand the need to move onto better things but I do not think they [murals] should all be eradicated. I am concerned, however, that tourists are going away with the wrong impressions, since there is so much emphasis on the terrorist angle.”
As discussed earlier, murals in West Belfast are used to reproduce territoriality, thus cleaning them up could be viewed as a move toward building cross-community relationships, particularly if the murals are painted over with images that signify a shared culture and history. However, leaving some of the past images for tourist “consumption,” even if they do portray paramilitary violence, may mediate the threat that these murals once represented as long as they do not “freeze the historical process” and make it “almost impossible for individuals and groups to enter into any kind of change.” According to Lisle, murals in Northern Ireland have become part of a global tourist circuit that “creates the greatest scope for disrupting the notion that the murals simply reinforce an ‘ideological struggle’ between two homogenous communities.” The idea that tourists constitute a third audience for murals in Northern Ireland and that tourists transcend the local territoriality that murals have been used for in the past is particularly intriguing in regard to the cross-community potential of tourism in general. The fact that official tour operators like CBT provide access to murals in both Republican and Loyalist neighborhoods means that local residents are becoming, if not necessarily more comfortable, then more familiar with outsiders entering their locally segregated spaces. Furthermore, the speculation that these murals are becoming increasingly commodified by tour agencies as marketing tools and sources of profit may neutralize the political saliency of the paramilitary images on murals that remain. Feldman warns in the context of Northern Ireland that “memory as a political commodity can also become highly disposable in the marketplace of insistent history.”

While touring the Troubles with official and local tour guides presents the possibility of improving cross-community relations, albeit arguably in a commodified manner, one recent initiative involving local tour agencies and community groups from both the Falls and Shankill areas highlights the historical significance of the arts and heritage of both communities. The West Belfast and Shankill Arts and Heritage Trail, funded in large part with EU Peace Funds, stresses the shared history of the communities in both areas and particularly the similarities of the conditions that the working class has confronted over time. The brochure for this trail contains two maps, one of West Belfast and one of the Shankill, which provide detailed information on art and heritage sites that tourists can explore on foot. Emphasizing the rich culture of both communities along with the similarities of their
experiences in one brochure provides tourists with an explicit, equitable, and accessible pathway to both the Falls and the Shankill Roads.

The one caveat on the potential for tourism to improve cross-community relations, according to AWB, is that some tour agencies funded with EU Peace money support ex-political prisoners by either employing them as tour guides or supporting them financially if they cannot find employment. She questioned whether some local tour guides had completed the required training to receive their “blue badges” and provide legitimate tours in Northern Ireland. She was also mildly suspicious that some of these tour agencies were receiving funding for cross-community work that was not cross-community in practice. While agreeing that local tour guides should be from the communities where they provided tours, she suggested that true cross-community tours should be balanced, not “one sided,” and that it was unlikely that Loyalist and Republican tour guides work on the same tour together. For example, the tour agency that WT is affiliated with works with a Loyalist tour guide, but the tours they arrange with these guides on the Shankill are at the request of tourists, and the Republican tour guide does not accompany the Loyalist tour guide on the Shankill. However, the fact that Republican and Loyalist tour agencies are attempting to coordinate tours of their respective communities together is a positive development if through their interactions they discover a shared history and future. For many, one part of this shared history is their time in prison for involvement with paramilitary organizations and their experiences trying to establish a livelihood with an ex-prisoner status, which prevents them from gaining employment in the public sector. While some tour guides such as AWB may resent having to compete for peace funds with these ex-prisoners, these funds may be supporting a peaceful alternative to the physical violence of the past.

CONCLUSION: AN ACCEPTABLE LEVEL OF SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE?

The findings from this study suggest that tourism in postconflict societies both builds peace and reproduces some processes of past conflict. The expansion of tourism in Northern Ireland fundamentally rests upon the reduction of physical violence, yet it enables the reproduction of symbolic violence, particularly through the process of territoriality. The growth of tourism in
West Belfast has allowed local tour operators an opportunity to capitalize on past conflict as a means to express their historical narratives and identities. This suggests that symbolic violence is not being experienced as the oppression of local tour operators by official tour operators, but as a struggle between local Republican and Loyalist tour operators to tell their versions of past conflict. This battle over collective memory and representation of past conflict in West Belfast is typical of other regions that have experienced ethnic civil wars, such as the Balkans and Lebanon, and includes other “gatekeepers” besides tour operators, such as government agencies that attempt to shape historical perceptions.\(^57\)

This is not to say there is an absence of contention between outside tour operators and local tour operators in West Belfast or that this contention is purely symbolic. In November of 2007, local youths threw bottles and stones at a City Sightseeing bus on the Falls Road, and in January and February of 2008 vandals burned two Paddywagon sightseeing buses in the parking lot of a hostel located in South Belfast. While these isolated incidents have been discredited by the local press as the acts of “anti-social yobs,”\(^58\) they imply that territorial boundaries matter and that spatial segregation remains strong. These events also suggest a potential polarization between not only Loyalists and Republicans, but also between locals and tourists, which may be partially based on the affluence and freedom of movement of the global tourist in contrast to the adversity and spatial restrictions experienced by some of the local community.\(^59\) Finally, though attacks on tourists are rare in West Belfast, when they do occur they serve as a reminder that “the memories of ‘locals’ will be as selective as those of visitors.”\(^60\)

NOTES

3. L. Richter and W. Waugh, “Terrorism and Tourism as


11. Northern Ireland remains part of the United Kingdom, although direct rule from Westminster was lifted as political parties agreed to a power sharing Legislative Assembly in 2007.


15. Hall and O’Sullivan, 118.


28. Figures provided to author by Belfast Visitor & Convention Bureau.
29. Figures provided to author by Belfast Visitor & Convention Bureau.
32. Alan Clarke, Chief Executive of the NITB. Quoted in Molly Hurley Dépret, “Troubles Tourism: Debating History and Voyeurism in Belfast, Northern Ireland,” in The Business of Tourism: Place, Faith and History, ed.
33. Causevic and Lynch, 12.
34. Dépret, 146.
35. Thompson, 61.
39. Interview notes are filed in the author’s office in a locked cabinet to protect the anonymity of the individuals included in this study.
40. All photos were taken by the author.
41. The failure to remember the Troubles in this area is remarkably similar to Beirut. Like the city center in Belfast, the rubble was cleared in the city center of Beirut “for new buildings and shopping complexes” with a “glaring forgetfulness” and lack of public memorials to the civil war and its victims. C. Nagel, “Reconstructing Space, Re Creating

43. The Orange Order, an exclusively Protestant organization, celebrates the victory of Protestant King William of Orange over Catholic King James II at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690 on July 12th. July 12th is a national holiday in Northern Ireland and tens of thousands of Loyalists, Unionists, and Protestants participate and observe Orange Order parades across Northern Ireland on this day. In recent years attempts have been made to turn it into a festival, or "Orangefest," to try to play down its sectarian roots.

44. BBC News, July 12, 2008.

45. There are, in fact, black taxi tours of the Shankill that depart from Belfast city center; however, these taxi tours are not explicitly advertised.

46. Claire McNeilly and Emily Moulton, “Bus Tour is Driven Off Falls Road,” Belfast Telegraph, November 2, 2007.


49. NVTV June 6, 2007.


