

INTRODUCTION

THE STORYING OF EVERYDAY LIFE IN BELFAST

Belfast has a real thirst for stories that aren't conflict driven, that aren't necessarily about Protestants and Catholics hating each other. . . just because I'm Northern Irish doesn't mean my story has to be about [that]. . . I don't want to be Seamus Heaney and write poetry about a foreign nation or whatever, I don't want to be asking to take a side. . . I just want to hear someone tell a story and have a drink.

—Justin, Belfast citizen, 2014

Belfast, more than many other European cities, has been stereotyped to death; its complex history in permafrost.

—Dawe, 'The Revenges of the Heart', p.207

[Alan] bought refreshments at the Spar on Bradbury Place. Striding into town, towards the docks, a green-red-and-white carrier bag swinging from his hand, he smiled to himself . . . He passed new cafés, new bars that had opened since he'd left for Oxford. He noticed the customers: affluent, chic, besuited, and he thought to himself, Belfast, at last, is catching up with me. Belfast is getting ready.

—Baker, *Offcomer*, p.103

'Susurrus' is a gentle, whispering, rustling sound, a sibilant onomatopoeic quality shushing it along, a background hum not particularly noticed unless one focuses on it. Although often associated with nature – wind in the trees, waves gently falling on shingle – it can be applied to any gentle background sound that provides a sonic context for louder or more piercing noises, such as the shrill cry of a seagull or an ambulance siren wailing past. During the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in the United Kingdom, in April and May 2020, when city centres suddenly became like ghost towns and traffic was greatly reduced, people would often comment that all the birds were singing louder; but they were not. The birdsong was always there. The susurrus was now getting attention

as it had less to compete with. This book is about what one chooses to pay attention to.

One could say that everyday life is a kind of susurruration. Although we pay attention to the details of our lives as we are engaged in them – shopping or cooking, working, meeting friends – much of this is not especially memorable. Profound events punctuate the quotidian, sometimes dramatically like the death of a loved one or a particularly joyous occasion, and these may get more attention not just from ourselves but also the people around us. They may be more important than the background hum of everyday life (or appear to be so) especially if they are charged with emotion or have life-changing effects. But everyday life is equally as important. We shop and cook to eat and without food we would die. We spend most of our lives in quotidian activity and *life* is important, one presumes, because most people choose to keep on living. This book is about everyday life.

It is a longstanding sociological conception that the nature of urban living necessitates engagements with strangers and in the contemporary city the modern stranger navigates these relationships with relative ease, from a few minutes chatting on a street corner to half an hour with a hairdresser, to the beginnings of acquaintanceship as repeated encounters build on one another: what Bülent Diken refers to as degrees of strangerhood (1998: 130–31). In these, as in all encounters, people choose how to represent themselves to others. ‘When an individual plays a part’, writes Erving Goffman, ‘he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them’ (1990: 28). When those observers respond in kind, an intersubjective *modus vivendi* is established that one could say oils the wheels of everyday life. Anthropology has traditionally accorded less epistemological weight to fleeting and superficial encounters with people, given that long-term participant observation is heavily promoted as its methodological gold standard, but to understand the complexity of city life we need to consider a spectrum of experience. If we pay critical ethnographic attention to the fleeting and superficial, then, paradoxically, hidden depths are revealed. This book is about the public presentation of the self between strangers in a range of urban encounters.

The primary methodological route to explore everyday susurruration is through personal narratives – the stories people tell of themselves, of their lives and of their city – and through fictional representation of urban life. ‘There will always be someone there to say “tell me a story” and someone there to respond. Were this not so we would no longer be fully human’ (Kearney 2002: 156). This puts storytelling at the heart of anthropology. Even in brief encounters with strangers on street corners we can give glimpses of ourselves through narration – a kind of oral flash fiction. ‘How are you today?’ ‘Lovely weather, isn’t it?’ ‘What kind of dog is that?’ These introductory questions invite a response that can lead to an intersubjective engagement that can tell a small story worthy of ethnographic attention. This book is about storytelling.

What receives academic attention is partly a disciplinary convention. In a city in the throes of civil conflict, for example, historians may focus on past events that underpin civil war. Sociologists may explore social structures that perpetuate or ameliorate the ebbs and flows of infighting. Anthropologists may analyse cultural representations of conflict, or the details of people's lives as they live with ongoing sectarianism and how (or if) people learn to live with post-conflict situations where former enemies may have to govern together. Psychologists, urban geographers and political scientists will all find their own research angle. In this way, urban and cultural studies, as a collective project, afford a richer understanding of urban life. But cities are constituted of individuals, and in (post-) conflict cities not everyone will experience conflict in the same way. Even for those in the throes of conflict everyday life continues – eating, drinking, procreating. As social scientists we choose which individuals to study, which social structures, historical trajectories, causes or effects or politics or culture to analyse. In short, we choose where to focus our academic attention. In doing so, we contribute to a collective narrative. If academic attention about a particular city is almost exclusively focused on conflict as its anchor point, it may become a misrepresentation of the totality of urban life, as the non- or less-conflicted everyday becomes sidelined. This book is about one post-conflict city – Belfast, Northern Ireland – and some stories that people told me about their everyday lives, stories that susurrate in the interstices of an academic narrative of Belfast that is dominated by conflict and division.

Directing Academic Attention

The key argument in this book is that the way in which some people present their ordinary lives, what they choose as their surface manifestation of themselves, challenges representations of life in Belfast in academic literature. This is evidenced through stories of everyday life told to me in a range of encounters, and my engagement with people was on a spectrum from a few fleeting moments to much longer and deeper connections. This mirrors the different levels of engagement we encounter almost daily in an urban environment. This type of sociality presents interesting ethical challenges. Some of the people in the book are not named as I know little of them other than how they presented in a fleeting moment. Sometimes I have used pseudonyms and altered distinguishing features. Others chose to be represented using their own names and some people have read and commented on particular chapters. This differentiation is not necessarily indicated in the text, since it is of importance to the people it affects, not the reader.

My interest in susurrus as a metaphor for everyday life began seventeen years ago, when researching the relationship between personal narrative and place (Lane 2008). My interlocutors were men who had grown up during the Troubles, the thirty-year conflict between Protestant unionists, Catholic nationalists and the British state that took over 3,500 lives and

affected many more. In 2007, I asked my research participants to take me to places in the city associated with personal stories that were meaningful for them and then to tell me those stories in those very places. In this way, place becomes more than just a backdrop; it is a multisensorial presence where sights, sounds and smells tap more easily into memory and emotion. Storytelling-in-place brings stories alive, temporally and sensorially, for both storyteller and listener. As an experience it meshes past and present – a story of then in a place that exists now. Embodied and emplaced perception helps the recall of sensory and cognitive memories and it feeds the imagination of both participants as the story is (re-) enacted in their minds. Life in the city is represented here as personalised and particular; a story associated with this street corner or that building or the park over there. Once story and place are connected in this way, even in the mind of a third party, they are bound together in one's imagination. The men I worked with had *carte blanche* to choose which places to visit and stories to tell. I expected to hear many stories of conflict, particularly as the city wears its Troubled history on its walls through murals that fill the gable ends of houses and where there are hundreds of parades each year to assert nationalist or unionist identity. This is a city that has many somewhat ironically named 'peace walls', built to keep warring factions apart but which, even now, become flashpoints for sporadic sectarian violence.

But in this Troubled city I heard very few Troubled stories. My interlocutors directed my attention to quotidian narratives that were meaningful to them but were susurrating in the background. Having chosen which stories to tell and how and where to tell them, they probably imagined the storytelling beforehand. In short, they were curating my fieldwork experience. This binds together interlocutor agency and academic attention. For example, Harry is a proud Protestant unionist who grew up in East Belfast and served in the British Army, although not deployed to his home city. He took me to Stormont, the seat of Northern Ireland's government. This imposing white building, high on a hill, 'symbolises unionist self-assertion and the will to preserve their British cultural identity against the nationalist "other"' (Neill 1998: 394). It is replete with unionist symbols, such as the prominent statue of Edward Carson in front of the building, leader of the Ulster Unionist Party during negotiations that led to Northern Ireland becoming a separate country of the United Kingdom. Harry, a keen historian, has many memories of Stormont, but what he chose to tell me about, on that day in that place, was of being eight years old and going up there with a group of friends on their bicycles, then whooshing 'all the way down from Carson's statue to see how far we could get without putting a pedal on'. Would they make it to the front gates a mile away? (See Figures 0.1 and 0.2.)

Harry's other stories that day were about his local football team, Glentoran, playing a home match in the 1967 European Cup against the Portuguese team Benfica; 40,000 fans crowded into a tiny stadium and he had to sit on his dad's shoulders to get a good view of the pitch. There was



Figure 0.1. Stormont Building, Belfast, 2007. Purchased from iStock, image credited to VisionsbyAtlee.

a story about having a drink with his dad in the Deer's Head pub when he was just short of the legal age of eighteen. And the one about getting an unexpected win on the horses with his demob money from the army (Lane 2008). As my research progressed, Harry's stories were revealed not as outliers but as part of the many non-Troubled narratives that people chose to convey.

Only one man who hailed from West Belfast talked about violence and sectarianism. Declan lived there for over twenty years. He moved to the



Figure 0.2. The mile-long driveway to Stormont, 2007. © ‘Harry’

estate when he was just two years old, five years before the Troubles began, and did not leave until the mid-1980s. This area experienced some of the worst violence during the conflict (Shirlow and Murtagh 2006: 72), so it is unsurprising when he went back that he remembered stories of everyday violence. He grew up in a macho culture, where the Irish Republican Army (IRA) was revered as well as feared for protecting and policing the nationalist community and where, as Declan says, ‘violence was normal for us’. His stories were about British Army Paratroopers raiding the housing estate to arrest IRA suspects, smashing in doors and windows while the women banged bin lids on the pavement to warn of the army’s presence. Of his mother being shot (not fatally) by a rubber bullet but, as she was lifted into the back of an ambulance, being more concerned about who would feed the kids their tea. And of the IRA managing anti-social behaviour through fear and aggression: ‘picked us up in the youth club, put T-shirts round our heads, puttin’ on the back of yer leg pretending they were going to kneecap yer. That went on for a while, so it did.’ But even as Declan re-lived emotional narratives of the past, he felt simultaneously detached from them, saying ‘that’s not me you’re talking about, that’s someone different’, because his life is a collection of stories, such as being a volunteer for many years for a peace and reconciliation organisation and working abroad. His memories of West Belfast were viewed through a ‘temporal thickness’ (Carr 1991: 4) that rendered them simultaneously proximate and distant.

Most of the stories people chose to share with me in 2007 were non-Troubled ones, such as searching for spricks (small fish) in a stream at the Waterworks Park, loving school – ‘I never missed a day’ – or training as a circus performer. Even when these stories were interspersed with profound events they were stories of small ‘t’ troubles, not the capitalised one: Shuggie’s disappointment at not meeting the Dalai Lama in Dharamshala because he was visiting Belfast at the time, but then, many years later meeting him on the steps of Belfast’s St Anne’s Cathedral; Adam being abandoned at a children’s home at twenty-nine days old and not discovering he had family in Belfast until he was in his forties.

Defining and Studying the Everyday

All human beings live an ‘everyday life’, a commonality to what it means to be a human being in the world. As a vernacular term it is easily understood: the day-to-day business of living a life. This includes necessary or mundane activities such as gathering food (from the forest, from the supermarket), eating, working, the ‘chores’ of daily living, but also more pleasurable activities like recreation or socialising with family or friends. Although the specific details of those lives may be very different – a hunter-gatherer in the Amazonian Forest, a sex worker in a Thai holiday resort, a chief executive of a global organisation – each will spend time in everyday activities and each will have their own understanding of what those activities comprise and what they mean.

Henri Lefebvre suggests that everyday life is what is left over when more important events are taken out, but then recognises that this privileges certain aspects of life over others, diminishing everyday life to a ‘scanty residual’ (2014: 116). Definition is challenging precisely because everyday life is not scanty. It relates to social relations and activities that are so familiar to us, Lefebvre argues, they can mask deeper meanings, a taken-for-granted-ness that inhibits further inquiry. Everyday life is arguably a *raison d’être* of anthropology, where the messy detail and nuance of people’s lives helps us to understand what it means to be a human being in society from that person’s point of view. But once you start to analyse the quotidian it becomes a slippery concept, ‘a contradiction, a paradox: both ordinary and extraordinary, self-evident and opaque, known and unknown, obvious and enigmatic’ (Highmore 2002: 16). This book foregrounds aspects of everyday life in Belfast but does so from a particular perspective.

First, I ask what is phenomenological about the everyday and how is it constituted as embodied experience? When Declan revisited West Belfast, we stood in the alleyway where he was told, on the way home from school when he was eight years old, that his mother had just been shot. His embodied response to being back in that place was visceral, as he relived that moment when his ordinary everyday routine was punctured. The pace of his narrative quickened: ‘someone said “your Ma’s been shot!” So, I run

down there. I was terrified. . . Jesus, I don't know what state I was in'. As we got to the bottom of the alleyway his body relaxed somewhat and the pace of the narrative shifted slightly, as he recalled seeing her being put in the ambulance (not dead) and his admiration for her reaction (who'll give the children their tea?). For Martin Heidegger, a central precept to understanding everydayness is through scrutiny of *in-der-Welt-sein*, our being-in-the-world: how we perceive, experience and engage with 'the worldliness of the world' of people, things and our inner selves (1996: 41). Embodied perceptual experience is foregrounded in Declan's story not just as an ontological essentialness but as an awareness of possibilities. We live as much in our imagination as we do in the external world – through perception, emotion and cognitions – where we effectively edit our experiences of the world, but as Irving (2013) reminds us, we do not have independent access to other people's minds. Analysing the everyday relies on the intersubjective encounter between interlocuter and researcher. Attention is focused here on how the everyday comes to life through language and performance. And on how they, in turn, are constituted by and constitutive of everyday life.

Second, I consider how the everyday is placed. The complexity of a city cannot be captured adequately by one researcher and represented in one book. The portrayal of everyday life, therefore, must be partial and positional. But the everyday 'is not an innocent concept' (Fischer-Nebmaier 2015: 6). It 'cannot be understood in a *sui generis* sense' as it takes place in, and is informed by, a socio-historical context (Gardiner 2000: 7). When Harry recalled his childhood excitement of speeding on his bicycle, he emplaced the story, literally and imaginatively, at Stormont, the historical and cultural epitome of Protestant ascendancy and ethnic division. This emplacement emphasised the non-Troubled aspect of Harry's story. In Belfast, the socio-historical context is a long history of violence, division and sectarianism, but it does not follow automatically that everyone's everyday is heavily structured by it. Heideggerian everydayness has a pragmatic character, an 'average everydayness' (Richardson 1991: 13) suggesting that which is unremarkable. Yet its analysis 'raise[s] our understanding of the prosaic to a level of critical knowledge' (Gardiner 2000: 6).

The final aspect to analysing the everyday is to examine engagements with strangers. In an urban environment the density of population and heterogeneity of activities result in a range of encounters with people, from fleeting connections to acquaintanceship to friendship, a spectrum of formal to informal contacts. In each of these intersubjective interactions we can share something of ourselves even in the most fleeting of moments. If one engages with a stranger on a city street, there may be a variety of reasons to prompt the interaction – politeness, boredom, a desire for sociality or for specific information. For example, as I was walking through Belfast one day, near to my home and with my dog, a man I had never met before cycled down the street, spotted us, then turned around to come over and say, 'that's a proper dog that is, not like the daft little thing my wife has'.

His demeanour was friendly, one could say conspiratorial, as we discovered a shared interest in what constitutes proper dogs and daft dogs. We chatted for a few minutes then went our separate ways. The time, place and nature of fleeting encounters contributes to any meaning made and the resulting exchange adds to our knowledge of self, other and place. This man decided to talk to a stranger, momentarily changing direction and presumably having accounted for opportunity cost in how he could have spent that time. For him, maybe this was a chance to stroke a dog he admired, his comment an invitation to talk about his frustration over his wife's choice of canine companion. I have no idea if it had any meaning for him beyond that (although it may have). However, for me the encounter was a familiar one in that many people stopped me to talk to or about the dog (see Chapter 1). This short conversation about dogs was part of the data that fed into my analysis that everyday narratives in Belfast are not dominated by its violent history. Shared encounters do not imply shared meaning, but it does imply that any knowledge of the world that comes out of that moment is a result of intersubjectivity. Although 'individuals speak, act, and work toward belonging to a world of others, they simultaneously strive to experience themselves as world-makers' (M. Jackson 1998: 8). These fleeting moments are worthy of analytical scrutiny for the knowledge they produce and how we can use that knowledge.

My analysis of the everyday comprises a key triad of performativity, place and strangers, as I explore to what extent they are related. We have a range of encounters in the city and present ourselves as we wish to be understood in that moment – friendly, inquisitive, disinterested or aggressive – and the place of that encounter may be irrelevant. The man on the bicycle who swerved off route reacted, in an instant, to seeing the dog. His decision may be unconnected to the place he was in, other than to note there was no traffic on the street to impede his U-turn. However, performance with a stranger may be deeply connected to place, history and imagination. I describe in Chapter 1 how a neighbour takes many months to decide to talk to me, an Englishwoman and known university researcher who is interested in her neighbours on a loyalist-flag-festooned housing estate.

When we present ourselves to others, we often exchange stories about who we are and where we are (Kearney 2002). My research covers several modes of storytelling with different temporalities: from fleeting moments or relatively short interactions with people, to stories that are carefully composed and then told verbally to an audience, through to how creative writers present the everyday in published fiction, stories that may have been years in the making. Researching the everyday is a fundamental tenet of anthropology and stories of quotidian lives could be said to be the backbone of the discipline. But 'the everyday' is a protean concept. It will mean different things to different people and, given its ubiquity, it is huge, almost infinite. So, this book pays attention to a particular kind of everyday stories. Those that are not focused on or anchored to the Troubles. But, to appreciate why

these stories warrant attention, it is necessary to provide the historical and academic context to living and researching in Belfast.

Situating the Troubles Historically

Remembering, recording and analysing the past in Ireland and Northern Ireland is problematic. This is true for both folk history and academic analysis. The past plays a large part in many people's identities. For example, events that cause suffering are 'often used to reinforce victim and perpetrator narratives'; meanwhile, memory of the past is 'active and continually refashioned. . . constructed and reconstructed, interpreted and reinterpreted' (McAuley, Braniff and Spencer 2023: 2–3). Interpretations of the past are used in the arts (films, plays, literature) and by paramilitary organisations (through murals) to illustrate and to justify the ideological stance people have towards others in terms of conflict. Collective memory serves political interests. Meanwhile, Irish historiography identifies several waves of scholarship. Prior to the partition of Ireland in 1921, nationalist history centred on British colonisation of Ireland and subordination of the Irish but, in the 1930s, historians began to critique these earlier analyses. Known as revisionism, it took a less critical view of the British state (Boyce and O'Day 1996) and an 'increasingly critical stance towards nationalist "heroes"' (Hutchinson 1996: 102). This in turn became a revisionist controversy, as these historians were attacked by fellow scholars as being iconoclastic.

Some histories are less well researched, such as Southern unionists (Buckland 1972), Irish soldiers who fought for the British Army (Jones and Madigan 2019), or feminist analyses on the role of republican and loyalist women in the conflict (Aretxaga 1997; Faulkner-Byrne, Bell and McCready 2023). Since the 1998 Belfast Agreement heralded a more peaceful era, archival sources relating to intelligence matters, as well as interviews with former combatants, have given historians new sources to analyse 'with a concomitant boom in scholarly literature' (A. Jackson 2005: 784). But, as Alvin Jackson points out, 'governments and ex-gunmen bearing archival evidential gifts should. . . be treated with caution' (2005: 791). On the island of Ireland, historical events, relationships between people and relationships with political representatives are complex and nuanced. Academic analysis is sometimes partial and contested. What is presented below is an intentionally succinct historical account to contextualise the lives of the Belfast citizens that will be discussed in this book.

Although origin stories could be said to have an arbitrary starting point (since in analysing cause and effect we can keep going backwards), the conflict between Britain and Ireland arguably began in the twelfth century, when Ireland was ruled by four kings at war with each other over who would become high king (Coohill 2005). In 1167 Dermot MacMurrough, king of Leinster, sought and received help from King Henry II of England, giving the English king a foothold in the country. However, it was not until

the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that English domination became a practical reality, as colonisation gathered pace and a succession of English monarchs from Henry VIII onwards dramatically changed the geographic, religious, social and political landscape in Ireland.

Important context here is the Scottish and English Reformations: the struggle to establish Protestantism as Britain's dominant religion. During this period the geographic proximity of a largely Catholic Ireland, in concert with France and Spain, was a threat to England, particularly from 1633 when Catholic James II came to the throne. A group of English nobles appealed for support to the Dutch Protestant Prince William of Orange, and he and his wife Mary (the Protestant daughter of James II) were crowned as joint British monarchs in 1689, becoming King William III and Queen Mary. James II mustered an army in Ireland as part of his attempt to regain the crown, but he was defeated by William III in 1690 at the Battle of the Boyne. This victory became embedded as part of Protestant Northern Ireland's origin story and is celebrated every year by unionists in Northern Ireland on 12 July (commonly referred to as 'The Twelfth'). In what became known as The Plantation of Ireland, the most fertile land in the country, especially in the northeast, was confiscated from Irish Catholics and gifted to Scottish and English Protestant settlers. Belfast sits within this most fertile area and Declan and Harry, whose stories are above, are direct descendants of these dispossessed Irish Catholics and ascendant Protestant settlers.

Throughout Irish history there have been fractures within nationalism and unionism. For example, in the early nineteenth century Daniel O'Connell emerged as an effective leader in the campaign for Catholic emancipation. He galvanised the Irish electorate and 'used the British political system to gain rights for Catholics' (Coohill 2005: 204). However, nationalism was not exclusively Catholic and O'Connell's constitutional approach was not radical enough for some: John Mitchel, one of the leaders of Young Ireland, was a Protestant lawyer who advocated the use of physical force to bring about an independent Ireland (Coohill 2005: 49). In the late nineteenth century, the British Parliament considered granting Home Rule in Ireland, which would devolve some power to an all-Irish parliament, whilst the country remained under British rule. But many unionists, particularly in the northeast of Ireland where they were in a majority, were in opposition to the proposals: 'Unionists clung desperately to their connection to Britain, yet stockpiled arms to fight against the threat of Home Rule imposed by the British government' (Coohill 2005: 205).

Subordination of Irish Catholics is a leitmotif threading through this history and it fuelled a long war of attrition by nationalists against what they viewed as their British oppressors. Following a bitter war of independence, Ireland was partitioned in 1921 to establish Northern Ireland as a separate country of the United Kingdom. The rest of the island became the Irish Free State, a dominion of the British Empire that achieved full independence in 1949. Partition embedded resentment and violence in the north, particularly

because Northern Ireland only included six of the nine counties in the Ulster region to ensure a Protestant majority, and post-partition discrimination against Catholics increased (McKittrick and McVea 2000).

Since the sixteenth century, the dominant ideologies in Ireland, and then in Northern Ireland, have been Catholic nationalism, which wants all of Ireland to be independent of British rule, and Protestant Unionism, which is loyal to the Crown: ‘the two communities construct their histories in radically different ways and their image of the world and what is possible within it is shaped by these opposing historical narratives’ (Ruane and Todd 1996: 115). As Coulter and colleagues note, ‘Northern Ireland was created in the full knowledge of the fact that it would please no one absolutely and displease many people very deeply’ (Coulter et al. 2021: 164). This culminated in the violence that occurred between 1968 and 1998, widely referred to as the Troubles, a period that has become a defining feature of contemporary Northern Irish society.

A total of 3,720 deaths are directly attributable to the Troubles (McKittrick et al. 2007), although this figure belies the scale of impact. Violence occurred throughout Northern Ireland, but Belfast has been especially scarred by the Troubles, where ‘history, identity and culture are played out, in a dramatic and public manner, through the instruments of threat, violence and deviance’ (Shirlow and Murtagh 2006: 2). There is no consensus on start and end dates for the Troubles, since violence, sectarianism and the island’s atavistic history pre- and post-dates whatever one chooses. A clear demarcation between war and peace is a false dichotomy, since ‘those sentiments, grievances and actors that initiate and sustain hostilities often prove deeply reluctant to respect such neat temporalisations’ (Coulter et al 2021: 4). For this potted history I choose as a ‘starting point’ 5 October 1968, when a civil rights march in Londonderry (also known as Derry) led to three days of violent confrontation between local people and the police. Disorder spread to other parts of the country, reinvigorating the IRA, a Catholic paramilitary group at war with the British state, and Protestant paramilitary groups, such as the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) and Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF). This resulted in British military deployment to Northern Ireland on 14 August 1969 to contain widespread violence and disorder. There were many key events of the Troubles, but I highlight just three to underscore the violent nature of the conflict, the role of retaliation and the role of politics in prolonging it, and the long tail of its legacy in understanding contemporary politics.

In January 1972, British Army soldiers fired on unarmed civilians at a civil rights march in Derry/Londonderry, killing thirteen people and injuring fourteen, an event which became known as Bloody Sunday. The initial inquiry into this event was held in 1972 and presided over by Lord Widgery. Lasting eleven weeks, the inquiry exonerated the soldiers and was declared by many in the nationalist community as a whitewash. However, a second inquiry announced by British Prime Minister Tony Blair in 1998, and

presided over by Lord Saville, took twelve years, received testimony from over 1,000 people and concluded that ‘firing by soldiers of 1 Para on Bloody Sunday caused the deaths of 13 people and injury to a similar number, none of whom was posing a threat of causing death or serious injury’ (Saville, Hoyt and Toohey 2010: 58). Publication of the Saville Inquiry on 15 June 2010 resulted in an unusually ‘fulsome and unambiguous. . . apology [in the House of Commons] by the then British Prime Minister David Cameron’ (Coulter et al 2021: 84), an extract of which is quoted below:

the conclusions of this report are absolutely clear: there is no doubt; there is nothing equivocal; there are no ambiguities. What happened on Bloody Sunday was both unjustified and unjustifiable. It was wrong. . . The Government are ultimately responsible for the conduct of the armed forces, and for that, on behalf of the Government – indeed, on behalf of our country – I am deeply sorry. (HC Deb 15 June 2010)

However, it was not until December 2023, almost fifty-two years after Bloody Sunday and thirteen years after Cameron’s apology, that it was announced that (only) one soldier would be charged with murder (Bradley and McBride 2023), and in April 2024 it was announced that none of the soldiers who were investigated for perjury during the inquiries would face charges (D. Wilson 2024).

A direct retaliation for the events on Bloody Sunday occurred six months later in July 1972, in a bombing campaign that became known as Bloody Friday. The Provisional IRA (PIRA) detonated twenty-two bombs in the centre of Belfast in the space of seventy minutes, most going off within half an hour of each other, killing nine people including civilians and injuring one hundred and thirty. No official inquiry was authorised, presumably because this was an atrocity committed by a proscribed paramilitary organisation rather than the British Army. In 2000, when Belfast City Council agreed to erect a plaque to remember the victims of Bloody Friday, it sparked an argument between Sinn Féin and unionist councillors about singling out one bombing incident (McGrattan 2013). But the plaque’s installation went ahead, with annual remembrance events ever since. PIRA issued an apology in 2002 on the thirtieth anniversary of the bombing. The events and legacy of Bloody Friday are much less well known and less reported than Bloody Sunday, in both popular and journalist media. Academic search engines, such as Google Scholar, provide a wealth of links analysing Bloody Sunday but very few for Bloody Friday.

Possibly the most overtly political event of the Troubles was the republican hunger strike in 1981, when ten male prisoners starved to death to protest the removal of political prisoner status. The leader of the group, Bobby Sands, was elected as Member of the British Parliament for Fermanagh and South Tyrone less than a month before he died. Although hunger strikes have occurred throughout Irish history, including by loyalist prisoners (Parr 2016), the 1981 hunger strike is explicitly framed both

academically (Hennessey 2014) and in popular culture (McQueen 2008) as a battle between two committed and implacable foes: Bobby Sands and the then British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Republican prisoners were demanding the reinstatement of special category status, in effect political prisoner status, that included being allowed to wear their own clothes rather than prison uniforms. Alongside the hunger strikes, they engaged in a blanket and dirty protest, wearing only prison-issued blankets and smearing urine and faeces on the walls of their cells. Both the IRA Army Council and the British Government were engaged in high-stakes political manoeuvring. Although the protest was largely unsuccessful in the short term, as the hunger strikes were called off with minimal concessions (and no special category status), the republican narrative is that the longer-term effects were to galvanise support for Sinn Féin, the political wing of the IRA, and to usher in growing support to take the armed struggle to the ballot box (D. Morrison 2006).

On 10 April 1998 the Belfast Agreement was signed, commonly (and hereafter) referred to as the Good Friday Agreement, heralding over two decades of relative peace. But dissention over competing rights remains in the twenty-first century. The political landscape of Northern Ireland is a multi-party one: the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), Ulster Unionists and Traditional Unionist Voice want Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom; Sinn Féin, the Social and Democratic Labour Party and People Before Profit want Northern Ireland to be reunited with the Republic of Ireland; and the Alliance Party and Green Party do not take an official position on the British or Irish constitutional future. The Good Friday Agreement enshrines a model of governance based on consociation (Coulter et al. 2021). This precludes political domination by one ethnic group by legislating for power sharing between the two biggest political parties, measured by the number of seats each party gains in the Legislative Assembly, the devolved government in Northern Ireland. The party with the greatest number of MLAs (Members of the Legislative Assembly) nominates the position of First Minister, the second largest party nominates the Deputy First Minister, and all other government positions are shared equally between these two parties. If either of the parties withdraws from the positions of First or Deputy First Minister, the Assembly collapses. Since 1998, the DUP and Sinn Féin have dominated the electoral picture, but there is fundamental disagreement over how to deal with the sociopolitical legacy of the Troubles. This led to the Assembly being suspended on numerous occasions, most notably in 2002–2007, 2017–2020 and again in 2022–2024. Arend Lijphart, who devised the consociational model of governance, advised it was not suitable for societies such as Northern Ireland that are ‘mired in armed conflict’ (Coulter et al. 2021: 13). Ten years of suspension in twenty-five years of governance bears this out.

Although sectarian violence has dramatically reduced since 1998, it has not gone away. There is a rise in aggressive and violent incidents at annual

flashpoints, such as the Orange Parades held in July to commemorate the 1690 victory of Protestant William III at the Battle of the Boyne, particularly when the Orange Order marches through Catholic areas of the city (McDonald 2015), seen by many as an intentionally provocative act. Although most parades are by the unionist community, there are nationalist parades too. Each August, parades take place to remember the introduction of internment (imprisonment without trial), which lasted from 1971 to 1975. This British policy in Northern Ireland was ‘directed solely against the Catholics, although there were many Protestants who provided just as strong grounds for internment’ (Sir John Peck, British Ambassador to Dublin, quoted in McKittrick and McVea 2000: 70). Eventually, it was used to imprison members of Protestant paramilitary groups. Politically motivated violence has also masked or overshadowed other forms of violence endemic in Northern Irish society (Coulter et al. 2021: 9–10). Since 2004, there has been a dramatic increase in incidents, as reported to the Police Service of Northern Ireland, of violence against women, primarily through domestic abuse, and of violence against migrants. Numerically, these far outweigh reported incidents of sectarian violence. They are also, probably, grossly underreported.

Residential segregation of Catholics and Protestants is both cause and consequence of the Troubles and, in Belfast, it is particularly marked. West Belfast (where Declan grew up) is predominantly Catholic, although with significant Protestant areas such as Shankill Road. East Belfast (where Harry grew up) is predominantly Protestant, but with some Catholic areas such as Short Strand. And North Belfast is a chequerboard of religious enclaves living cheek by jowl, a patchwork of potential flashpoints. Violence still occurs at community interfaces and some ninety-nine peace walls serve as physical barriers in the city, separating ethnoreligious groups, a significant number of which were constructed after the peace accord was signed (O’Leary 2022). Although ethnoreligious mixed areas have increased since the Good Friday Agreement, these are predominantly among the middle classes in the south of the city or in the gentrified city centre by the River Lagan waterfront; during the same period, inter-communal violence increased in North and West Belfast (Murtagh 2011).

Ethnoreligious segregation is most marked in the education system. Although there is a growing number of integrated schools in Northern Ireland, where Catholic and Protestant children are educated together, they account for only 7% of pupil enrolment (Roulston and Hansson 2021). The stark corollary of this statistic is that 93% of children attend a Catholic or Protestant school. The vast majority of young people in Northern Ireland will not be educated with those who practise ‘the other’ religion until, and if, they reach higher education. There is even segregation in death. An underground wall separates Catholic and Protestant dead in Belfast City cemetery (Shirlow and Murtagh 2006).

Thus, conflict and division in Northern Ireland is ethnoreligious, political, ideological and not necessarily in the past. It is between Catholic and

Protestant; between nationalists who want reunification of the island of Ireland and unionists who want Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom; and between republicans and loyalists, traditionally associated with paramilitary groups that advocate violent means to achieve their ideological ends. As Coulter and Murray note, one needs ‘to exercise a little caution before speaking of Northern Ireland as a place that exists “after the troubles”’ (2008: 21).

Aspect Perception

This historical and contemporary overview goes a long way to explain why my ethnographic findings – a plethora of non-Troubled narratives – surprised me in 2007. I grew up in England in the 1970s with the Troubles on the television news, filtered through reportage that focused on violence, particularly by the IRA. Loyalist violence was given much less airtime. The British Army were portrayed as heroes working in unspeakable conditions. And ‘republican interviewees – whether members of military or political organisations – [were] treated as “hostile witnesses” [and] the “checks and balances” on Irish coverage [became] effective censorship’ (Curtis 1986: 63–64). My awakening to other ‘truths’ in the Northern Irish conflict was in my twenties, when I read *Only the Rivers Run Free: Northern Ireland: The Women’s War* (Fairweather, McDonough and McFadyean 1984). This details the effects of the 1981 hunger strike from the point of view of (mainly) republican women. In 2006, I attended an Irish Studies Summer School at Queen’s University Belfast, where I was introduced to the complexity and analytical scrutiny of Irish history and politics and their contemporary expression. In my Master’s fieldwork, the following year, I chose to work with men who had grown up during the Troubles. I expected Troubles stories. If I had looked for them specifically, these stories would have been abundant. But they were not the stories that my interlocutors shared when given carte blanche to link story and place.

My awakening to this ‘other story’, this aspect of everyday life they chose to convey, is what Ludwig Wittgenstein refers to as ‘dawning’ (1998: 194): a sudden recognition that what you see can be interpreted differently. There is a difference between seeing something, in an objective sense, and seeing it *as* something, where meaning is subjectively ascribed to it. This is because the aspect perceived is interpreted through one’s prior knowledge and experience. Wittgenstein famously uses a picture that is an optical illusion (see Figure 0.3).

Most people perceive this picture, initially, as either a duck or a rabbit. It may not be until the other possibility for the drawing is pointed out that they recognise another interpretation: a different aspect to the drawing. Before undertaking fieldwork in 2007, my prior knowledge of Belfast was of a place riven with conflict. It took a series of quotidian narratives to show me a different aspect.

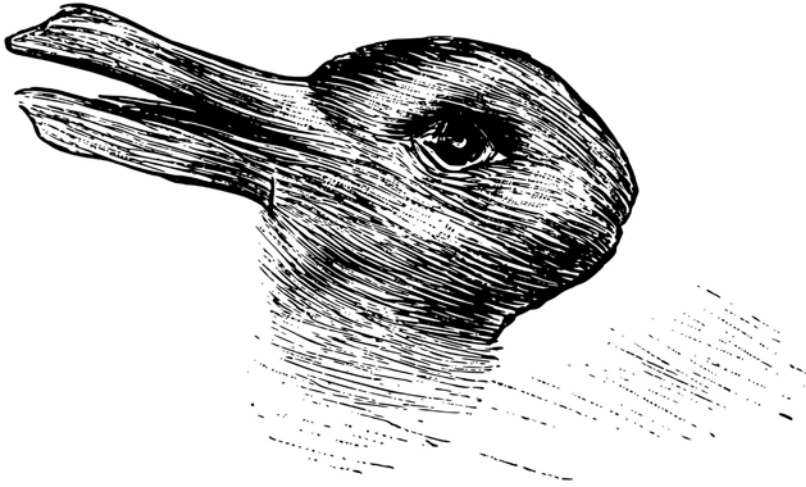


Figure 0.3. Duck-Rabbit. Image from Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

Situating The Troubles Academically

Given its history, it is not surprising that the conflict (including its causes, the protagonists and victims, and its legacy) has occupied academics working on and in Northern Ireland. Collectively, they have made important contributions to understanding and critiquing the situation and have often advised the government on policy initiatives (Donnan and McFarlane 1989). There are several reasons for an academic focus on the Troubles, the term used here as a metonym for both the historical situation and its legacy, since studies on peacebuilding are still anchored inherently to the conflict. First and foremost, the conflict had a devastating effect on many lives and for some people continues to do so, as Pádraig Ó Tuama (2013: 27) poignantly reminds us in this extract from his poem ‘The Pedagogy of Conflict’.¹

When I was a child,
I learnt to count to five:
one, two, three, four, five.
But these days, I’ve been counting lives, so I count
one life
one life
one life
one life
one life
Because each time is the first time that that life has
been taken.

In the book *Lost Lives*, David McKittrick and colleagues count the lives of the victims of the Troubles, presenting 3,720 stories, each one attesting to the human cost of each life that was taken (McKittrick et al. 2007). Conflict

and social division in Northern Ireland are facts that cannot be ignored: '[It] was, and it remains, impossible to understand local rural and urban communities without understanding ethnicity, sectarianism, national identities, class, and the overall importance of history in everyday life' (Wilson and Donnan 2006: 27–28).

The second reason for an academic focus on the Troubles is that research priorities may be explicitly or implicitly influenced by research funding. The British Research Excellence Framework focuses on impact as well as quality. Output that can be turned into policy may be more attractive, such as the report by Paul Nolan and Dominic Bryan (2016) on official and unofficial flag flying, which proposes explicit policy options.

The third reason lies in preparation for research, especially in the early stages when reviewing relevant literature. In the academic search engine Google Scholar, the algorithm heavily weights citations. This favours what Beel and Gipp call standard literature, and it is less effective as a search engine for papers 'advancing views opposite to the mainstream' (2009: 239). If one puts 'Belfast' or 'Northern Ireland' as a search term into Google Scholar, the overwhelming return is for books and articles relating to the conflict and its legacy, even if one narrows the search term down to the last few years. One of the reasons I expected to hear Troubles stories in 2007 is that academic literature steered me towards this. There is an academic metanarrative of Belfast as a Troubled place.

A metanarrative, or grand narrative, is an ideology or paradigm that explains dominant modes of thought and 'exerts a strong influence on what is considered just and true' (Du Toit 2022: 86). This leads to the suppression of narratives that differ from the mainstream. Jean-François Lyotard (1988) argues that metanarratives also suppress new and different ways of thinking and acting. He calls for a shift in attention to little narratives (*petits récits*), which are multitudinous, varied and constantly reinventing themselves, 'free from the weight of tradition and the restrictions of pre-conceived ideologies' (du Toit 2022: 88). The stories told by Harry – at Stormont, at Glentoran Football Club, outside the Deer's Head pub – exemplify Lyotard's little narratives, although the diminutive does not diminish them. These narratives are important to Harry; Lyotard would argue they are important in challenging the metanarrative of Belfast.

The academic metanarrative of any given place is a multidisciplinary undertaking that has no omniscient author. Individual scholars' research topics may depend on their discipline and their field of study within that. In Northern Ireland, one might expect political scientists to focus on division when this dominates so much of past and current politics. But Sara Dybris McQuaid (2012) criticises academics for focusing on the social pathology of division rather than, for example, why many people express a preference for integrated education and living in mixed areas. Analysis of the middle ground in Northern Irish discourse is ridiculed as the 'let's just get alongers' or 'affluent, patronising do-gooders' (McQuaid 2012: 76) and then

ignored. For an anthropologist this raises concerns. Anthropology studies what it means to be a human being in the world from the perspective of those humans and seeks not to sit in judgement. Of course, the discipline has a long colonial history of studying ‘the other’, the phrase usually applied to historical works on small rural societies in faraway places. Since the late 1970s, the discipline has gradually moved away from this analytical lens (Balzani and Besnier 2021). But there is an element of othering in the study of violent conflict, given a reasonable assumption that most academics and their audience are not combatants.

Joel Robbins argues that anthropology’s contemporary ‘other’, the primary object of anthropological attention, is ‘the suffering subject... living in pain, in poverty, or under conditions of violence or oppression’ (2013a: 448). It is widely acknowledged in Northern Ireland that the conflict and its legacy are disproportionately represented in working-class communities, people who not only bore the brunt of the violence but have seen fewer benefits from the promised ‘peace dividend’ (Coulter and Shirlow 2023: 7). Eve Tuck (2009) identifies a similar issue in the study of Native American and First Nation peoples, calling it damage-centred research. Well-meaning researchers focus on pain and loss, such as abuse, addiction, poverty or illness. Although this is intended to enable change for the better, in the process it embeds a narrative of damaged societies. Robbins calls for an anthropology of the good, not meant as a moral judgement of good versus bad, but as a shift in focus from a metanarrative of suffering to encompass other aspects of people’s lives.

I do not advocate ignoring the conflict and its legacy in Northern Ireland since this too would be a misrepresentation. Nor do I criticise academics who carry out this research; they make an important contribution to understanding and explaining ongoing suffering. Karen Lysaght counsels that although an emphasis on everyday activities ‘creates a more complex and nuanced picture of life in the divided city, [it is] important not to create a false sense of “normality”’ (2006: 128). However, I counter that a focus on division creates an exaggerated picture of conflict. If we are to understand life in the city in its totality, then those whose lives are less touched by the Troubles, or those who choose not to speak of damage, are equally important. This requires a shift in academic attention.

Returning to the opening quotes for this Introduction, this is why the poet Gerald Dawe states (in somewhat ironic language) that Belfast ‘has been stereotyped to death’ (2003: 207). It is that academic literature that has helped to embed its complex history in permafrost. The question I would ask is, would everyone living in Belfast recognise themselves as themselves in academic literature? The conflict and its legacy are important, but it is not the only story. Justin’s quote attests to this when he says that Belfast has a thirst for other stories: Lyotard’s *petits récits*. This is something that fiction writers hailing from or writing about Belfast have already begun to embrace, as exemplified in the quote from Jo Baker’s novel *Offcomer*, where

the protagonist Alan returns to his home city from university in Oxford, observes the changes in the city centre and thinks to himself that ‘Belfast, at last, is catching up with me’ (2002: 103). As academics we must pay attention to other narratives because people choose what in their lives is worthy of communicating.

The Susurrus and the Siren: Paying Attention to Academic Attention

In the mid-1970s, Eimear lived in a small town in Northern Ireland. She desperately wanted to study art at university but lacked the confidence to apply, so enrolled in a local life drawing class. The life model was a middle-aged woman who was completely comfortable in her own body, despite it carrying the marks of childbearing, and this gave Eimear the confidence to draw. In 1978 Eimear was accepted at Belfast College of Art. She wrote what follows many years later, in preparation for an oral storytelling evening (discussed in Chapter 3).

Seventeen years old and up from the country to Belfast. Art College. Freedom. Sitting in the college canteen, fourth floor, listening to the tutor explain what he expected of us. A big wide wall of windows overlooking the rooftops of surrounding buildings, gazing across an ocean of concrete and red brick. A bomb went off; and then another. Plumes of grey smoke half a dozen streets away, spouting like some fiery Leviathan. It was the Troubles and I appeared to be in the middle of it. Streets governed by men and women in khaki, body searches to gain entry through the railings of the closed city centre, bag searches to get into each and every shop. Girls and women queued outside shop doors waiting until someone left before we could enter. Occasionally we wondered if we were in Belfast or Moscow.

Life at Art College was pure freedom. I went into the studio at noon and worked until ten at night, after the students who had real homes to go to left to have dinner. It was peaceful even with the odd siren blaring or the distant hum of the helicopter overhead. And the city lights glowed at night, twinkling if it rained. It was the city that made me stay on after college. The anonymity of it all. In the country everyone knows your business, knows who your father is, knows who your family is. So, I embraced Belfast with all my teenage desire to be known for myself and not my family history.

In the evenings we’d head to McGlades bar, got to know the elderly dapper owner, got to know his Tequila Sunrises, sitting looking at them and not wanting to drink them for fear of spoiling the near-perfect red into orange into yellow. And on Saturdays we’d sometimes head to the Bodega in Callender Street, with a bar on each floor decorated differently but all stereotypically Spanish, tumbling out into the bright daylight and singing our way home. Students. Wonderful memories unfolding in Belfast: falling in love, getting my first job, my first flat, climbing over the railings of Botanic Gardens in a silk dress and suspenders and high heels. . . but that’s an entirely separate story.

Life was good in Belfast. Art student. A huge liberation. Not only to come to art college but to come to a city. And I have no idea how I survived but it was wonderful, crazy and I made tons of friends. It was just huge and different and wonderful, colourful.

What could we pay attention to in Eimer's story and what should we pay attention to? There are three registers of attention I wish to explore here: the attention that Eimer gives to the world, what she calls attention to through her story, and the academic attention I paid to what she told me.

At seventeen years old, when Eimer went to the life-drawing class, there would be many things happening in her life – some profound, most quotidian – within a local and global context. For example, by the end of 1977 the Troubles in Northern Ireland had claimed 1,909 lives (Malcolm Sutton Index 2024) and the Swedish pop group ABBA had consistently topped the music charts. One focus for Eimer's attention at this time was her desire to pursue art, to branch out from her family network and move to the city.

Life is messy, multitudinous and with many things happening simultaneously, and our thoughts in the moment can be fleeting and inchoate. One way to make meaning of the events of our lives is to corral them into a story. Narrative is central to what it is to be a human being. For Barthes, it is 'present in every age, in every place, in every society. . . [it is] international, transhistorical, transcultural: *it is simply there, like life itself*' (1993: 251–52, my emphasis). To construct a narrative arc for a personal story one pays attention to the facts, description and feelings that progress the plot, excising anything that is superfluous. In this way existential disorderliness is caged into a narrative structure (Carr 1991). Eimear begins her story with a description of bombs going off, the army on the streets and the distant hum of helicopters. But her story is not about the Troubles. It is about freedom, liberation, friendship and coming of age. Through her language she draws our attention to her life in the city in 1978 as 'embrac[ing] Belfast with all my teenage desire to be known for myself'. The Troubles are the context to her life – there were bombs and bag searches – but the focus of her story is Belfast as 'huge and different and wonderful, colourful'.

A multidisciplinary metanarrative may not have an omniscient author, but a single piece of work does. As an anthropologist my role is not just to report my observations but to analyse them. Ethnography is an epistemological exercise and part of that is to place my observations within past and current academic debate (Gay y Blasco and Wardle 2019). I choose what to analyse, which literature to place it against and how to represent it in written publication. I choose where to focus my academic attention. Eimear's story represented above is an extract of her written work supplemented by a record of our interview and notes from other meetings. She shaped her story for me and I reshape her story for you. I could have chosen a mainstream analysis of her story – how a seventeen-year-old woman navigates a move from a rural town into what could arguably be considered the epicentre of the Troubles. But, several years earlier, I had a Wittgensteinian dawning of another aspect to life in Belfast, of quotidian life susurrating against the siren of conflict. So, my attention focuses on the rest of her story. Once I had seen Wittgenstein's duck as well as the rabbit I could not unsee it. Because disciplinary attention is addressed in different ways it becomes something of

a slippery concept, and so Pedersen, Albris and Seaver prefer to explore it as a matter of concern, rather than a matter of fact, because ‘this state of affairs demands anthropological attention’ (2021: 310). To analyse attention to the Troubles, I begin with the concept of ethnographic seduction.

In the mid-1990s, Antonius Robben worked with perpetrators and victims of violence in Argentina. He uses the term seduction in a neutral sense: of being led astray from a particular line of questioning, or the difficulty in objective analysis because of the power of someone’s rhetoric, the sadness of the story and the seduction of being told secrets. There is a ‘conscious utilization of the complex social, emotional, dialogic, and trans-ferential dynamic between ethnographer and informant’ (Robben 1996: 73). It may be easy to question half-truths told by perpetrators, but less so by victims. Traumatic experiences may be repressed and this can obstruct anthropological understanding. And there is the additional complication that many perpetrators of violence want their views widely disseminated: Robben needed to avoid being a proxy mouthpiece by giving academic credence to particular and partial viewpoints.

Robben pays attention to the intersubjective relationship between researcher and interlocutor and his theory is influenced by psychoanalysis. This can be problematic. He writes, ‘the difficulty with seduction is that the ethnographer is often not aware of it taking place’ (Robben 1996: 83). This denies the ethnographer’s agency and suggests anthropologists can be some kind of unsuspecting puppets. This may be true temporarily, in the moment of working with an interlocutor, but as an ongoing analytical exercise it becomes an abdication of anthropological responsibility. But I wish to expand Robben’s ideas on ethnographic seduction to consider how this may contribute to a metanarrative.

Since there are many truths that can be diametrically opposed, Robben says that manipulation of appearance is at the heart of seduction. This wins the ethnographer over to a pretence of a real understanding of the world through the eyes of an interlocutor, but what is revealed is ‘nothing more than a *trompe l’oeil*’ (1995: 85). This is an art technique that deceives the eye, such as a two-dimensional painting that looks as though it is in three dimensions. In Cristina Beretta’s painting on a cupboard door in Figure 0.4, the 3D effect is achieved by the shadow of the ribbon and the angle of the books, giving the appearance of depth to the bookshelf.

John Berger writes that the ‘compositional unity of a painting contributes fundamentally to the power of its image’ (1972: 6). It is not just the individual details in a painting that are important; each element relates to the others such that the totality becomes something else. The single red ribbon against the blue books acts as the *punctum* of the painting (Barthes 2000), drawing our attention to this individual element. It is one point of vivid colour that breaks through the background, but it invites us to see it in relation to the entire painting, because it needs the monochrome *studium* of the books in order to be the *punctum*. When looking at the painting we

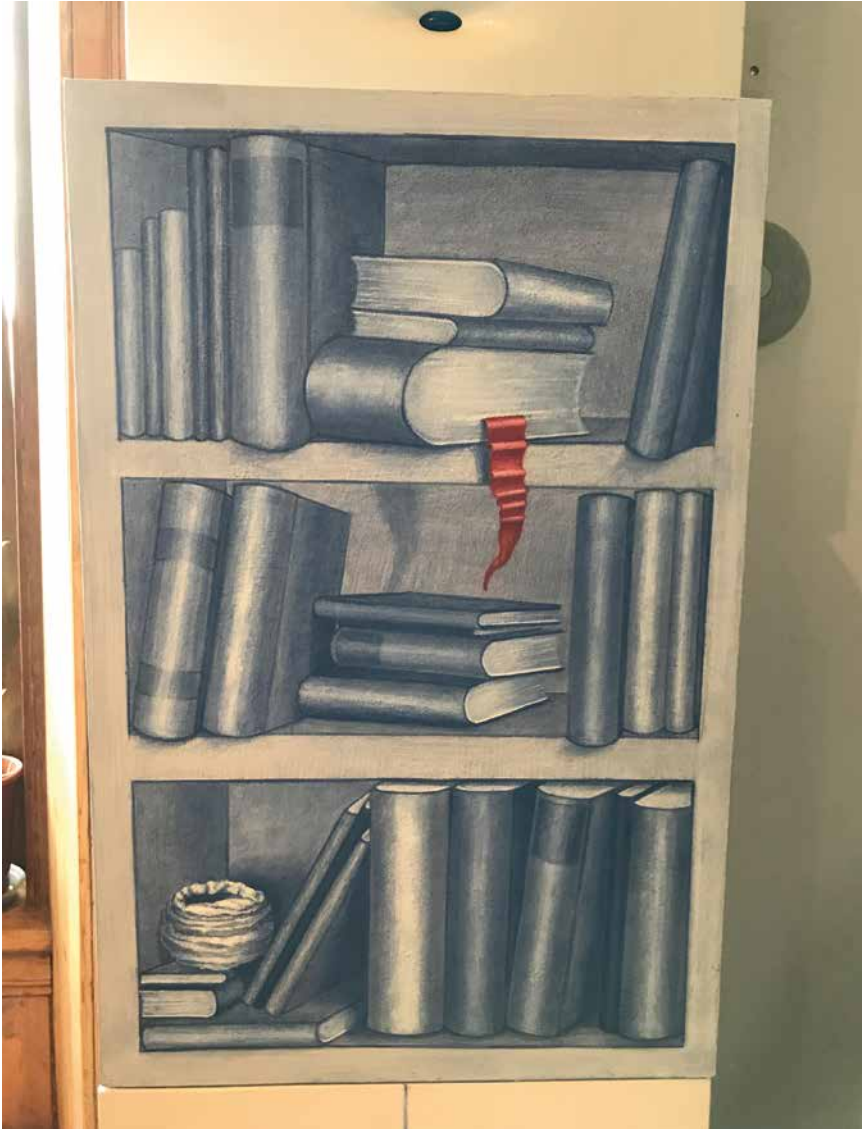


Figure 0.4. Painting on cupboard door. © Cristina Beretta

could choose to pay attention to one of the books or the pot, but what we generally see is the whole, a bookshelf, with the ribbon as a focus. But if this painting becomes a metaphor for published academic output on Belfast, it would be a mass of red ribbons (see Figure 0.5), predominantly in the north and west of the painting, and everything else would be greyed out. Through replication, the *punctum* ribbons dominate what we see. The books are still there but are now susurrating in the background.



Figure 0.5. Cupboard door revised. © Karen Lane

When an image is presented as a work of art 'it is affected by a whole series of learnt assumptions about art' (Berger 1972: 4). This is not dissimilar to Wittgenstein's aspect perception, interpreting what we see through the concepts we hold. But looking, as opposed to seeing, is an active process and this is where it relates to attention. A sonic analogy

would be hearing an ambulance siren or listening to the susurrus of the traffic. Roland Barthes raises awareness to attention when there are myriad possibilities; ‘why choose (why photograph) this object, this moment, rather than some other?’ (Barthes 2000: 6). Why does Eimear choose to tell a story of her life in Belfast in 1978 out of all possible stories? Why does she choose to portray it as a positive coming of age story, rather than a fearful move to a violent city? Why does she draw our attention to her experience of the city as ‘wonderful, colourful’, rather than dwelling on the bombs and bag searches, if not to portray what she wants our attention to be focused on? In the second iteration of the painting on the cupboard door we would need to look, not just see, to find Eimear’s story written in the greyed-out books beside or behind the red ribbons of conflict. A painter’s way of seeing is to focus on colours, brush strokes and composition. Academics’ way of seeing is coloured by what we choose to research, the context and aspect through which we see it. The choices we make – in how to represent our findings and the academic debates within which to situate our arguments – direct in which academic gallery we hang our work. Of course, conflict and non-conflict is not a neat dichotomy. In Kayla Rush’s (2022) research on community arts in Northern Ireland she uses the metaphor of a cracked mirror, wherein art reflects a community of disjuncture. While many of the community artists ‘work to “rise above” what they perceive to be sectarian division, they cannot entirely escape this crack in the art world’ (Rush 2022: 13).

For Joanna Cook (2018), it is important to contextualise attention as an analytic object, particularly in this technological age where there are innumerable demands on attention that are blamed for the malaise of modern life and an epidemic of distraction. Paying attention to attention, she argues, can be part of the solution not just the problem. Mindfulness, a practice of being acutely aware of one’s being in the moment, which derives from Buddhist meditation, is about paying attention in a particular way (Cook 2018). If we are mindful of academic attention on Belfast, and pay attention in particular ways, it can become part of the solution towards a balanced metanarrative of life in the city, rather than being an unwitting fortifier of a heavily Troubles-focused narrative that does not necessarily reflect the experiences of all its citizens. Some academics working in Northern Ireland do research other topics, such as Marta Kempny’s or Naoko Maehara’s work on the lives of migrants (Kempny 2010; Maehara 2018), Emily Mannheimer on *Game of Thrones* tourism (Mannheimer, Reijnders and Brandellero 2022), Neil McCaffery’s (2018) circus performers, Joseph Webster (2018) on Plymouth Brethren (a non-conformist branch of Christianity that believes in and practises a doctrine of strict separation), or my work on Belfast’s Ten by Nine storytelling evening (Lane 2019). But when these are taken together with the rest of the academic output on Belfast, they represent the susurrus of non-Troubled narratives against the siren of conflict. To ensure a balanced metanarrative about any city, we

need to pay attention to our chosen topic, not only during fieldwork, but from the very beginning of the research journey.

But is it fair to expect PhD candidates and their supervisors or career academics to care about the metanarrative? They may be driven by a burning interest or joining an established research project or being mindful of the potential impact of their research to nurture their careers. However, if we take decolonisation of the curriculum as an exemplar, we can justify shifting anthropological attention. Anthropology's uncomfortable colonial history has long been acknowledged, particularly since the 1950s and 1960s with the growing independence movement among former colonies (Asad 1979). As long ago as 1978 Edward Said criticised Western scholarship for exoticising the Orient. But the discipline was slow to translate this into teaching practices and even slower to address how the legacy of colonialism permeated research methods and anthropological writing (Sanchez 2018). Nevertheless, a concerted effort over the last five years or so has focused our attention. We revisit reading lists and how we frame lectures, to whom we direct students' academic gaze, as well as how to change our teaching practices and promote more collaboration with interlocutors (Karampampas 2023). We may not be undertaking neocolonial research ourselves, and we can put anthropology's history into context, but there is a collective expectation of a disciplinary need to pay attention to correction, not to excise that history or the works of our forebears, but as a critical interrogation and a rebalancing. What ends up as publication or teaching begins with our initial research and we should all pay attention – at the outset – as to how we may be perpetuating, challenging or rebalancing dominant discourses, whether this is decolonising the curriculum or contributing to a Troubles metanarrative in Northern Ireland.

Structure of the Book

This book presents non-Troubled narratives told by people living in Belfast, ranging from fleeting encounters with strangers to longer-term relationships, and considers how lives in the city are portrayed in contemporary fiction and drama. In Chapter 1 I explore how my dog, Torridon, worked as my research assistant. She is a friendly, shaggy dog who attracts attention. Walking around the city many people stopped to stroke Torridon and to speak to me. She worked as an introducer and mediator, helping to navigate social relations, a neutral reason for me to be out on the street early in the morning or late at night. But the dog proved to be more than just a meet-and-greet facilitator. Torridon brought forth stories that would not be told (or told so easily) to an anthropologist alone, as I explore the positionality of the researcher and developing trusting relationships with interlocutors. Canine behaviourist Alexandra Horowitz (2009) suggests that dogs pay close attention to human behaviour but they do this in different ways from humans, for example, through a very powerful sense of smell and a highly

Not the Troubles

Alternative Narratives from Belfast

Karen Lane

<https://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/LaneNot>

Not for resale

developed ability to interpret non-verbal behaviour. Paying close attention to human–other animal interactions can yield new insights.

Cities have a diversity of public spaces in which social action is performed. Chapter 2 focuses on one type of space – the workplace, in particular a hairdressing salon – to interrogate how surface presentations can yield so much in a relatively short encounter. In an unexpected performance, a hairdresser dramatically enacts her concerns regarding child abuse and immigrants living in Belfast, setting up a multisensorial and emotionally charged ‘ethnographic moment’. This chapter considers how we can use perception as part of our methods toolkit, the role of the senses in the data we collect, and how to employ sensory knowledge in our analysis, since it is ‘a key component of the experiences that form the bedrock of our understanding’ (Gottlieb 2016: 101). Played out in front of a large mirror, hairdresser and anthropologist become a cast and audience of two. The mirror becomes an analytical tool as it visualises a complex set of relationships between people and their images (Polhemus 1988): a visible marker of embodied experience.

Chapter 3 examines the fundamental role of narrative in our lives to communicate who we are and what is important to us, since Michael Jackson argues that storytelling is a ‘vital human strategy for sustaining a sense of agency’ (2006: 15). This crystallises as a narrative imperative, an existential need to tell and to listen to stories. Ten By Nine (Tenx9) is a popular public storytelling night where nine people have ten minutes each to tell a true and personal story of their lives. Working with storytellers – and telling a story myself – illuminated a sense of togetherness between storytellers and audience, what Victor and Edith Turner would call *communitas* (V. Turner 1995; E. Turner 2012). This encouraged people to share their everyday lives in a room full of strangers. The juxtaposition of stories – amusing, poignant, educational – reflects how the profound and quotidian can emerge simultaneously in people’s lives. At Tenx9 people narrate stories of life in Belfast that challenge the hegemonic academic narrative of this (post-) conflict city.

Chapter 4 explores the connection between everyday lives and place. Using storytelling on location as a methodological entry point, it considers people’s symbolic relationship to the city of Belfast. When personal stories are told in the places they relate to, these ‘spaces of encounter’ (Amin 2013: 3) act as a multisensorial mnemonic, evoking and provoking stories of belonging and outsidership, of activism and despair. These narratives differ from the fleeting engagements with strangers explored in the first two chapters because they are ‘staged encounters’ (Irving 2007: 186). People have had time to think about what story they want to tell, where and why, with place taking centre stage.

Chapter 5 is the final ethnographic chapter and marks a methodological shift, as it moves away from the physical city – a peopled, built environment – to consider how creative writers imagine and represent

Belfast in fictional literature and drama. This necessitates a shift in focus, as I discuss some ‘Troubles’ novels, to locate the importance of Troubles literature both during and after the conflict. This enables me to demonstrate a trajectory that sees fiction reflecting the lives and concerns of Belfast’s citizens transitioning away from Troubled narratives.

In the Conclusion I explore the concept of alternative narratives in Belfast by analysing two examples: a fleeting encounter with a stranger that highlights the role of contingency and narrative in our lives; and through a comparison of Belfast with another city that focuses attention on a non-Troubled narrative. The nature of urban living necessitates myriad engagements with strangers. These are contingent on factors such as time and place, and on the opportunity and willingness to engage with another. But this apparent superficiality can reveal hidden depths to people’s lives. This is explored theoretically through Edward Casey’s (2007) argument that the act of glancing, while appearing to be superficial, is a central feature of how we perceive the world. This demonstrates that surface presentations reveal a deep temporality. I then consider how cities are analysed theoretically and comparatively. Life in Belfast is often compared to other post-conflict cities, such as Beirut or Jerusalem. Instead, I compare Belfast with Nashville, revealing an alternative narrative through popular music. Belfast is predominantly analysed (stereotyped) as a divided city but, as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie states in her TED talk on the danger of a single story, ‘the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue but that they are incomplete’ (2009 13:06).

In his book *Road Markings* (2012), anthropologist Michael Jackson reminisces about a day spent wandering around San Francisco and he recalls snippets of overheard conversations.

In a grocery store at Nob Hill, I overheard a woman telling her companion that her brother had committed suicide seventeen years ago to the day. ‘I turned the corner this summer,’ she said, ‘which makes me think I’m now ready to write a book about it.’ On a street corner at Russian Hill, I passed a woman pushing a friend in a wheelchair. The woman said, ‘Well he didn’t fit in with the kids.’ To which the woman in the wheelchair replied, ‘But you didn’t fit in either.’

Thus the world hands us stories on a plate. (M. Jackson 2012, no page number)

On a street corner in Belfast, next to Windsor Presbyterian Church, I meet a woman who is waiting for her husband. ‘We’re off to a funeral’ she says. ‘It’s for the minister’s son. So sad. He was at university in England and was killed just before he graduated.’ At a hair salon, a hairdresser dramatically recounts a story of child abuse and I worry about my researcher role. In an arts venue on Hill Street, a woman stands before two hundred people, most of them strangers, and tells us about a life model in a drawing class. ‘He was naked. He was enormous!’ Next to the

Harland and Wolff shipyard, a man displays a photograph of two large yellow cranes photoshopped with the letters 'L&G' and 'B&T'. And in a short story collection that promises Troubles on the book jacket, small 't' troubles are smuggled in.

Thus does Belfast hand us a susurrus of stories on a plate.

Note

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