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Published PDF deposited in Coventry University's Repository

Original citation:

Lepp, E, O'Driscoll, D, Vogel, B & Morecroft-Rice, D 2025, 'Graffiti as Method: Spatio-temporal Analysis of Political Perception and Community Relations in Belfast', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, vol. (In-Press), pp. (In-Press).

<https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2024.2444078>

DOI 10.1080/17502977.2024.2444078

ISSN 1750-2977

ESSN 1750-2985

Publisher: Taylor and Francis Group

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To cite this article: Eric Lepp, Dylan O'Driscoll, Birte Vogel & Dan Morecroft-Rice (14 Jan 2025): Graffiti as Method: Spatio-temporal Analysis of Political Perception and Community Relations in Belfast, Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding, DOI: [10.1080/17502977.2024.2444078](https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2024.2444078)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2024.2444078>



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Graffiti as Method: Spatio-temporal Analysis of Political Perception and Community Relations in Belfast

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the methodological possibilities that a graffiti dataset offers to a spatio-temporal analysis of peace and conflict. Leveraging our original visual dataset of Belfast's changing muralscape, the analysis unpacks how messages painted on walls offer a lens into evolving local sentiments, politics, unity, and divisions. We suggest that tracking changes in graffiti across time offers methodological innovation in understanding contested spaces, and, when used as a foundational method, a dataset enhances researcher understanding of violence, avoidance, memorialisation and publicly debated social issues, paving the way for further research on graffiti as a lens for understanding complex societal phenomena.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 19 March 2024
Accepted 16 December 2024

KEYWORDS

Methodological framework;
graffiti; muralscape; peace
and conflict; Belfast

In conflict-affected societies the use of graffiti¹ can transform, respond to, and organise the spaces in which it occurs. In Belfast, for instance, the use of murals to alter public spaces and aesthetics has been a long-standing practice of public communication. It contributes to a process of art transformation (Cole 2024; Kappler, Richmond, and Vogel 2024), referring to the transformation of social, political and cultural space through the arts. Graffiti, more generally, has been recognised by scholars as an important medium to communicate local issues of peace and conflict (Cole 2024; Haworth et al. 2022; Ryan 2016; Vogel et al. 2020). It plays a crucial role in shaping and reflecting spatial identity, participating in processes of identity maintenance, and influencing peacebuilding and community cohesion efforts, and thus contributes to space and place making. Likewise, social movements and activists increasingly rely on visual forms of protest, highlighting the potential for graffiti to communicate political claims, especially where traditional spaces of communication are distorted by conflicts or controlled by elites. This article frames graffiti in relation to localised everyday practices of communication and expression and what this means across time and space. We suggest that a spatio-temporal analysis of graffiti through large-scale visual datasets offers insights for peace and

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conflict studies scholars, and can act as a foundational methodology, which can be instrumental in the development of supplementary methods such as surveys, interviews or focus groups on the knowledge production process about local dynamics of peace and conflict.

The novelty of this article lies in its exploration of the methodological and analytical possibilities of larger visual graffiti datasets for a spatio-temporal analysis of contested spaces and the micro dynamics of peace and conflict within them. The dataset we are presenting in this article was created exclusively from open access data. In this article, we want to explore the use of large-scale visual datasets as a method and explain its opportunities and limitations. The approach taken to create this dataset not only offers a cost-effective and environmentally friendly data collection method, similar to remote neighbourhood audits or remote systematic observations used across disciplines (Odggers et al. 2012; Rundle et al. 2011) but could prove especially useful in conflict-affected regions where travel and academic research may be restricted or unsafe (Vogel et al. 2020). Furthermore, leveraging open access data facilitated our examination of visual histories predating the current research project. This approach enabled us to concentrate on the evolution of mural expressions across different time periods without relying on the memories and narratives of people living in neighbourhoods of interest.

We demonstrate the use of this methodological approach in Belfast, where murals have a significant history in the politics, nationalism, territorialisation, myth, and memory of the region (Rolston 1991). As Crowley (2015, 75) notes, ‘the words and images on the walls give an insight into social realities that are often obscured by the niceties and imprecisions of other forms of discourse’. In addition, Jarman (2005, 174) highlights that regarding murals as simply images ignore their power, stating: ‘Their very location affects how they are interpreted and what they mean, while the location is used and treated differently because of the paintings’. In this way, the paint on the walls has been a significant feature of both producing and reproducing ethnosectarian division in Belfast. Using illustrative and representative sequences from the dataset, this article shows that the ephemeral nature of murals, and their regular refreshing and reimagining, demonstrates evolving ways Nationalist and Unionist communities see themselves in present and past while also maintaining ‘othering’ between the two historically divided communities that can be captured through large-scale visual data.²

In generating our argument that spatial and temporal analysis of graffiti offers a lens to understand conflict dynamics and socio-political developments, this article first presents a new methodological framework to analyse graffiti as an evolving political artform. In concentrating on *when* and *where* graffiti is painted, this section demonstrates that local political and social understandings can be deepened by tracking mural changes or retainment across time. Here we introduce the term *spatial signalling* to illustrate graffiti’s ability (and those who control it) to send signals that are either inviting or excluding to others, based on both present and past *muralscapes*. This spatial signalling can also focus on the ingroup to send messages on community positioning. In the next section, we detail our methodological approach, explaining how we have constructed and utilised our dataset, the selection and justification of our sites of analysis, and the timeframe of analysis. A contextual overview of our Belfast case study follows the article’s methodological framework. This section engages an historical and contextual overview of Belfast as a deeply divided setting, highlighting the ways in which graffiti has been

used and presented within the city and region, and offering an examination of how mural sites have been, and are being, researched and interpreted. We then discuss the findings of the wider dataset and present some selected sequences from the dataset to show the potential for analysis. The examination of graffiti sets presented through chronological images act to hone the case study into local neighbourhoods and local dialogues. The article concludes with discussion surrounding the way in which graffiti has embedded itself as a significant local communication method in Belfast, focusing on the period since the Good Friday Agreement,³ and how murals have come to interact with the changing city, and its understanding of violence, single-community identity, avoidance, memorialisation, and current social issues. Most significantly, the article develops a methodological framework to demonstrate that graffiti can be used as a lens to understand local perceptions of peace and conflict, the transformation of society, and the positionality of communities in and beyond Belfast and the disciplinary boundaries of peace and conflict studies.

Methodological framework

The importance of understanding the connection of peace, conflict, geographies and spaces has steadily increased in recent years, often summarised as the spatial turn in International Relations (IR) and Peace and Conflict Studies (Vogel and Field 2020; McConnell, Megeran, and Williams 2014; Björkdahl & Buckley-Zistel, 2016; Gusic 2019; O’Driscoll 2021; Lepp 2022). We propose that graffiti is another lens to understand and systematically analyse spatial dynamics in conflict-affected areas, which connects to debate and discussion around visual IR (Bleiker 2018). The analysis of *when* and *where* graffiti is painted is vital to understanding its message and can provide nuanced insights into local communities’ sentiments and politics. In deeply divided societies, like Belfast, graffiti can allow for an understanding of which political messages are socially acceptable where, and, by considering previous versions of graffiti in the same space, how politics and attitudes might change over time, remain the same, or even demonstrate competing narratives in the same neighbourhood. Graffiti, approached and analysed by a variety of methods, thus offers a lens into localised sentiments, politics, unity and divisions. As Gusic (2019, 49) highlights, ‘society is fundamentally spatial in the sense that everyday life, protests, violence, war, and peace all play out in space ... therefore that what exists in space will affect how society plays out’. Graffiti not only exists in space but occupies public space and sends a message about the space and its ‘community’ and politics. As such, graffiti is part of the process of identities merging with territory, and in turn shaping and being shaped by social interactions (Björkdahl and Buckley-Zistel 2016; O’Driscoll 2021). Thus, graffiti is informed by the spatial identity, but also informs the identity, in a type of nation building process (Brubaker, Feischmidt, and Fox 2008). Particularly in deeply divided societies, it is part of people’s attempt to change the meaning of space, as ‘on being inhabited, space is appropriated, given meaning and interpreted and thus transformed into place’ (Björkdahl and Kappler 2017, 2).

This highlights the decisive link between conflict, space, and graffiti. Graffiti can display both messages of exclusivity and inclusiveness, thus supporting or hindering peacebuilding approaches and community cohesion in any given space (Migeon and Vogel 2024). While graffiti is often associated with ‘sub-cultures’ and youth movements, sanctioned

graffiti, such as murals and street art, can in many cases be representative of consensual community opinions as its placement and design is discussed with various stakeholders, and murals are designed to stay in place more long-term than unsanctioned graffiti such as tags or slogans. Cole (2024), as well as Kappler and McKane (2019), show that spatial transformation through sanctioned graffiti – in their cases street art – can be part of a peacebuilding process, but that this spatial transformation is carefully curated by different people from the grassroots to the elites. Within Belfast, the term ‘re-imaging’ is used to describe when government-sponsored community committees decide motives and designs for murals that replace sectarian murals (Rolston 2012; Extramural Activity n.d.).

Graffiti can likewise play the opposite role and uphold boundaries and stereotypes about ‘the other’ or one’s own community. In Belfast murals can situate the locality ‘within a universe of political conflict, sectarian divisions, and paramilitary groups’ (McCormick and Jarman 2005). This speaks well to the already rich literature on graffiti as territorial demarcation or territorial claim-making processes (Kappler and McKane 2019; Ley and Cybriwsky 1974; Ross 2016) that stems originally from research into the use of graffiti by gangs to visibly mark and claim their territories in urban spaces. In fact, Shirlow and Murtagh (2006, 68) make a direct link between mural and space, arguing that a mural ‘encompasses signals of territorial demarcation’.

Yet, space is not static but changes over time in accordance with the communities that produce and reproduce it (Lefebvre 1991; Massey 2005; Soja 1998). If we follow this argument that space is produced by the interactions and people within it, one must also recognise the potential diverse and changing agendas within it (Vogel 2018). Moreover, spaces are subject to transformation, resulting in breakaway factions aligning with different social groups. As such, spaces, especially in conflict-affected societies, are not static entities; rather, they undergo a continuous process of evolution. Over time, new political ideas may emerge and become dominant while others are discarded, shaping the ever-changing nature of spaces.⁴ Again, graffiti can be an indicator of this. When murals are changed a ‘conscious decision is made to reclaim, reuse or redefine a space and an image is deliberately removed or updated to allow for the process of change and renewal’ (McCormick and Jarman 2005, 54). From a temporal perspective graffiti has the ability to depict any period from the past, but also to refashion it in the image of the writer or commissioner. There is a growing trend of using murals to ‘re-historicise the past’, with particular attention to local culture, traditions, and history.

This interplay across time and space leads to something we refer to as *spatial signalling* to explain how graffiti can communicate messages that reinforce social norms or assert power and identity within a space. While territorial marks, examined as indicators of space claiming (Ross 2016; Shirlow and Murtagh 2006), have received substantial attention as argued above, the dynamic nature of graffiti also influences the way spaces are perceived, read and interacted with in more than one way. Murals constantly send signals to those walking the streets. Based on the positionality of the viewer, these messages can be perceived as welcoming or threatening, while for some they do not evoke an emotional reaction at all (Vogel et al. 2020). Some signals are also stronger than others, or contradict and confuse the messages of other pieces around them. In addition, for those viewers very familiar with an area, changes to the walls can likewise send strong signals. Therefore, temporality emerges as a critical factor in the analysis of graffiti and its

intersection with space and place making. For instance, if a previous mural held paramilitary associations and a subsequent mural is only featuring moderate identity symbolism (e.g. a Tricolour or Union Jack, to stay with the example of Belfast), or is all of a sudden replaced with a peace dove, this change might convey a positive signal to members of the other group who might perceive the area as less threatening as a result. At the same time, a changed mural might also send a signal to those members of the internal community that cling on to the violent past that others in the community have moved on, and no longer align with violent ideologies. This shift in visual representation can serve as an indicator that certain beliefs or actions are no longer considered part of the community's prevailing mindset or values and changing social dynamic. Conversely, if a peace dove is replaced with an identity symbol, e.g. a flag, the change may be perceived as threatening to neighbouring communities and perceived as an indicator of deteriorating relations. As a result, a comprehensive understanding of spatial signalling means researchers should not only focus on the analysis of a single graffiti piece in isolation but also an examination of its contrast with preceding markings or other markings in the vicinity.

The above points to the importance of sustained interactions with graffiti in the production of space. A single photograph of a graffiti piece, taken out of time and place, does not allow for the same depth of analysis. Instead, the dynamic nature of graffiti necessitates a methodology that captures spatial change over time to track alterations in the visual expression and representation of communities. Such changes can comprehensively be tracked within the dataset that we will introduce in the next section.

Applied methodology: constructing the dataset

To capture the multidimensional aspects of Belfast's evolving *muralscape*, we created an original dataset of graffiti images⁵ organised by the 'site'⁶ in which they were collected and the 'set'⁷ to which they belong.⁸ We collated a total of 147⁹ graffiti sets, spanning six predefined data collection sites (see Map 1), within the database. Each set contains anywhere from two to 24 pieces of visual data, with a total of 680 individual pieces collected. The dataset is organised along axis of space and time to generate a visual record. Each mural set is geotagged by its Global Positioning System (GPS) coordinates. The set's visual change, or lack of it, is then recorded annually, with new visual data entities only



Map 1. Map of research sites forming our dataset.

added for the years visual change occurs. The dataset is based on open access records and digital archives and a limited number of our own photographs (used for quality purposes, rather than lack of alternative). Nonetheless, context does matter significantly in any analysis of graffiti, and we bring to the project an advanced understanding of the conflict dynamics and the political geography of Belfast. All authors travelled to or conducted research in Belfast for differing periods of time and one resided in the city during the time of writing. As discussed, we deliberately avoided interviews as a supplementary research method as the aim of this article is to see what examining graffiti images alone over time can tell us about peace and conflict dynamics at the local level. As a group of qualitative scholars, we fully understand the value that qualitative elements, such as walking interviews, would add to our understandings of peace and conflict in Belfast and spatial signalling. However, the purpose of this article is to demonstrate the possibilities of larger visual graffiti datasets for a spatio-temporal analysis of contested spaces and the micro dynamics of peace and conflict within them. We see the dataset as a foundational method; it enables the development of other methodologies and guides the lines of questioning taken. Nonetheless, it is important to note that we enter this process with significant knowledge on Belfast's conflict/peace dynamics, which of course influenced our analysis.

To construct the dataset, we consulted the following online and open access data sources: the Extramural Activity interactive mural map,¹⁰ the Peter Moloney Collection¹¹ (itself partly embedded within the Extramural Activity map), the Claremont College Collection,¹² and Google Street View¹³ (GSV). Since 2007 GSV has been generating open access imagery of streets by driving cars with 3D cameras down roads and recording images. While the images originally had no time stamp, making it more difficult to use them for research, Google added a date stamp (month/year) to new images in 2011 (Curtis et al. 2013). Yet, Curtis et al. (2013, 3) highlight the uncertainty of accuracy of the exact date of imagery as a potential limitation for research purposes. We do not consider this as problematic for our research project as our database is broken down by years rather than a granular timeline. However, it means the dates in our dataset show in which year a new mural was first recorded, which could include a time-lag to when it actually was changed. While this does provide an opportunity for temporally fleeting data to 'slip between the cracks' of our timeline, we have limited this by deliberately consulting three established databases, each constructed for differing purposes, to capture as whole a timeline as possible. In general, we are carrying forward the potential limitations of all our data sources into our own database.

To construct the dataset, we defined temporal and spatial bounds. We limited the data collection to the years 1998–2022. These temporal bounds were set in line with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, which marked a significant will to alter attitudes and ideologies for the sake of peace (Ruane and Todd 1999). We stopped recording new pieces in late 2022. The spatial constraints were placed primarily to limit the numbers of recorded murals to a manageable level, while still providing an overview of the spatial politics replicated throughout Belfast. To represent these, we selected divided estates surrounding the Unionist Shankill and Nationalist Falls Roads, the interface area between them,¹⁴ and a shared area surrounding the Royal Victoria hospital. In addition, we selected two small but data-rich sections within the heart of each community. Within the majority Unionist East Belfast, we selected an area along the Newtownards Road referred to as 'Freedom

Corner’; while within the predominantly Nationalist West Belfast we chose the area in the Gaeltacht Quarter where the Glenalina and Whiterock Roads intersect (see [Map 1](#)).

The dataset includes a large, divided section of the city, one of Belfast’s many securitised community interfaces, an amenity space shared by both communities, and a section of both the Unionist and Nationalist communities that lie within the heart of their respective areas. These spatial bounds were influenced by a few key sites of interest. Within the Nationalist Falls Road area the ‘international/solidarity’ wall was identified as data rich, as the wall acts as a quasi-official space in which Nationalist murals, and in turn ideology, are exhibited with a relative temporal fluidity. A similarly functioning space aided in defining the Unionist Shankill area. This space, an estate in the Unionist Lower Shankill, that used to contain the popular ‘Mona Lisa of Belfast’,¹⁵ is a key location for Belfast’s tourist black cab tours. Therefore, the area effectively functions as an ‘exhibit’ space for Belfast’s conflict tourism industry as the murals are known to be observed by those outside the Unionist sphere. The interface area was included due to the uniqueness of its spatial reality, and the replication of these small, securitised boundary spaces throughout Belfast (Jarman and O’Halloran 2001). As the space is bounded by gates and surveillance equipment used to control access in relation to localised tensions (Jarman and O’Halloran 2001), the occurrence and composition of murals within it offers a specific spatial insight. The outer wall of the Royal Victoria hospital along the Falls Road offers a similar spatial insight as it is dominated by crude, but cause-specific, graffiti that respond to current events, hence its inclusion within the dataset as a data-rich shared space. In addition, the two mural-rich sections located deep within East and West Belfast were chosen due to their distance from both the city centre and the usual conflict tourism route that predominantly tours the Falls and Shankill. As a result of this distance the graffiti and murals within these spaces are viewed predominantly by their respective communities, therefore they should offer an insight into community sentiments unmarked by the potential of a tourist audience. This combination of spatially representative graffiti-rich spaces, and temporal bounds that capture a time of political change, allows the database to provide a wealth of generalisable visual, spatial, and temporal data.

Some caveats: the dataset did not necessitate the initial existence of any graffiti in 1998 for it to be included during the subsequent years of the dataset. Additionally, any graffiti within the spatial bounds of the database that had not undergone visual change from 1998 to 2022 was not included; however, the removal, destruction, or altering of existing pieces within the temporal bounds of the database was included. Importantly, graffiti that has been deliberately maintained via repainting, design alterations, tag removal or any other form of active maintenance are included within the database as these actions produce visual change and are in turn recorded as a new entry in the set. The decision to forgo the capture of unchanged graffiti was based on two logical factors. First was the practical necessity to reduce the quantity of data recorded in the dataset so it could be completed in a reasonable length of time. The second was that by focusing solely on changing pieces we can observe what is new, as opposed to it being drowned out in a backdrop of old, unmaintained pieces. For example, if we consider the inclusion of two pieces: a new mural about housing and a paramilitary mural that has not been repainted for 24 years, and we choose to include both in the database, then we attribute both pieces with the same level of significance – despite no changes, maintenance or updates taking place in the latter. As our framework is centred on

temporality, changes are important and so new and updated *murals* or those pieces that the community has taken care to maintain (ensuring its place and legacy in the neighbourhood), are the parameters upon which the database was deliberately constructed.

For every data source other than GSV, visual data was systematically searched one street at a time, along a chronological timeline. GSV data required additional exploration to identify mural locations. We did this using the same spatial and temporal logic; however, with the additional process of visually identifying graffiti in the images. All visual data from these sources contained temporal data detailing the year in which the photograph was taken, and in the case of the Extramural Activity map and the Peter Moloney Collection, the years in which no visual change occurred. For the Claremont Collection and GSV data sources, temporal data detailing a lack of visual change was constructed via the consultation and cross-referencing of all available data to reveal periods in time during which no new visual data was generated. We determined the spatial data for each mural set by using the Extramural Activity map points and generating the respective GPS coordinates using Google Maps tools. For graffiti sets not present within the Extramural Activity map, data detailing their general location (i.e. street name) was investigated and pinpointed by comparing the pieces of visual data to GSV data until a match was found. GPS coordinates were then generated using the same Google Maps tools and ascribed to the visual data allowing the data to be sorted into the dataset. Whilst the entire dataset was used in the analysis, we have visually included six graffiti sets, that span the range of the dataset's spatial and temporal bounds, within the article. These sets are presented within their own timeline of change, and the data is analysed to provide an insight into the ideological ebb and flow of Belfast's *muralscape*.

Situating the analysis

Belfast and its murals, briefly

Central to this study is the Troubles, the period of conflict that spanned from the late 1960s to the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 – a particular period of violent struggle, driven by a divided society with almost half the population desiring to secure a united Ireland and more than half the population desiring to remain within the United Kingdom (UK). Belfast was a central place of urban war and struggle throughout the Troubles, from the late 1960s as a Catholic-led civil rights campaign led to violence in the city streets that resulted in British military occupation and direct rule (Darby 1995; McKittrick and McVea 2001). The Troubles saw entrenched division of urban spaces which remains a legacy of post-peace agreement Northern Ireland, and if one finds themselves in a single-identity neighbourhood the use of flags, painted kerbstones, and murals offer a quick reminder of whose territory one is in.

Murals on gable ends in Belfast have a significant and important place in understanding the past, present and future. There are accounts of murals memorialising King William of Orange's victory at the Battle of Boyne in Unionist neighbourhoods leading back to the beginning of the twentieth century (Lisle 2006). Rolston, whose chronicling and knowledge production of murals in Belfast is extensive, suggests that early Unionist murals became entangled with a sense of civic duty, innately tied to the British state with depictions of not only King Billy but also valorising participation in the two world wars (Rolston

1995). These early murals functioned as an ‘apolitical and consensual’ cultural expression, aligned completely with the British state (Lisle 2006). However, as this article illustrates, murals represent, and contribute to, changes in time and space, and the 1980s represented a shift in which murals gained traction as a tool of visual political representation, using public spaces to make socio-political and ethnosectarian claims and draw on memories that centred both community and othering (Jarman 1998; Migeon 2024).

In the early 1980s, the art of muraling moved into Nationalist areas of Belfast, when solidarity murals towards hunger striking prisoners began to appear in 1981 (Jarman 1998). The 1980s and 90s became a significant time of growth and change for murals across the region. Following the hunger strikes, Nationalist murals emerged on a variety of themes, including ‘Irish history and mythology, current political grievances and demands, and solidarity with political struggles elsewhere’ (Rolston 2012). In Unionist neighbourhoods there was a shift in this same time period towards murals used to demonstrate paramilitary prowess and dominance – which connects to an imagined extension of the British military to local paramilitary groups – these murals often depicted hooded men with guns (Rolston 2012).

In 2006 there was a change in mural practices highlighted by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland making 3-million pounds available to address the physical and psychological legacy of the Troubles through ‘increasing pride and strengthening relationships within communities through artistic expression and, where relevant, assisting with the process of replacing divisive symbols and emblems with collaborative and positive artwork’ (Arts Council of Northern Ireland 2016, 1; see also: Hill and White 2012; Rolston 2012). As noted earlier, when state sponsored channels are used to replace an existing mural with one that is less oppositional – for example the removal of hooded gunmen – the term ‘re-imagining’ is used to describe the change. Building on this notion, the ‘Hit the North’ street art festival, hosted annually in the city centre, was established as part of a rejuvenation effort for the North Street area of Belfast and draws in street artists from around the globe for a 10-day street art festival, noting that it is “helping bring NI’s rich cultural heritage for mural art into the 21st century” (Seedhead Arts 2023). The transformations, and the power structures, around graffiti practices in the city centre present reasoning for our omission of this physical area in our research site selection.

Interpreting and reinterpreting murals in Belfast

The literature on murals in Belfast engages many forms of analysis, particularly through a lens of post-peace agreement encounters with memory (Filardo Llamas 2012). Conrad (2007) notes that murals have become a feature of the conflict landscape, and in doing so generate a distinct and violent vision. In alignment with this sentiment, much research demonstrates that murals exhibit varying narratives of past experiences and ethnosectarian positions (Smithy 2011); political causes (Crowley 2011); and draw attention to suffering at the hands of the ‘other’ while also calling for solidarity in struggle (Goalwin 2013). In recent years murals have taken a central place in research with varying focal points and arguments including cultural violence (Larsson 2021); issues of ‘dark tourism’ (Kappler and McKane 2019); representation of women in murals (Migeon 2024; Rolston 2018); and the communicative function of murals targeting both local and international audiences (Goulding and McCroy 2021; Hopper and Renfro 2022). In recognising that Belfast’s murals are not fixed, but rather temporary, spatial, and

always changing, Jarman (1998) argues that they are ‘used and abused, admired and transformed, replaced and defaced and[...] while they ultimately physically disappear, will often survive as reproductions, and thereby transcend their context in time and place’. It is in this vein of remaining, changing, altering and surviving, in both image and ideology, that this article finds its contribution to the landscape of literature on murals in post-peace agreement Belfast.

Belfast’s murals

In this section, we demonstrate what the dataset tells us broadly about changing sites of murals and graffiti before engaging with specific sites that demonstrate the dynamic process of change and its implications for peace and conflict in Belfast. By delving into graffiti at different points in time and locations, we will shed light on how visual communication through graffiti intersects with the broader endeavours of identity maintenance and revival within the two communities. This allows us to draw conclusions on societal and political transformation, as it captures the evolving sentiments and aspirations of the communities in Belfast over time.

Generalised findings of the dataset

While the following examples present some specific walls from our dataset that best reflect the types of changes witnessed, the broader dataset informed our analysis. For instance, between 1998 and 2022, we have seen a broad trend (with a few outliers) of a move away from murals that depict and glorify violence, weaponry and paramilitaries (see also Crowley 2015). These have largely been replaced by murals that honour culture and heritage, commemorate events, and build identity. This change is particularly reflected in the Shankill site (see [Map 1](#)), where murals depicting paramilitaries and violence have seen a 75 per cent decrease since 1998.¹⁶ Returning to the idea of spatial signalling, the move away from depictions of violence indicates some progress in terms of the methods used for political agendas. Spatial signalling is also used by Unionist communities to push back against the view that Unionist-established organisations are viewed as male-dominated, through using murals to demonstrate that the community has modernised, or at least that is how they want to portray themselves publicly.

Although the dataset broadly demonstrates a shunning of violence depicted on the walls; the resulting change is not reconciliatory in nature. When we focus on murals in our database, rather than the traditional spraypainted graffiti, the database demonstrates a move away from violence, but not a move towards each other. It demonstrates two distinct identities that are entrenched. In Unionist areas, murals are often replaced with new ones depicting Protestants as hardworking, whilst representations of the monarchy (symbols of crowns) and Union Jacks remain prevalent. Whereas in Nationalist areas there is a strong connection to socialism, resistance movements and revolution, Gaelic traditions, and depictions of the Tricolour. However, it is important to note that these are not peace murals, despite the gradual move away from violence. The majority of murals still have a tradition of otherness and separation of the ‘two’ communities and portray a vision of either Unionist or Nationalist identity. Whilst Unionists feel their identity is threatened by the growing Nationalist community and Nationalists sense an

opportunity of cementing their Irish identity, these murals have a distinct purpose within the nation building process and the idea of a common identity/culture/history separately amongst both Unionists and Nationalists. Temporality plays a role in fashioning identity, as selective memory and murals come together in an attempt to maintain and revive a distinct cultural identity through cultural nationalism (Hutchinson 2013). Thus, they still do help to maintain divisions (Goalwin 2013). Yet, returning to the idea of *spatial signalling*, visual shifts act as an indicator that certain beliefs or violent actions are no longer in line with the majority mindset or values of the community. Taken at face value, there is a general move from Loyalism to Unionism, from Republicanism to Nationalism. Consequently, some may be prompted to re-evaluate their own perspectives over time, considering the implications of this evolving social dynamic that is represented on the walls of their communities that surround them.

Shankill

The ‘Gateway to the Shankill’ Murals on Peter’s Hill mark the entry into Shankill from the city centre. Shankill Road is a historically and geographically important Unionist community in the city of Belfast. The importance of the road as a main artery leading to and from the city centre to west Belfast, made it a central place of activity for the Unionist paramilitary activity and community organising throughout the Troubles. This graffiti set spatially forms a type of boundary marker for the Shankill and serves to clearly demarcate territory, informing people they are about to enter Unionist territory. The changing murals seen in the set in Figure 1 are an example of how a spatiotemporal dataset can be used to monitor change in attitudes – it demonstrates a move away from the glorification of violence, whilst still using murals to ‘other’ and in Unionist cultural identity maintenance/revival through cultural nationalism (Hutchinson 2013).

The first mural in 1999 centres the Red Hand of Ulster¹⁸ and honours the Loyalist paramilitary groups the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) and the Ulster Freedom Fighters



Figure 1. Gateway to Shankill (54.60334841347254, -5.939967398175652).¹⁷ Note: Extramural Activity (1999); Extramural Activity (2010); Authors’ own photograph (July 2022).

(UFF). The UFF was a wing within the UDA tasked with carrying out violent paramilitary attacks on Nationalists. The mural honours violence and separates communities. The murals painted in 2009 and 2021 demonstrate a move away from honouring violence with no portrayal of weapons or reference to paramilitary groups. However, they do ‘other’ and follow a clear nationalism trait in trying to establish the community as the rightful and first occupiers of the territory, thus furthering their legitimacy. The 2009 mural is more explicit in its claim-making than the 2021 iteration by establishing the Shankill as the ‘Original Belfast’ and place of the first settlers and providing a written explanation for it.¹⁹ It also still contains a crown to signify its loyalty to the UK. The 2021 version keeps the claim of the ‘Original Belfast’ but without further identity related symbolism or explanation, and instead celebrates community work in the lower Shankill by depicting community workers and young people from the area.

Falls area

The ‘international wall’ is a site that is central to Belfast’s conflict tourism industry. These tours, which have been touched upon in the previous analysis of graffiti in the Shankill, commonly visit the Peace Wall on Cupar Way, and go through the gates that separate the two communities around the corner on Northumberland Street. Its location so close to this historically significant interface between the Falls and Shankill communities means that this space is important to curating core community beliefs to an external audience. The international wall is used by the Nationalist community to offer an extension of the messages across other Nationalist walls, but with a transnational revolutionary flavour. The murals painted strongly identify with the globally oppressed and situates the Nationalist struggle amongst other revolutionary movements (Palestinians, Tamils, Kurds, to name just a few that are referenced). In terms what a spatiotemporal dataset can provide, this site was chosen as it represents a dynamic site with multiple changes often connected to events (local and global) at the time. The wall section selected on Divis Street, begins in 2001 with a mural representing the local, rather than the international. It depicts the Nationalist community, both adults and children, as victims of state violence. In 2002, the mural was replaced with one that takes on the more international flavour with anti-war messaging following the invasion of Afghanistan. The Nationalist community has a strong affinity with the Palestinian cause, as depicted by the adjustment made to half the 2002 mural in 2009.²⁰ Between 2009 and 2017 the mural focuses on different elements of oppression, internationally and locally, apart from in 2014, when there is a mural honouring Gerry Adams. In 2017 the mural represents broader Irish Nationalism, with a piece depicting the Easter Rising. Perhaps the most interesting mural on this section of the international wall is the mural painted in 2020 honouring the National Health Service (NHS). Although the NHS stands closely to the principles of Nationalist parties, with their socialist history, it is still a British institution. However, with Covid-19 there was a general appreciation of health workers. Nonetheless, the honouring of all health workers was replaced in 2022 with a shift back to Nationalist ideologies. The latest mural has many parts that together epitomise Irish republicanism. It contains a former provisional IRA member and well-known hunger striker (Bobby Sands), a message saying we are united in Gaelic, the flag of the Republic of Ireland, the original Irish flag, and a message essentially saying a united Ireland in our lifetime. So, although



Figure 2. International Wall. Divis Street (54.59983026632108; 5.945737697756759). Note: Peter Moloney Collection (2001); Extramural Activity (2004); Extramural Activity (2009); Peter Moloney Collection (2009b); Peter Moloney Collection (2010); Extramural Activity (2012); Extramural Activity (2014a); Extramural Activity (2014b); Google Maps (2017); Google Maps (2020); Authors' own photo (July 2022).

it does not directly demonstrate violence, it has the purpose of othering and creating a united Irish identity (Figure 2).

Ballymurphy, West Belfast

Whiterock Road in West Belfast sits outside the tourist gaze of walking tour visits from the city centre. This Nationalist neighbourhood is home to a number of murals, and this



Figure 3. Whiterock Rd. and Glenalina Rd. (54.593323881970555, -5.985170536245079). Note: Peter Moloney Collection (1993); Peter Moloney Collection (2005); Authors' own photo (July 2022).

section engages the mural set on the corner of Whiterock and Glenalina Roads. Although this set has not seen the frequency of changes of other sites presented in this article, the site holds historical significance as one of the main points of entry to Nationalist housing estates known as Ballymurphy. The August 1971 Ballymurphy Massacre, which is the theme of the current mural (Figure 3), was the result of British army activity that resulted in the deaths of 11 people²¹ in this neighbourhood, a lack of transparency from the British army, and a corresponding inquest that took almost 50 years to pronounce the victims entirely innocent (Kelpie 2021). The current mural appeared in this location during the Ballymurphy inquest (2018–21) and is an image of the 11 victims, and a scene of victim Fr. Hugh Mullan being shot by the paratrooper in the red beret while coming to the aid of his neighbour, Bobby Clarke (Extramural Activity 2019). This is the third location for this mural board that was painted by Risteard Ó Murchú in 2008 (Extramural Activity 2019). This represents the only ‘moving’ mural in our dataset.

The earliest two murals in this set illustrate important Nationalist memorialisation of the 1916 Easter Rising.²² The first mural was painted to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Easter Rising,²³ and the second mural, featuring images of leaders Countess Markievicz, Padraig Pearse, and James Connolly and the words ‘Freedom Fighters outside the GPO’ (General Post Office), occupied the gable end for 17 years. These murals align with other murals that memorialise the armed struggle for independence from British rule that are fixtures further up Glenalina Road.²⁴ In returning to the spatial and temporal focus of this paper, the timing of mural change at this neighbourhood entrance point – recognising the anniversary of the Easter Uprising and the mural board being placed here during the inquest of the Ballymurphy massacre – illustrates the way that the site is used to remember and memorialise based on specific time periods.

‘Freedom Corner’ – East Belfast

In Unionist majority east Belfast, a large multi-house mural network that dominates the centre of Newtownards Road, ‘Freedom Corner’, has displayed significant murals for over 40-years and is seen as an important historical marker of the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), in particular the East Belfast Brigade. This mural has been refreshed a number of times, notably in 2015 when the walls were damaged by water cannons deployed in a



Figure 4. 2016 Freedom Corner Mural (54.59956846957873, -5.903052316270838). Note: Authors' own photo. April 2022.

nearby escalation of conflict (Black 2015); however, until the summer of 2022 these murals had been largely unchanged in their message and style since the Good Friday Agreement. This expansive mural has been a longstanding message of paramilitary territorial claim-making, affirmation of the union of English, Scottish, Welsh, and Northern Irish (read: British) identities with the respective national flags and symbols represented and had employed images that were described by Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) Councillor, Dr John Kyle, as 'implied threats' (Rainey 2022) (Figure 4).

The spatial location of this mural set is particularly notable, not just in the mural's size, but also in constituting the way the mural is viewed and embedded in this working-class area of the city. Notably, directly to the west is Dr. John Pitt Memorial Park, site of one of Belfast's prolific bonfire nights;²⁵ and the Nationalist enclave, Short Strand, is only down the street. The space this mural occupies and creates demonstrates a significant marking of territory (Figure 5).

In 2022, without community consultation or inclusion, Freedom Corner was white-washed and the current murals were commissioned. This process demonstrates how the dataset can be used to track the complex relationship between the community organisations, paramilitary groups, and public spaces across time. While the change in art style is notable, the substance of the mural set continues its thread of linking Northern Ireland to the British union, aggrandising paramilitary activity and territory. Notably, however, the new muralscape draws in the role of women demonstrating that this site, like Hopewell Crescent, seeks to break the perception of male-dominated Unionism and allows the dataset to be used for comparative analysis and trends across time and space.

Concluding thoughts

Our aim in this article was to introduce large-scale visual datasets as a method of analysis for peace and conflict studies based on a temporal and spatial analysis of graffiti. We were interested in what the visual dataset can tell us about space, peace and conflict without being supplemented by additional methods; in this pursuit we have demonstrated that such a dataset can act as a foundational methodology, guiding the selection of complementary methodologies and their development for a more complex, in-depth analysis of reasons for mural transformation.



Figure 5. 2022 Freedom Corner Mural Set (54.59956846957873, -5.903052316270838). Note: Extramural Activity (2022); Extramural Activity (2022); Extramural Activity (2022); Extramural Activity (2022); Authors' own photo (July 2022); Extramural Activity (2022).

In this article, we have shown that systematic graffiti analysis that focuses on spatial and temporal analysis contributes to knowledge development around local sentiments and representations, which is of significance for peace and conflict studies, social movement studies, contentious politics, and broader political science. Whilst graffiti has been widely analysed, its use as a lens to understand local peace and conflict dynamics is a still

emerging – and, as we have demonstrated, fruitful – avenue of research in peace and conflict studies. As far as we are aware, our dataset constitutes the first systematic visual dataset of graffiti pieces that enables a spatio-temporal analysis of its entries. As we have highlighted, various qualitative methods could have strengthened our analysis, but our focus was on the methodology and not the case study. As a foundational methodology, the dataset provides insight into questions around the decision-making process behind changing murals, the funding of murals, the community buy-in with regard to representation in the murals, and the impact of the cultural messaging. Thus, as a method, the dataset is important in the production of what questions can/should be asked in supporting qualitative methods – walking interviews, key stakeholder interviews and even community surveys. These qualitative methods, when associated with the visual dataset, can generate more fulsome understanding of who the drivers behind the changing walls are, e.g. if these changes are really community-driven or are led by state or NGO sponsored programmes. Likewise, the dataset cannot capture how local communities react to those changes. However, as our main aim was methodological, we wanted the focus to be on the dataset as a foundational methodology and to best understand the potential of graffiti datasets as a window into local communities. While the dataset is relatively small, building it has enabled us to tailor it to our project and research questions and set the spatial and temporal boundaries exactly as required. It allowed us unique insights into Belfast’s *muralscape* since the Good Friday Agreement. Given the novelty of the dataset, we invite other researchers to use it for further research or expand it further. While the geographical focus of this particular dataset is on Belfast, it also serves as a model that can be replicated for similar analysis in other geographical areas.

Notes

1. Given the evolving debates around terminology across different fields, we follow Haworth et al. (2022, 35) and use ‘graffiti as a catch-all for the diverse range of public expressions on urban landscapes ...’. However, this article does focus specifically on murals in terms of analysis.
2. In this article we predominantly use the terms Nationalist (those who desire for Northern Ireland to join the Republic of Ireland) and Unionists (those who desire for Northern Ireland to remain within the United Kingdom). We acknowledge that many of the sites of analysis are traditionally Republican (willing to use violence for the above Nationalist aim) and Loyalist (willing to use violence for the above Unionist aim). However, in a changing Belfast, we do not believe in using such blanket terminology that label entire communities as believing in violence.
3. The Good Friday Agreement, also known as the Belfast Agreement, signed on 10 April 1998 included a referendum for approval in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in May 1998 and is broadly understood as the end point of ‘The Troubles’.
4. Dempsey (2022) demonstrates the ever-changing nature of spaces through the removal of an Oliver Cromwell mural for a more inclusive mural.
5. Although this article focuses on sites that portray murals, the wider dataset includes multiple forms of graffiti.
6. A ‘site’ denotes the general spatial area in which data collection was bound – see Map 1.
7. A ‘set’ refers to the entire range of temporal data collected in relation to a precise spatial location.
8. The dataset can be found at <https://doi.org/10.17632/w4ttp6d7pb.1>
9. 61 sets within the Shankill estates, six within the gates of the interface, 65 within the Falls Road area, four within the hospital area, three within the Glenalina/Whiterock Road intersection, and eight along ‘Freedom Corner’, reflecting the different size of each area.

10. See: <https://extramuralactivity.com>
11. See: <https://petermoloneycollection.com/visual-histories/>
12. See: <https://library.claremont.edu/sca/>
13. See: <https://www.google.com/maps>
14. An interface area is the physical area where single-identity segregated Unionist and Nationalist communities meet one another.
15. Referred to as Mona Lisa because it pictured a paramilitary gunman whose weapon always seemed to be looking at you.
16. Factors such as the EU funding mural change should not be ignored, but this does not account for the more general change.
17. The Red Hand of Ulster is a popular and re-occurring symbol in murals used in Unionist areas. It is associated with the O'Neill dynasty, one of the ancient Gaelic clans. It often is seen as a symbol of defiance, strength, and pride within the community (Brighton 2004, 155).
18. The 2009 mural reads: *Original Belfast – since 455AD. The parish of Belfast was formerly called ... Shankhill, which signifies 'Old Church'.*
19. Like graffiti, flags also demarcate territory and besides the Irish flag and Union Jack, you will also see the Palestinian flag in Nationalist areas and the Israeli flag in Unionist areas.
20. One man died of a heart attack; the others were killed by gunfire.
21. The 1916 Easter Rising was an armed insurrection against the British government in Ireland.
22. We have confirmed that this mural was on display from 1991 to 1994 and we believe it was on display until refreshed with the 2001 mural, however we cannot confirm when it was removed.
23. A 2010 example of a mural on Glenalina Road can be seen at: <https://extramuralactivity.com/2010/06/22/ni-thig-lead/>
24. Bonfire night is held annually on 11 July. Towering bonfires are lit to kick-off celebrations of 12th July, an Ulster Protestant celebration of King William III (Protestant) defeating King James II (Catholic) at the Battle of Boyne in 1690.
25. This refers to GPS coordinates.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their gratitude to Cathal Woods from Extramural Activity for sharing his time and expertise. We also thank Marisa McGlinchey and Roger Mac Ginty for providing feedback and guidance which strengthened our work. To the editors of the Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding and to the anonymous reviewers who took the time to share their knowledge, we are grateful. All errors of course remain our own.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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