Carnival as a Practice of the Possible: Belfast, the Beat, and the Politics of Civic Celebration

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This paper examines the relationship between performance and politics through the work of the Belfast based Beat Carnival, an award-winning independent arts charity established in 1993. Self-described as 'a safe space for fantastic ideas' which creates 'spectacular participative carnival arts in ways that leave a legacy of creative skills, collaboration and celebration in our communities', the Beat produces public events which take place predominantly in the street or in other public spaces.[1] These collaborative events consist of an interweaving of professional and amateur performances and mobile carnivalesque constructions; floats, sculpture, props and costume. The Beat has an ongoing core of participatory programs taking place at its current Shankill Road Carnival Centre base, such as drumming and dance, and also delivers carnival arts workshops in community spaces as preparation for specific events. Beat Carnival is connected internationally through collaborative networks and projects, exchanging with and hosting practitioners and performers from all over the world. Beat's civic spectacles have consisted of small(er) winter lantern parades located in the East and West of the city as well as larger, central municipal celebrations such as St Patrick's and Lord Mayor's Day Parades.[2]

We explore the idea of carnival in Belfast as an adapted form within a post ceasefire and later post Good Friday Agreement context; considering it as 'performative enablement' to collectively re-imagine civic space.[3] Drawing from interview data with founder/director David Boyd and observations from arts practitioner Sheelagh Colclough's decades of involvement with the Beat, we argue that the public participatory nature of Beat events has facilitated a shift in the performing of social identities. We examine how this embodied practice of shared celebration generates the possibility of new forms of self-knowledge by the opening of

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[1] NICVA. (n.d). Beat Carnival. [Online] Available from https://www.communityni.org/organisation/beatcarnival [Accessed on 11 December 2021].

[2] Beat Carnival has also produced other site-specific events in different locations in the city and outside it, such as Belfast Carnival Village, Belfast City Samba, Belfast Urban Ballet as well as various Halloween Parades. Beat's annual audience numbers in recent years ranges from the average 250,000 to over 600,000 people.

[3] Rogoff, I. (2007). Academy as Potentiality. *Design Open Data*. [Online] Available from https://designopendata.wordpress.com/portfolio/academy-as-potentiality-2007-irit-rogoff/ [Accessed 17 July 2018].

space(s). Carnival, and specifically the Beat's incarnation of it, enacts the concept and practice of cultural (re)negotiation; and, in order to enable a greater understanding of the implications of this, we will duly beat the theoretical bounds. We do this through a frame of three lenses: carnival as agonistic pluralism, carnival as liminoid space, and carnival as contemporenaeity.

Context for Carnival

As Gerri Moriarty notes, the practice of community arts when embedded in a place, develops according to the specific political and cultural circumstances of that place, Northern Ireland being a potent example.[4] Here, culture intersects indivisibly with identity, belonging, and the legacies of the past in the present. Who we were is also a part of who we are and who we could be. However, from the observations of the authors of this paper, an insider and an outsider, there is a state of denial within many communities in Northern Ireland, compounded by paths to peace which emphasised material prosperity rather than any collective processes or period of social reckoning, recompense or reconciliation.[5] The transitional framework that unfolded in the north of Ireland has most often welded 'looking forward' to 'dealing with the past' framed in terms of economic investment, such as inward capital development through regeneration schemes.[6] However, as academics reflecting on the recent twenty year anniversary of the Belfast Agreement have noted, the much heralded 'peace dividend' did not trickle down as promised.[7] The Troubles, instead of being understood as a collective experience, a lived social history to bear witness

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[4] Jeffers, A. and Moriarty, G. eds. (2017). *Culture, democracy and the right to make art: The British community arts movement*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, p.116.

[5] Sarah Feinstein was born in Detroit (USA) and spent 10 months doing fieldwork for her doctorate in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry in 2015. Sheelagh Colclough was born in Belfast and has been involved in participatory art in Northern Ireland for the last 20 years. Class and cultural identity undoubtedly complicate the implicit meaning suggested by those terms.

[6] Hocking, B. (2015). *The great reimagining: Public art, urban space and the symbolic landscapes of a 'New' Northern Ireland*. Oxford: Berghahn; Jarman, N. (2001). 'Troubling remnants: Dealing with the remains of conflict in Northern Ireland', in Schofield, J., Johnson, W.G. and Beck, C.M. *Material culture: The archaeology of twentieth century conflict*. London: Routledge, pp. 281-295; Nagle, J. (2009). 'Sites of Social Centrality and Segregation: Lefebvre in Belfast, a "Divided City"', *Antipode*, 14(2), pp 326-347.

[7] Murtagh, B. (2018). Regeneration and segregation in Belfast: rethinking the economics of peacebuilding. *The London School of Economics and Political Science* [Online] Available from https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/regeneration-and-segregation-in-belfast/ [Accessed 2 July 2020]; Braniff, M. (2018) The spirit and promise of 1998 has been firmly cast aside #Agreement20. *Slugger O'Toole* [Online] Available from https://sluggerotoole.com/2018/04/09/maire-braniff-the-spirit-promise-of-1998-agreement-has-been-firmly-cast-aside-agreement20/ [Accessed 2 July 2020]

to, instead seems to remain as a traumatic wound.[8] This is generally unacknowledged as having a legacy with far reaching communal affect or ramifications.[9] Still a source of bitter contestation, our past injury is commonly and conveniently displaced by a society at large which seeks 'to move on'; located either in largely poor working class 'deprived' communities that still bear the physical scars of the divisions in Northern Ireland, or within those individual victims and survivors who have physical and or psychological scars they continue to live with.[10]

This social siloization of outlook and experience works to further complicate notions of civic cohesion and community, with culture often acting as residual site for unresolved conflict.[11] One of the most contentious expressions of local culture remains the performance of identity in public space. In Northern Ireland the tradition of parading in particular is a major part of public participation and performance and continues to provide flashpoints for conflict to such a degree that parading in public is regulated by a specific governing body and legislation. The Orange Order parades held on July 12, commonly referred to as the Twelfth, are the climax of what is known as marching season, the period from late Easter to the end of August which commemorates the 1690 victory of a Protestant king over a Catholic one.[12] The Twelfth parades and bonfires constitute a highly charged experiential reference to this living public memory. These much anticipated and equally

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[8] The Troubles is the colloquial term for the period of active ethno-sectarian conflict in the north of Ireland starting in the late 1960s and ending with the signing of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement in 1998, in which an estimated 40,000 were injured and over 3500 died. The 1998 peace agreement established the devolved system of governance constituting of the devolved legislature as the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Northern Ireland Executive as consociational power-sharing. The sharing of what is colloquially termed as 'the peace dividend' is dialectically related to the power dynamics of power sharing, as well as the political, social and economic contexts of class, ethnicity and gender.

[9] Phil Scraton (2008) talks about the importance of 'bearing witness to the pain of others' as a key concept of critical social research using personal testimony 'from below' to foreground voices which disrupt and challenge official discourses and mainstream knowledge. Belfast.Murdered journalist Lyra McKee has written about the effects of intergenerational trauma in Northern Ireland which has seen more deaths by suicide since the ceasefire period than the total number of deaths during the conflict. See McKee, L. (2016). Suicide of the Ceasefire Babies. *Mosaic* [Online] Available from: https://mosaicscience.com/story/conflict-suicide-northern-ireland/ [Accessed 2 July 2020]

[10] Dawson, G. (2007). *Making peace with the past?: Memories, trauma and the Irish Troubles*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

[11] One example is the ongoing political stalemate around the establishment of an Irish Language Act, one of the issues which saw the 2017 collapse and 3 year suspension of Stormont, the devolved local power sharing government in Northern Ireland.

[12] Formed in County Armagh in 1795, the Orange Order is a Protestant fraternal organisation, self-identified as conservative British Unionist. The Orange Order is named after the Protestant Dutch Stadtholder William of Orange, and subsequent king William III of England (William II of Scotland) who defeated the Catholic king of England, Ireland and Scotland, James II (and VII) at the Battle of the Boyne, in 1690. The organisation is made up of lodges, the majority of which are located in the nine counties which historically constitute Ulster, one of Ireland's four provinces, although there are lodges worldwide. Most lodges have a marching band whose musicians practice year-round and can consist of flute,

dreaded annual commemorations have long been a site of symbolic discord and affirmation, conflict and celebration. Orangefest, the attempt at marketing the Twelfth as a more inclusive family friendly spectacle suitable for tourists, emerging as a brand in 2008, does not seem to have gone much further than sloganeering.[13] Following a typically glocal approach to tourism, the controversies of Northern Ireland's recent past are often flattened as site specific Troubles Tours, presented alongside Game of Thrones and Titanic experiences.[14] How domestic contemporary culture is perceived, presented and experienced, particularly in the public space of the street, as a site redolent with such heavy symbolism, is something which remains in flux.

Fig. 1: Bonfire, Holiday Inn Belfast City Centre Car Park, Sandy Row and Wellwood St, Belfast, June 2014 (Credit: Sarah Feinstein)

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drum, bagpipe and or accordion players who typically parade in vibrant matching uniforms.

[13] The County Grand Orange Lodge of Belfast's slogan 'It's about the Battle, not the Bottle' launched in 2016 to promote responsible consumption of alcohol on the Twelfth. See Williamson, C. (2016). Orange Order says 'it's about the Battle not the Bottle' in Twelfth alcohol awareness campaign. *Belfast Telegraph* [Online] https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/twelfth/orange-order-says-its-about-the-battle-not-the-bottle-in-twelfth-alcohol-awareness-campaign-34858181.html [Accessed 2 July 2020]

[14] Glocal is a portmanteau of global and local referring to the urban planning and cultural policy tendency to package local culture for global consumption/markets. This more generally refers to and sarcastically comments upon the pop culture edict 'think globally, act locally', inferring that this practice may be an attempt to do this but in practice does not. For more on the Northern Irish context of the glocal, see Hocking, B. (2015). *The great reimagining: Public art, urban space and the symbolic landscapes of a 'New' Northern Ireland.* Oxford: Berghahn.

Carnival as agonistic pluralism

Carnival has long been identified as a form of cultural subversion of, or resistance to, social norms particularly in a post-colonial context; most often articulated through the theoretical framework established by Mikhail Bakhtin.[15] Central to the Beat's iteration of carnival is a rejection of the symbolic and material division of space and the development of a foundation to create and express an alternative picture of community through participation; a commitment to joy, to exuberance, and to play. In the local context, that can be powerfully transgressive. Beat events are a coming together of both professional and amateur participants, and, in the larger manifestations of carnival, a coming together from across the city itself. Carnival as a practice of performance on the street collapses the boundaries of 'the stage' which L.M. Bogad highlights through Bakhtin's dictum that 'carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators.'[16] This is pertinent to the symbiosis between participation and democracy, which often defaults to an illusory spectacle; the performance of politics and the politics of performance. This performative spectacle is further troubled by Chantal Mouffe's assertion that modern pluralist democratic politics are inherently characterized by conflict and difference between social agents in a relational claim to power. Mouffe considers that the impossibility of achieving a universally accepted consensus as expounded by rational liberalism only pushes divergent political positions to greater antagonisms because this ideal of harmonious consensus essentially 'fails to grasp the pluralist nature of the social world.'[17]

     In the context of the north of Ireland, there is a legacy of dualism rather than pluralism. This is aggregated by longstanding patterns of residential and educational segregation, which in places is reinforced by literal walls between communities.[18] There has been a tendency among politicians and academics however to view the 'two communities' (Unionist and Nationalist, Loyalist and Republican, Protestant and Catholic, etc.) as the only functional identities in Northern Ireland, rather than the prevailing (or perhaps even dominant) political assemblages. Nonetheless, there has always existed a deep desire to transform public cultural life beyond the often-constricting identity politics of the 'two communities' narrative.

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[15] Robinson, A. (2011). Bakhtin: Carnival against Capital, Carnival against Power. *Ceasefire* [Online] Available from: https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/in-theory-bakhtin-2/ [Accessed 23 November 2018]; Sofo, G. (2014) Carnival, Memory and Identity. *Culture* [Online] Available from: https://journals.cultcenter.net/index.php/culture/article/view/41/32 [Accessed on 26 September 2018].

[16] Bakhtin quoted in Bogad, L.M. (2006). Tactical carnival: social movements, demonstrations, and dialogical performance. In Cohen-Cruz , J. and Schutzman, M. (eds.), *A Boal companion Dialogues on theatre and cultural politics*. New York: Routledge, p. 55.

[17] Mouffe, C. (2007). Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces. *Art + Research.* [Online]. Available from: http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v1n2/mouffe.html [Accessed 21 June 2014].

[18] McAtackney, L. (2011). Peace Maintenance and Political Messages: The significance of walls during and after the Northern Irish Troubles. *Journal of Social Archaeology,* 11(1), pp. 77-98.

This is evidenced by various Northern Irish subcultures from showbands to punk, which complicate the dominance of dualism to articulate both the existence of and the possibilities offered by an 'Alternative Ulster.'[19]

Fig. 2: Lining up for Belfast Lord Mayor's Parade, 2005 (Credit: Beat Carnival)

Mouffe sees the potential for a radical democratic practice through 'agonistic pluralism', wherein politics is characterized as a shared space between 'persons who are friends because they share a common symbolic space but also enemies because they want to organize this common symbolic space in a different way.'[20] This would mean a platform where divergent opinions can maintain autonomy and mutual respect through negotiation (i.e. 'chain of equivalence'), rather than entrenched consensus through antagonism of an 'us versus them' paradigm that is most often facilitated through nationalistic responses to conjuncture (i.e. 'war of position'). The type of pluralism Mouffe advocates does not neutralise disagreement trapped within a perpetual democratic minority through blanket 'rational' consensus, but instead seeks to extend the possibilities offered by democracies in accommodating and negotiating difference. As a cultural form, carnival presents an opportunity not only to accommodate but also to showcase difference through not blending its participants into one homogenous whole. Instead difference is in

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[19] Burns, J. and Ogilvie, G. (1978). *Alternative Ulster*, UK, Rough Trade.
[20] Mouffe, C. (2000). *The Democratic Paradox*. London: Verso, p. 13.

essence amassed in the street, displayed, paraded and applauded, often experienced as a deafening blast of glorious discordance.

Mouffe argues that for the arts specifically to produce this type of critical, political and public subjectivity, what is needed is the extension of cultural activity in diverse and divergent social spaces. It is needed as a means to help stave off capitalism's monopolies on both our existence and expression, using the collective experience of a robust civic culture to highlight 'the contingent nature of any type of social order.'[21] This 'irruption,' or what Jacques Rancière terms dissensus, can be generated through the subaltern counterpublic via public demonstrations such as the performance of carnival or, more generally, the site of the festival.[22] Gerard Delanty states that as a mode of celebration, public festivals offer an analysis of public culture that 'combines sociability, aesthetics and politics, and expresses the communicative notion of culture.'[23]

Beat Carnival could be read as such a manifestation of public culture, its origins reverberating with an example of Mouffe's agonistic pluralism; the divergent but common cultural tradition of public drumming as practiced within two different Ulster identities. David Boyd, founder and director of the Beat describes that some of the initial local reactions to carnival drummers were of surprise and excitement at something familiar yet also fresh, having assumed that the new noise was part of practices for the Twelfth:

> One of the things in the first place was the connection with what people have done historically which is get together and parade, march. We wanted to have people dancing down the street rather than marching on the street. It gives a whole different perception of what the street and public space is for… Carnival was able to bring both a vision for the future and a means for people being part of that. People welcomed the opportunity to get together on the street.[24]

What started as an imported tradition of carnival samba drumming, developing through collaborations and exchanges with national and international practitioners, has also incorporated giant carnivalesque versions of Lambeg drums and bodhráns often interspersed with Irish and Ulster Scots dancers and musicians in large public celebratory events.[25] This symbolic coming together of familiar tradi-

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[21] Mouffe, C. (2007). Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces. *Art + Research*. [Online]. Available from: http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v1n2/mouffe.html [Accessed 21 June 2014].

[22] Ranciere, J. (2010). *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*. London: Continuum.

[23] Delanty, G. (2011). Conclusion: On the cultural significance of arts festivals. In Giorgi, L., Sassatelli, M. and Delanty, G. (eds.). *Festivals and the Cultural Public Sphere*. London: Routledge, p. 191.

[24] David Boyd, interview with Sheelagh Colclough, 11 November 2018.

[25] The cultural significance and symbolic power of these indigenous instruments carry embodied and complex resonance for local populations. For a more nuanced exploration of this see Colin Harte (2019). Bodhráns, lambegs, & musical craftsmanship in Northern Ireland, *Ethnomusicology Forum*, 28:2, 200-21 and Paul Moore (2003). Sectarian Sound and

tions, coupled with myriad styles and types of performers, local and global, amateur and professional, all occupying the same space results in a processional, cacophonous dissensus of expression. Over time the Beat's local carnival line-up has further expanded and grown more diverse, reflecting the increasing cultural pluralism of Northern Ireland and its expanding multi-ethnic communities and their heritages.

Fig. 3: Lambeg Drum Float, Belfast St Patrick Day Parade, 2019 (Credit: Beat Carnival)

Part of the success of the Beat's events both as a means of de-territorialising public space *and* imagination has come from this resonance between known local traditional cultural forms and less familiar international incarnations of carnival and civic celebration. Boyd explains the importance of this link, within a Northern Irish context where communities have tended to be both spatially and relationally tight knit:

> Part of what we wanted to do was bring in those outside cultural influences to enrich our own… We've brought people in from all over the world and likewise we've been able to bring some people to other parts of the world where they have never been. Whether people physically travel, they have developed a more international view of ourselves and who we are connected with, rather than just being connected to the past.[26]

Cultural Identity in Northern Ireland. In Bull, M. and Back, L. (eds.), *Auditory Culture Reader*. Oxford: Berg, pp. 265-279.

[26] David Boyd, interview with Sheelagh Colclough, 11 November 2018.

To facilitate the adoption of something that was in one way easily recognisable but also manifestly different required all the local participating groups and publics to create an interior space to make room for these new cultural forms. It also meant being willing to position themselves in sometimes contentious exterior spaces. For some that meant a willingness to step into others' territorial spaces, sometimes for the first time. For others it meant a tacit sharing of 'their' space, resulting in a de facto temporal expansion of identity and connection. The degree to which the idea of carnivalesque procession was embraced and owned by participating groups can be evidenced in those communities in East and North Belfast who started their own lantern parades or events, commissioning Beat Carnival as performers or makers to feed into their own local celebrations. For the communities who went on to organise their own carnivalesque events, such as lantern festivals and parades in North and East Belfast, this was an example of the manifestation of communitas emerging from a liminoid space.[27]

Carnival as liminoid space

A central component to the egalitarian potential of public space can be understood through Victor Turner's concept of liminality, specifically liminoid space and communitas, developed from Arnold van Gennep's theories of rites of passage.[28] Turner argued these types of public rituals require the suspension of the normative social order through the construction of a temporary and transgressive space. This liminal space is characterised by impermanence and transition; it is a space that is passed through in a state of flux, some place in-between. Liminoid space shares the same characteristics of suspended social hierarchy and transition as liminal space, but is distinct to a secular context and distinct from rituals tied to 'rites of passage' (e.g. graduation ceremony) and other structures of social renewal. This is tied closely to the concept of 'play', particularly the subversive play of the carnival. This is problematised in the context of Belfast in a viscerally complex way, both by indigenous cultural traditions played out in the street and the memory of occupation by military/paramilitary forces. Turner identifies the agency of liminoid space as being productive for both the 'apologia for the political status quo,' as well as able to 'generate and store a plurality of alternative models for living, from utopias to programs, which are capable of influencing the behaviour of those in mainstream social and political roles…in the direction of radical change.'[29] Echoed by Mouffe's conception of agonistic pluralism and its role in exposing the fragility and temporality of the foundations of social order, fundamentally what Turner points to in

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[27] New Lodge Arts. (2020). *North Belfast Lantern Festival 2017*. [Online] Available from: https://www.newlodgearts.com/north-belfast-lantern-festival-2017 [Accessed 27 June 2020]; Strand Art Centre. (2020). *Lantern Parade*. [Online] Available from: https://www.strandartscentre.com/community/community-projects/ [Accessed 17 June 2020].

[28] Turner, V. (1974). *Drama, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*, London: Cornell University Press.

[29] Turner, V. (1974). Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbology, *Rice University Studies*, 60:3, pp. 65.

the construct of liminoid space is that 'the social world is a world in becoming, not a world in being.'[30]

The conceptual lens of liminoid space is productive in unpacking the discourse of 'shared space' in Northern Ireland. In post-1998 Agreement Belfast policy rhetoric, the concept of shared space has been a key discursive mechanism through which structural inequalities as well as cultural division and social exclusion have been addressed.[31] In Northern Irish public policy, it is deeply embedded in the distribution and language of public funds and officials, drawing on the principle of parity of esteem.[32] Although it is perhaps easier to define shared space by its opposite (i.e. divided, segmented or segregated space both in terms of physical and social barriers), what is meant by space can be equally problematic to consistently define (e.g. public sector institutions and/or built environment, public parks and/or town squares). Shelley McKeown et al classify shared space as naturally shared environments ('everyday spaces'), policy driven (mandated, typically towards normalization, such as integrated schools), and field interventions (temporary and facilitated interactions).[33] The logic of sharing space and sharing power are not synonymous, but they are related in the policy and politics of Belfast.

There is also resonance with a broader political discourse. Mouffe argues that the practice of sharing space supports the civic bonds that are essential to a functional pluralistic democracy because 'democratic individuals can only be made possible by multiplying the institutions, the discourses, the forms of life that foster identification with democratic values.'[34] However great the *potential* of shared space may be, one significant problem is that 'even in what is perceived as shared space, groups often remain highly segregated in homogenous groups. As a result, shared space does not necessarily lead to meaningful encounters between groups.'[35] This would imply that the *use* of shared space (its praxis) is a more indicative measure of the attainment and maintenance of embodied peace. For the large-scale parades that the Beat coordinates and organises which require transportation of participants across a number of residential divides, the act of sharing space constructs the shared space of both the street and the experience of the city. It is through this interaction and engagement that something new becomes possible.

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[30] Turner, V. (1974). *Drama, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*, London: Cornell University Press, p. 24.

[31] OFMDFM. (2005). *A Shared Future: Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland*. [Online] Available from: https://www.niacro.co.uk/sites/default/files/publications/A%20Shared%20Future-%20OFMDFM-Mar%202005.pdf [Accessed 11 December 2021]; Wallace Consulting. (2011). *Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Consultation Analysis*. Portadown: Wallace Consulting.

[32] For a concise history of both the concept of parity of esteem and pluralism in Northern Ireland, see Wilson, R. (1997). With all due respect: Pluralism and Parity of Esteem (Democratic Dialogue Report). [Online]. Available from https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/dd/report7/report7a.htm [Accessed 3 July 2020].

[33] McKeown, S., Cairns, E. and Stringer, M. (2012). Is shared space really shared. *Shared Space*, 12, pp. 83-93.

[34] Mouffe, C. (2000). *The democratic paradox*. London: Verso, p. 96.

[35] McKeown, S., Cairns, E. and Stringer, M. (2012). Is shared space really shared. *Shared Space*, 12, p. 84.

Fig. 4: Belfast Urban Ballet, 2013 (Credit: Beat Carnival)

Sharing space as an ongoing praxis resonates with David Wiles' concept of citizenship as a practice in which cultural participation functions as civic bonding.[36] Within the complex context of co-creating citizenship through being together in public, Wiles outlines the differences between 'a bounded individual self' and 'a permeable social self' the latter making up 'components of a cultural matrix, so the language we speak, the religion we practised as a child and the music that stirs us become essential parts of who we are.'[37] In a society like Northern Ireland this form of cultural DNA can be particularly problematic when these formative lived experiences are potent signifiers (for both individuals and communities) of not only what one is, but what one *is not*. The inherent danger being that this can result in a de facto cultural isolationism which acts to 'other' fellow citizens. The practice of sharing space enabled by a collective performative embodiment of being together differently offers a powerful experiential citizenship. As such within the participative carnivalesque there is a latent opening of cultural matrices, in which diverse traditions and influences can coexist with the potential capacity for excess without hierarchy or limit.

The Beat alongside other community and civic organisations have sought to hold a shared liminoid space for a society in flux to begin to redraw its own boundaries. As Boyd explains, this process involved a lot of work and negotiation, particularly in areas such as East and West Belfast, and wasn't without setbacks:

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[36] Wiles, D. (2011). *Theatre and citizenship: The history of a practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
[37] Wiles, 2011, p. 18.

> We weren't able to achieve it 100%. We had to do things like get a particular community to join in as it came past their area and then go to a 'neutral' area at the end. Still, that was seen as a step forward. It was seen by people in the area as a huge thing because they remembered the times when big groups of people coming out onto the street meant it was only for violence, for trouble. People were literally hugging each other on the street when they came out together. That is important. This was a different experience that carnival can offer and bring out into the public realm…[38]

Boyd recounts a recent example from a community lantern parade wherein a group from a predominantly Catholic neighborhood chose a route through a gate in the peace wall, walking with their lanterns through a 'no man's land' area to join in with the parade with their neighbors on the 'other side' of the wall. The carnivalesque here functions with a different iteration of transgression to the traditional Bakhtin reading, but is potentially no less liberating to the inhabitants of a city who literally disrupt its territorial fixity, crossing the liminal space of a peace wall to, temporarily at least, physically and symbolically unite with their fellow citizens. An example of Mouffe's coexistent frenemies, not renouncing their identity but modulating it. The liminal flexibility, that ephemeral yet memorable participatory performances such as the Beat's offer, can also be read as a physical manifestation of public pedagogy. As educators Myles Horton and Paulo Freire suggest in their conversations on education and social change, *We Make the Road by Walking*, social transformation is the enactment of a process in which 'we are being made *by* the history we make.'[39]

Because of its potential to facilitate social unmaking and remaking, liminality contributes to the production of communitas. Communitas is Victor Turner's conception of a structureless, egalitarian society with three sequential forms: spontaneous, ideological, and normative.[40] Edith Turner argues that 'communitas through the readiness of the people – perhaps from necessity – to rid themselves of their concern for status and dependence on structures,' allows for mutual recognition (i.e. solidarity) independent of social hierarchy (i.e. a loss of ego).[41] In a highly divided society recovering from the trauma of political violence where identity and culture, both symbolically and economically, have strict codes of conduct and possibilities; the liminoid space of carnival offers the potential for an imaginative (re)examination. However transformative this experience of communitas can be as an embodied practice, it is always already impermanent and unsustainable. Victor Turner argues its use value creates a paradox that 'the *experience* of communitas becomes the *memory* of communitas, with the result that communitas itself in striving to replicate itself historically develops a social structure, in which initially free

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[38] David Boyd, interview with Sheelagh Colclough, 11 November 2018.

[39] Horton, M. and Freire, P. (1990). *We make the road by walking: Conversations on education and social change*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, p. 216.

[40] Turner, V. (1974). Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbology, *Rice University Studies*, 60:3, pp. 53-92.

[41] Turner, E. (2012). *Communitas: The Anthropology of Collective Joy*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 1-2.

and innovative relationships between individuals are converted into norm-governed relationships between social *personae*.'[42]

Fig. 5: Lantern making workshop at Beat Carnival Center, 2017 (Credit: Beat Carnival)

In the Beat's desire to manufacture a Northern Irish specific celebratory cultural form, it has avoided big P politics in order to go about creating a small p politically accessible entity that affords everyone room to participate. In part this has to do with the Beat's approach to long-term relationship building with the same community groups and associations. Although some participants in workshops and parades are new to each event, there is a continuity with carnival organisers and arts professionals engaged in designing, delivering, stewarding and performing, as well as with the personnel in the community organisations themselves. However, this success in building communitas is problematised through its adoption or co-option by the local authority in commissioning a broadly neutralized yet often divisive identity event such as the Belfast St Patrick's Day Parade. Victor Turner's normative stage of communitas is evidenced in the civic performance of identity as regulated by administrative body, in this case the Belfast City Council. Belfast's St Patrick's Day Parade is put out to tender by the City Council, who remain in control of theme, promotion, route and management. Typically the council spends more on marketing its St Patrick's Day celebrations than the Beat receives to create

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[42] Turner, V. (1974). *Drama, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*, London: Cornell University Press, p. 78.

a community program and resulting bespoke parade.[43] The event has seen protests in recent years from members of the Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist community, albeit very small in number and heavily policed. Belfast's St Patrick's Day Parade has often been criticized in local media as exclusionary and is routinely boycotted by Unionist Lord Mayors and councilors, yet commonly results in roughly 50/50 participation from both cultural traditions, something the Beat has worked to develop over the years.[44]

Fig. 6: St Patricks Day, 2016 (Credit: Beat Carnival)

The radical potential of liminality and communitas, then, is not exclusively defined by its experiential modality, but the critical and reflective capacity it offers to challenge the hegemonic social order. In other words, both the practice and the memory become a source of self-reflection and possibility. In Belfast's case, as realized through the adapted cultural form of carnival and the opportunities therein, an incremental modification and expansion of identity. The temporality evoked by this in embodied practice and memory speaks to a different sense than the eternal return of Turner. To understand it, and what it may become in future public life, we must think through what it produces and circulates in terms of knowledge production.

Carnival as contemporenaeity

This matrix of the possible reimagined, produces and reproduces what Irit Rogoff categorises as 'not-yet-known-knowledge' the types of knowledge acquisition arising from 'the lived contemporary realities we experience' located within a broad pedagogic sphere. [45] Rogoff presents her analysis of current art practices' conscious

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[43] David Boyd stated that 'we had many discussions with BCC about the inadequate budget for our work. BCC's budget for St Patrick's Day was always around £170,000 / £180,000 but Beat Carnival's contract was under £30,000.' (Boyd, email to Colclough, 3 July 2020).
[44] David Boyd, interview with Sheelagh Colclough, 11 November 2018.
[45] Rogoff, 2007.

refashioning of academic, social, economic and cultural formats, imbuing them with a more fluid type of self sanctioned agency. Rogoff sees this as the potential for opening up rather than gatekeeping 'professional' roles and structures by 'inhabiting them differently [...] actualising their potential to do more than might be expected.'[46] This has obvious relevance for carnival's function as a conduit to access different forms of knowledge which are exposed when strict social and territorial boundaries collapse. This is particularly relevant in relationship to the Beat and public cultural life. It is within this 'loosening of frames' the desire to inhabit deliberately transitional theoretical and performative space, where Rogoff locates 'contemporenaeity':

> In contemporeainity [*sic*] it is a question of 'access' – of how do we get to know things, how do we get to take part in them, how do we have a position, how do we intervene not as a response to a demand to participate but as a way of taking over the means of producing the very questions that are asked.[47]

Rogoff's presentation of contemporenaeity as the coming together of theory and practice in this flexible and ultimately borderless way embraces a deterritorialisation of representation through the process and product of participation. This is of great pertinence to an artform which has such historic pedigree as a civic performance *unto itself*. There are participatory parallels too between how public space features in social movement activism, particularly in the 'public performance of dissent.'[48] Concerning the manifestation of the carnivalesque in public protest and its power to open rather than merely occupy space, Bogad invokes Augusto Boal's concept of 'spect-actors'. This concept highlights the pedagogical elision of audience and performer, and the subsequent boundaries between wider active and passive social participation. Beat events, manifesting a type of public demonstration of how a collective space might be opened, have always depended on the subtle blending of audience and performer. In effect, communities reconstituting themselves and performing to each other. Simply put, without their participation, there is no carnival. Events would have been impossible without local people accepting artists, dancers, drummers and performers (more often than not locals themselves) into their halls, community houses and centres and agreeing to create something together.

Rogoff's knowledge exchange of contemporenaeity juxtaposes here with the tensions Bogad identifies in the occupying of public space as often being tightly controlled with hierarchical rules of public order. This tension, or as Bogad argues the constructed 'dramaturgy of the space', asks the questions: 'Is the composition of the group diverse or homogenous? What culture is being created and expressed in the space? [...]What is the role of art and creativity?'[49] The Beat's work over the

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[46] Rogoff, 2007.

[47] Rogoff, 2007.

[48] Bogad, L.M. (2006). Tactical carnival: social movements, demonstrations, and dialogical performance. In Cohen-Cruz , J. and Schutzman, M. (eds.), *A Boal companion Dialogues on theatre and cultural politics*. New York: Routledge, p. 51.

[49] Bogad, 2006, p. 51.

years has used a polymorphous understanding of culture and creativity to explore the question of who we could be (at least with each other in public) and how this can be safely negotiated and explored. To paraphrase Erving Goffman, this is in effect carnival working as 'the presentation of *ourselves* in everyday life'; a dramaturgical praxis underwritten by active participation.[50] This requires buying into the idea of a wider collective cultural citizenship than what might have been previously available.

Fig. 7: Carnival Float at Beat Carnival Center, 2012 (Credit: Beat Carnival)

Using a wide historical lens to allow for the ideological malleability of what citizenship might consist of in a contemporary sense, Wiles succinctly surmises that in the modern day, 'citizenship addresses the fundamental problem of cohabitation.'[51] Drawing on Jurgen Habermas and Hannah Arendt, Wiles outlines the post war doctrinal oscillations between the dangers of both (over) active and passive citizenship in the public sphere, the existence and fostering of communities of individuals and the role of public participation in the making of a shared identity. Common to the beginnings and evolution of both Beat Carnival Lantern Parades

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[50] Goffman, E. (1978). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. London: Harmondsworth.
[51] Wiles, 2011, p. 2.

in East and West Belfast were doubts expressed about local people seeing the value of participation; linking the practice of contemporenaeity as a potent form of knowing through doing. In essence, habit is required in the facilitation of a new (or reclaimed) paradigm for a community, the opening of a space or indeed the performance of citizenship through a joyous, uplifting and unpredictable experience. That habit is neither formed in isolation or in a singularity.

What is produced in the pedagogy of performance is an alternative logic to the dominant 'symbolic landscape' of Northern Ireland. Marc Ross posits that 'culture is a mechanism for connecting people across time and space and provides powerful tools for expressing inclusion and exclusion in a community.'[52] He argues that this is done through the construction of a 'symbolic landscape', which 'communicates social and political meanings through specific public images, physical objects, and other expressive representations' displayed in public spaces and commemorated through ritual.[53] Beat Carnival has altered the symbolic landscape of public performance through public participation in a new dramaturgy of the carnivalesque and helped create an opportunity to enact other aspects of civic identity. Another memory echoes in the street from carnival events, one that has become an embodied memory of 'contemporaneity' for a heterogeneous mix of Belfast's residents. This is significant in a city which operates within the regenerative logic of commodifying culture, a logic which markets as spectacle various versions of its present, future and past to new creative and tourist classes.[54]

The value of a post conflict 'carnivalesque of contemporaneity' is not dependent on the consumption and monetisation of a newly available cosmopolitan culture of excess. This contemporaneity is embodied utopia as Andrew Robinson explains through Bakhtin 'not simply a deconstruction of dominant culture, but an alternative way of living based on a pattern of play. It is joyous in affirming that the norms, necessities and/or systems of the present are temporary, historically variable and relative, and one day will come to an end.'[55] Although defined in terms of building a social movement, Bogad counsels the creation of an experience, within the time and space temporarily occupied, which 'inspires desire and defiant joy.'[56] The anticipation and release of performing on 'event day' gestures to improvisation and innovation as a state of being. This has resonance for carnival as a collective manifestation of a social moment, if not movement, in which citizens are performing alternative ways of being together. This begins in making or doing workshops as

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[52] Ross, M. (2009). Culture Contestation and the Symbolic Landscape: Politics by Other Means? In Ross, M. (ed.), *Culture and Belonging in Divided Societies: Contestation and Symbolic Landscapes*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, p. 5.

[53] Ross, 2009, p. 6.

[54] Belfast City Council. (2018). *Festivals* [Online] Available from: http://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/tourism-venues/culture/festivals.aspx [Accessed 25 November 2018]: 'Belfast is a city of festivals, staging the equivalent of at least one festival for every week in the year. Festivals are part of Belfast's cultural life blood and provide substantial social and economic benefits for our city.'

[55] Robinson, A. (2011). Bahktin: Carnival against Capital, Carnival against Power. *Ceasefire* [Online] Available from: https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/in-theory-bakhtin-2/ [Accessed 23 November 2018].

[56] Bogad, 2006, p. 51.

the preparation for the main event but is most acutely felt in the experience of being on the street itself. Critical to this is the build up to assembling and performing on the day, as well as the dramaturgical design involved in planning the parade order itself. This requires a fluid and swift adaptation to changing circumstances as any event organiser inevitably must have, but for the Beat there is also a collective emphasis on maintaining care throughout the process for participants and performers. This care is at the core of a civic event which recognises the centrality of community participation and is evidenced by relationships which have been built on over the years, between artists, performers, organisers and groups. That demonstration of care and the reciprocality shown by participation sustains the concept of carnival as a continuing commitment to, and expression of, contemporaneity.

Fig. 8: St Patricks Day, 2018 (Credit: Beat Carnival)

Playfully massing in *defiant joy* in the same Belfast streets that have seen pitched battles has visceral affect and effect. Contending with the reality and memory of various shows of strength and violence, as well as the performances of identity which many find threatening, problematic or alienating, is part of the gradual and long term work of diversifying our lived experiences and changing the story of who and what we are and could be. As Rogoff encapsulates, much of this work, and indeed 'serious play', comes down to posing the complex question of 'how we might know what we don't yet know how to know.'[57] In Northern Ireland, much of this not-yet-known knowledge is at the basic but fundamental level of not just how to share space with each other, even temporarily, but how we might *co*-exist together. The Beat along with many other socially minded organisations, have long been attempting to engage local populations to *make this road by walking it*.

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[57] Rogoff, 2007.

Fig. 9: Shankill Lantern Parade, 2018 (Credit: The Beat Carnival)

Conclusion

In terms of social justice, despite its dark international reputation, the populace in Northern Ireland has often been ahead of many of its elected and self-appointed representatives. For example during the Troubles, as early as 1971, public peace rallies were held; attracting up 10,000 people in Belfast alone.[58] More recently this has been evidenced by the polls on local attitudes to abortion and equal marriage prohibitions, which remained enshrined in Northern Irish statutes until 2020.[59] However while there are unquestionably difficult legacies to work through and new forms of economic and cultural divisions emerging, in terms of possibility and

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[58] ESRC event *Untold Stories: Touring Belfast's Grassroots Peacebuilding History*, 28 September, 2018 (guided tour based on Emily Stanton's 2018 doctoral research on peace building in Northern Ireland).

[59] Amnesty International (2020). New poll confirms overwhelming majority of people in Northern Ireland want to decriminalise abortion [Online] Available from https://www.amnesty.org.uk/abortion-poll-research-majority-people-northern-ireland-want-decriminalise [Accessed 11 December 2021]. Ironically for the DUP who long insisted on the principle of regulatory alignment with the rest of UK in terms of Brexit negotiations, their blocking of bringing Northern Ireland into step in terms of citizen's rights was finally overturned by Westminster, whilst devolution was suspended. See Coulter, P. (2020). Same-sex marriage now legal in Northern Ireland, BBC [Online] Available from: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-51086276 [Accessed 27 June 2020].

potential it is important not to forget the paths previously laid down which enable our present. It is therefore worth remembering those working in fields such as peace building, community development, alternative education and learning (as well as the arts) who have dedicated their lives to finding new ways of being and co-existing in the world.[60] Much of the relative peace we enjoy today is due to those individuals and communities who laid that fundamental groundwork. Politicians may sign agreements, but it is citizens who enact them.

Beat's idiosyncratic carnivalesque form is designed for people to be able to visibly enact a new kind of defiant joy together, in the street. This is carnival functioning as Rogoff's performative enablement of contemporaneity, a novel un-bound experiential form of knowledge, accessed spontaneously through doing. Within this framework of celebratory participation there is a commitment to vanquish the previous darkness from the symbolic site of the street. This illumi-nates the potential for, *and lays down the memory of*, co-existent civic multiplicities. However, as Boyd states:

> Although Belfast has changed, in some ways it hasn't. There is a lot more artistic life and cultural diversity, but what still dominates the streets is our more tribal way of presenting ourselves… The big picture has been to have carnival and that not just people would buy into it, but our institutions and our agencies would see carnival as a way of celebrating, local authorities par-ticularly and government, our cultural department. That hasn't come about and [it's a] disappointment because, generally I would say, people would say we need something like that… Politicians play to their constituency, in terms of tribal fears and the old senses of identity. The question for me has been in more recent times is there still a place for carnival and doing parades on the street and creating those alternative pictures and celebratory pictures? [61]

Carnival as a practice of the possible has to be practiced, habituated, and embodied. Without active participation the carnivalesque community is not fluid but fixed as a spectral celebratory image, wherein the possible exists as a memory or transmog-rifies into something else. We are currently in a liminal space in which the possible is shifting, and the haptic need for society to be with each other together in public is more keenly felt than ever. In Northern Ireland, as in many other places, whether we experience our collective possibilities as citizens or as customers in the co-cre-ation and consumption of our own culture, remains to be seen.

<p style="text-align:center">❧</p>

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[60] Moriarty, G. (2017). Grown from Shattered Glass: A View from Northern Ireland. In Jeffers, A. and Moriarty, G. (eds.), *Culture, democracy and the right to make art: The British community arts movement*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, pp 115-130.
[61] David Boyd, interview with Sheelagh Colclough, 11 November 2018.

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