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Report on Anthropology Student Research Grant

With the generous support of the Anthropology Student Research Fund, I spent four weeks in the city of Belfast studying the lasting social, cultural, and infrastructural legacies of the "Troubles." In that time I conducted research at local archives, conducted interviews with residents, and extensively photographed the city and its remaining system of "Peace walls" which separate majority-Protestant areas which tend to favor the union with Great Britain from majority-Catholic neighborhoods which tend to desire to be reunited with the Republic of Ireland. After living and studying in the city for the time that I did, I have gained a great appreciation for the fact that the system of walls and gates is but one tool in the toolbox of social control which the regional government, city council, and police service have used for decades to attempt to limit violence while maintaining claims to balance and political impartiality.

Minutes and reports from the office of the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland held in the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland reveal that what are known today as the "Peace walls" began as a single "Peace line." This line was no more than a set of improvised lumber and barbed wire barriers erected by the residents of the Catholic-Nationalist Falls Road and the Protestant-Unionist Shankill Road neighborhoods of West Belfast in August 1969 following a week of rioting over harsh treatment of Catholic and Nationalist protestors involved with the ongoing Civil Rights movement. On August 14th the British Military would take possession of these barricades and further fortify them as to completely separate the two communities, with the exception of a small number of monitored checkpoints. Plans to redevelop the neighborhoods in the early 1970s entertained the possibility of forcibly mixing the residents of the two areas in hypothetical housing schemes, but ultimately the Minister's cabinet endorsed a plan to develop fortified industrial estates along the "peace line" to reinforce the separation. The public records also indicate a complete loss of all institutional memory about the "peace line" following the dissolution of the position of the Prime Minister in 1973. All mentions of the line in government documents after this time are accompanied by admissions of confusion about the structures' original purpose. Nevertheless, the line came to be used as a model for other communities who felt that the diminished police presence brought about by the ceasefires of the mid-1990's would

put their communities in danger. Most of the structures which exist today were built at the request of their communities during this period.

Today, the Department of Justice refers to all of these structures which it owns as “Peace walls,” while residents tend to use the term to refer to any wall or fence which separates a neighborhood from its surroundings, including those which are privately owned. From interviews with community activists, faith leaders, and political ex-prisoners I gained an understanding of how those who live near these structures think about them and the conflict more generally. The feeling that the barriers act as a “safety blanket” is common, and many whom I spoke to compared the prospect of the walls being removed or the gates left open at night to the possibility of leaving one’s door unlocked: The question is not of whether or not some actual, attempted crime or disturbance is prevented by locking one’s door, but rather of whether or not one can make the possibility of a disturbance disappear entirely. This logic can be found in other techniques used by the government and the police service to manage the city’s population after the ceasefires. For example, apartment buildings in the Nationalist Divis Street and New Lodge neighborhoods which had been used as landing pads for British Military helicopters in the 1970s and 80s have been modified to include an additional top floor and a new roof which is either curved or jagged. To the pedestrian on the street the purpose of these additions is obvious; they render the return of the helicopters spatially impossible. Another example is the city’s “alleygating” program, a program which provides for the installation of locked gates at the entrances of alleys and courtyards which the police service deems to be hotbeds of so-called “anti-social behavior.” Again, the purpose here is not to grapple with the causes of such behavior, but rather to make it impossible by removing the space in which it once took place.

Apart from this archival and interview data, my time in Belfast allowed me to travel around the city to experience and document the legacies of the conflict as well as the ways in which the various neighborhoods and communities practice and represent their own conceptions of political and cultural belonging. Witnessing first-hand and speaking with those who participated in the (July) Eleventh and Twelfth bonfires and parades was an unforgettable experience which raised a number of questions I hadn’t before considered about the relationship between Protestant temperance and social teaching, the British military tradition, and public celebrations featuring mass public intoxication. Some of the most informative conversations I

had were with political ex-prisoners from both communities who now work as tour guides and spend their days selling their personal experiences to tourists in what is becoming a booming industry of Troubles-based tourism.

In the end, I deeply appreciate this opportunity afforded to me by the Student Research Fund. Not only did it give me an opportunity to collect data which will likely form the backbone of my senior thesis, but it also allowed me to test and hone my research skills in the wild. That is to say, it allowed me to work in a situation in which I have full autonomy and thus the ability to experiment with methods while beginning to build an understanding of how to effectively do research in the field.