Through the Eyes of Women: photovoice and participatory research as tools for reimagining place

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ABSTRACT In this article, the author explores how one particular group of working-class women living in Belfast, the North of Ireland, experience the place(s) in which they live. The perspective of place that this exploration is embedded in represents the accumulation of multiple person-place relationships that are mediated by the sociopolitical history of the North of Ireland, as well as by the gendered, classed, and religious-mediated contexts in which the women live. The author explores the relationship between place and identity by describing a feminist participatory action research (PAR) project that she engaged in with a group of women living in Belfast (which included the use of photovoice as a tool for investigating people's lives) that provided them with a culturally relevant lens through which to view the relationship between place and the everyday lives of Irish women. Out of that investigation, the author and the women designed a photo-text exhibit that provides knowledge to local and international communities about the ways in which women engage in the formulation and reformulation of place and identity within contexts of everyday life.

I feel that I get it now, that this is a reflection of our lives, a part of a theme that is about livin' here and that those photos are the things that effect how we live and who we are and why we are. (Deirdre)

The geographer, Anssi Paasi, suggests that ‘place represents the nodes of the life biography, which is, itself, a unique web of situated life episodes … [Thus] each place has unique meaning for each individual … [and] is shaped by the person’s past, as well as by the person’s attitudes, beliefs, and actions in the present’ (Fullilove, 1996, pp. 1517–1518). In addition, Fullilove argues that place can ‘be understood as standing for human interactions occurring in a given location, that is, as the psychosocial setting’ (p. 1517). It is within a framework of thinking about place as a psychosocial setting and a web of situated life episodes that I explore how one particular group of working-class women living in Belfast experience the place(s) in which they live. The perspective of place that this exploration is embedded in represents the accumulation of multiple person-place relationships that are embedded in the sociopolitical history of the North of Ireland [1], as well as within the gendered, classed, and religious-mediated contexts in which the women live. I explore the relationship between place and identity by describing a feminist participatory action research (hereafter PAR) project the women and I engaged in that provided us with a culturally relevant lens through which to view the relationship between place and the everyday lives of Irish women.
Overview of the Project

Participatory action research (PAR) is a process whereby people reflect on particular aspects of their lives so as to engage in individual and/or collective action that leads to a useful solution which benefits the people involved. The roots of PAR can be traced back to Latin America where, in the 1960s, social scientists were engaged in collaborative processes of investigation, education, and action with poor and oppressed groups with the ultimate goal of transforming community and societal structures so as to improve the lives of those involved (Hall, 1981).

Practitioners of PAR draw from a variety of perspectives, including, but not limited to, Marxism, Freire's theory of conscientization, Gramsci's identification of workers as organic intellectuals, and critical race theory (McIntyre, 2000). In addition, feminist theories have contributed in a significant way to the field of PAR where much of the literature and practice continues to retain an analytic framework which is largely androcentric and where women and gender issues are not always a central aspect of a PAR project (Maguire, 1987; McIntyre, 2000).

The framework that was developed for the PAR project in Belfast stems from an orientation to feminist PAR that is characterized by, among other things, (1) an emphasis on the lived experiences of women, (2) a focus on the relationship between violence and gendered identities, (3) the activist stance of the researcher, and (4) an emphasis on social change as an integral aspect of social science research. Equally important, feminist PAR allows for a contextual approach to understanding the relationship between gender, geographical space/place and, in this case, the multiple identities of Irish women (see, for example, Maguire, 1987; Lykes, 2000; McIntyre, 2000; Reason & Bradbury, 2001 for further discussion of PAR).

Complementing feminist PAR is photovoice (Wang, 1999)—a methodology that (1) enables people to record aspects of their daily lives from their own perspectives, (2) provides opportunities for people to attend to aspects of their lives and communities that they take great pride in, or have the greatest concerns about, and (3) uses photography to catalogue social issues in the hopes of influencing social policy (see Ewald, 2000; Lykes, 2000; McIntyre, 2000; and Wang et al., 1998 for further discussions of photovoice). By putting cameras in the hands of local women, we hoped to enrich our understandings of how they perceived themselves as Irish women living in a context of struggle and possibility. As importantly, the camera provided resources enabling the women to tell 'visual stories' about themselves, thus creating opportunities for them to express themselves in their own images, words, and reflections. In turn, these images became points of entry into seeing beneath surface issues, relationships, community events, and the extent to which place informs identity.

The Women of the Road

Monument Road [2] is a small, working-class, predominantly nationalist and republican [3] community with about 3500 residents located in Belfast, the North of Ireland. People in the area have suffered greatly over the past three decades from sectarian violence. Over 50 residents have been murdered and many more injured, imprisoned, or forced to leave the area.

I met two community members from Monument Road in 1996 and spoke with them about the possibility of collaborating in a community project aimed at
developing strategies for addressing how young children living in Belfast experience life in their community. They were eager to participate. I visited Belfast shortly thereafter and made contact with a number of women, local community workers, teachers, children, parents, and caregivers. I returned to Belfast a number of times over the next two years to work with children and youth in a local Irish school as well as in the local youth center.

Although I was primarily working with children and young people during the first two years I visited Belfast, I was also learning a great deal about the day-to-day lives of the women on the Road. Together, we spent many hours talking, laughing, crying, eating, drinking tea, and engaging in multiple forms of community work. Out of those experiences, we decided to participate in a project aimed at exploring issues that affect the women as mothers, daughters, wives, partners, caregivers, and the primary stakeholders in community life.

Two of the women I live with when I visit Belfast (Sorcha and Nóra), as well as two other women in the community (Lucy and Tricia), agreed to invite other women in the community to join us in a project that was loosely framed around the question of how the women experience life in the Monument Road community. The women based their decisions about who to invite to participate in the project on availability and who they felt would enjoy the opportunity to engage in a group project. Overall, 11 women were invited to participate in the project. Two women were unable to participate for reasons associated with their work lives. Thus, the project began with nine women.

The nine women who chose to participate in the project ranged in age from 24 to 40. Deirdre and Nóra are unmarried without children. Winnie is unmarried and has a 10 year-old son. Lucy is married and lives with her husband and six children. Sorcha is married and lives with her husband and three children. Tricia and Patricia are both divorced. They each have four children, all of whom live with their respective mothers. Kay lives with her partner and has three children. Jacqueline also lives with her partner and her three children.

Lucy, Tricia, and Jacqueline were all born in the community and have lived on Monument Road all their lives. Nóra and Sorcha moved to the road 11 years ago. Kay moved to the Road over 15 years ago. Patricia grew up in West Belfast, married, moved to another county, and returned to Monument Road 10 years ago after separating from her husband. Deirdre and Winnie have lived in the Monument Road community for 5 years.

All of the women participating in the project identify as working class. Lucy, Tricia, and Kay are employed part-time. Lucy works as a receptionist; Tricia as a childcare provider; and Kay cleans office buildings. Jacqueline, Sorcha, and Patricia do not have paid employment. The remaining three women are employed full-time: Nóra teaches in an Irish language primary school, Winnie works for a film company making documentaries about life in Ireland, and Deirdre works for Relatives for Justice—a Belfast-based non-governmental organization working with and providing support to relatives of people bereaved, and injured, by the conflict across the North of Ireland including border regions in the 26 counties.

All of the women completed secondary school. Nóra and Sorcha completed university programs after secondary school and are now certified teachers. Although considered professionals in Irish society, Nóra and Sorcha believe that their politics, world-views, where they have chosen to live, and the ways in which they engage their lives position them squarely with the working-class women they live beside in the Monument Road community.
Defining ‘Community’ on Monument Road

There is no consensus in the social science literature about the meaning of ‘community’ or the criteria for defining what a ‘community’ is (Stukas & Dunlap, 2002). The use of the term ‘community’ in this article refers broadly to a geographical section of Belfast that is commonly referred to as Monument Road. In a more textured sense, ‘community’ refers to the relational aspects of the women living on Monument Road—how, within contexts of mistrust and uncertainty, they connect with and support one another, develop and sustain networks of survival, respond to external forms of violence, and engage the current ‘peace process.’

The Monument Road community, like many other communities in the North of Ireland, on both sides of the sectarian divide, ‘support[s] and sustain[s] [its] members in daily existence, active resistance, and collective political solidarity’ (Cole, 1994, p. 322). Yet the Monument Road community is not politically homogeneous, nor do the people living there coalesce around political and social issues in unproblematic ways. There are political divisions, internal contradictions, disagreements about how to respond to the Good Friday Agreement [4], and complicated struggles over how to address years of social suffering. Yet there is also a cohesiveness that has characterized the community over the last 30 years that has been essential for its survival. At the same time, that same cohesiveness has often silenced political divisions and masked internal conflicts that have not always been acknowledged or addressed by the residents as a whole (Cole, 1994, p. 322).

Aretxaga (1997) suggests that political factionalism and internal conflicts within Belfast communities are ‘not incompatible with a sense of community and the solidarity derived from sharing the same predicament.’ Rather, they are ‘coexisting dimensions of the same process’ (p. 71). That process is a difficult one for many of the women living in the North of Ireland to engage in. Both Protestant and Catholic women are living in the betwixt and between of ‘peace’ and ‘war’—new territory for people who have spent most of their lives engulfed in violence, fear, and hatred.

Some of these women negotiate the difficult terrain of living in contested communities by becoming involved in women’s centers that, in varying degrees, address issues related to what are traditionally considered ‘women’s’ issues, e.g. poverty, education, children, housing, and employment. The creation of women’s centers by Catholic and Protestant women has been in response to the violence and political neglect that characterizes many working-class communities in the North of Ireland, as well as the lack of any formal structures to assist them in remedying various forms of social suffering (see, for example, Rocks & Teague, 1989; Miller et al., 1996; Heenan, 1997; Sales, 1997; Cockburn, 1998; Hinds, 1999; McKay, 2000). Although there are a number of cross-community women’s centers in the North of Ireland, the majority of the women’s centers in the country are single identity groups. This is perceived by some to be a barrier to developing a strong, collective voice for women in the North of Ireland. On the other hand, it may be that local women need spaces to address the consequences of a 30-year war within communities that are familiar and somewhat safe before they develop ongoing relationships with women from oppositional communities. Nora believes that people living in both republican and loyalist communities ‘cannot be thinkin’ of cross-community work at the minute because there is so much uncertainty in our own communities about what we’re doin’ and why we’re doin’ it. Both sides are sort of holdin’ our breath hopin’ that we won’t be betrayed by our own politicians or by them from the other side.’

The uncertainty many women from both nationalist/republican and unionist/loyalist...
communities have about the current political process is disrupting the idea of ‘community’ that many of them have lived with and under for many years. They, like many others, are now being faced with the disintegration of what they believed was an integrated individual and communal life. In its place, they are left questioning ‘the sureness of political discrimination … how it is [and will be] articulated and reconfigured’ (Rose, 1992, p. 297) in the current climate of social and political unease.

The women from Monument Road recognize that allegiances between and among people have been ‘brought sharply into focus’ (Johnson, 1999, p. 37) since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. Yet they hope that, as a community, they will weather whatever challenges emerge in the near and present future. For now, they retain a cautious realism about the current sociopolitical process—a process that ‘may not yield any final destinations’ but, as many people in the North of Ireland hope, ‘may point to some resting places [and] temporary closures’ (Das & Kleinman, 2001, p. 27).

A Brief Note Regarding My ‘Place’ in the Overall Process

My decision to work in Belfast is directly related to my own ‘place’ as a white, Irish, North American female who was brought up in a large, working-class, Catholic family in Boston. As a long-distance observer of the conflict in the North of Ireland I was conscious of the similarities between the ways African-Americans were/are discriminated against in the USA and how Catholics are discriminated against in the North of Ireland. The genesis of the discrimination that both groups experience differs: African-Americans are discriminated against in the USA due to skin color, ‘race,’ and the historical effects of slavery. Catholics in the North of Ireland are discriminated against due to religious beliefs, ethnicity, political affiliation, and the historical effects of imperialism. In addition, the degree to which members of each group experience the types of discrimination that exist in their respective countries differs according to gender, economic status, and geographical location.

I explored the issues of race, ethnicity, and discrimination, particularly as they intersect with the lives of Irish Catholics living in the North of Ireland and the lives of African-Americans living in the USA, at a state teacher’s college I attended after high school. Upon graduating from that college, I secured a teaching position in Boston and began to focus my energies on teaching inner-city youth and developing strategies to address the ways racism mediates education in the USA.

After teaching elementary and middle school for 12 years, I returned to graduate school. It was there that I was introduced to the multiple interpretations of feminist participatory action research (PAR)—an introduction that turned out to be a catalytic experience for me. Feminist PAR provided me with opportunities to explore the links between knowledge construction and pedagogy, theory and practice, research and teaching, and scholarship and social change. My previous experiences as a feminist activist teacher and a union organizer led me to initiate a PAR project for my dissertation research which explored how a group of white student teachers made meaning of whiteness and how that meaning informed their teaching (McIntyre, 1997). That was followed by a PAR project in Bridgeport, Connecticut, where I explored with a group of African-American, Jamaican, and Puerto Rican students the multiple strategies they used for making meaning of and responding to the urban environment in which they lived (McIntyre, 2000).

Given my background as an activist educator and researcher, and the ways in which
I identify with the ongoing struggles in the North of Ireland, I was eager to explore issues of identity and community with the women of Monument Road. In many ways, I identify with how the women from the Road engage their lives with a mixture of humor, alcohol, work, activism, and a ‘get over it—there is another fight around the corner’ attitude. On the other hand, I find myself at an experiential distance from the women in many ways. Although we share similar beliefs about the causes of the social suffering and injustices that characterize the North of Ireland, my sense of place, identity, and positionality in the world are distinctly different from the ways in which place, identity, and positionality mediate the lives of the women I accompany in this project—and who accompany me.

**Visual Stories of/by Women of the Road**

One of the primary reasons the women wanted to participate in the project was because even though many of them are friends and spend a great deal of time raising families and actively working in the community together, they have little time to reflect on the intersections of those responsibilities. Therefore, we set up a series of workshops where the women could ‘take time away’ and engage in numerous creative techniques and processes that would assist them in reflecting upon and making meaning of the multiple aspects of their lives (e.g. collages, symbolic art, painting, and poetry). Over the course of the two-year project, I audiotaped all of the discussions we engaged in during the workshops. I transcribed and analyzed the women’s discussions. I presented my analysis to the women on a regular basis, inviting them to provide me with their comments, feedback, clarifications, and questions (see McIntyre, in press).

In addition, we designed a year-long photovoice project aimed at documenting the women’s daily lives through photography. Photovoice is a tool for investigation that enables people to ‘reflect on photographs that mirror the everyday social and political realities that influence their lives’ (Wang et al., 1998, p. 80). With those photographs, people can increase their knowledge about the issues that most affect them, enrich their understandings of their lives within a particular community, have fun, and be given an opportunity to express themselves in new and imaginative ways. In this feminist PAR project, the use of photography provided the women and me with an opportunity to gain a more kaleidoscopic view of life on Monument Road. In addition, it helped us explore the women’s feelings of identification with, and alienation from, the country in which they live.

To assist us in formulating how we wanted to structure the photography project, we reviewed the works of other researchers, educators, and activists who have conducted similar photovoice projects in other parts of the world (Wu et al., 1995; One STEP Group et al., 2000; Women of ADMI & Lykes, 2000). We discussed how black and white prints evoked different emotions and responses than color prints and how photographs taken ‘up close’ disclosed different information than photographs taken at a distance from the subject under study. We also discussed the ethical issues involved in photography, developing shared understandings of when picture-taking is appropriate, respecting people’s choices about their inclusion in a photograph, and clarifying the reasons for taking particular photographs. It was also during this time that we discussed organizing a photo-text exhibit that would be displayed at the West Belfast Festival.

During the initial workshop, which took place in October 2000, I provided the women with two instamatic cameras—one color and one black and white—and invited them to tell a visual story about their daily lives. By providing the women with two separate
cameras—a disposable Kodak camera for color prints; an inexpensive (20 American dollars) 35mm camera for black and white prints—and by providing the women with two different types of film, I hoped to create a situation in which the women would have a choice in how they wanted to capture and document the people, places, and things that were significant to them.

Due to my schedule, a second workshop was not scheduled until the following March. During the second workshop, we reviewed the over 400 photographs the women had taken during the previous five months, commenting on the various people, places, and things depicted in the photographs. (All the film was developed one week prior to my arrival.) Once the women had reviewed and reflected upon their photographs, they decided to choose five photographs each that they felt best represented their lives as women living in a Belfast community—photographs we would use for the photo-text exhibit we were designing for the West Belfast Festival that was scheduled for August 2002.

We discussed Caroline Wang's (1999) work with photovoice and decided to use Wang's approach to choosing, analyzing, and interpreting the women's photographs. By using Wang's approach, we hoped to facilitate a process of thinking through what photographs best reflected the women's daily lives in the Monument Road community. The questions Wang suggests as tools for analyzing photographs spell out the acronym SHOWED:

- What do you See here?
- What is really Happening here?
- How does this relate to Our lives?
- Why does this situation, concern, or strength Exist?
- What can we Do about it?

After discussing the above questions, I reminded the women that they could add, modify, or reconfigure the questions in ways that would facilitate the overall interpretative process. I also explained to the women that they did not need to use the questions at all if they felt that the questions were not applicable to how they wanted to represent their photographs.

Within 30 minutes of the session, it was evident that some of the women were frustrated with the process of using Wang's questions to ascertain what photographs they would choose and why. As Lucy said, 'The questions are preventin' me from thinkin' about the photos without havin' to have an answer to them.' Winnie agreed, stating that she just wanted to 'write and not have to stop and see if it all fits into those questions 'cause I don't think my photos do really. Not the way the questions are listed there.'

Ultimately, the women decided to lay out all the photographs they had taken on the conference table, review each one, and think about what the photographs meant to them rather than how they looked or how they fit into Wang's questions. As Patricia stated, 'This is not just about looking at pictures. It's about saying something meaningful about them.'

Once the women had chosen their photographs, we discussed their choices by thinking through a host of questions that the choices generated for us. What did the photographs mean to them? What was the relationship between the content of the photographs and how the women perceived their community? How did the women see the photographs as reflecting issues that are salient to them as women living on Monument Road? It was by engaging in these discussions that the women gained a clearer sense of what text they wanted to create to accompany their individual prints.
After long and informative discussions about the women’s photographs and accompanying texts, we developed a set of interrelated themes that framed how the women perceived themselves and their community: family and friends, violence, education, and politics (see McIntyre, in press). Family and friends represented:

the people in the community, like our networks that we all use in the community ... We started to look at family and then we started to look at friends and once we started to separate them all out, we realized that they were all part of the one thing and that we worked and lived through all those people and that there wasn’t any very fine line for us between family, friends, and neighbors. (Deirdre)

The women’s individual and collective stories about their experiences with violence:

provide graphic accounts of the manner in which everyday life is transformed in the engagement with violence [and how] people engage in the tasks of daily living, rehabiting the world in the full recognition that perpetrators, victims, and witnesses come from the same social space. (Das & Kleinman, 2001, p. 2)

The theme of education represented ‘how different our experiences of it were growing up’ (Patricia) and ‘how we are educators to the children and young people in the community’ (Nóra). Politics was a theme that included the women’s discussions about the extent of their political agency and the strategies they have developed to address ‘the central questions facing [a group of women] differently placed in specific political, social, and historical contexts characterized by injustice’ (Collins, 1998, p. xiv).

Another major theme that was generated by the women in the photovoice project was the notion of ‘place’—a significant factor in how the women make meaning of their lives. Unless they work outside the home, and/or their places of employment are located in areas outside the community, the women’s physical worlds are quite small and insular. That is not necessarily a negative thing. Yet it raises questions about the formation of one’s identity when that identity is so intertwined with the geographical places that make up one’s life—particularly when those places have been bloodied, blown up, and battered by a 30-year war. I discuss the importance of place in more detail below.

Lovely, Brilliant, and Tragic: photographs of everyday life

Three examples of place emerged as most salient to and for the women in their photographs and texts—places that are ‘center[s] of meaning’ (Tuan, 1999, p. 105) for the women and that ground them in their everyday lives. First, the women’s photographs and texts illuminate the importance of the local community center, which is often referred to as ‘the Reccy,’ the recreational center. Second, the women’s photo-texts reveal the significance of ‘home.’ As the data reveal, ‘home’ carries with it both a connection to one’s immediate family as well as to members of the larger community. Third, the women’s photographs and texts make known the importance of having a ‘special place’ outside the community—a place that is ‘mine, that is any place but here. And I need that’ (Deirdre). Below, I describe how place, socially constructed and interconnected to how one engages the world, has real effects on the women’s daily lives—lives that are, as Tricia suggested, ‘stressed, depressed, and oppressed,’ but also ‘full of children, life, friendship, and support.’
Many of the stories the women shared about the local community center were met with a sense of joy, a degree of pride, and a shared feeling that the woman who was speaking was speaking for everyone. For example, Tricia chose a photograph of some of the children and youth from Monument Road performing at a Christmas celebration. She did so to demonstrate the community's success in securing the new neighborhood community center (see Fig. 1). Tricia wrote:

This photograph shows the children in the community doing a Christmas play. I work as a volunteer with the after-school’s group and the teenager group. We have just moved into the large community centre which is great for the children/teenagers. Also we have a parent and toddlers group and loads of courses going on. It is a great achievement for all the workers and community in the area. The last place we had was on a busy main road and it was dangerous for all involved, so this place is far safer.

The other women in the group agreed with Tricia, stating that securing the Reccy was a ‘huge achievement’ and has helped them to ‘better ourselves’ in ways that heretofore had been unavailable to them. For example, Patricia’s photograph and written text (see Fig. 2) reveals how the current peace process has enabled the women in the community to create places—in this case, at the Reccy—where they can participate in a variety of activities and courses that are designed specifically for them.

This is a ‘smoking break.’ These are three of the women attending a course. The course ran over a 12-week period. Each session lasted for three hours once a week. None of us had any computer experience yet all seven of us passed our exam. Before peace came we never had any funding to do any type of course. Now the peace money has given us the chance to open our minds through courses directed especially at our needs.

Patricia’s reference to the current opportunities for women to take courses designed for their needs is significant in that many women living in the North of Ireland, particularly...
Protestant and Catholic working-class women, have been systematically socially excluded, economically disadvantaged, and institutionally marginalized. Like many other women living in conflicted areas throughout the world, the women participating in the PAR project have had little opportunity to benefit from or take advantage of social, cultural, and/or educational opportunities. For many years, the women of the Road were preoccupied with war and the consequences of chronic and unpredictable violence, meeting in places like the local pub, around their kitchen tables, and on the street corner. Within those places, the conversations they had and the actions they took revolved around how to respond to the violence that was affecting their community. It has only been with the advent of 'peace,' precarious as that is at the present time, that the women have had the opportunity to participate in social and educational activities that are offered at the Reccy.

Not only does the Reccy provide opportunities for the women to learn new skills, it also serves as a place of social and emotional support for many people in the community. As Jacqueline stated, 'For me, having our community center is very important for us to get together and if we need help or need to get advice or share a problem, we know where to go.' As Jacqueline suggests, the community center is not simply a place to go in a material sense. It is a safe haven, a place where she and other members of the community can find support, friendship, and a sense of connection to one another. It provides a 'sense of coherence that holds the individual in place, particularly in times of external uncertainty' (Bammer, 1994, p. 97).

Something that causes a great deal of uncertainty in the Monument Road community is marching season. Ritual marching has been used by the Protestant Orange Order to express their cultural, political, and sectarian identity, as well as their loyalty to the British crown, since 1921 (Cairns, 2001). The Orange marches have been a controversial issue ever since. Two of the most contested marches on Monument Road are scheduled for 12 July and 12 August. The twelfth of July is the annual Protestant celebration commemorating the victory of William of Orange over the Catholic King James II in 1689, and 12 August is a major celebration for the Apprentice Boys, an organization of
Protestant men who gather to march in commemoration of the day when 13 Apprentice Boys closed the gates of Derry, keeping King James and his forces from taking over the city. (The British Government and most Protestants refer to the city of Derry as Londonderry. Most Catholics refer to the city as Derry.)

Nóra shared her photograph of a Land Rover (see Fig. 3)—a vehicle used by the British army and the Royal Ulster Constabulary (the police force in the North of Ireland)—as it was parked at the top of one of the bridges that borders Monument Road.

This is a picture of the RUC blocking the bridge into the town as an Orange march makes a protest at not being allowed to march through our community. Although this was the last march of the year and it wasn’t allowed down and we get a physical break from the marching during the winter, it’s in the background and as the spring and summer approach it comes more and more into your thoughts and you realise that you’re planning your life around expected marches. Because we don’t know whether a march will be forced through the community by the RUC until the week before there’s a real feeling of fear and uncertainty from this stage of the year (March/April) until the autumn (September/October).

Nóra’s photograph changed the tone of the discussion from lighthearted identification with some of the ‘brilliant aspects’ of living on the Road to a sense of anger and frustration directed at one of the most difficult aspects of living in this particular geographical area.

Immediately after Nóra finished reading the above text, the women began discussing the noticeable shift in the strategies that political groups, community residents, and government officials have used to resolve a host of socio-political issues in the North of Ireland since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement—including the Orange marches. During that conversation, the women discussed how challenging it was for them to create a placard for the photo-text exhibit that provided viewers with a definition of their community.
Nora: It’s very hard to define right now because everybody has problems with different labels. I have problems with saying this is a Catholic community.

Lucy: Yeah, it would be hard to say the community is one thing.

Nora: D’ya know what I mean? Ya gettin’ into dodgy issues there.

Lucy: Well everybody knows us because of the Orange marches and the [murders at the] bookmaker’s shop in ‘92. But we are more than that. But that’s how we are known.

Nora: It’s just very hard. It would be easiest to say a Catholic community but then you’re misrepresentin’ those of us who don’t consider ourselves Catholic.

Lucy: No, I think it would be easier sayin’ predominantly nationalist rather than Catholic.

Nora: But there’s problems with that, too. Some people don’t identify with bein’ nationalist.

Lucy: Aye, ‘cause it’s republican, too.

Nora: Every which way ya say it, there’s problems with it.

Sorcha: It’s a community that is united in opposing Orange bastards. [laughter]

(27 October 2001)

Due to the women’s backgrounds, and their experiences in and with the war, they have different views about what it means to be a nationalist or a republican. The women also have differing views about the current efforts to achieve peace. Some of the women respond to the ‘peace process’ with tolerant republicanism—they identify as republicans, support Sinn Fein, and believe that, in time, the North of Ireland will achieve the goal of being free from British rule. There are other women who respond as solidly republican. They do not necessarily support Sinn Fein but for now believe it is the only game in town. They find the peace process distasteful and a major shift away from old-time republicanism which they believe is rooted in a belief in self-determination, unity with the rest of Ireland, and expelling the British Government from their country.

For the women participating in the project, the one issue that erases their political differences is the Orange marches. The women’s identities as nationalists or republicans, Sinn Fein supporters or supporters of a different political party, supporters of the Good Friday Agreement or women who disagree with a number of concessions that were made under that Agreement, are muted under their collective identities as victims of the Orange marches. As Deirdre stated, ‘We disagree and argue about lots of things but not the marches. We stand together there.’

It remains to be seen if the residents of the community will stand together on other political issues (e.g. policing, decommissioning, funding)—issues that are fraught with questions of power, trust, authority, anxiety, separation, and loss. For now, those issues remain problematically interconnected within the Monument Road community, as well as within many other communities in the North of Ireland that are struggling to address the consequences of a 30-year war.

Unpacking the Meanings of Family and Home

Massey (1994) argues that communities are not necessarily place-bound but, in fact, are affiliations between and among people that can engender feelings of commonality and shared vision which are not dependent on geographical place. As importantly, and as noted earlier, many communities in the North of Ireland struggle with the political differences that exist between and among local residents—differences that Nora suggested could ‘destroy everything we’ve worked for for so long.’ Yet those same differences
can also mobilize people and strengthen existing relationships that are, as Sorcha stated, '[L]ike family; people ya would have in your home.'

The women's experiences reveal that home, like community, is not simply a geographical place but a complex interplay of family and community. For the women, the functional reality of home is broader than that which the term conventionally signifies and 'includes those close friends and comrades who have become [the] familial community' (Bammer, 1994, p. 104). Sorcha shared a photograph with the group that exemplifies the inclusion of community and friends in one's notion of home and family (see Fig. 4). Her photograph and accompanying text also represents the extent to which many of the women living on Monument Road reach out to others, thus developing trusting relationships that can withstand the unpredictability of violence—and peace—that continues to mediate life on Monument Road.

My babysitter, who is also a good friend, brought her wee brother round to see my new baby. It seemed like no time since her brother was a tiny baby and the photo reminds me to take the time and enjoy the baby while he is so small. The photo reminds me how lucky I am to have a babysitter that I can trust completely. She's a great teenager, full of life and energy. I also know that my baby will grow up in a safe community with people about him of all ages that will keep an eye out for him.

Sorcha's reference to having her son grow up in a safe community is something that is shared and felt by all the women and most definitely influences how they make meaning of family, home, and community. As noted earlier, the people living in the Monument Road area have suffered greatly over the past three decades from sectarian violence. For them, the constant threat and reality of violence has resulted in what McWilliams (1995) calls 'frozen watchfulness' (p. 14)—a state of being where one has a sense of impending doom about what might happen to them, their families, and in particular, their children. This sixth sense about 'what might happen next' results in the women living with an underlying anxiety about where their children are and whether they are safe while 'hanging about the streets.' In a community where young people are always 'out and
about, where most of the time they are safe because they are under the gaze of the adults who live in the area and who are acutely aware of who belongs and who does not, there is also a feeling of unease, particularly during specific times of the year, or when there has been a violent event in Belfast or in another part of the North of Ireland.

Jacqueline showed us a photograph that illustrates the extent to which violence affects the everyday lives of the people living on the Road. As importantly, it reveals the relationship between home and violence and how the two become interconnected within contexts of struggle and uncertainty (see Fig. 5).

Jacqueline: This is what I wrote for this picture. This photo is of my two sons on my stairs. The gate you see is a security gate. It gets locked at night to stop unwanted visitors.

Tricia: [Paramilitary] death squads.

Lucy: [Paramilitary] death squads.

Jacqueline: from harmin' my family when we are in bed. Most families 90%, mostly 90% of the families in the community have some sort of security in their homes. The children in the community are used to this. Mine have never asked why we have this and we will never remove this gate as I do not trust enough yet.

Tricia: My sister stopped usin' it. She took her gate off.

Nora: You're jokin'?

Tricia: And then a girl's house got blew up four doors down.

Lucy: I wouldn't take my gate off. I would not take my gate off. My doors can lie open but I would not take my gate off.

Jacqueline: Same as me. When I go to bed and know it's locked, I sleep. If I hadn't got them, my nerves would be shot.

Tricia: Funny you sayin' that. From them pipe bombs over the last couple of weeks, I haven't been able to sleep properly. It's just, I'm not worried, if they throw a pipe bomb in. I don't care as long as I can get my kids out. That's my real fear—gettin' them out.

(10 March 2001)
The women's concern about getting their children out of their own homes reveals the contradictory nature of what it means to 'be home.' What should be a nest of comfort is also a field of rules (Aitken, 2001)—a place where people are 'placed' in a situation where their understanding of home-as-a-safe-place is challenged. As Tuan (1977) suggests, 'in an ideal sense home lies at the center of one's life' (p. 128). The centers of life for many people living in the Monument Road community are constantly under threat of attack. Thus, the lesson one learns from an early age is to abandon one's center of life, to leave the source of one's physical, emotional, and psychological comfort.

Although the women realize that the area in which they live is vulnerable to various forms of violence, they do the best they can to defend their families by designing escape routes, installing various forms of security, and keeping a close watch on who comes in and out of the neighborhood. Within the boundaried spaces of what is both a refuge and a 'sitting target,' the women, and their children, live in a state of 'just never knowing,' negotiating the unpredictability of violence at the same time that they remain rooted in the familiarity of home.

Special Places

Yi-Fu Tuan (1999) argues that place needs to be 'defined broadly as a center of meaning (care and nurture) includ[ing] far more entities than towns and cities or even neighborhoods, homes, and houses' (p. 105). He goes on to ask, 'Why not also a fireplace, a favorite armchair, and even another human being[?]’ (p. 105). Many of the women's photographs reflected Tuan's notion of place. They found meaning in their kitchen tables, the local pub, the neighborhood community center, 'my front door,' 'the view outside my classroom,' 'the beach in Donegal,' and 'the football pitch.' These places were concrete—something the women could see, touch, and inhabit. At the same time these places were imbued with a state of mind that carried with it a set of emotions that transcended the immediate location revealed in the developed prints. In addition, some of the 'center[s] of meaning' described by the women were located outside the parameters of Monument Road. As Deirdre stated, ‘They are special places to go away to but the people that are there are the reasons that we go and so they are still part of our here, d’ya know what I mean?’ Deirdre’s special place is a beach in County Donegal (see Fig. 6).

Adult learners from my 'Irish language' evening class that I teach take on the big sand dune at Machaire Rabhartaigh Beach, County Donegal. This is 'my beach.' I have been going here for the last 11 years. I walk the beach alone when I need to think, or need to get away from things. I love to bring other people here as well, like it's my gift to share. This is my favourite place.

Lucy’s special place is just across town at her place of employment (see Fig. 7). As she stated: ‘That’s me away—away from everything I have to do here. It’s my time out.’

This picture is of some people I work with. Work to me is a sense of my identity, something I do on my own and not part of the community work I do. Work takes me away from the everyday things, house, kids, husband and community. I do it because I want to.

Nóra also has a place where she takes time out to reflect on the significance of where she lives and works (see Fig. 8).
This is a picture of the view from outside my classroom on the Whiterock. Although it’s a big change for me working outside my immediate community I am glad sometimes to be in other parts of Belfast and involved in the wider community. In the mornings I get a beautiful view of Belfast before the rest of the children come in and I really appreciate the weather and the mountains behind the school and the view of Belfast as far as [Monument] Road.

The women’s photo-texts that describe and give meaning to their ‘special places’ underscore how important the temporary personalizing of spaces can be for people who live amidst chronic and unpredictable stress and uncertainty (Breitbart, 1998). The women’s ‘special places’ give them the necessary space to remove themselves from some
of the daily activities in their lives—activities that require a great deal of their energy and time. As importantly, the places the women identify as 'special places' become 'active mediums' (Ruddick, 1996, p. 135) through which their identities can be (re)created, contested, and renegotiated. In those special places, the women are not simply 'mother,' 'sister,' 'wife,' and 'community worker.' Instead, they are able to step outside the 'fixed' identities that shape their daily lives and feel energized, nurtured, and affirmed as women, as travelers, and as curious seekers of new experiences and knowledge. Once replenished with the energy and enthusiasm that comes from connecting to 'special places,' the women feel more able to create safe and secure places in their daily lives that provide a sense of stability and permanence for those who inhabit them.

As the above data reveal, 'place' was and is a social matrix of multiple elements, all of which shape and influence the narratives the women constructed as they brought their photographs to life through stories, memories, and individual and collective experiences. Many of the women’s 'centers of meaning' are contested places—places that offer shelter at the same time that they are sites of struggle and survival. Yet the places the women describe in their stories and texts seem to coexist without contradiction. To them, the places they deem significant are permanent. Although the outside physical structures may change, the sense of the place, the meaning of the place remains permanently etched in their psyches. As Lucy stated, 'These are places that are inside us. They can bomb the pub, march down the Road, attack a house, but they can't take away the places we know.'

**Concluding Reflections**

The process of viewing multiple photographs addressing place was an illuminative, informative, and confidence-building experience for the women. By re-viewing their individual photographs and texts with one another, even when those photographs and texts generated a sense of disruption in the ways they organize their lives, the women
were able to articulate, frame, and openly discuss personal and communal experiences in ways that led to a more nuanced read of their everyday lives.

In addition, the photovoice project provided opportunities for the women to engage in a process that was socially and emotionally supportive. They appreciated the more personal and intimate aspects of each other’s lives by listening to the stories that accompanied various developed prints. The women were able to retell—or tell for the first time—stories that disrupted the typical distortions and stereotypes that have come to characterize Belfast and its people. As Massey (1994) argues, ‘we should question any characterization of place which is singular, essentialist, which relies on a view of there having been one past of this place [and] one story to tell’ (p. 114).

Although the women participating in the project have a singular view about their community when it relates to the Orange marches, and also share a singular view about the endgame in the North of Ireland—freedom from British rule and unification with the South of Ireland—their photographs and texts illuminate their own unique and individual relationships with their families, workplaces, and with the city and country in which they live. In addition, the women’s images disrupt the scenes of death, violence, and destruction, accompanied by truncated stories of hate, rebellion, and violence, that have permeated various media outlets for 30 years. As importantly, the women’s photographs and texts undermine stories about life in Belfast that serve to bolster the official record of events while dismissing the social history written by everyday people living within circumscribed spaces of violence and conflict.

The women’s visual and textual stories may not change the extent to which violence, and uneasy peace, mediate life on Monument Road. Yet what they can do is provide politically disempowered people with opportunities to author individual and collective stories that best represent how they experience their lives—individual and collective stories that carry the signature of the people who live them.

NOTES

[1] Many nationalists, republicans, Catholics, and international activists use ‘the North of Ireland,’ ‘the occupied six counties,’ and/or ‘the six counties’ to describe what is commonly referred to as Northern Ireland. Using the term ‘the North of Ireland’ raises questions about the authority and legitimacy of the present sociopolitical structures in that country.

[2] The names of some people, places, and things have been changed. Some of the women participating in the project chose their own pseudonyms that were used throughout the project. Others, like Patricia, ‘refuse to use any other name than my own, so just put me down with my real name.’

[3] The conflict in the North of Ireland exists between multiple groups and constituencies. The terms used to define such groups are important for understanding how people make meaning of their religion, ethnicity, nationalism, and politics. These terms are not fixed, nor are they similarly defined within and across constituencies. For the purposes of this article, nationalists are predominantly Catholic by religion, encompass a range of social classes, and desire an end to British rule; republicans are predominantly Catholic by religion, are predominantly from the working class, desire an end to British rule, and actively support and work toward the goal of a united Irish Republic. Some republicans, although certainly not all, support(ed) the use of violence to achieve their goals; unionists are predominantly Protestant by religion, encompass a range of social classes, and want to see Northern Ireland remain part of the UK; loyalists are predominantly from the working class and more likely to identify as British. They are Protestant by religion and actively support and work toward retaining their status as part of the UK. They, too, have been associated with the use of violence to achieve their goals.

[4] The Good Friday Agreement represents multi-party negotiations between the North of Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, and Great Britain. The Agreement outlines the structure for the Northern Ireland Assembly and the mechanisms for addressing a number of issues to protect and further the economic, social, political, cultural, and civic rights of the people of the North of Ireland. See: <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/agreement.htm> for the complete document.
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