UNIT 3: READING IRISH IDENTITY IN THE WALLS: THE TROUBLES IN NORTHERN IRELAND MURALS

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PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

The present unit focuses on matters concerning the process of defining an identity. The peculiarity of this case lies in the troublesome history of Ireland and in the cultural, religious and political consequences of its partition in the early twentieth century. The conceptualisation of the hyphenated term "Northern-Ireland" has involved the shaping, reshaping and transgression of different kinds of boundaries that will be explored along this unit. Questions pertaining exclusively to the reality of Northern Ireland and to its well-known Troubles will be tackled by way of looking at its most famous murals, signifiers of a landscape defined by fear, sectarianism and threat.

BRAINSTORMING ACTIVITIES

1. *Irish politics*. How much do you know /do you think you know/ about the Northern-Irish political situation?

a. Get a blank piece of paper and write down the first words that cross your mind when the expression "Northern Irish murals" is uttered. Share your small list with that of a group of at least 4 classmates. Do you coincide in the basic facts? What are the ideas/concepts that are most repeated?

b. Look at the webpage (http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/bibdbs/murals/rolston.htm), where you can find a division of the Northern Irish murals into those pertaining to the Republican and the Loyalist traditions. Choose one from each group and compare them trying to find similarities and differences. Focus on identity matters and ask yourselves questions such as: What do I see here? How do I feel? What makes both paintings different? What do they try to represent?

c. Check the selection of symbols, flags and banners from the two main communities of Northern Ireland. Relate each symbol with one of the two traditions referred above and, if possible, explain their meaning. Which ones are part of the Protestant/Loyalist community? Which ones belong to the Catholic tradition? Which ones are used by the two communities?

The poppy	The sash	Easter lily
The Celtic knot	The harp	The red hand

2. *Reading the murals*. Before you see the Power Point presentation, read carefully the following text to understand the contextual frame of the murals in Ireland.

Ireland and its murals

More than a geographical demarcation. Ireland is a political division that has caused a historical antagonism between the Protestant and the Catholic communities. The country is formed by four regions, being Ulster just one of them. Any outline map of Ireland shows clearly the partition of the country. The limits of the Northern-Eastern division, which is called Northern Ireland, do not coincide with those of the region of Ulster. The whole island of Ireland is formed by thirty-two counties. Ulster is constituted by nine of these and, within Ulster, there are only six counties which conform Northern Ireland. Therefore, it is wrong –although too common as well– to equate Ulster with Northern Ireland. So, why has the history of Ireland led to its division into two?

Ireland was the first British colony and also the closest one. Although this occupation lasted for almost eight centuries, the Irish have always tried to maintain their own genuine identity. It was in 1922, after many attempts to set Home Rule for Ireland, several unsuccessful Risings and a violent war, that Ireland settled for partition in the belief that it was the best that could be achieved at that time. The southern part of Ireland, formed by twenty six counties, became then the Irish Free State –or Éire–, and remained a dominion of the British Commonwealth until Ireland became a Republic in 1949. On the other hand, Northern Ireland, formed by six counties, chose to remain part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Ever since this happened, and until very recently, the image that Northern Ireland has exported worldwide has been defined by an armed conflict, sectarianism, fear, violent politics and constant struggle. And this, inevitably, has formed the pillars of the identity of Northern Ireland, as it is manifested in its culture, literature, society and artistic production. Its famous murals are a vivid example since the images and symbols exposed can be read as signifiers of a culture and as representations of certain set of values pertaining to their specific community. This explains why they have become inseparable icons of the landscape of this region.

When Ireland was partitioned, two parliaments were established. The Prime Minister of Northern Ireland was responsible for the internal affairs of the province but, since its beginning, the Stormont Parliament was dominated by Protestants. The minority of Northern Irish Catholics soon felt marginalized as regards housing, education and employment, and inevitably segregated neighbourhoods began to mark the division between the two communities. Ironically, the religious and political lines that mark the areas or ghettos are called "peace-lines", and they can be found in Belfast, Derry and other areas of Northern Ireland.

These barriers have a very significant and relevant meaning. In some of them, for instance, the "peace line" at Lanark Way in Belfast, the gates divide the Catholic area of the Falls Road from the Protestant area of the Shankill road, for security reasons. Other pictures reveal the existence of long and high walls made of concrete blocks and metal netting, which serve to part the two zones and to prevent people from throwing weapons to the other side.

The consequences of such territorial marking can be appreciated in the religious segregation in Belfast or Derry. One should also note that, ironically, the two main communities coexist with middle-class areas in which the two groups live together in order and harmony.

The historical antagonism between the Catholic and Protestant communities of Northern Ireland has made itself visible in sectarian murals. Protestant, Catholic, Loyalist and Republican images cover a wide number of walls –mainly in the working class areas of Derry or Belfast– contributing to create a landscape of fear, sectarianism, violence and bigotry. These visual expressions, together with other kinds of signs –like flags, colours, graffiti or banners– are pervasive in such a culture of symbols and markers. They offer a good representation of the main claims of both communities.

These wall paintings are usually placed at the side of houses to make a political claim, to commemorate historical events or to draw the attention of the people to a coming new issue. Republican murals often employ images of armed men to emphasise the heroism and justification of the war. However, there are those of a more artistic kind, which depict Celtic mythological figures and other symbols from the past, usually from a pre-colonial time. This would be the case of a series of murals devoted to the warrior hero Cú Chulain, famous for his bravery and strength in his fierce defence of Ulster. Many of these murals include symbols, such as the sun rising, to refer to "Na Fianna Éireann", the young political wing of the Irish Republican Army, the four shields, representing the four provinces of Ireland, or the tricolour flag, among others.

Another historical event that became an important source of inspiration for the Republicans was the hunger strike of 1981, which caused the death of ten prisoners. Additionally, political campaigns are also the motive of some other walls, as was the case of the electoral bid of Gerry Adams for Westminster election –which proved successful since he was elected M.P. from 1983 until 1992. Also, the different attempts to put an end to the violent struggle have been represented in murals inspired on the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 or on the British-Irish Agreement of 1998. At the same time, the various peace processes of 1994, 1998 and lately in 2006 have also become the motives of paintings displaying messages like "time for peace" or "time to go".

As far as the Loyalist murals are concerned, many of them were painted or retouched each July to commemorate the victory of Battle of the Boyne in 1690. These used to have King William of Orange –"King Billy" – as their protagonist, often riding a white horse. Another frequent source of inspiration was the figure of Oliver Cromwell, surrounded by clear anti-Catholic messages. More aggressive and threatening are those murals that depict the different paramilitary Loyalist organizations, like the UVF –Ulster Volunteer Force–, the UDA –Ulster Defence Association– or the UFF –Ulster Freedom Fighters– ready for action. The Loyalists also include their own symbols and flags, like the red flag of the City of Derry, the white and red flag of Ulster, or even the red, blue and white flag of the United Kingdom, the Union Jack.

An important turning point for the history of the Troubles in Northern Ireland was the British-Irish agreement of 1998, which was reached after two years of negotiations, on a symbolic "Good Friday", 10 April, in Stormont. In May 22nd it was massively ratified in two separate referenda held in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland. As a result, some articles of the Constitution were also changed. This new agreement tried to be inclusive as far as questions of identity were concerned and acknowledged, for instance, the possibility of having a double passport, British or Irish for anyone who claimed it.

All in all, the differences between the two communities present a long history and cannot be reduced to simplistic dualistic notions of Britishness/Irishness, Catholic/Protestant, Green/Orange, or Loyalist/Republican. On the contrary, the underlying root of the conflict should be searched in the segregation as regards schooling, housing and employment that Catholics still suffer in Northern Ireland, in spite of the improvements that society has achieved in the last decades.

Today, in the year 2009, after several cease-fires, peace talks, the complete decommissioning of arms and the withdrawal of army troops from the streets, sectarian violence is still part of everyday life in some ghettoicised areas. In fact, in Northern Ireland, segregation augments proportionally to the lowering in socio-economic status. So, although many of the abovementioned historical events took place a long time ago, there is still some bitterness, which is fueled every twelve of July when Protestant Orangemen cross Catholic neighborhoods of Belfast to celebrate King William's victory with parades and banners that provoke the anger of the Catholics, in a never-ending retaliation between the two communities.

A brief presentation of the different kinds of murals that constitute the landscape of Northern Ireland provide a useful historical background to the origin and evolution of the Troubles. Not all murals in Northern Ireland are political or religious by nature. There are some commemorating important events in Irish history, others that recall icons from Irish mythology, and still some others with artistic value. Nowadays, murals representing peace and tolerance are becoming increasingly popular, since cross-community understanding has been promoted in schools by way of conducting workshops in which groups of children from the two communities design or paint alternative murals in areas around their schools.

PRESENTATION

Complete the information of this unit with the Power Point presentation enclosed.

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POST PRESENTATION ACTIVITIES

1. *Quiz*. Look at the questions in the following chart and mark the correct answer (Yes or No).

Statements or questions	Yes	No
Northern Ireland is not a geographical demarcation but a political division		
The terms Northern Ireland and Ulster should be used as synonyms		
With the partition of Ireland in 1922, the country became a Republic		
Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom		
Northern Irish society is not segregated any more		
War lines separate Catholic from Protestant neighbourhoods		
The Falls road and the Shankill road, respectively, divide the main Catholic and Protestant areas in Belfast		
In Belfast and (London)Derry, middle-class districts of Catholics and Protestants live together in harmony and peace		
All murals have a political meaning		
Republicans like to paint murals with the image of King William		
Loyalists liked to paint murals each July to commemorate their victory in the Battle of the Boyne		
Cú Chulainn is a hero often evoked by Republicans		
The tricolour is the Northern Irish flag		
An important turning point in the Troubles was the British-Irish Agreement of 1998		
The flag of Ulster is white and red		
Sectarian violence has been completely eradicated in Northern Ireland		
Nowadays children are becoming involved in the painting of murals devoted to peace and tolerance		

COMPLEMENTARY EXERCISES

1. *Discovering murals*. Use the link *CAIN. Political Wall Murals in Northern Ireland* (http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/murals/) and choose an image of one Republican, Loyalist or Post-trouble mural to write a short essay identifying signs of difference between them. For your description, give details of what you see in the mural (if possible, state the location of the mural and include information about figures, colours, words, etc.).

2. *Comparing murals*. Choose two opposing murals and analyse their peculiar marks of identity.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

Rolston, Hill (1992). *Drawing Support: Murals in the North of Ireland*. Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications.

Woods, Oona (1995). *Seeing is Believing? Murals in Derry*. Guildhall: Printing Press.

Rolston, Hill (1995). *Drawing Support 2: Murals of War and Peace*. Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications.

Rolston, Bill (2003). *Drawing Support 3: Murals and Transition in the North of Ireland*. Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications.

USEFUL WEB LINKS

http://www.wesleyjohnston.com/users/ireland/geography/counties.html (A useful map included in the section entitled "Counties and Provinces of Ireland" from the web page www.irelandstory.com (History +Maps).

http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/images/maps/map5d.jpg (An outline map of Ireland where the partition of the country is made clearly visible).

http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/images/photos/belfast/peaceline/lanark1.htm#lanark1 (*CAIN Web Service*. A photograph of the peace line, at Lanark Way, Belfast).

http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/images/photos/belfast/peaceline/lanark2.htm#lanark2 (*CAIN Web Service*. Photograph of the security lanes at the peace line in Lanark Way, Belfast).

http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/images/maps/belfast_religion.gif (Map of the religious distribution in Belfast).

http://www.wesleyjohnston.com/users/ireland/maps/towns/derry_religion.gif (Map of the religious distribution in Derry).

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"READING IRISH IDENTITY IN THE WALLS: THE TROUBLES IN NORTHERN IRELAND MURALS"

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Political Murals of Northern Ireland

- See the following webpage for a selection compiled by Bill Rolston (1998) http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/bibdbs/murals/rolston.htm
- Choose one mural from each of the two traditions (Republican and Loyalist)
- Focus on the similarities and differences between the two murals and contrast the symbols, the colours used…

COMPARE AND CONTRAST

POLITICAL *VERSUS* GEOGRAPHICAL DEMARCATIONS

- Counties and Provinces of Ireland
  - http://www.wesleyjohnston.com/users/ireland/geography/counties.html
  - http://www.wesleyjohnston.com/users/ireland/maps/island_provinces.gif
- Outline map of Ireland

  http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/images/maps/map5d.jpg

PEACE LINES

- "Peace Line" at Lanark Way, Belfast
  - http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/images/photos/belfast/peaceline/lanark1.htm#lanark1
  - http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/images/photos/belfast/peaceline/lanark2.htm#lanark2
- "Peace Line" walls
  - http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/images/photos/belfast/peaceline/peaceline1.htm#peaceline1

SEGREGATION

- Religious segregation in Belfast
  - http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/images/maps/belfast_religion.gif
- Religious distribution in Derry
  - http://www.wesleyjohnston.com/users/ireland/maps/towns/derry_religion.gif

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POLITIC AL MURALS

- A map of Belfast murals with a slideshow
  - http://www.belfast-murals.co.uk/
- Republican murals
  - http://irelandsown.net/murals.htm
- Loyalist murals
  - http://www.scottishloyalists.co.uk/murals.htm
- Mural directory
  - http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/murals/

SUMMARY OF CONTENTS

- Murals as icons that reflect the conflictting identities of Northern Ireland
- The political demarcation of Ireland divides the Republic from Northern Ireland
- Murals can be political, religious or artistic
  - They represent the claims of the two main communities of Northern Ireland
  - Post-Troubles murals tend to address community understanding