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Pillars of the House: Women, Community Education and Social Change in Northern Ireland

by

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ABSTRACT

This narrative inquiry explores the lived experiences of five women from North Belfast, Northern Ireland, their perceptions and thoughts on the educative process and subsequent transformation to personal awareness and social change in their community.

The Ulster People's College, an adult educational institution that delivers community and political education to communities from both sides of the divide, and the North Belfast Community Development Centre, provide the sites where people locally engage in an education that seeks to create personal and societal change.

The text traces the historical landscape of the contested territory that is Northern Ireland, examines the social and cultural reality of survival in a divided society, and explores the understandings and meanings of ordinary people's lives in the context of time and place. The form of the text reflects the methodology of narrative; the writer's own journey through the research process is integrated with the stories of the women who participated in the study.

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PROLOGUE

ANY WOMAN

I am the pillars of the house;
        The keystone of the arch am I.
Take me away, and roof and wall
        Would fall to ruin utterly.

I am the fire upon the hearth,
        I am the light of the good sun,
I am the heat that warms the earth,
        Which else were colder than a stone.

At me the children warm their hands;
        I am their light of love alive.
Without me cold the hearthstone stands,
        Nor could the precious children thrive.

I am the twist that holds together
        The children in its sacred ring,
Their knot of love, from whose close tether
        No lost child goes a-wandering.

I am the house from floor to roof,
        I deck the walls, the board I spread;
I spin the curtains, warp and woof,
        And shake the down to be their bed.

I am their wall against all danger,
        Their door against the wind and snow.
Thou Whom a woman laid in manger,
        Take me not till the children grow!

From the Collected Poems of
Katherine Tynan

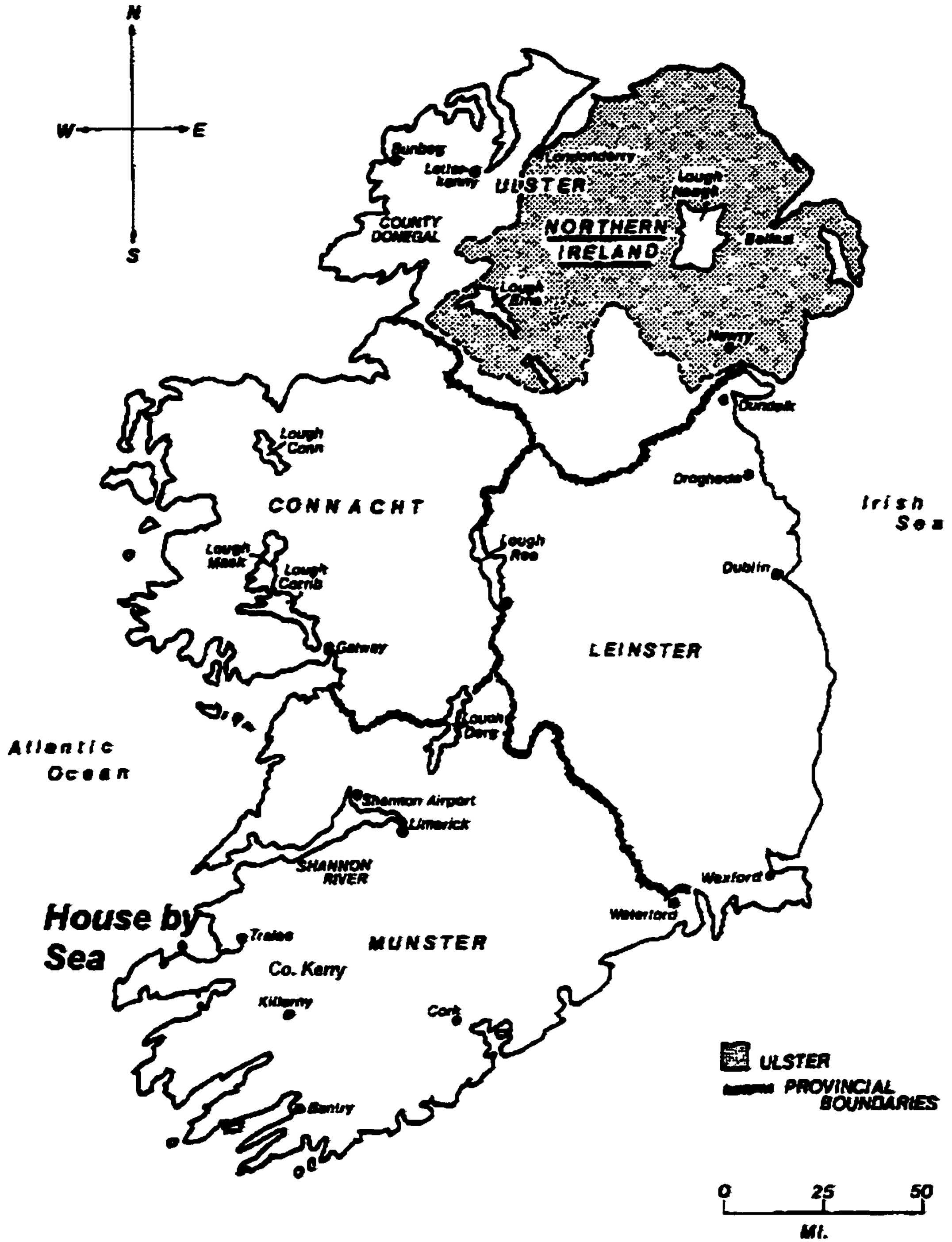


Figure 1: Map of Ireland

BEFORETHOUGHTS

My relationship with Ireland originates in the South, the Republic. My mother was born and raised in a small village in County Kerry situated on the southwest corner of the island in a house nestled between Tralee Bay and the Atlantic Ocean. A war bride, she left Ireland over forty years ago to start a new life in Canada, but each year returns during the summer months to that little house by the sea.

When I was six years old and for almost every year thereafter, I returned to Ireland with my mother during the summer months; I clearly remember my grandmother—a stern, dignified, proud woman. Her long, magnificent hair, tied up in a braid during the day, is what I remember most vividly. In the evening she would release the pins and untie the braid for brushing; her hair would come tumbling down, almost touching the floor. The ritual of brushing and the consistent stroke of the brush seemed to transform her serious, solemn face to that of a serene and tranquil state.

Life, it seemed to me, was predictable then. I took comfort in the routine, the sameness, the simplicity and the seemingly uncomplicated virtues of village life. Myth or fact, I yearn for these very same qualities in my own life today but wonder how thin is that veil between fantasy and reality when relying on memory to inform us.

The Irish are well-known for their storytelling, and I became infatuated with the stories that fed my curious imagination. Many were embellished for the benefit of a good story. *He put legs under that one,* my mother would say after the telling of a particularly adventurous tale. Many of the villagers today live on through the telling and re-telling of stories passed down through generations. This is how communities survived.

As is customary in Ireland, my uncle, the eldest son, inherited the house and the fields after my grandmother died in the early 1960s. Each morning, before dawn, off he would go with his dog Chip by his side to face a day of weeding, planting, cutting, digging, or whatever needed to be done. There was always something no matter the season. There are two images of my uncle that will forever remain: kneeling in his field with two burlap sacs tied to his knees to protect them from the unforgiving hardness of the ground, and then, years later, when arthritis had consumed his body so severely that he could no longer walk beyond the front door, I can see him still, peering over the hedge to catch a glimpse of his field.

My relationship with Ireland is partly inherited and partly cultivated. It has been a mystery to me over the years why I am constantly drawn back to a place for which, however clear, my memories are fragmented. I have created a fantasy of my own perhaps about a land I have merely visited. *It is wedded to your soul*, a friend of mine once told me. *You'll never be rid of it now.*

Beyond the Beyonds

The question I am most frequently asked is why I went to Northern Ireland to carry out research. People rarely ask me about topic or question but are obviously confused as to why I would choose such contested territory to conduct research. It is a reasonable question, I suppose, and in order to answer with any credibility at all, I had to consider the question seriously. None of my friends or family in the Republic had been to the North, and I had barely ventured beyond County Galway. *They're a odd lot up there,* my uncle would say as he switched off the radio after listening to more reports of bombings and killings; *It will never be fixed,* he would declare in disgust as he walked

away. So why would I choose to venture into such unknown territory where I had no family and knew not a soul? Partly curiosity and partly chance I think.

I happened across an item on the Internet one day when I was searching for information about experiential education. The article, written by Tom Lovett, who is the founder of a college in Belfast that uses a Freirian model of experiential education for adult learners, piqued my interest. The Ulster People's College, a cross-community residential adult and community education centre, provides courses in community development and community relations and was visioned by Lovett in 1982 in response to the rising sectarian divide in the North. The College operates in a neutral setting and offers a safe, accessible environment in which groups from the Catholic and Protestant community come together to explore their social, political and cultural differences and similarities. Thus, the beginning stages of my topic and connection to Northern Ireland were born out of a trip in cyberspace, and my ongoing curiosity about the *odd bunch* beyond those borders.

My interest in how education transforms and empowers has its foundations in both my personal and professional life. Post-secondary education was for me not an option; it was not part of the language in the early 1970's for a female of working-class origins. No one had gone before me, and within my peer and social group the gendered roles placed before us seemed our only choice. Financial considerations aside, higher education was not within the realm of possibility. Years later, when I had the confidence to break away from the confines of class and gender expectations, I returned to school; I felt virtually transformed and discovered a world of possibility.

Professionally, as an adult educator in the Yukon Territory of Canada, I witnessed both the successes and failures of institutional adult education. The Yukon Territory lies in the northwestern region of Canada and consists of an indigenous population who often feel marginalized and disenfranchised by mainstream society. The result of the post-colonial experience, many communities in the North are characterized by poverty, shorter life expectancy, drug and alcohol abuse. Mainstream education does not validate everyone's experience.

The Ulster People's College has a grassroots approach to education that emphasizes the importance of the individual within his or her community. Its commitment to a democratic, non-sectarian society, which seeks to improve conditions for those who have been excluded and silenced, reinforced my growing interest in education that transforms, empowers and awakens people and their communities.

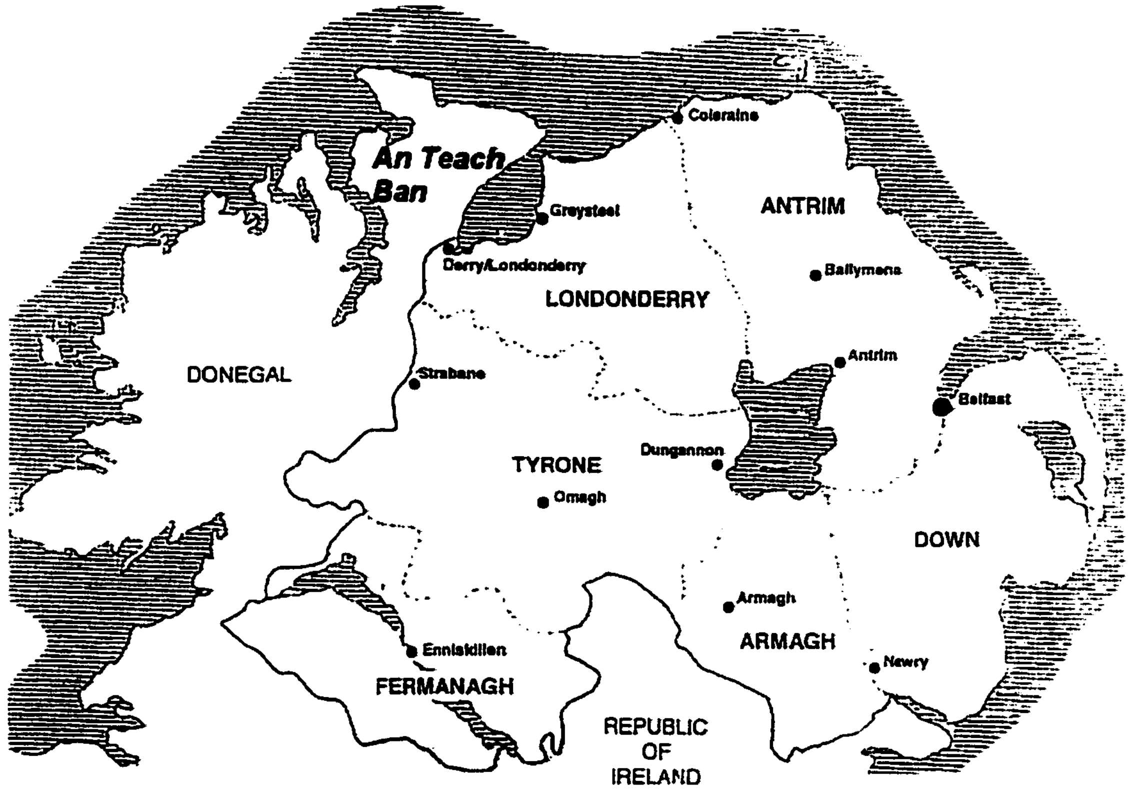


Figure 2: Map of Northern Ireland

AS IT WAS

My knowledge of the events in Northern Ireland prior to my visit was somewhat limited, but I considered myself fairly well read on the conflict, as I had been following the media reports and editorials over the years. The conflict seemed straightforward enough. The Catholics were Irish and the Protestants British, and the two traditions clearly did not get along. Gerry Adams represented the Irish side and Ian Paisley represented the Protestant side. However, after only a few days in Belfast, the complexity of the political and social situation became increasingly clear; the more I learned and listened, the more bewildered and confused I became. It seemed the more I knew, the less I understood, and more questions followed each resulting answer. I cannot pretend to discuss the complexity of a centuries-old conflict within the confines of this thesis—any attempt to do so would be futile. In order, however, to place this research in context and establish some sense of time and place, I feel it necessary to reach back into the centuries where present-day tensions originate. Belfast, the site of the field, is also important to the understanding of this research, and later in this thesis, I intend to highlight the physical, as well as the cultural space of the city and area in which I worked and lived.

Two Traditions: The Enemy Without

The violence and continuing instability in Northern Ireland are because *People can't see beyond their* noses, a bus driver told me on my first day in Belfast. *It's not all religion as you Yanks think; sure we're on opposite sides, but it isn't the Protestant and the Catholics fighting. It's us fighting to hold onto our roots. We're dead scared of each other and that's not going to change soon, I can tell you that.*

Some of the reading I had done on the plane over confirmed much of what this bus driver was telling me. To outsiders, the situation in Northern Ireland appears to be about an ancient conflict between two religious groups—Catholics and Protestants. The war is defined as a religious dispute. Although both groups are identified by their religious affiliation, the difference in religion, used as "boundary markers" (Sales, 1997, p.2), influences the political, social and cultural life of each community. These two national identities, according to Sales, who places Northern Ireland in the context of British history, says these two national identities are a result of "different historical experiences of colonialism" (p.2). Attitudes are slowly shifting in a positive direction, but both groups continue to fear the loss of their place in society and progress continues to be impeded by distrust and suspicion.

Nationalists (Catholics) dream of a united Ireland inhabited primarily by Catholic Irishmen, whereas Unionists (Protestants) view the Republic of Ireland as hostile territory waiting to invade their province in the North. The fear is that if Nationalists gain power and their aspirations of a united Ireland become a reality, the now Protestant majority in Northern Ireland would be absorbed into a Catholic majority with subsequent loss of civil rights and cultural identity. Political tension could be reduced if both traditions were able to legitimize each other's right to co-exist. Although progress has been made in the political landscape of Northern Ireland, the long and sordid history of the island remains the major obstacle to unequivocal acceptance of both traditions.

"Northern Ireland's contested national identity is at the heart of the conflict," Sales suggests (p.3). Two traditions, two cultures and the ongoing question of identity and failure of each group to accept and legitimize the cultural, social and religious

traditions of the other is the cause of the current conflict in Northern Ireland. The Ulster-Irish desire to participate in the social and cultural traditions that are essentially Irish, and the Ulster-British identify with British, as well as Irish, traditions. Both assume the labels of Catholic and Protestant, but it is not religious worship they are fighting over—it is the right to exist ("Two Traditions Group," 1996, p.5).

Northern Ireland: Contested Territory

Into the Past

In order to understand the current 'Troubles,' (as the locals call it), which started in Northern Ireland in 1969, one needs to go back several centuries. What follows is but a very brief account of Irish history, but it may facilitate understanding on the issue of the severe divisiveness of Irish society today and the complexities of political life in Northern Ireland.

Paul Fitzsimmons, who argues for an independent Northern Ireland, presents a detailed historical account in his book, *Independence for Northern Ireland: How and Why*. In it, Fitzsimmons explains that Ireland experienced two conquests. Its first conquest by the Celts occurred between 700 and 100 B.C. and established a political structure of about two hundred small kingdoms with a highly ordered tribal society but no central government. There were intertribal clashes throughout this period, but the early centuries allowed for the solidification of Celtic tradition and culture. The Romans, who had conquered most of Europe, held it within their power to cross the Irish Sea and invade the tiny island; luckily for Ireland, they chose not to do so.

The Christianization of Ireland began in the fourth century when trade with Britain, Europe and the Mediterranean exposed the island to the Christian faith, but the

relative peace that was enjoyed during this time came to an abrupt end in 795 when Viking raiders occupied the island. For more than two centuries conflict consumed Ireland. Because the Celts lacked internal political unity and a central government, the Vikings were able to strip Ireland of much of its treasures. The end of the Viking raids came only when a man named Brian Boru, the acknowledged High King in Ireland, defeated the Norsemen in 1014.

A century and a half later, Ireland experienced a second invasion—this time by the British. In 1170, Dermot MacMurrough, one of Ireland's kings who had been ousted by Ireland's High King, returned to Ireland with a contingent of Norman-Welsh warriors to reclaim his kingdom. During the first century after their arrival in Ireland, the Anglo-Normans built many of the now-standing country castles and established many of the towns that still exist today; however, by the 1300's, the Anglo-Norman population had begun to decrease, and they began to lose some of the territory gained during the invasion. This was also a time when the formalization of the division between the native and the foreigner became more pronounced. Native Irish were not extended the same legal rights as the Anglo-Normans, and the struggle over Ireland's lands would continue into the centuries. The following years would bear witness to various uprisings, rebellions, conflicts, and massacres, but England's final victory came after the Irish, who were no match for the better equipped and organized forces of the British, finally surrendered in 1602. The conquest was complete.

The British began planting Presbyterian Scots in the northern province of Ulster during the seventeenth century in order to establish an Anglo majority there, and as

prosperity grew among Protestants in the northern region of the island, tension between the northern and southern parts of the country increased (Fitzsimmons, 1993, pp.5-13).

Begona Aretxaga, who writes about the political conflict in Northern Ireland in her chapter about the 'Troubles,' says that Irish society was viewed as barbaric by the British, and a ruthless military campaign was waged and advocated as "the only path to civilizing the Irish." Oliver Cromwell and his forces, in 1649, consumed the country in a quest to 'civilize' and as a result "85 five percent of the land in Ireland was expropriated and given to Protestant planters and Cromwellian soldiers" (1997, p.90).

Consequently, by the early 1700's, although Irish Catholics made up three-fourths of the population in Ireland, they owned less than one-seventh of the land. Irish Catholics were denied the right to vote or hold office and denied many of the legal rights and privileges enjoyed by the Anglo-Irish. Irish Catholics were prevented from purchasing real property and, as a result, by 1770, Catholics owned only five percent of all the lands in Ireland (Fitzsimmons, p.19).

The years subsequent to the Cromwellian massacre would consist of cycles of more wars, violence, bloodshed, the potato famine, and further political and social unrest. Tension between Catholics and Protestants continued, particularly in the North where Protestants became the majority.

Home rule was the central issue of Irish Nationalists. In 1916, on Easter Monday, now known as the Easter Uprising, a small band of Irish patriots rebelled against the British troops in Dublin. Although the rebellion was not successful, and the leading patriots subsequently executed, it radicalized the Nationalist population in the country and a war for independence became inevitable (p.40).

In 1921, at the end of that war, the British government and Irish Nationalists signed a treaty giving independent status to twenty-six counties in the South and six counties in the North. Six of the traditional nine counties of Ulster consisted of an overwhelming Protestant majority. The Republic of Ireland would remain independent, while the six counties in the North, now Northern Ireland, would remain part of Great Britain. This treaty gave the Republic of Ireland the status of partial independence but left the country divided into two parts: pro-treaty and anti-treaty factions (Aretxaga, 1997, p.15). With the formation of Northern Ireland, the divisions between the British Protestants and Irish Catholics were now firmly entrenched.

Historically, settlement in the South was characterized by absentee colonial landlords, while in the North the area was more densely populated by people from England and Scotland who were mainly of the Protestant religion. The formation of Northern Ireland produced a society in which separation and alienation between Catholics and Protestants dominated their everyday experiences. Northern Ireland was created amid violence, bloodshed and social upheaval.

The Unionist Party emerged as the monolithic Protestant majority party in the newly formed Northern Ireland and, to ensure their fragile majority, they quickly designed measures to ensure their advantage over the minority Catholic population. Discrimination was firmly institutionalized in the formation of the Northern Ireland state, and the Catholic minority became marginalized politically, socially and economically (pp.30-31). Basic rights to jobs, housing and education were routinely denied them, and Catholics were more likely to live in poverty and be excluded from electoral politics than their Protestant counterparts.

Owners of multiple properties were given more than one vote and non-taxpayers excluded from voting at all. Housing was allocated only to Unionist members, and the police force, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), was predominantly Protestant. The depression of the 1930's made the job market tight and led to the formation of the Ulster Protestant League which influenced employers to hire only Protestants. The Civil Authorities Act of 1922 permitted police to take action in violation of civil and legal rights, and arrest and internment without trial were most often carried out against the Catholic minority (Fitzsimmons, 1993, p.47).

Sectarian tension lessened for awhile during the war years when jobs were more plentiful and, for the first time, secondary and third-level education were free, thus allowing poor Catholics equal access to higher education. However, the hope and reconciliation that seemed to dominate the early years of the 1960's would end in destruction and violence. The rebirth of sectarian hatred would dominate the social, cultural and political life of Northern Ireland for the next twenty-five years.

Into the Present

The Civil Rights Movement in the 1960's challenged the second class status of the Catholic minority in the North. The Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA), comprised of young men and women students at Queen's University in Belfast, sought to end the political, social and economic discrimination against Catholics by peaceful demonstration. Inspired by the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, and in response to exclusion, dissatisfaction with housing allocation, high unemployment and poverty in Catholic areas, four thousand social activists erupted onto the streets of Derry, a city of particularly high unemployment and unfair housing practices. The Royal

Ulster Constabulary came to the aid of the Orangemen who were in turn protesting the presence of a Catholic march in traditional Orange territory. Reactions to the march set off rioting and arson in the Catholic Bogside of Derry and, two days later, the British Army was called in to protect both communities. Their presence was initially welcomed by the Catholic community, but the relationship turned sour when the army not only failed to protect, but began to suppress the Catholic community (Fitzsimmons, 1993, pp.74-83; Aretxaga, 1997, p.31).

The objective of internment without trial in 1971, was to quell the re-emerging forces of the Irish Republican Army (I.R.A.) and control a state which was on the verge of anarchy. The province of Ulster was consumed by British troops who arrested I.R.A. suspects; thirty people died in gun battles and bombings.

Again, in 1972, fourteen civilians were shot and killed during another Civil Rights March in Derry in what is now known as Bloody Sunday. Direct Rule from Britain was introduced—a temporary measure, but one which has continued for over twenty-five years (Sales, 1997, p.44).

The Civil Rights Movement in Northern Ireland was a threat to the majority Protestant population, "striking at the heart of the Protestant state from which they derived their sense of identity." The state of Northern Ireland is constructed on majority rule, and sectarian division is built into the structure and identity of Northern Ireland. The pursuit of basic democratic rights challenged state power, "whose very basis lay in sectarianism" Sales contends (p.44).

The army's presence in Northern Ireland continues today, and Aretxaga believes the army has contributed to "the high toll of violence, has created a lore of bitter

memories among working-class, ghettoized Catholics" (p.31). The two communities became increasingly divided and defined on the basis of religious identity, and this continues to dominate everyday life in Northern Ireland.

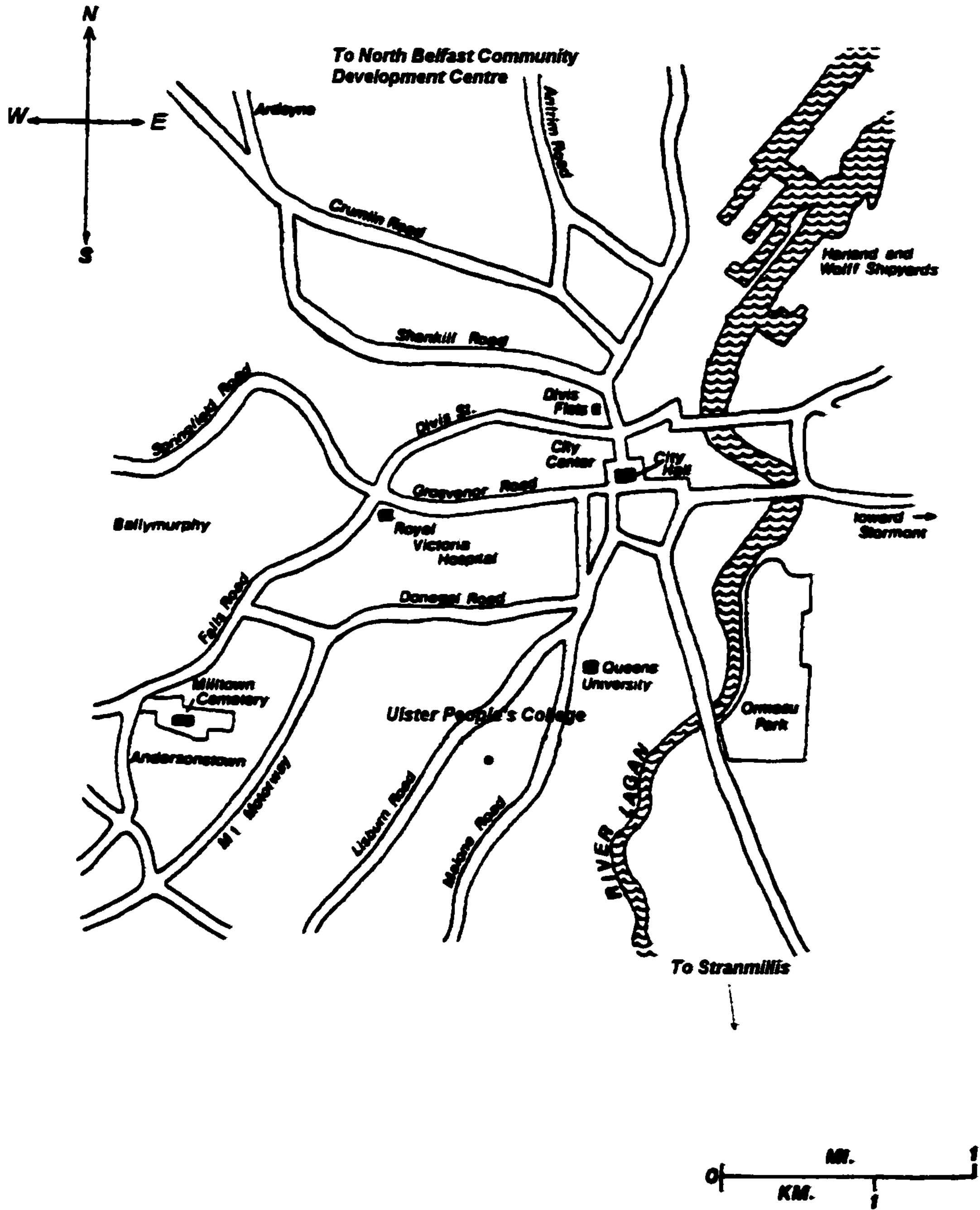


Figure 3: Map of Belfast

ARRIVING AT THE TOPIC

The highway leading into Belfast from the airport begins its journey along what looks like a large country road but eventually leads into a four-lane highway and maze of congested traffic as it nears the city. I was the sole occupant on the bus and thus had the driver's singular attention. As he drove, he frequently threw his head back to shout out nuances about places of interest along the way, and luckily, I was too jet-lagged and too fatigued to care about the number of curves and sharp bends the bus had to make to avoid oncoming traffic and cyclists. A Belfast accent is difficult enough for the novice foreigner's ear, and the increasing rise of the traffic as we approached the city interfered with an already fragmented understanding of what he was saying.

Clutching my suitcase on my knee to prevent it sliding from one side of the bus to the other, I began the journey by repeating *pardon me* every few seconds but soon realized he expected nothing from me other than simply to sit and listen. Even in my dazed state, however, I managed to glean pieces of information that proved useful in the following days. He advised me on how to approach a 'Black Taxi,' where I should and should not walk, and *Never,* he insisted, *never discuss your political views with anyone. Everything is political here you know and there's no escaping it.* He continued by repeating a rather well-known joke on the island:

> *Have you heard the one about the man who was asked about his religion? He thought he would be clever by evading the question and answered: 'But I'm an Atheist!' 'Ah yes,' replied the inquirer: 'Now would that be a Catholic Atheist or Protestant Atheist?'*

I had heard the joke many times before but smiled faintly nonetheless. He laughed loud enough for both of us—as if he were telling it for the first time.

He was proud of his city, and I sensed he wanted to leave me with a favourable impression of 'his' Belfast. Before we parted he gave me a small lapel pin of the Irish flag. When I started to pin it to my coat he quickly stopped me and cautioned, *You're not to wear that or you're likely to get into trouble. Just put it somewhere safe,* he suggested, *and every time you look at it you will be sure to remember where you are.*

Belfast: A Living History

Belfast is a comparatively young city and a thousand years ago merely a sandbank crossing over the Lagan River. *Beal Feirsde,* Belfast in Gaelic, literally means "mouth of the sand banks" (Aretxaga, 1997, p.26). It was an insignificant city until the seventeenth century when Protestant Scots and English settlers began arriving, the foundation of which Aretxaga says, was "part of a colonial strategy to Anglicize Ireland by ensuring a Protestant majority" (p.26).

Nineteenth century Belfast was witness to the fastest growing urban centre in the United Kingdom and surpassed even Dublin by the end of that century. Cotton launched Belfast as an important commercial centre and it became the core of world production. At the same time, Belfast became the site of a flourishing shipbuilding enterprise and a significant commercial and industrial centre. The population began to rise even more with Catholics, who were driven off their land in the South and West, and mass migration due to the potato famine in the 1840's (Bardon, Heatley & Patton, 1995, p.2). Catholics settled in working-class West and North areas of the city—a settling pattern that still exists today.

The following excerpt from an 1887 Commission of Inquiry describes how religious and class boundaries took shape in Belfast even then.

> The people of the artisan and labouring classes...dwell to a large extent in separate quarters, each of which is almost entirely given over to persons of one particular faith and the boundaries of which are sharply defined. (cited in Sales, 1997, p.16)

Discrimination in the textile and shipbuilding trades was well established by the turn of the century—Protestants monopolized skilled labour and the sectarian divide was firmly entrenched in the economic life of the city. Sales notes that "the jobs and supervision and maintenance of machinery were held by skilled Protestant men surrounded by thousands of poorly paid Catholic women" (p.17).

Belfast was the centre of Unionist Protestant opposition and the Ulster Volunteer Force was formed in response to the Irish Nationalist quest for Home Rule. Irish volunteers, hereafter known as the Irish Republican Army (I.R.A.), launched a resistance in 1919, and in 1921, when Ireland was partitioned, Belfast became the capital of Northern Ireland.

After World War II, the linen and shipbuilding industries suffered a serious decline, but new firms making synthetic fibers prospered for a time until the oil crisis in 1974, when severe economic problems set in. Belfast's commercial life ebbed away during the 1970's and, by this time, the 'Troubles' had already engulfed the city. The period thereafter is characterized by bombings, murders, intense rioting, house burning and population movement (Bardon et al, p.3).

It is a city, Aretxaga suggests, "whose conflicted history is inscribed in its physical layout, its internal distribution, its landscape, the names of its streets and the images stamped on its facades" (1997, p.26).

<u>South</u>

Don't live anywhere near the West or the North of the city, someone told me early on when I was looking for a place to live. The impression I got was that I would not be safe and that something might happen to me. I later discovered that it may have been more because my presence would cause suspicion. I also discovered that the man who cautioned me had never been to the West or North of the city, except perhaps to drive through, and the source of information he drew from was probably the same as mine—the evening news.

There are many Belfasts. Areas in Northern Ireland are distinguished by what is safe, violent or peaceful, and neighbourhoods are clearly defined spaces of Catholic, Protestant, or both. The neighbourhood in which I lived was peaceful and serene—no street riots or smashed and burning cars here. A middle to upper middle-class area of South Belfast, a mixed area, it survives in relative isolation from working-class Belfast. The streets are lined with trees, and the River Lagan, a stone's throw from my house, provided a quiet refuge where I could feed ducks and walk along the river's edge for miles. A neighbour of mine, whom I used to meet in the evenings while he walked his dog, seemed little interested in what was going on or had gone on not more than five miles from his door. *It has nothing to do with us,* he once told me. *Let them fight it out amongst themselves.*

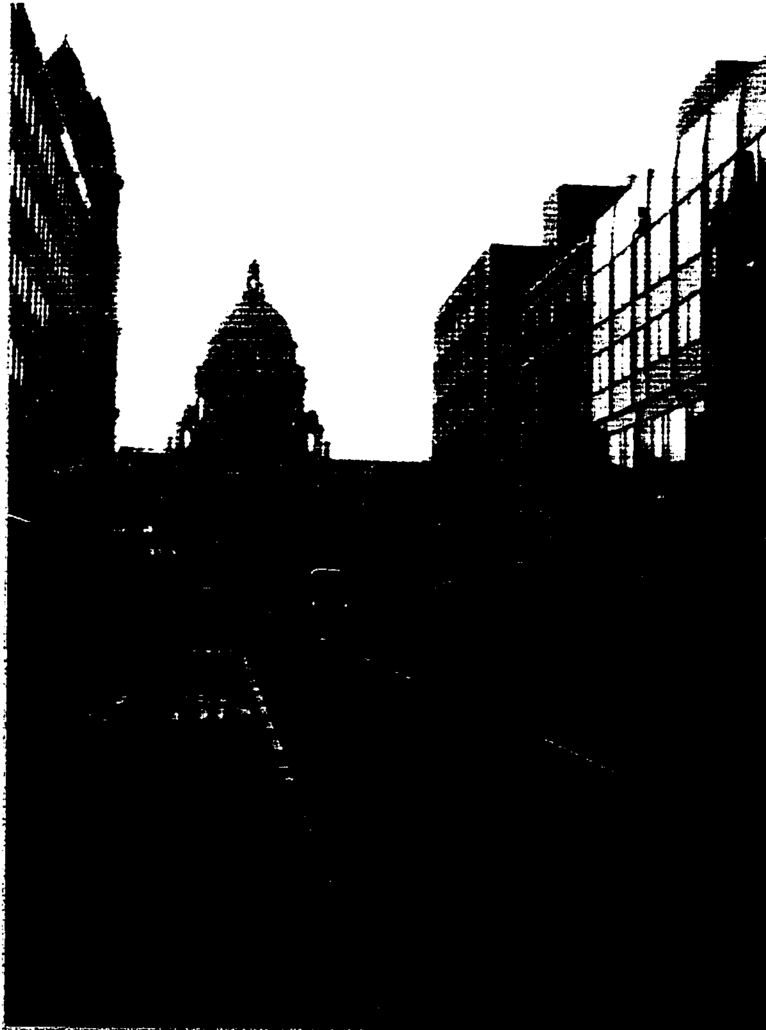
Implicit in this remark is the realization that the divisions in Northern Ireland are not solely based on religious demarcation but also defined along class lines. Archbishop Eames, who spoke to the Opsahl Commission, a project set up to allow the people of Northern Ireland an opportunity to express their concerns and issues, spoke of two

communities, only one of which is "involved in violence, suffering, unemployment, and injustice. The demarcation is class" (cited in Pollack, 1995, p.45). The two divisions, the one between Catholics and Protestants, and the other, Joseph Peake maintains, who also spoke to the Opsahl Commission, is a "horizontal one between the haves and the have nots... it's when the two intersect that the conflict is the worst" (p.45).

Most days I chose to walk from Stranmillis in South Belfast, where I lived, to the Community Development Centre in North Belfast where ultimately I formed my research. The route I followed took just over an hour up the University Road, past the red-brick Victorian buildings of Queen's University and through the Botanic Gardens. Approaching the city centre the pace of the city increased, with cars whizzing past, people rushing about. The City Hall was my beacon. The building itself stood magnificently in the centre of it all. Having no sense of direction whatsoever, I got lost

regularly, especially in the early days, and the City Hall, where North, South, East and West converge and part again, is where I would most often stand to get my bearings, catch my breath and proceed on my walk North. This is where I would leave the 'other' Belfast behind.

North

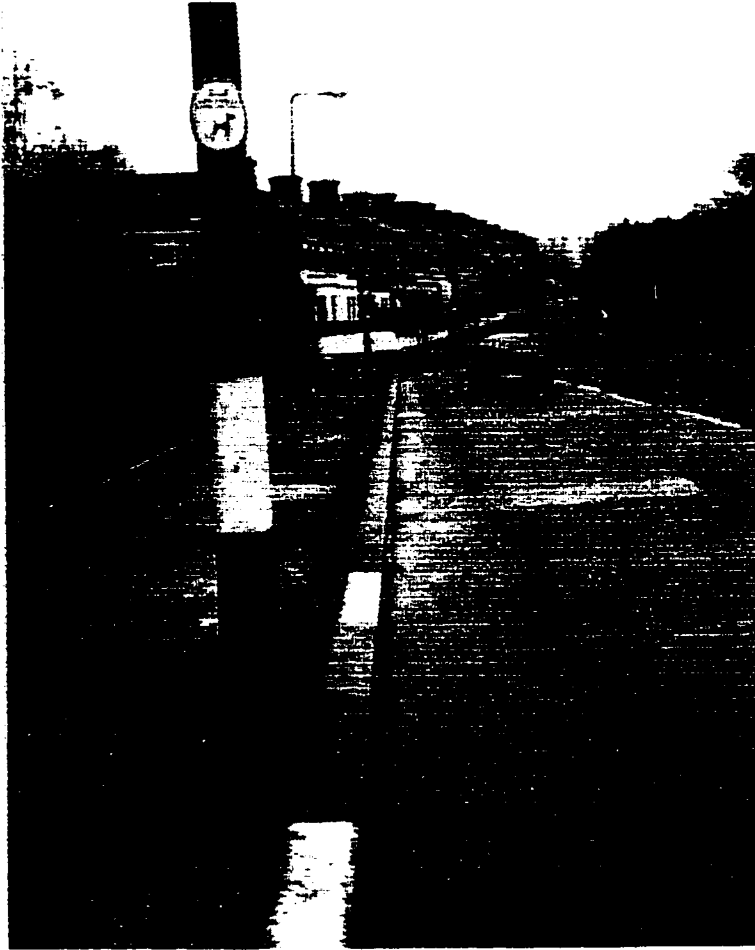


Outside the neutral space of the city centre the symbols of territoriality are obvious. Neighbourhoods are clearly labelled as Republican or Loyalist, Nationalist or Unionist, Catholic or Protestant, with the visible display of the Irish flag hanging from a store or house, or curbsides painted in the red, white and blue of the British flag. Corresponding slogans and graffiti adorn walls in Irish or English and clearly signal either Catholic or Protestant territory; murals of suffering and aggression, which a friend

of mine once told me made Belfast look like the world's largest theme park, are also obvious indicators of territoriality. The lines that demarcate these territories, Aretxaga, who carried out research in Catholic West Belfast explains, "are deeply interlocked with social class positions and ethnic distinctions" (1997, p.33).

Peace walls, erected during times of extreme violence, indicate where one community ends and the other begins. A turn of a corner, a mere few yards, can bring one into the 'other' community in minutes. Dispersed within and about North Belfast are numerous areas that were once Catholic and are now Protestant. Conversely, entire streets at one time Protestant may have been burned out and replaced with Catholic families. Families are still sometimes intimidated out of their homes with threats of violence, hate mail, graffiti on doors. A woman I interviewed told me her family had windows broken every night and death threats. *I lived on the interface,* she said, *and there were even attempts made on my husband's life. We had lived there eight years and we just had to get out of there.*

Although some streets house a mixed population of Catholics and Protestants living side-by-side, more commonly streets are clearly defined spaces and within incredibly short distances, one can be in a completely different territory. People, buses, and black taxis are assigned specific routes and spaces are defined by unwritten, local knowledge. Local people are well versed in the history of all the movement—a history with no winners. A woman who lived in North Belfast on the same street for over twenty years said she had never been to the bottom of the road even though it was the closer route to the shops. *I wouldn't dream of going down there,* she said, pointing to a

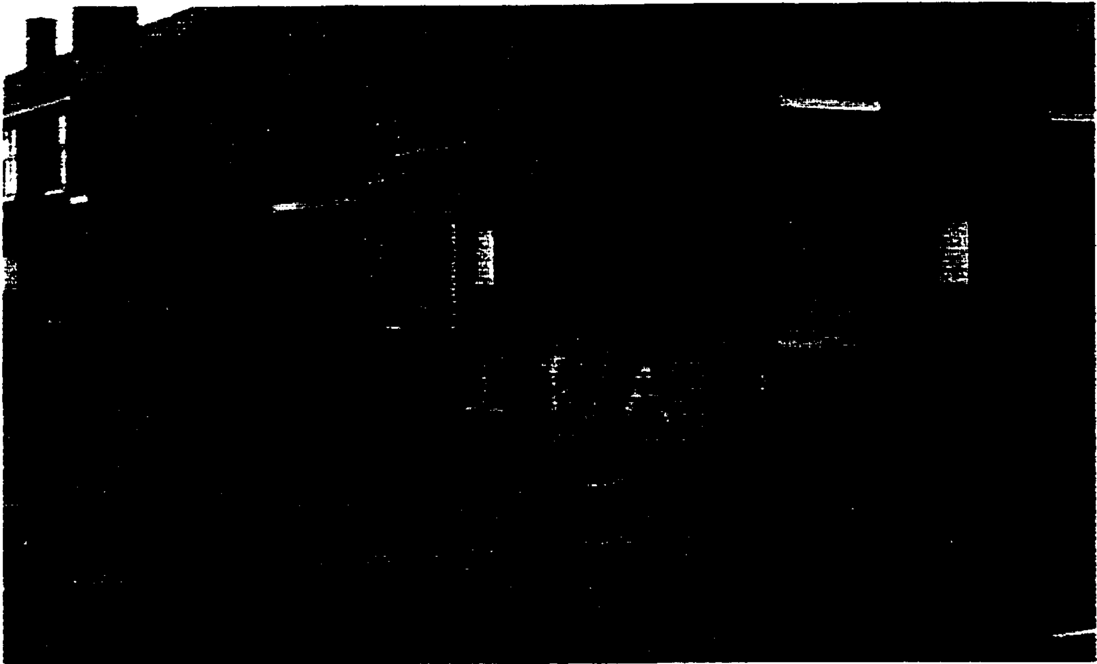


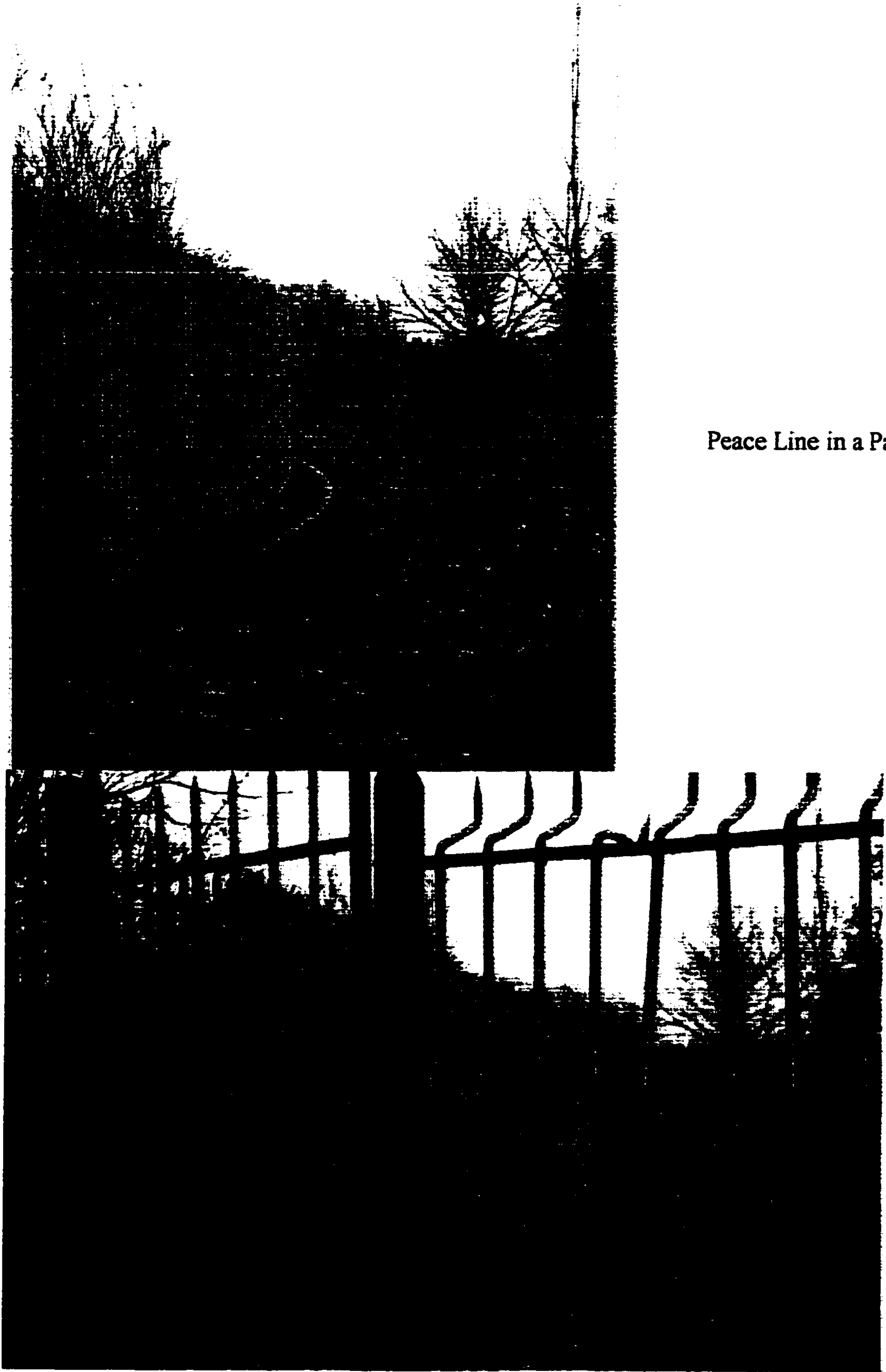
Loyalist Area

(Protestant)

Republican Area

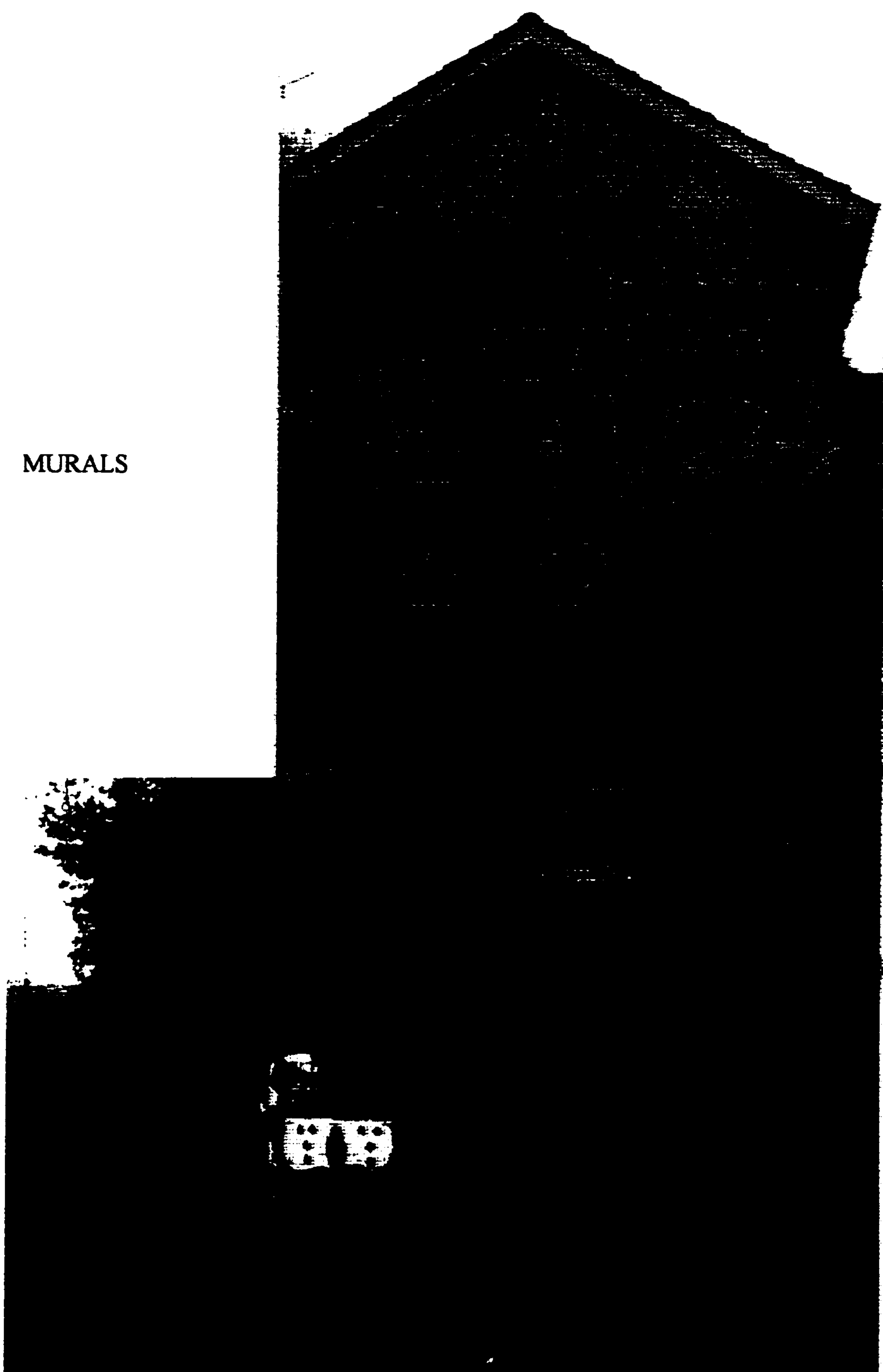
(Catholic)

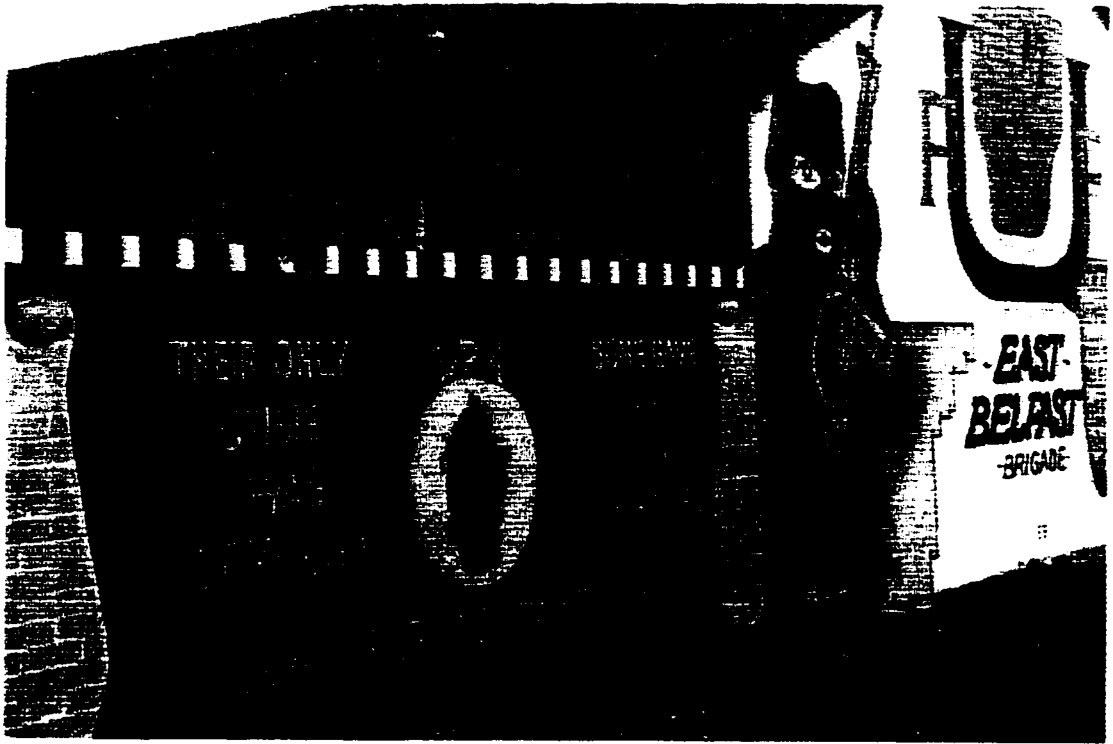




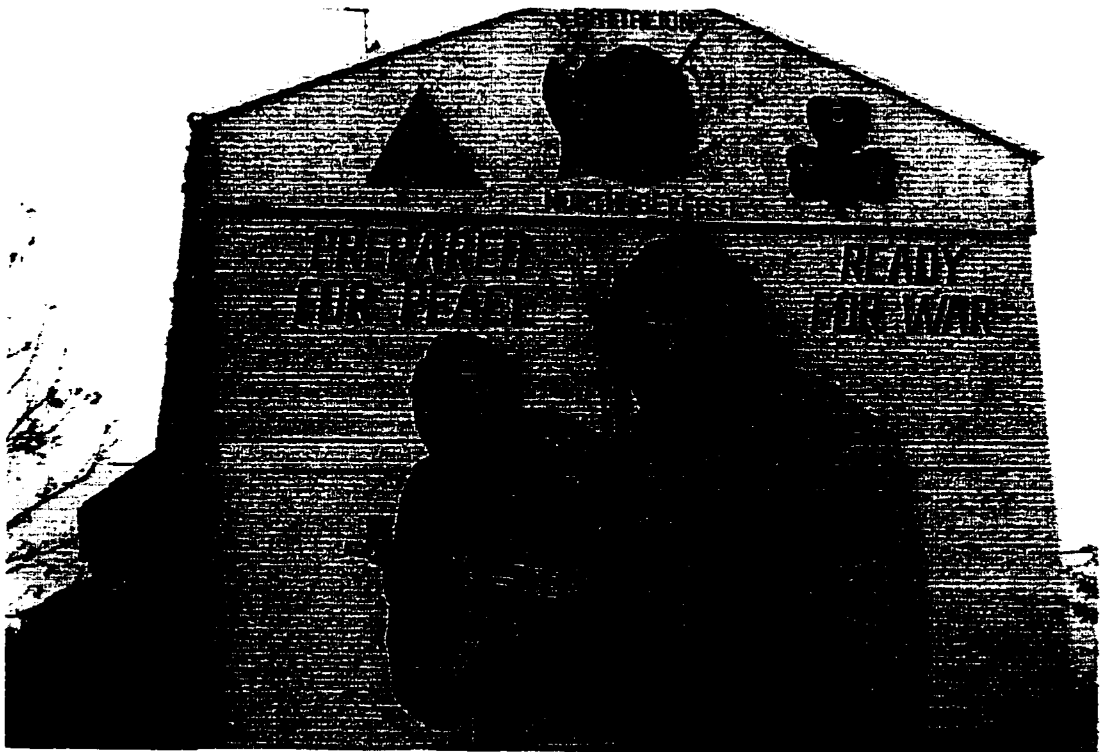
Peace Line in a Park

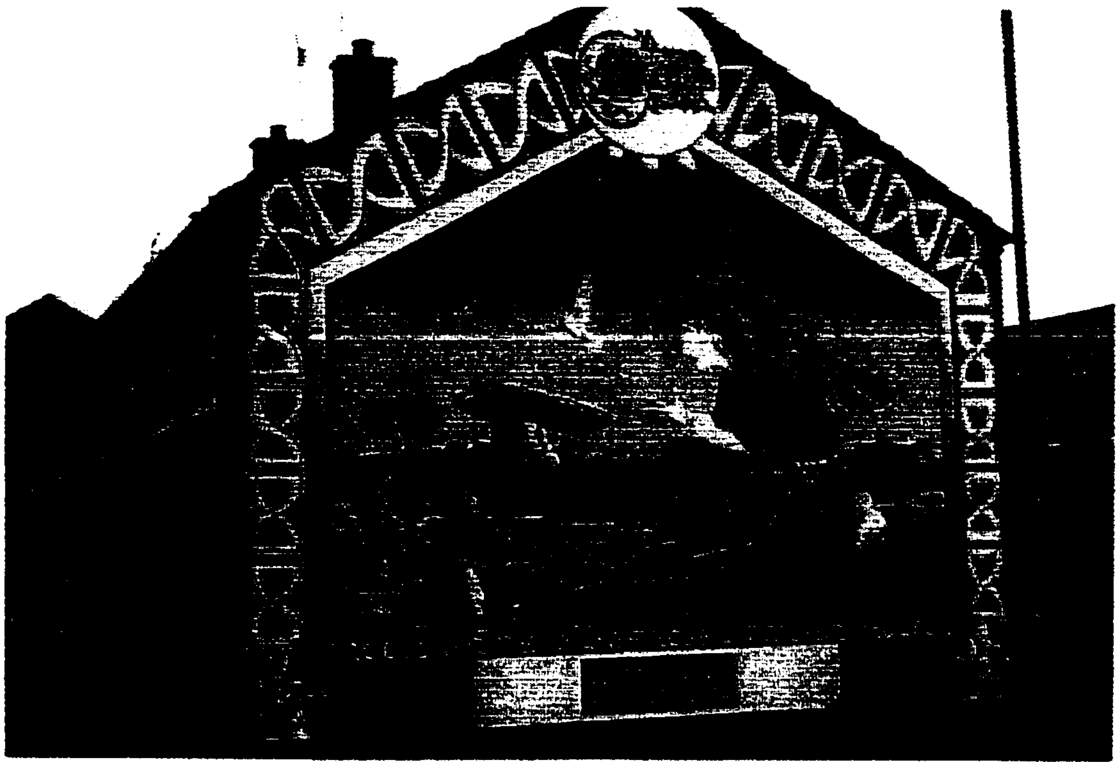
MURALS





Loyalist Murals





Republican Murals

Protestant area, *and my children and my grandchildren have never been down there either.* She went on to say that although she felt comfortable participating in a course of mixed women from both communities, she would not feel at ease in a shop outside the neutrality of the Community Development Centre. *How can people tell if you are Catholic or Protestant*? I asked. *Oh, they know,* she said, *they can tell by my name, the school I went to and especially the area I live in.*

Another woman I interviewed told me that Catholics' eyes are close together and that is how people can tell the difference between a Catholic and a Protestant. *The way you pay a black taxi is also how people say they can tell,* she said. *If you pay inside you're a Protestant and if you pay through the window you're a Catholic. If you walk into a pub other than your local people will always try to figure out who you are. Most of the time it's not because they are prejudiced, but it's more of a comfort thing—safety—people need to know where to position you.* Aretxaga confirms this and explains that "places have encoded meaning and class position, religion, and national identity can be guessed, or imputed, through one's name and the area in which one lives" (1997, p.35).

Boundaries shift and move with each renewal of violence and tension, but moving around the neighbourhoods, I had the distinct sense that people seemed to be where they belonged. I had read numerous stories about families displaced because of petrol bombs thrown through their windows, but I also spoke to families who were born, married and raised their own children in the same community. Even those who move maintain a close connection and relationship with their neighbourhood and return regularly for social events. Historically, in Britain, "a strong attachment to urban neighbourhoods is most

often found among working-class families" (Bertaux & Thompson, 1997, p.154), and feelings of identity are closely connected to where one was raised.

The journey from the City Hall to North of the city was a busy one. The traffic is usually heavy and the streets congested, but once beyond Carlisle Circus and onto the Antrim Road, the journey becomes more interesting with shop windows and people to look at. The endless row of houses look, to the untrained eye, as if their inhabitants live in peaceful co-existence, and in mixed areas, without knowledge of past or history, neighbourhoods look friendly and safe. I took many walks around the area by myself and probably looked out of place and a stranger to most, but I never felt unsafe or uncomfortable in alien neighbourhoods. I was taking photos one day in the New Lodge ward of North Belfast, principally of run-down, burned out houses, but I became distracted by the individuality of the windows in front of each house. Irish windows have always fascinated me, and I was captivated by the diversity of religious icons and images that expressed the locality of a Catholic area. Seemingly from nowhere appeared a young man from around a corner. He asked brusquely what I was up to, but on hearing my accent, his tone immediately changed, and he struck up a friendly conversation about the area and its history. Not knowing the rules and conventions of appropriate 'in-place' behaviour are not problematic for foreigners but can be dangerous for locals.

Coming to Terms

Ulster People's College

My topic emerged as I explored. I wrote earlier about how I came to study in Northern Ireland, but how I came to topic grew and transformed as I made my way through the culture and people.

The Ulster People's College was a crossroad in my journey—a place to pause,

take in the scenery, and then move on to what would be my final destination. I took refuge there while I settled in and acclimated to the culture and city. The College's work and mandate has grown since Tom Lovett's vision in the early 1980's, and I knew I would need to re-focus my lens on a particular aspect or program.

The College delivers short courses targeted at youth, women, community activists, political activists and peace and reconciliation groups. The objective is to promote social change by using education as a tool for understanding and embrace alternative options for the future. Currently, the College delivers a one-year accredited Community Development and Community Relations course, as well as provides political education for political parties. Short courses include Community Leadership Training, Women and Leadership and Irish language classes. In addition, the College lends its premises and residence to community groups from around the city and province for meetings and discussions. It is an "accessible, secular, neutral venue which working-class people from both communities (i.e. Catholic and Protestant) could come together to explore common problems and perceived differences," Lovett writes (1995, p.283).

People are encouraged to learn and discuss their cultural and political differences and reflect on common problems of housing, unemployment, education, health and other social concerns (p.183). These problems are similar to other people's, other areas but, in Northern Ireland, the issues are compounded by sectarian division and violence. The goals of the programs are to instill a sense of understanding and mutual respect on both sides of the divide.

In recent years, the College has established a community partnership with eight community development agencies in Belfast, the object of which is to deliver training and education to community organizations that are in turn at the centre of as many as twenty smaller community groups. The courses encourage participation by local people within their community and attempts to attract people who would not otherwise enter adult

education. My intention was to study how education influences social change and how transformation occurs within an environment tormented by history.

The Ulster People's College is situated in a middle-class neighbourhood, safe from the tensions of conflict; community members and groups come here from all over the divide for workshops and discussions. Here they feel secure to express ideas and concerns. I felt, however, if I were going to write about how people language their experience about social and personal change that my work should be within a local neighbourhood where people live, work and have experienced the war first-hand.

Although I am not sure I knew this yet, I wanted to hear people's stories. Since my arrival and initial contact with that enthusiastic and talkative bus driver, I had been exposed to countless individuals in various situations who wanted to share their stories. If I paused on the street to orient myself, someone would inevitably approach me with offers of assistance; often they would end up walking me to wherever I was heading and telling me something about their life or experience. Many times, while drinking my morning coffee in Bewley's coffee shop in the City Centre, someone, anyone sitting at my table, ultimately began or ended the conversation with a story or anecdote about past or present events. My accent, of course, was a dead giveaway but a great opener, and I found people anxious and almost desperate to share what they knew. Like that bus driver on my first day in Belfast, I received advice on what and what not to do, how to act, where to go. Perhaps I noticed it all the more because Canadians, who are friendly but reserved, and at times intensely private people, are not generally given to stopping strangers on the street and striking up long conversations. After such an intense and desperate war, I suppose, people at last had the opportunity to explain, release, express

and share their thoughts and feelings. It was as if once the talking began, the floodgates opened and the words came flowing out. And here I was, a willing listener, a stranger, someone not belonging to the past, a sympathetic ear.

The ceasefire had been in effect for more than three years when I arrived in Belfast and the ground troops had just been pulled from the streets. There was a sense of liberty in the air—as if something very heavy had been lifted. As one man put it, *I keep looking around the corner for the next checkpoint and it isn't there. It's a strange feeling indeed when you've lived under a cloud for twenty years or more.*

North Belfast Community Development Centre

The North Belfast Community Development Centre, one of the partners of the Ulster People's College, serves an area severely affected by violence over the years. Its

location suited my issues of locality and experience and, I believed, here a perspective of change and transformation could be approached at the grassroots level.

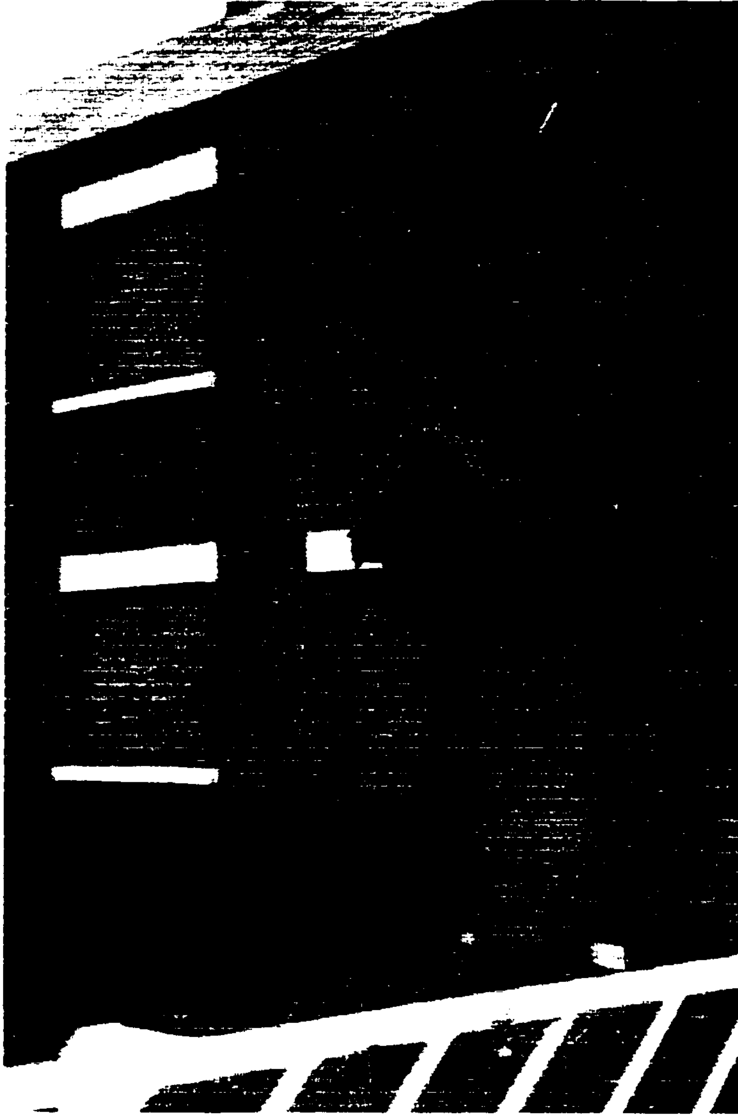
North Belfast is one of the most deprived areas in Northern Ireland and is deeply divided along religious and political lines. Despite media and government reports, many Protestant communities also live in impoverished conditions alongside their Catholic neighbours. Of the fifteen Belfast wards, Donnelly reports, "where unemployment was 40% or over, six were Protestant." The figures suggest "a level of deprivation otherwise hidden," he says (1998, p.1).

The Opsahl Commission reports there have been over five-hundred people killed in this small area over the last twenty-five years (Pollak, 1993, p. 298). The North Belfast Partnership Board reports that of the fourteen wards in North Belfast, two are the most deprived in the city (1998, p.4). The most deprived areas are usually the most

violent, and "Forty-five percent of Northern Ireland's unemployment and 65 percent of the violence" occur in West or North Belfast (Pollak, p.45). Also unique to North Belfast is the high number of interface areas, where both Catholics and Protestants live, and peacelines, walls erected to mark the division between the two groups and which separate the two communities, are numerous and interspersed in the area. They are like a "'patchwork quilt'" configuration and a kind of "'no-man's land'" exists between the spaces (Lovett, Gillespie & Gunn, 1995, pp.54-55).

The textile industry, which provided an employment base traditionally, no longer exists and long-term unemployment, economic and social problems plague the area. With wards that consist of either Catholic or Protestant populations, and wards that are mixed with Indian, Chinese and Jewish people, "North Belfast is in many ways a microcosm of the Northern Ireland region" ("North Belfast Partnership Board," 1998, p.3).

The Community Development Centre is located in a grey, non-descript building on the Cliftonville Road in North Belfast. Immediately inside the door, a creche or daycare is situated to the left and the rest of the building consists of a maze of doors and hallways. Smoking in public buildings is still common in Northern Ireland, as are bars across windows to protect against vandalism and unwanted bottles or objects. One of the houses I came across on one of my walkabouts had cement-boarded up all the front entrances, including the door. The people, I suppose, lived only at the back of the house, tired of replacing the windows from the possibility of thrown rocks and the highly dangerous petrol bombs during the height of the Troubles. It looked like a self-contained prison. A woman who lives in the area said that her family never sat in the living room on the furniture. Everyone watched television lying on the floor. *It*



was too dangerous, she said, *because you never knew what was going to come through the window*.

Working space at the Centre is limited and workers, for the most part, perform their tasks in one large room. There is a kitchen on each of the two floors, where workers often congregate to make tea and socialize—one of the hallmarks of the Centre. A woman I later interviewed told me, that when she first started using the Centre, she felt comfortable walking in and making herself a cup of tea. The Centre is a safe environment where members of the community have an opportunity to meet for workshops and programs.

The Community Leadership Program, one of the programs offered in partnership with the Ulster People's College, presented itself as a possible opportunity of inquiry. The uniqueness of the Program was highlighted by the cross-community aspect of an exclusively female group—apparently not common in this kind of a community. I had not intended to do feminist or gendered research and frankly felt uneasy with the unfamiliarity of the territory, but it seemed all conversations and discussions about possibility of topic directed its way back to women.

Initially, I silently resisted and inquired about other groups, other courses, other areas that I believed would be interesting and worthy topics of study. Obviously, an area of inquiry with the most potential use to the community was my preferred choice. After some consultation, Karen Snoddy, the Women's Coordinator at the Community Development Centre, identified women as the least studied and most often ignored by researchers. I was pulled into topic. Despite all my meanderings, I continued to be led back here.

Community Leadership Program

My research in Northern Ireland and Belfast, without exception, is characterized by incredible hospitality, openness and generosity of spirit. Because women and leadership had been identified as undeveloped territory, the Community Leadership Program, which traditionally attracts more women than men anyway, was an obvious point of departure. Karen Snoddy suggested it would be useful to determine the women's thoughts about the Program through the eyes of an outsider. I was determined to conduct people's research, and we decided the best way to obtain information about participant perspective was through individual interviews and talking with the women who participated in the Program about their views, thoughts and experiences.

Social change and its relationship with community education had now the additional dimension of gender. If community activists are transformed and empowered by participation in community education programs, how does this encourage social change? If community education empowers women, how are communities altered or stimulated by the individuals within? How do individuals perceive their journey through personal and societal transformation? And, as I was discovering, why have women activists not received the recognition they deserve? Out of each question a new one surfaced.

The Community Leadership Program is an accredited course through the Open College Network and part of an education and training partnership with the Ulster People's College. A team of co-ordinators in each of the eight partnerships delivers quality-assured, consistent programming. The Program is designed to meet local needs, as well as the needs of the individuals participating. Meeting times and method of

delivery suit the local population, and travel expenses and daycare facilities are provided to ensure access to maximum numbers of individuals in the community. Community activists from a set of similarly disadvantaged neighbourhoods engage in acquiring consistent training and acquisition of knowledge and skills.

Two twelve-week courses contain a number of modules. The first level, "Building Your Skills," includes the basics of communication, negotiation, leadership and teamwork skills. With emphasis on personal development, this entry-level program builds confidence, self-esteem and assertiveness. The second level, "Managing Your Organization," focuses on behaviour within organizations, and highlights conduct at meetings, presentation skills and fundraising activities.

Community development, education and training, and its capacity to affect change in marginalized communities have been the subject of discussion for almost as long as the on-going dissent in Northern Ireland. There have been questions in recent years about the direction of community development and its ability to overcome sectarian division, its sustainability and impact on poverty. Northern Ireland is facing the prospect of a decline in funding from European sources, and at the same time lacks the infrastructure to support its communities in the market place. Mike Morrissey, who carried out an external evaluation of the Program in five Belfast communities, suggests that "the key to sustainability in the community sector lies in the investment in human resources" (1998, p.13); the upgrade of skills and knowledge in disadvantaged communities will generate healthier, stronger, and more developed communities. The Program is about the general development of individuals who otherwise may not have had the opportunity to engage in education. Morrissey speaks of the Program in this way.

> It embodies a particular concept of education that validates the skills and experiential knowledge of the participants and then engages with these to produce general propositions about community development. It is therefore more about action learning than teaching...it offers a diverse range of community activists the opportunity to study locally on standardised, quality assured modules, to meet within one another and, possibly, to network. (p.19)

Empowering and addressing the unbalanced distribution of power and resources, starting where people are at, and giving voice to disadvantaged populations are all aims of the Program. Not only are individuals empowered, but whole communities reap the benefits of activists who are confident, knowledgeable members of the community, and who possess the skills and knowledge in structuring and building successful organizations within their community. Education arguably increases people's ability to participate in the labour market, but access to jobs is not the primary focus of the Program; rather, it is the capacity to enhance personal development which will ultimately affect positive social change. Its key goal is bottom-up development in principally disadvantaged areas of high unemployment where sectarian division and violence have been most prevalent.

One participant told me that the whole community may not feel the benefits of the Program immediately, but *As more individuals change*, she added, *this in turn will influence how communities within and around communicate*.

I marvelled at the humour and cheerfulness of the people I met in the neighbourhoods I walked through each day—neighbourhoods that had so obviously witnessed some of the worst days of the conflict. At first I worried about approaching women from the Program to interview. How many women would take time out from their busy days to talk with someone from outside their community and share their

thoughts and experiences about a program they completed months ago? Would they perceive this as prying or curious meddling? As I wrote earlier, my experience with people in Belfast is characterized by friendly, warm, sincere people. Ironic, I thought initially, in such a media-portrayed hostile land. My fears about having to unearth willing participants out of obscurity were unfounded, and within days, Karen, at the Community Development Centre, had lined up several eager, keen women willing to share their experience with a stranger from a foreign land.

ARRIVING AT THE METHODOLOGY

My topic revealed itself as I explored. As well, methodology, data analysis and my role as researcher emerged as I wrote. To help explain how this process transpired, I will compare it to the construction of a patchwork quilt in which many pieces are threaded together to make the whole. The artisan, based on a pre-determined vision, pieces together bits and pieces of cloth. The manner in which these pieces converge is contingent on the techniques, the tools, the serendipitous nature of the process. The unexpected may occur. The original mission and image of final product may alter in the process of piecing together fragments of fabric not previously in view, the addition of which transforms the quilt into something unpredicted and unexpected. The artisan is always prepared to re-mold the original vision—create as she discovers. Some pieces are added and some removed—the shape and form of the quilt emerge as the artist works.

Research is a process of discovery. Part of this process was pre-planned, and the other part emerged as I wrote and reflected. "There is no single interpretive truth," say Denzin and Lincoln, who argue for research that creates space and acknowledges multiple ways of doing (1994, p.115). Research for social transformation, the nature of human experience and discovery of meaning were all threads of a topic evolving and consistent with a qualitative research method of inquiry where process and meaning are emphasized and social experience created and interpreted.

Interviewing, engaging in participant-observation, observation, and reviewing of documents were decided on in advance of my field research as the method of my inquiry. As I wrote earlier, my research orientation changed as I adapted to the culture of Belfast and became more familiar with the issues and current concerns of the local environment.

The form remained the same, but the substance changed. As the artisan, whose initial vision of creation is always present, but who is constantly re-working the piece, a shift occurred in my earlier version of research purpose and way of working merged with the new as I worked.

The Telling of Tales

I interviewed five women who participated in the Community Leadership Program and two workers at the North Belfast Community Development Centre. I also interviewed others who contributed to the research: academics, community leaders, tutors at the Ulster People's College, but the core of my research lies with these five women who I came to know well, respect and admire. Interviews were conducted at the Community Development Centre and at a residential weekend in County Donegal, during which I also had the opportunity to observe and participate in discussions and planning of an upcoming Women's Forum in North Belfast.

I began each interview by providing participants with a letter containing academic information about myself, the purpose of my research, ethical considerations, and a consent form granting me permission to interview. (See Appendix D.) My questions were laid out on the table before me, neatly typed. My first question confirmed their participation in the Community Leadership Program, and then I proceeded to question the women about motivation, goals and expectations with regard to the Program. (See Appendix A.)

The women I interviewed were cooperative and happy to answer all questions put to them. Questions were answered directly, precisely and promptly. However, a mere fifteen minutes into my first interview with Mary, all my carefully prepared questions had

been answered. I glanced at my question sheet while the sound of the tape, whizzing around the wheel of the recorder, conspicuously dominated all other noise in the room. In an attempt to break the awkwardness of the long pause, I started to plan my next move. Perhaps I should start asking the same questions again, I thought—for clarification? I am not sure if Mary sensed the distress in my eyes but, luckily, I had little time to strategize; Mary quickly began to tell me about her parents, friends, and life on the interface. This is what Mary really wanted to talk about. She went on to elaborate about how she met her husband, about their marriage and subsequent divorce. I thought of interrupting, wondering if I should control the interview by keeping it on track, but decided it would be rude to interfere with the flow of thoughts and feelings Mary was sharing with me. Subsequent interviews followed a similar pattern—I began with questions, participants answered succinctly and without elaboration. The questions, exhausted in fifteen minutes, were followed by thirty seconds of awkward silence, and then, a succession of stories. The sessions that followed ultimately became enjoyable hours for me in which women, with remarkable honesty and enthusiasm, parted with information about their lives and experiences. They wanted to tell their stories, and I wanted to hear them.

The Language of Personal Experience

Initially, I lamented when I glanced at my data. I came away from that first interview I describe above believing there was little information useful to my topic. When I returned from Belfast, I placed all my transcripts, notes and interview tapes in a box and stored it under my bed. I would pull the box out about once a week to read over the transcripts and my notes. In the early days, I believed the data I collected was incomplete. I developed a morbid fear of that box under my bed, and after several

months passed, I gave up on moving the box altogether; eventually, only when the edge of the top flap caught my eye would I give it any attention at all. I never completely forgot about it, but I managed to avoid its presence altogether, as with time, the box was pushed to the back and became completely invisible due to the arrival of ski boots and winter gear. I was quite literally, frightened of my data and moaned to a friend that the project was hopeless.

I had not yet learned to read beneath the words, the plot. The process of discovery and uncovering meaning only emerged as I wrote, and the information I was 'supposed' to acquire was there—I simply needed to reveal it.

My interview questions had been answered, politely and enthusiastically, but the depth I was expecting, the reflection and critical analysis were absent. The following excerpt from the early days of interviewing illustrates the foundations for my initial apprehension.

Me:	What were your goals, objectives and expectations before you entered the Leadership Program?
Clare:	I just wanted to meet some new people.
Me:	Do you have any concerns about any part of the Program?
Clare:	No. We all had lots of fun.
Me:	How do you feel about your journey through this process?
Clare:	I hadn't really thought about it.

Asking a set of pre-established questions allowed little room for variation in response and limited the free-flow of thought. I learned to ask more open-ended questions. For instance, instead of asking a question like: *Did you enjoy participating in the Community Leadership Program?* I asked a question more like: *Tell me about what*

you enjoyed about participating in the Leadership Program? The differences are subtle, but the second question is more of an invitation to talk and elaborate. I used my interview sheet as a guide only and was prepared to abandon pre-set questions whenever the direction shifted. The critical step, even more so than the questions, was that I learned to listen in a new way and suspend content analysis and interpretation. Interviews are social interactions in which the conversation leads itself, and as Gadamer, the German philosopher reminds us, "has a spirit of its own" (1994, p.383). The recognition that the other's experience is valid is the first shift toward research that seeks insight and understanding.

By the end of the second interview, and upon reading the transcribed notes, I discovered that the stories were constructions and re-constructions of people's lives. On first glance, the musings, the anecdotes, the wanderings throughout the text, seemed unrelated to the mission at hand and the questions I had come armed with. Tales—some of hardship, some of joy, some of frustration, and some of simple, everyday activity highlighted the texts. Attention would occasionally redirect back to the Leadership Program but, generally, it was interspersed between a story about the neighbourhood, spouse, children, or the other women in the Program.

The link between community education and social change, and how these women perceived their personal change through this process was the primary purpose of my questions. Of course, the educational pursuits of these women did not exist in isolation from their social world, and by constructing and re-constructing personal thought and story, they were placing what I wanted to know in context—these women were making

sense of their social world and experience using their words and speaking within the language available to them.

Survival of family and home, protecting children from the despair of violence, and finding a space for their voice are foreshadowed in all these women's interviews. Mary told me that she and her young son arrived home one night to a crew of police surrounding a blood-splattered front door. *A young lad was shot outside my door,* she explained. *He had been doing some stealing of cars, I think, and the local paramilitary got onto him.* He had been kneecapped, shot in the knees—a common form of punishment in Northern Ireland neighbourhoods controlled by paramilitary justice. This same woman, a Catholic, upon moving to a Protestant neighbourhood when she married, in the post one day received a bullet attached to a threatening note. When the second warning came, she went to the police who told her the only thing she could do was change her Catholic name to a Protestant one. Margaret, a woman I encountered in the park one day, told me she and her family were intimidated out of her home, not once, but twice. *It got so we couldn't leave the house even to get milk,* she told me. *I was afraid we'd come back to no house.*

I had misjudged my audience. These five women are not academics from the world where I now come from. This twelve-week, entry-level Leadership Program was the first non-formal educational experience for many of these women; they are working-class women from a disadvantaged area in Belfast who had endured a lengthy, unrelenting war. For the younger women in the group, the war was their only reality and social experience. Languaging experience is different for everyone and people express themselves in the everyday language of their social reality.

A woman I met at several of the meetings I attended was chatting with me outside the building one day during a break. Suddenly, in mid-sentence, she stopped and apologized for her frequent use of expletives. I really had not noticed because I found her stories engaging and humorous, but she felt the need to explain herself I guess. *Sorry love,* she said, *but it's the language of the oppressed you know. If you lived here you would be ?#!@# swearing too.*

I moved to re-invent my expectations, remove my critical gaze from the final product and the information I was 'supposed' to acquire and work within the boundaries of a research methodology that recognizes and honours people's voices. New possibilities of understanding and appreciating ordinary people's strategies of disseminating information and negotiating reality was a significant change in the early days of data collection.

Norman Denzin, writing from a postmodern perspective, believes that no position is privileged and that multiple epistemologies will produce and increase the importance of research for social change (1994, p.512). My goal is to produce a text suitable for the academic community, but also, I am committed to writing a piece of work that all communities, particularly the one in which I studied, will understand and share, and one in which local knowledge and academic knowledge merge to produce "a more useful and complete knowledge for social change" (Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991, p.151). I wrote earlier that I wanted to know how people language their experience through transformation. These women live storied lives. My challenge is to describe this experience and interpret their meaning.

Narrative Inquiry: Common Sense Knowledge

Perspective and insight come in many forms and capturing meaning and honouring social and personal experience is the challenge of good qualitative research. Fals Borda argues in the participatory research literature that people's experience is the basis of knowledge.

> We regard popular science—folklore, popular knowledge or popular wisdom—to be the empirical or common sense knowledge belonging to the people at the grassroots and constituting their cultural heritage. (1991, p.127)

This knowledge is "practical, vital and empowering knowledge which has allowed them to survive, interpret, create, produce and work over the centuries" (p.127). The working-class communities of Northern Ireland are not peasant communities but do represent an oppressed, marginalized position in Northern Ireland society. What of their knowledge and experience? Working-class communities possess their own form of knowledge and language of expression—knowledge that is often devalued and overshadowed by the intellectual community. Knowledge, says Fals Borda, is "also a means of gaining strength," and "popular knowledge is constantly being created in the daily experiences of work and community life" (p.128).

Truth is relative and depends on the context in which it is found. Knowledge and understanding emerge from first-hand experience—they are constructed and elusive—not fixed, not absolute. Knowledge is temporal and vulnerable to social conditions and must be challenged, negotiated, redefined, and validated regularly in a way in which people experience it.

As narratives were created from personal interviews, a shift occurred in my own understanding of how people express themselves. People create knowledge by telling

stories in their own words—to explain their world. Connelly and Clandinin, who write extensively on personal experience methods and narrative inquiry, believe that people are natural storytellers.

> One theory in educational research holds that humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. Thus, the study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world. (1990, p.2)

Narrative is the object of the study, but it is also the method I use to present the study. People tell stories to make sense of their lives: researchers collect, describe and write narratives about the stories they hear and ultimately inquire into their meaning (p.2). Narrative inquiry is "a process of collaborative involvement and mutual storytelling" (p.4). Language is the principal method of expression, and stories are the vehicle by which experience is understood.

My way of working and method of inquiry are consistent with a critical theory premise that seeks to disrupt the status quo, criticize the cultural forces that serve to exclude, and encourage an interpretive style that includes the voices of silenced people. Also consistent with my method of inquiry, is a feminist orientation that builds on women's experience, encourages interactive and unstructured interviewing, acknowledges that no research is neutral, and supports an equal, collaborative relationship between researcher and participant. Feminist methods examine equity, power and social structure and believe that agency and self-identity progress through the reporting of personal experience and narrative writing. The text is judged by its ability to reveal the power structures of oppression; it creates space for voices to speak.

Feminist-based interviewing requires, "openness, emotional engagement, and the development of a potentially long-term, trusting relationship between the interviewer and

the subject" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p.353). By creating awareness and an alternative vision, is it possible to change what is being investigated? Judith Cook and Mary Fonow, who believe in the importance of consciousness-raising, suggest that "the transformative power of knowledge is emphasized in feminist methodology, so that attention is paid to generating information that can be used to create alternatives to oppression" (1990, p.89). Meaning informs social action, creates awareness, and an alternative vision possibly converts what is being investigated. Cook and Fonow go on to say, that "knowledge must be elicited and analyzed in a way that can be used by women to alter oppressive and exploitative conditions in society" (1990, p.80). Knowledge and understanding are a result of efforts to stimulate change in some way.

At the centre of this inquiry are women, and their transformation and empowerment through education: the goal is to uncover a reality not previously visible. Ordinary women's lives, experiences and world-view have often been overlooked and women have been virtually ignored in traditional approaches to knowledge. Much of the research and literature has focused on middle-class women and little on the perspectives and understandings of the working-class. In their article on oral history methodology, Anderson et al say, that in order to understand women in the context of a working-class community, it is necessary to start with "concrete people and their actual lives" (1990, p.97).

Narrative inquiry involves more than merely gathering information but also drawing conclusions about what people are telling us. Traditional research focuses on events or facts, but personal experience methods are concerned with ordinary people's

interpretation of events. The meaning behind the facts is more significant than the facts themselves.

At the start of this process I delayed choosing a methodology, but the data I collected through intense interviews, observation, and time in the field naturally presented itself as a story. I was working within the methodology of narrative before I named it. I began my journey in Northern Ireland happily listening to and sharing my stories with happenstance strangers, and eventually, participants in the study. The satisfaction and delightful hours I derived from this pastime proved to be a harbinger—the landscape over which everything would follow.

Negotiating Entry

We are part of two social worlds: the one we come from and the one we research. We are, all of us, products of our social and cultural worlds, and thus, there are no objective observations and interpretations. My role as researcher is not neutral: my own social class, gender and ethnicity influence and shape the research.

Before meeting the five participants who agreed to take part in the study, I worried they would regard me as not only a stranger from another land, but as someone foreign to their social world. Working-class women in Northern Ireland do not present themselves as victimized, oppressed individuals who sit around lamenting history. For the most part, the women I interviewed, as well as others I met along the way, are cheerful, generous, witty, soulful and accepting individuals. They seemed to take no notice at all of the difference in our social worlds, and I quickly ceased to worry about how I was perceived or judged.

The participants seemed intrigued and, at the same time, perplexed that I was interested in their lives and their stories, and when I shared stories and experiences of my own about life in Canada's north, they were genuinely enthusiastic about receiving them. As the months wore on, I came to know these women in a variety of circumstances. We met at meetings, socialized, and went away together to a residential weekend in County Donegal. Out of these meetings I believe a relationship of equality and mutual purpose and intention occurred.

As well, finding and expressing voice through words, and "a sense of equality between participants is particularly important in narrative inquiry," Connelly & Clandinin insist (1990, p.4). It is essential that all participants have voice and feel equal. These five women, although from different communities in North Belfast, interacted with one another with mutual respect and admiration. Many of the expressions of esteem were manifested by gentle chiding and humour, but despite the range in age (twenty something to fifty something), and despite the differences in religion (four Catholics and one Protestant), they all *got on,* as Julia said and, *always had good craic with one another.*

Moving from Field to Research Text

I did not want to lose the voice of the participants in this study—so authentic and genuine were their stories. I wanted to keep my voice alive as well but had to be careful that my own voice did not override and obscure the voices of the women I interviewed.

As inviting and interesting as the data were, the task before me was to move the field text to research text where I could construct meaning for the reader. Field texts are descriptive and part of the experience, and as Clandinin and Connelly caution, it is

sometimes tempting to stop here. Research texts, however, "grow out of the repeated asking of questions concerning meaning and significance" (1994, p.423).

My role as researcher was to listen to the stories, create a space for voice and understanding from a data base of interviews, participation, observation, and local documents. The stories I collected were used to construct a larger story. The field text was shaped by my relationship with participants and the research text emerged from my understanding and interpretation of experience. The goal of growth and transformation for self and participants justifies in part the role of research, but I seek also to produce a text suitable for the academic community.

Transcripts of the core group of five women interviewed are organized into categories of experience within and across transcripts and presented in the "Presenting the Data" section of this thesis. My field notes and transcripts are extensive, and reading and re-reading were necessary pre-requisites to deciding on method of interpretation. As part of a focus group near the end of my field study, the women come together to reflect on their transcripts and discuss issues relating to their perception of the process. Here their voices are represented as one under categories of experience, also in the "Presenting the Data" section of the text. (See Appendix C.)

Recurring themes and patterns are summarized in the "Making Sense" section, along with my interpretation and understanding of the data. Here I search for meaning and look beyond the words to tell the larger story. Tensions and contradictions in the data are briefly noted.

Data from participant interviews were analyzed in stages. I transcribed tapes personally to ensure accuracy and familiarity with content. Transcripts were stored

separately from other research material and the names of participants have been changed to protect their identity.

The 'other' voices of those I interviewed, such as community leaders, tutors and academics, are expressed within the text generally. (See Appendix B.) Interview participants, and others who agreed to be interviewed, were given a typewritten copy of their transcript for verification or further elaboration or discussion of questions.

The search for patterns, threads of common experience, themes and tensions within and across participants' transcripts became a process whereby I continually revised, consulted, developed and repeated my steps. Their meaning surfaced as I described, re-told and re-traced the journey.

PRESENTING THE DATA

In representing the narratives of the five women interviewed, I was concerned with presenting the voices of the participants in a manner that would honour their individual presence. Each of the women interviewed was presented with the same general questions from my interview sheet. (See Appendix A.) To preserve the individualistic quality of the answers, I have organized the dialogue into categories of thought and experience. To minimize my influence on the interviewing process, and in reporting the findings, I attempted to interview the group with minimal interference and direction during the interview. The women's words have not been collapsed together and presented as one, but their perspectives and thoughts have been preserved as identifiable, single voices.

The ultimate decision of what is included, left out, and how the words are arranged in the text is mine, but by sharing the transcripts and involving the participants in reflecting on their own words, I believe I have authentically and honestly presented their words and interpretations of lived experiences.

The following are vignettes, snapshots if you will, of five women in North Belfast, their thoughts, reflections, musings, ruminations about an educational endeavour in a Community Leadership Program. More importantly, the words represent a quest to understanding of themselves, others, family, community, and their place in the world. The names and some identifying characteristics of the women have been changed, but I believe the voice of each woman speaks from the pages. For voices that have traditionally had little space to speak, I attempt to stay out of the way as much as possible and allow the participants to do their own talking. I am undeniably present and part of

this process and have included my own impressions, understandings and perceptions to assist in placing the words in context. Because I believe it is important to contextualize participants' lives within their historical, cultural and social environment, I seek to preserve the words as they were spoken within what was common in each of the categories. I also endeavour to honour multiple perspectives and remain sensitive to voice, and as Denzin suggests, "let the prose of the world speak for itself" (1994, p.511).

Readers of this text may identify with or recognize common elements of experience; however, I make no claim that the words speak for all women in Northern Ireland, Belfast, or North Belfast. There is a universality to all experience, knowledge and the human condition, but the lived experience of the women who participated in this process is situated in the local. The text's integrity lies in the uniqueness, the particular of experience. One group, one community, within the context of place and time is represented in their own words.

In Their Own Words

During my time in Northern Ireland, I drank more tea and ate more biscuits than I had in my entire lifetime. Each meeting, social event, celebration or crisis began or ended with a cup of tea. A woman I met in one of the communities, who had lived in Toronto when she was first married, told me that in Northern Ireland women drink more, smoke more cigarettes and apparently swallow more valium than their Canadian counterparts. *During the war*, she told me, *valium was the only thing that held my mother together*. I also found that people laugh more, talk more, and generally seem to have more fun. The interviews were enjoyable experiences and I always came away from the conversations with a profound sense of belonging.

On Program Expectations

All five women speak positively about the Community Leadership Program. They praise the organizers and presenters and credit much of the success of the Program to the dynamics within the group.

Amanda, who admits to suffering from severe depression prior to the Program, says she remembers specifically what initially drew her into the Centre.

> *It was a leaflet really that came through the door one time...it was just a simple wee flyer and I thought I'll go down and try it...something said to me that I wanted to do that.*
>
> *Because I suffered badly from depression, I shut myself off and didn't go out. Because I had shut myself down completely, I didn't want to speak to people—didn't want to meet people. I have two kids but they're all grown up. They're 24 and one has just turned 18. I think I may have been rebelling against my upbringing and I think it was eating me like a cancer.*

She goes on to recount the painful experience of walking into a roomful of women on the first day of the Program.

> *I wanted to turn...I just really wanted to backtrack. I didn't want to be there because I didn't know anyone...I wasn't cheeky enough to walk right into that circle and don't ask me what held me there. Maybe it was time to say enough was enough. When I eventually did go into that circle, everybody had given their name...they were laughing and joking and I didn't feel too uncomfortable. But I remember I wanted out.*

After the first evening of discomfort that Amanda describes below, she eventually relaxed and learned to enjoy the experience.

> *We did a lot of role plays. The first part was very relaxed. There was a lot more fun in the first part of the course and it wasn't as intense. In the first part if you thought it you said it—I felt very comfortable.*

Julia, a woman in her twenties and a single mother of two young children, feels that even though she had been involved in community work for many years, she needs experience and skills to strengthen her confidence.

> *I knew I needed more knowledge and confidence. Confidence, knowledge, assertiveness, you know how to get on when people are sitting asking me questions.*

The women participated in two levels of the Leadership Program. The first concentrated on basic skills such as communication and teamwork, and the second level focused on skills and knowledge about the organization. Peggy joined the Program to acquire information and skills to improve employment possibilities.

> *We set up a steering group in the community I'm living in. We got the funding to bring in a worker and we got our own offices and stuff. You know, I felt in order to follow that through and in order to do the job properly I needed to build these skills. The first part was enjoyable but it was a lot of stuff I had already done—the assertiveness and stuff like that.*

The first level was described as fun and social whereas the second level provided more of a challenge. Julia compares the two levels.

> *The first part was mainly personal development. We had some craic at that I can tell you. The second part of it was slightly heavier and towards the end it got really heavy and I actually winged off a few of the times. But they pushed me to keep going. It was just stuff very few of us had done at the time.*

<u>On Community Development</u>

The absence of democratic structures in Northern Ireland has given rise to a large number of community organizations (Officer, Price, McQuade, 1997, p.36). Northern Ireland is the site of a vibrant civil society; there are over 5,000 community groups and 95,000 people involved in community work ("Women for a Change"). Approximately

250 women's community groups are working in North Belfast alone, and 60 plus are exclusively women's groups ("Under Napoleon's Nose," 1996, p.8).

The extensive community work carried out by women in local areas is well-known but has gone unrecognized. Julia speaks of her involvement in community work as one that extends as far back as her teen years.

> *I worked with after-school clubs. I worked with mothers and toddlers. I've always done community work on a voluntary basis...I was doing voluntary work for about five or six years in the community I was living in previous to where I am now. And I thought I might as well go and learn it properly.*

Julia goes on to say that community work covers a lot of issues and territory and that it is a full-time job.

> *I'm only learning now that community work isn't 9 to 5; it's 24 hours a day. People would knock on my door and say, 'You're on the Resident's Association, could you get someone to come out, my drain's blocked.' It's enjoyable because you can see things happen. I get a lot of satisfaction out of it. But if all that bitterness wasn't there it would make life easier.*

Peggy, who has lived in North Belfast all her life, also worked as a volunteer from an early age.

> *I've always tried to—not even that I have tried, but I always seem to become part of it. From the age of about 15 I worked in a local youth club, but everything was geared to the boys—it was sports oriented, you know, it was snooker, football, boxing and there was very little of it for the girls. Then we got a local talent competition going...I get this community mindedness from my father maybe...my father has been a supporter and member of Sinn Fein, and he was presented with a plaque by Gerry Adams for the work he's done in the community.*

Although Amanda became involved after her participation in the Community Leadership Program, she speaks of her involvement now in this way.

> *I can't say no. If someone says to me would you do something for us, I might not want to do it, but I hate saying no to anybody.*

Women's lack of representation at meetings, conferences and in the formal arena is often due to lack of childcare facilities, self-esteem issues and a preference for an informal style of communication. Clare, a divorced single mother admits she has always possessed a strong sense of self and is highly motivated. She told me that family responsibilities were a barrier in the early days.

> *When I got my divorce first I couldn't get away. I have family here but I could not be asking them all the time to babysit. Even if I wanted to attend meetings or sit on committees, I could not just leave my children alone.*

Mary admits to reaching a low ebb in her life as a result of pressures of divorce and trying to raise her son on her own.

> *I had reached an all time low in my confidence. Two years ago I could not have sat here and talked to you. I could not have stood and talked to a group of people or just walked in and said, 'I want to make a photocopy.' I could not have done that, I could not have done it. And now it's no problem at all.*

Peggy, married fifteen years with four children, never hesitates to speak her mind. She describes for me a particular circumstance when a woman's way of communicating comes into direct conflict with ways of doing in the formal arena. Peggy makes a statement about the disrespectful behaviour in the room and about a process dominated by a group of people far removed from the ways of working at the community level.

> *There was a taxi company on the Antrim Road that wanted to open up a pool room and we were objecting to it, so I had to go in front of the council and give them a verbal objection... so we went down and they were all sitting there behind this beautiful big oval oak table and they were all sitting there and I knew the Sinn Fein personally but the rest...faces you would only see on TV. You go in and it is really intimidating because you have to press this microphone and speak into it...they were all having their tea and coffee and were just drinking and putting their cups down and clattering...they certainly weren't giving the impression they were listening, and then I had to say my piece...and*

> *I just turned around and said, 'Excuse me gentlemen, I have four young children at home and have taken time out of a very busy day to come here and I think the least you could do is to put down your cup and listen to me. It mightn't be important to you but it's very important to me and my community.'*

On Cross-Community Work

North Belfast consists of many self-contained communities that are highly segregated along religious lines. The boundaries that divide these two communities are still deeply entrenched. The divided society of Northern Ireland has overshadowed discussion of gender inequality, and traditionally, sectarianism has kept women isolated in their respective communities. The Community Leadership Program was unique in that women from both communities participated in the Program. Historically, Catholics, in response to social and political deprivation, and who felt alienated from the state, participated in community development initiatives, while many Protestants, even those who lived in disadvantaged areas, viewed this work as betrayal to the British state. This is currently changing but most programs still attract a higher percentage of Catholics.

Julia, the only Protestant of the five women interviewed, explains that she is unusual because she lives in a Protestant area but works in a Catholic one. Of her community she makes this comment.

> *Most people don't mix with the other community. I think they're frightened and see them as a threat...I just think they have never had the opportunity, so they're afraid to take that first step but maybe they'll come around in their own time...there's maybe about two or three of us who have already taken on the training and we can pass on the stuff we have learned to them and give them a wee push.*
>
> *I think people just aren't clued up on it you know. They need to just take one step and go and see what's it like in another area...they just won't do it in my community...they just don't know enough to go into another area...I suppose it's just one of those things I will need to keep*

working on. Maybe it's because this is just a delicate time. Maybe if this was all fast forwarded.

When I asked Peggy about the uniqueness of the cross-community aspect of the Program, she objects to the term itself.

I don't agree with that term 'cross-community.' I don't think they should say anything at all...I don't see what is the importance...I mean does it matter if it's a Catholic and Protestant group. It doesn't matter...maybe it's unusual. People have a romanticized view of what happened here...you know they have this idea that we never come together, and we come together all the time. Domestic violence is another term...why don't they just call it violence?

While Julia says she feels comfortable in both communities and relates well to the other women in the Program, she admits to certain circumstances when it would not be appropriate to be identified with the 'other' community.

I did a cross-border community group about three years ago between Belfast Catholics and Protestants, and Catholics from Dublin, and they wanted to come up and take all their pictures in front of all the murals in front of Shankill, Falls etc., so we got the bus and showed them all the political murals...and they wanted their photographs taken and they were like...'come on'...and we were like...'no we couldn't.' It was hard for them to understand why we couldn't get our photographs taken in Ardoyne under the mural.

Women argue they can cross the divide and place their views and opinions on political issues aside in the interests of peace, but Clare admits to wondering what would happen if those invisible boundaries were crossed.

I think cross-community works better with women. Women are more willing to put their differences aside and talk...I find as long as we laugh and joke and keep it on that level it's OK...if things turn political though I'm not sure if all that good humour would stick. There's a line I haven't seen crossed yet.

Peggy also believes crossing that invisible line would be difficult.

> *I mean you can joke, but to sit down and tell someone your views is a really hard thing. Their beliefs are as strong as yours and they believe they're right.*

On the Interface

Whereas cross-community work is where people meet in formal events and settings, the interface is where people live side-by-side. Often peacelines, walls, and fences separate the two communities, but movement in some areas is restricted by invisible markers.

Clare believes too much emphasis is placed on labels and blames the politicians for maintaining the divisions in communities.

> *The politicians don't care about real issues like equality, poor housing, education and poverty. They just want to win the Catholic or Protestant vote. Why can't we just vote as citizens who all want the best for our children? This is why more women should be in politics...this is what's keeping them out...those old...who just want religion on the agenda.*

Amanda describes her anxiety about travelling into a Protestant area alone, but suspects both sides of the divide have similar fears. I asked Amanda if she would venture into a Protestant area alone.

> *No. Not at all. I would be afraid. Everyone around here sticks to the local bar. It's only lately people from North Belfast are venturing out of their own area.*

During marching season, when Orangemen assert their right to parade down traditional Orange territory, now Catholic, the city becomes tense, and often entire areas are closed to cars and pedestrian traffic. Julia remembers a time about three years ago when she and her children could not get down the road to visit her family.

> *We were living in a Protestant community with a Catholic one here and a Catholic one here which meant at certain times of the year, like marching season, would have got really bad—riots and all this stuff*

going on...we couldn't get down to visit my grandpa because we weren't allowed out of our area. It was scary, very scary.

Peggy's primary motivation for sitting on the Resident's Association results from her family's experience with threats and intimidation.

We had windows broken every night, death threats. I lived on the interface...and then there was an attempt made on my husband's life. We had lived there eight years and we just had to get out of there.

On Being Catholic

The women, without hesitation, agreed that religion in no way influenced their relationship with one another. Mary reveals that growing up in a Catholic neighbourhood and defying certain social conventions sometimes proved hazardous.

I've been stopped in pubs and asked where I'm from, why am I here. I get myself into trouble you see because I politely tell them to take themselves off and I've been asked to leave places.

I asked Mary how people make the distinction between a Catholic and a Protestant. *How would you know*? I asked.

That's because you're an outsider. When we were younger it was the way you pronounced your letters. If you said the alphabet 'aych' and 'hach.' I can't remember how it goes now. Or, if you had a Catholic name, or they used to say if your eyes were closer together you were Catholic.

I'm not a religious Catholic—I'm not a Nationalist and I'm not pro the whole Sinn Fein thing whereas there's people who are pro that side and there's ordinary people who just happen to be born Catholic.

Peggy sends her children to an integrated school and feels the Church, because it disapproves, punishes her children for not attending a Catholic school.

I have more of a problem with the Catholic Church and all their ideas than I do with the Protestant religion. Now I get on quite well with our Priest...he knows I respect him but he knows I have no respect for the pulpit.

On Being Protestant

Although Julia is Protestant, she grew up in a mixed household.

My mother is a Catholic and my father is a Protestant and my mother's mother before her. I reckon from about three or four generations ago. That's when it started in my family...some people in my community can't see it that way. You know they say you kick with both feet.

Julia has been exposed to both communities and is familiar with the expressions of description for each group.

You know the buzz words they use to describe a Catholic or Protestant. I mean they would call a Catholic a Taig or a Fenian. I never used those words when I was younger because of my family background. My mother is Catholic and my father is Protestant.

If you're used to your daddy sitting in front of the TV 'look at that Orange bastard'...I have actually walked into someone's house and heard their mother as well as their father shouting at the TV screen shouting...when you're young you're wondering why he's shouting at the TV screen.

On Family and Home

Family ties are strong in Northern Ireland. It is common to hear people talk about growing up, getting married and having their children all within blocks of each other. Parents often live over the road or across the way, and friendships and relationships with neighbours endure. The war has had an impact on the neighbourhoods in North Belfast in that people have had to move because of intimidation, threats or violence. Entire streets have moved into territory traditionally populated by either Catholic or Protestant families. Children remain the primary concern, and Peggy, who supported the Civil Rights Movement in the early 1970's, was sympathetic to the Republican cause.

I'm not concerned with protecting my country anymore. Having kids makes us passive in one sense but aggressive in another. I don't think I could have actually taken a life for the Republicans, but I know I could take a life if somebody tried to hurt my children and I wouldn't need a

weapon. I could do it with my bare hands. When you have kids your priorities are different.

Julia explains that her children were the initial motivation for returning to school.

I only have two girls, but I'm on my own. I'm really proud of what I'm doing because I'm rearing them myself without any help from anybody else, although I do have family support and their father plays a very active role in their bring up as well, but he's not there 24 hours a day like I would be...I don't want my kids going through what I went through when I was their age...you know listening to arguments. When two people get married it's because they've made a commitment to each other and love each other not so they can throw up in each other's face about religion. I'm only actually realizing this now that I'm saying it.

Clare has moved several times since leaving home but has always remained within blocks of her family.

I don't know what I would do without my family close by. I'm close to my brothers and sisters—my one sister in particular. They have been my support since my divorce. I feel safe knowing I can just nip around the corner and go for a visit.

Peggy remembers how difficult it was to make ends meet when she was first married.

I was 23 when I took the twins home from the hospital, and my husband and I lived in a pokey flat and he didn't have a good paying job and when the twins were seven months old he lost his job, so all your time was concentrated on living and getting by and surviving and you would say you got through the week and if you had anything in your purse at the end of the week you would think to yourself, 'God I haven't paid something,' you know. It was normal not to have money.

Peggy's husband of fifteen years has been very supportive throughout their marriage but supporting a family of four has been difficult through the years.

My husband is very, very inactive but he supports me in whatever I do. My husband is a qualified youth worker...he has no confidence in himself and he's been unemployed for so long. He's been out of work for thirteen years.

> *He's very much a hands on father...he's more than happy for me to go back to work and take on the role as breadwinner...he's quite happy for me to take on whatever job that I feel I can do and bring in a half decent wage.*

Amanda says her husband was very supportive of her getting out of the house and meeting people. She speaks of her father fondly, but describes him as someone belonging to another time.

> *Like my da thinks women should still stay in the house. He hates it. He is still the same. I don't think my da will ever change. A couple of days ago, he got a new C.D. and...you know that song 'I Love You More Today Than Yesterday,' and he could not...even a song...he could not use the word love and I think that's very hard.*

<u>On the Peace Process</u>

The Good Friday Agreement, signed in 1998, was endorsed by the people of Northern Ireland with a 71% 'for' and a 29% 'against' vote. The people have elected an Assembly which will govern on a cross-community basis and address the poverty and social exclusion that affects both communities. Optimism has been cautious on both sides of the divide, and because of all the disappointments and failures that have come before, people are fearful of hoping for too much. Mary is particularly hesitant about making predictions for the future.

> *As far as I'm concerned there still is no Peace Process. They still do punishment beatings regardless of the Peace Process. Where I grew up you would not have dared going down the bottom of my street. I used to go down there anyway and one time got tied to a lamppost because of my uniform because I crossed over the line. People think because of the Peace Process that people have changed, but people still have the same attitudes.*

This is not to say that everyone is not in favour of peace, but not everyone agrees on how they will get there. Julia believes that the speed of change may be hasty and distrusts the politicians' motives.

> *I see things changing too quickly. For instance, the prisoners getting released. Would you not think that if someone murdered someone they should do their time that they've been given in the first place? They're only releasing these prisoners to keep on the good side of the religious divide.*

When I shared with Julia that I regarded the speed at which peace was moving as a positive sign, she reminds me that the 'Troubles' are all she knows.

> *As far as I can see, I've been there for 26 years and I haven't seen a big change at all—maybe over the last year with this agreement and different bits and pieces, things are working but it is just moving far too quickly. I've heard people say this is all going to blow up in our faces one of these days. You know yourself if you're working towards something you don't just get it all out there...you take your time and you build up to it and, and then you see what happens...they're all playing each other off against each other these politicians.*

> *When the ceasefire came in and it was like, yes, we can walk about now and we can visit such and such without getting a gun pointed at me. Not that it was happening but you didn't know if it was going to happen. We could go to the shops without soldiers standing on the corner. That was a big change...but it has taken so long for it to come around...it could take another ten years.*

Some people are looking well into the future and believe equality, fair access to education, long-term employment and better housing are on the horizon. A safer community is Amanda's hope.

> *Everybody's dreaming about what they're going to get and it sounds lovely if everyone gets their dream. People are looking for work out of it, and then there's people saying it's going to bring a whole new community together.*

Peggy is cautious about her views on the process and believes there are difficult times ahead.

> *I really don't care how we get there. I just want to live in this country and have the same rights as everybody else because we still don't...I would certainly encourage my children to leave this country. I don't think Omagh is the final word and I think more people will die before*

> *it's over. It's weird to see people all sitting around the table talking...politicians actually talking to each other.*

Clare is both optimistic and pessimistic about plans for peace.

> *Before anything can happen, there has to be decommissioning and the release of the prisoners. I'm all for peace, but I don't know how I would feel if it were one of my relatives who were murdered. It's going to be a long road.*

On Politics

Women have been active in the working-class neighbourhoods of Northern Ireland long before community development became a funded, organized activity. However, the work that women do as volunteers and paid workers has gone largely unrecognized. Women feel excluded from the formal political structures, and although their involvement at the local community level remains unchallenged, women continue to be shut out from the decision-making process.

Many political parties have ties with paramilitary organizations and are distinctly masculine in nature. As well, politics over the last twenty-five years have been dictated by constitutional issues; concerns such as childcare, housing, education and health have been low on the agenda.

Women do not see themselves as part of the present political structure, and when I asked Julia whether she believes she could change her community by becoming involved in politics, she says she prefers to leave that task to her children.

> *Not on a political level, although...I have been trying long enough to get the network with Catholic groups. My saying is you have to start with the kids...they are the best people to work with because they are going to be the next generation.*

Mary replied that she is satisfied working at the ground level, and that for many women, politics is still a private matter.

> *Religion and politics is not an issue with me. Some of the women, I know from talking to them, they prefer to keep their politics and religion to themselves.*

Because some women believe participation in formal politics is alienating and disempowering, they prefer to work at the grassroots level. Politically active in the early 1970's, Peggy says she was drawn into the political realm initially because of the prevailing social injustice.

> *It was a highly charged time and this kind of activity was almost the norm. In fact if you didn't get involved it was looked upon as strange.*
>
> *I was very aggressive in the 70's...I would have been known as a Republican and I actually was arrested...I was detained in the interrogation centre...I provided safe houses...Because of my association with some very active young men I became known to the security forces. They have a file on me...on two occasions I was taken to the interrogation centre and held for three days when I was seventeen. They could hold you for seven days back then. That's without a lawyer and without a change of clothes...my own father served a prison sentence...you could be on remand for up to two years before you came to court.*

She admits to being discouraged by the snail's pace progress of politics in Northern Ireland.

> *No wonder the country is in the state that it's in. Apart from the fact that they're all too bloody old, the politicians I mean. When you look at Gerry Adams he would be considered a young man compared to say Paisley and Taylor.*
>
> *Paisley and Taylor were interviewed by the BBC by this reporter who attended Queen's between 1966 and 1972. He was there when all the Civil Rights things were happening, and he remembers the same politicians and he asks Paisley and Taylor whether their views have changed at all over the last thirty years. Have your views evolved, he asks? Taylor and Paisley both said they held the same views they held thirty years ago. No wonder nothing has changed!*

Women still regard politics as male-oriented or a domain reserved for the well-educated, middle-class. Clare believes the most tangible results are achieved in the communities and clearly views the work she does in her community as non-political.

> *I could never see myself in politics. The Women's Coalition has done some great things, but I don't see myself with all those educated types and don't feel I have the right language to get up and make all those speeches. I see politics as something men do. I know that's wrong but I just don't know how we can squeeze in there...I think we make more of a change down here anyway. Things move faster in the communities because this is where the real issues are.*

<u>On the Journey</u>

Confidence-building and improving self-esteem have been identified as significant contributors to effective community development. Not all the women reported an increase in confidence, but all acknowledged that the educative process changed some aspect of their lives.

Peggy, who attended Grammar School but was expelled, said she would someday like to return to school, but that she did not enter the Leadership Program to gain social skills or confidence. She admits to some unintended consequences as a result of participating in the Program.

> *I was brought up with Civil Rights and my father would say if you wanted something you had to ask for it. I don't think the course changed a lot for me, but it gave me some skills that I didn't already have. It was also a very strong group...the idea of the Women's Forum actually came from the Leadership Program. It was really a neat group.*

Clare, who dropped out of school before receiving a Leaving Certificate, admits also she did not choose the Program for personal development reasons but acknowledges the social benefits, the friends she made, and a change in her perspective.

> *The course really changed the way I look at things. I don't see things in black and white anymore. I can't say it changed my life, but I met some great people. The coordinators of the course did a super job of bringing us together.*

When I asked Amanda how things had changed for her, she seemed surprised by the question.

> *I don't know I never thought about it before...you've put something in my head and now I'm going to wonder why about this. There's something there that must have triggered. The penny hasn't dropped yet as to why.*

Amanda goes on to credit the Program with lifting her from a depression and awakening a deeper awareness of her external world.

> *I remember the days I would sit in my house from 9 o'clock when the kids went out to say 4 o'clock when he came home from work and I maybe would see the face of one. Now my phone never stops and I'm on the go...well, there's something to get up in the mornings for now. I remember the times I would have gone back to bed. You had nothing to get up for.*

Amanda is committed to the on-going process of community work and believes she would not have been able to attend a meeting on Domestic Violence without the confidence and esteem she gained from the Leadership Program.

> *There was solicitors, social services, policemen...I didn't say as much as the rest of them but I said my name and where I was from. I wouldn't have done that two years ago.*

Mary is currently studying reflexology and plans to have her diploma by next year. She agrees she is more confident now but believes the consequences of her commitment to her studies and personal growth resulted in the breakdown of her relationship.

> *I have definitely improved so much compared to before and it caused so much friction. I was doing better for myself and I wanted to change...and he couldn't handle the change, and then finally it wasn't*

worth the hassle...if he was going to interfere with my education...to me if he was any kind of a man he would have backed me a hundred percent. I'm not the only person. I've spoken to people who have done the course and they said there were four divorces in the last course before us. We're not blaming the Ulster People's College though.

Julia works as a paid community worker and is working toward a Community Development Certificate at the Ulster People's College. She believes many things changed for her professionally and personally.

Before I done this I wouldn't have thought about sitting here talking to you like this. I wouldn't have been in a room with a stranger giving a talk. I wasn't assertive. I still do get nervous talking to people...I may be working all day and have things to do at night, but those things I do at night I bring my kids with me. It gives them a taste of what I do when they're at school.

Amanda says she now views her community differently and appreciates its diversity.

I now associate people with the streets I go down now. Each street to me has a different feel. Now I look at a street and I can think of something out of that street—like how a street with derelict houses on it will look after re-development...and maybe years down the line they might be neighbours. I have friends now who are going to live in it—it's not just me now. I see people around me now whereas before I didn't. To me they were only people and you really didn't have contact with them. You said hello to them. But you know them. You know what their fears are and you know what they're hoping for. I live on the peaceline and I have friends over the other side of the peaceline and they would have similar fears.

I used to feel I didn't need my neighbours. I thought I didn't need anybody, but that's stupid thinking because everybody needs someone. You do need your community. You mightn't like them but you have to live with them.

Clare has always worked at the community level but now feels a stronger sense of responsibility toward her community and its future.

> *My community is my primary concern because it is our children who will have to live in them. I don't want my children to look at me one day, as I look at my parents sometimes, and say, "Why didn't you do something?"*

The Best Laid Plans

It was a few months before I realized why I was constantly getting lost in Belfast. Because I am no stranger to losing my way, I have always been vigilant about writing down addresses carefully. In Belfast, however, one has to be all the more alert and attentive to the second part of a street name. A street is rarely just a Street. For instance, Botanic Avenue could also be Botanic Place, Botanic Road, Botanic Park, Botanic Way, Botanic Gardens, or even Botanic Mews. I lived at a 'Gardens'. Failure to pay close attention to the difference can lead to hours of knocking on the wrong door until locating the correct house. I thought because I was not of this place that it was an error made only by foreigners, but on the evening my focus group was to arrive for our group discussion and further reflection about the Leadership Program, I began to worry when the hour had gone well past six o'clock and no one had yet arrived.

I was careful to write out the number of the house for Mary, and even drew a small map she could give to the taxi driver, but now I wondered whether I had remembered to write 'Gardens' on the other side of my street name. I moved constantly between kitchen and window and peered out through the curtains every time I heard a car passing the house or a door slam. *It's ruined,* I thought. *All my research, all my careful planning, all this food!*

I had already done enough fretting about the evening. I possess only three dishes in my cooking repertoire and all are meatless. There were three vegetarians in the group, including myself, but my greatest task, I knew, would be the coordinating and separating

of the meatless from the meat-laden dishes. *Give them spaghetti and throw some sauce on,* Karen, one of the co-ordinators at the Centre told me. *These women are looking forward to a night out and will be happy with anything.*

Despite these words of encouragement, the night before, I mentally organized the pots on the stove, prepared the dishes and utensils on the counter, and for ease and speed of movement, removed the small table from the corner of the kitchen. I vacuumed, dusted, watered the plants, arranged the chairs in the receiving room in a perfect circle to facilitate discussion, and closed the cover of the piano to prevent distraction. I cautioned my flatmate that we were not to be disturbed unless it was vitally important, because, I told her, *There* was *research going on in that room.*

I heard the laughter long before I saw the black taxi pull up beside my door. Out piled five happy, smiling women, all talking at once, chiding the taxi driver for taking them all over Stranmillis. *We went to the wrong address,* shouted Mary. *Twice*, added Peggy. *We've been to a Park and a Place and took a chance when we saw the Gardens.*

The women piled into the receiving room and immediately pulled the chairs to one side and continued talking and laughing and telling me all about their ordeal. I returned to the kitchen where I cursed the mushy spaghetti and dry sauce. Someone had found the piano, because I could hear a rather interesting version of "I Wish I Was in Carrickfergus," followed by "Danny Boy" emanating from the room. I apologized profusely about the spaghetti and dry sauce, but my laments went unnoticed and they barely seemed to be aware I was there at all. I served, and they ate and talked and laughed and joked. They seemed to be having a good time in spite of me.

The aftermath of all the food and joviality had a calming effect on the room, and people began to at last drift into a relatively tranquil state—enough I thought at least to allow for dialogue to begin about the women's thoughts on the Leadership Program, their transcripts and their own words. As I bent down to turn on the recorder, my hand on the button, the faint sound of the theme song to "Coronation Street" could be heard coming from the sitting room where my flatmate was watching television. I froze. In answer to my greatest fear I heard Mary say, *We can't miss Coronation Street tonight. There's a wedding. It is only half an hour*, I thought, resigning myself to the moment, *and then we can get down to business.* As the women lumbered out of the room I heard someone say, *It's special tonight and it's on for a 'whole' hour.*

As I sat in the empty room, chairs disheveled, piano music lying on the floor, I made a conscious decision to surrender to the moment and cease to fuss about matters beyond my control. I checked the batteries and tape in my recorder one last time and made my way into the sitting room to join women scattered on the sofa and floor, my astonishingly good-natured flatmate crouched in the midst of it all, and partake in the watching of Britain's oldest television drama.

Voices on the Rise

With the eating, singing and television watching finally out of the way, the women were ready to discuss their transcripts from previous interviews, and dialogue with one another about questions I asked about personal changes since the Leadership Program, education, community activism and women in politics. My questions were general, and I focused on their perceptions of the process since my initial interviews with them. (See Appendix C.) Unlike the previous section, where the words were separated

into single, individual, identifiable voices, the following excerpts have been organized into streams of thought. No names have been attached to facilitate the sense of conversation and discussion, and to symbolize a unified presence.

It was a step—it was a foundation...

> *I have to facilitate a group at the Women's Forum on Monday but I never would have thought of it a year ago before the Leadership Course...so every course we take is a step towards more confidence.*
>
> *It taught me how to free up my time...I was spending a lot of free time doing nothing...I was busy doing shopping and getting kids to school, but it wasn't getting me anywhere.*
>
> *I've known Mary for years and she came into that place like a larvae, like a butterfly...I've always known Mary to be very, very quiet, very self-effacing and very, very inward. That's the Mary I knew.*
>
> *Another thing that stands out is Julia coming in and saying, 'I have been asked to be Treasurer of my group,' she said. 'I'm never going to be able to do this,' and then in the end saying, 'I'm going to do it.'*
>
> *I think being a lone parent is an achievement after reading my interview...I have the After School Club there and my family, but I do have to pat myself on the back.*
>
> *You get women coming along and saying, 'You can't do that, you can't do that,' and you come on this course and there's no such word as 'can't.'*
>
> *It's something we're all passionate about...it's something you want other people to have the chance...that's why any research done about it will benefit.*
>
> *It does no good to hide yourself or put yourself down. It's not doing any good for yourself or the people around you.*
>
> *I'm still coming up against barriers and I know I still need to work on my confidence. Getting up and talking in front of people is still a barrier.*
>
> *The most important part is that we all made friends.*

If I feel better about what I'm doing, it can only benefit my family...

> *When I took the Leadership course I wasn't expecting to get that much out of it—the Personal Development stuff I had done all before, but it was the role of the organization part was really what I needed but another reason I went into it was that my husband and I have been unemployed for so long that I thought it was important to me that my children saw my experiences.*
>
> *Yesterday I took my kid to college with me so she sees me and what I do during the day.*
>
> *Corey nearly comes to all my courses...he sees me learning and enjoying learning.*
>
> *I communicate more openly with my husband. If I'm pissed off at him I just don't sit there and expect him to know I'm pissed off at him. I'll turn around and say it. Before I would just sit there and seethe and seethe.*
>
> *I try to be different with my kids. I tell my kids that there is nothing out there you can't achieve if you want it enough.*

Did I really say that...?

> *I can't believe I talked so much about myself. I didn't realize how political I was...I went into an awful lot of detail, but it's part of our life. It's what we've grown up in. It would be strange not for us to talk about politics.*
>
> *I only answered one question about the Leadership Course and the rest was talking about me.*
>
> *When I read the words I said I didn't like how they sounded. My husband said to me, people just have a different way of talking and presenting themselves and it doesn't mean you're saying anything less valuable.*
>
> *I hadn't really thought about any of these things before your questions. I can see now that maybe I know more than I thought I did. I almost feel like I can do anything now.*

Everything in some way is connected...they are all threads....

> *Everything we say and do I guess is related in some way to furthering our education.*

If I feel better, get more education, my family benefits and my community benefits, and then who knows, maybe the whole world is a better place to live. Is that what they mean by 'act locally, think globally?'

What I learned different was that you go along and learn something and you don't have to spend time writing notes the whole time. It is possible to learn from listening and it's possible to learn from talking.

I know when I qualify that I may think I will go on even though I say now I never want to see another book again in my life.

I have a fear of change and things that might make me more powerful...

I don't know what makes me like this but I guess it's because of my upbringing. I was taught to fear almost everything.

I think it's fear of change because most of us are uncomfortable with change, and it's like anything you change in your life.

I fear failure I suppose but I also fear success. Also the unknown.

There is little for women in the current political structure...

You know Mary McAleese comes from Ardoyne. We laughed about that and said any one of us could be President of Ireland one day.

Token positions we've been given. You're usually sitting on a committee with seven or eight men.

When I first started sitting on the steering group it was expected that because I was a woman that I would take on the role of setting up Mother's and Toddler's and Arts and Crafts.

We have always had something blocking us. Partly it was the commitment to family.

Politics to me has always seemed dirty. I mean, personally I wouldn't have wanted to be tainted, because politicians here have bad reputations.

Mo Mowlam is very good. She's very smart, she's a working-class woman and she gets up there and does what she has to do. That's what

makes her so unique, because most working-class women wouldn't have the confidence to get up there and do that.

I think the Women's Forum will have a lot to do because there are women working together. I would like to see people from the Forum going onto the Civic Forum which will feed into the Assembly. It's the Women's Coalition who fought for this.

It's like chipping away at a block of cement...

The relationships you build at the Community Centre are lifelong because you're so close and you share everything from your husband and your work troubles.

Everyone is working away at their community and adding to the possibility of peace. Without community centres women would be back in the house making tea and meeting the neighbours.

A lot of what we do doesn't get recognized, but what people don't realize is that our work fuels what everyone up there in higher politics does.

The work we do at the community level is the lifeline to all else that goes on at the upper levels. We're not up there making the big speeches, but we're opening up youth clubs at odd hours so kids have a decent place to play off the streets, we're organizing weekends away for those children who have never been out of their area before. It may look like tea socials and frill to some, but this is what holds communities together.

MAKING SENSE

As a researcher, I worried about my own position of privilege in that I come from a formal academic background, another country. It is an enormous luxury and opportunity to engage in educational research, particularly a research project so far from home, and I wondered how women in a working-class environment would view me. I felt a little bourgeois to be frank, and I was not certain the women would genuinely accept me as both a researcher and an equal. I expected distance, some resistance perhaps. I even expected the women may feel compelled to tell me about things they thought I wanted and needed to hear. In fact, the women were remarkably open, immediately befriending and forthcoming; I always felt a sincere respect for the research process and an authentic desire to tell it like it is. Perhaps, I reasoned, in a culture where women have few opportunities to express themselves publicly, I provided an outlet, an opportunity to assert some individuality and identity.

Still, the question of my authority continues to surface. What gives me the right to speak for working-class women in a culture to which I do not belong? This question continued to concern me throughout the process of data collection and writing. I believe I partly resolve the issue by remaining conscious of my position and allowing the women to speak from the pages in their own words.

The process of uncovering meaning, illuminating experience, is no simple task. Meaning lies in the text and is there to be discovered, lifted, exposed. It is an interpretive process that Denzin reminds us,"sets forth the multiple meanings of an event, object, experience, or text" (1994, p.504). It is my goal to describe everyday commonsense understandings, and interpret meaning, but to be clear, interpretation, understanding, and

discovery are reported through my eyes. The representation of the participants in the text cannot avoid my presence and self-presentation, and as Krieger argues, "when we discuss others, we are always talking about ourselves" (1991, p.5). This act of discovery, therefore, is guided by my self, my intuition and my inner voice. Because I also seek to stimulate change, create meaningful dialogue and understanding, I remain committed to speak from the perspective of the voices in this text and an epistemological position of respect for the other and different ways of knowing and doing.

Linking Threads

Linking threads emerge from the data that speak of education as opportunity and possibility: personal development such as increased self-esteem, awareness, independence, self-identity; enduring friendships, family relationships; and, a commitment to community and place. Also revealed in the collective experiences and narratives of the five women I interviewed and observed is a sense of pride, achievement and hope, as well as a sense of uncertainty, powerlessness and alienation from the political structure. Fears of the unknown, change, failure and success are also present in varying degrees.

The most compelling recurrent themes in the narratives such as increased self-esteem, confidence, personal growth, self-awareness, independence and identity, did not surprise me. That education empowers, transforms individuals, and changes families and communities are not astonishing discoveries. Frustration, uncertainty, powerlessness, voiceless presence are also no surprise given that the working-class and women have been historically marginalized by mainstream society.

These themes are expressed with differing degrees of intensity amongst the women, and although there is more commonality than difference in the narratives, individuality and voice are distinctly present. With regard to education as possibility, Amanda is the only woman who does not say skills acquisition for present or future employment was motivation for participating in the Program. She is, however, the one for whom personal development and increased self-esteem, confidence, and independence are felt most profoundly. Mary and Julia also express an improved sense of self, but both Peggy and Clare, women of no frail resolve when I met them, admit their educational pursuit satisfied the need for more practical skills rather than personal skills.

Feelings of uncertainty about the future of Northern Ireland are shared by everyone. The women also feel uncertain about their own future and speak of the end of the peace money as the possible demise of many community groups, but Amanda feels jobs and communities will be stimulated by the changes.

Friendships, and a sense of community and place built on the strength of united families, are commonly felt by all the women. Hope in the future rests with children, the women believe, and both Julia and Mary include their children in their educational activities. Children are the priority of all, and while Amanda and Peggy have had the support of their husbands during this period of transition, Clare and Julia are single mothers who are solely responsible for the well-being of their children. However, Mary, also a single mother, credits the breakdown of her relationship to her evolving growth and personal development. There is a sense of pride and achievement felt also by all the women—not only by the success of the Program, but in the raising of their children as well.

Alienation from the formal arena of politics is commonly conveyed by all. The women cite certain barriers, such as lack of formal education and child minding responsibilities, and do not visualize politics as part of future possibility or experience; they undoubtedly still believe they do not belong with the speech and law-makers. Clare believes their work at the grassroots level is more valuable anyway—even if it is not always recognized. A resounding on-going commitment to community work is clearly articulated, and the North Belfast Women's Forum identified as the next challenge.

Contradictions are also present in the narratives, but not profoundly significant. For instance, commitment to community and future development is present in all the women's narratives, but Peggy and Julia both emphatically express a desire to move away, out of the country, for the sake of their children. As well, an openness toward each other's community is evident in the transcripts, but Julia, Clare and Amanda say there were situations where they feel tense and out of their area of comfort. A willingness to cooperate and socialize is clearly expressed, but it is currently still inappropriate under certain circumstances to enter another's area. Also, a sense of hope and future is articulated, particularly at the community level, but a sense of uncertainty and powerlessness when the topic of politicians, the peace process and politics in general is raised. Peggy is critical of her religion and made disapproving remarks about her church, but her identity and sense of locality are very clear, and all the women remain committed to their local environment.

Some of what I expected to find, however, I did not hear. Profound despair, remorse, anger, blame and recrimination were absent. Even when the women speak of

struggle and times of hardship in their narratives, details are presented as fact—the way things are. Their attitude is unfailingly positive and willful.

After the interviews and upon transcribing the data, I had the sense that there were no grand moments of realization or profound understanding. As I wrote earlier, I had concerns that the data I collected would not inform my research. My overall impression was one of a matter-of-fact attitude and disposition about a process the women had not given much thought to. Julia was sometimes surprised by her own words, and Amanda, who perhaps verbally expresses the greatest personal change, admits my questions had given her something to think about. Mary and Clare say they did not realize they had talked so much about their personal lives and children.

On examining the transcripts and presenting the data, my impression about the women's personal transformation and evolution has changed. I began to hear the words of the women more clearly and discover meaning where I initially believed there was none. Intense reflection and analysis are absent perhaps, but the words of the women speak clearly to their own sense of personal growth and awareness. The responsive and open attitude of the women, and their willingness to participate in the study at all are indications of increased esteem. Julia expresses this clearly when she tells me, *Before I done this I wouldn't have thought about sitting here talking to you like this. I wouldn't have been in a room with a stranger giving a talk.* I heard this and other admissions of change, of course, and listened to the words on the recorder as I typed them, but because my training and ear are accustomed to the expressions and ways of speaking of the academic, I initially believed my data lacked the intensity and purpose I had hoped for. I was listening for in-depth reflection, ponderings, and careful consideration about the

educative process and social change. A friend of mine reminded me that these women are busy carrying on with their lives, planning the next meal, shopping, caring for children, and sometimes providing as sole support for their family. *Reflection is a luxury,* she points out. *People in working-class areas don't have the time to analyze what they're doing and why they do it. They just do it and get on with things. They're too busy getting food on the table.*

Informing Understanding

In moving from field and text to sense making, my next challenge is to communicate how the data inform my understanding and how they are situated in the context of the emerging questions I wrote of earlier in the text. Around the central issue of education and its link with social change and community development, other curiosities, other issues, surfaced. Because women have been at the centre of this research, I am curious about their understanding of their contribution at the grassroots level, of their movement through the educative process, and their continued absence from the political structure.

An Absent Presence

In Northern Ireland there are no women Members of Parliament in Westminster, no women elected to the European Parliament, and only thirteen percent of the local councillors are women (Lister, 1997, p.8). At the local level women are increasingly active in participating in community organizations but remain invisible beyond their community work. They are present in the political life of communities but absent in the decision-making structures of politics.

Karen Snoddy, the Women's Coordinator at the North Belfast Community Development Centre, confirms this in an interview.

> *It's the women who get out on the streets and the teas get made, and if there is a bomb, it's basically the women who are holding a community together. Certainly in North Belfast they had to because men weren't there for at least a decade, so there was a huge impact on the work that women did but there has been no recognition of that...and when we look back now it was men who took the credit for that. Women almost allowed that to happen.*

Women, very active on the ground, are an important aspect in the life of the community and play a significant role in community organizations; however, women have not been able to translate the work they do at the community level to activities related to power and the decision-making process. Barriers such as time, family commitment, childcare and confidence exist for many women, but more importantly, women do not vision themselves as part of a world they believe is reserved for the well-educated, the middle-class, or men. Clare speaks of caring for family as one significant barrier that kept her from community work initially, but on politics she says, *I could never see myself in politics—it's not for me.* Peggy also regards politics as something reserved for the old and distinctly male population of Northern Ireland. *Taylor and Paisley,* she says, *held the same views they held thirty years ago. No wonder nothing has changed.*

When I spoke with Eilish Rooney, a lecturer at the University of Ulster, she pointed out that *It is somehow more acceptable to say you're not political—here it has negative connotations at the grassroots level.* So perhaps it is not surprising that the women I interviewed, and many women who work in community groups, regard their activity as distinctly apolitical. Karen Snoddy explains that political parties are often linked with paramilitary groups and regarded as something the 'boys' do.

> *There are women's groups that I can go and work with and the boys, so to speak, will be grand if they're doing ceramics—you try to get them to start talking about politics...the paramilitaries come in and say, 'Out! You're not working with them anymore.'*

The word 'politics' to many is regarded as divisive and subversive, whereas local community groups and sites are friendly, inclusive and more acceptable to women used to local areas. Karen Snoddy says, *If I was trying to raise a couple of kids in North Belfast your priority would be putting food in their mouths, not necessarily going out screaming about the global whereabouts of women.*

A woman from North Belfast, in oral evidence to the Opsahl Commission, says of politics: "We are involved with politics with a little 'p' on the ground, but we get no recognition for it from politicians who are involved in politics with a big 'P'. There needs to be recognition for those with a little 'p'" (Pollak, 1993, p.12).

Ruth Lister, in her writing on citizenship in Northern Ireland, believes a narrow definition of politics makes a distinction between the public and private, and she contends that formal politics tends to operate in the public domain. Women have been traditionally relegated to the domestic, the private sphere; their territory is the neighbourhood. Mary makes the distinction between the private and public domain and told me that *Most women prefer to keep politics and religion to themselves.* But, for women, keeping politics at arm's length and at home also has a practical dimension in Northern Ireland. The public is where the formal arena of politics operates, and because in Northern Ireland the notion of politics centres on constitutional matters, the issues associated with women are generally described as non-political.

Women view 'private' or 'personal' issues as non-political, and feel that in order to be heard, it is more expedient to separate themselves from the political process. Ruth Lister believes 'private' matters should be included in 'public' debates.

> Community activism, particularly amongst women, is often about placing 'private' matters on the public agenda, and in the process bridging the public-private divide. Yet political theory and politicians tend to disregard such activism. (1997, p.5)

Martha Ackelsberg, a feminist who writes on the politics of community life and women's political activism, also believes that issues identified as part of the 'private' domain are not considered worthy of 'public' concern.

> In its earliest formulations...politics was identified with the public, moral world and limited to men; the home, the arena of private morality, was assigned to women. In this view, women have no proper place in the public sphere; their participation is neither encouraged nor welcomed. When women have acted outside their homes...their activities have often been ignored or ridiculed, defined as lying outside the domain of politics properly construed. (1988, p.300)

Thus, who participates in politics and what is considered as 'public' are severely limited by a definition of politics that places childcare, housing, education and safe neighbourhoods low on its list of priorities. Ackelsberg believes that if we do not re-language or seek to redefine politics and focus on communities, people who feel excluded and ignored by the system will be driven further from the process of decision-making. "Political life *is* community life," she says, and politics should not be "a narrow range of behaviours undertaken by a few" (1988, p.308-309).

"Private life is the kingdom of inequality," whereas public life is the place where possibilities of equality are assumed (Schmukler, 1991, p. 252). Society's understanding of what is political must make a shift and recognize that the social life in communities is

also of a political nature. To be deprived of a space in the 'public' sphere perpetuates the position of inequality for women and community development.

Women devote considerable time to their communities despite domestic responsibilities, and the reasons women become involved in local organizations are perhaps different than why women, few as they are, enter formal politics. The women who participated in the Leadership Program wanted to build skills and improve self-esteem, but also, the social aspect and friendships established were significant factors in sustaining their interest and commitment to continued involvement. Women traditionally come together through friendship and because of concerns common to their communities and organizations; coalitions are formed based on women who experience similar problems. The reasons why women choose not to engage in politics beyond the local level may be influenced by a structure that works against them.

Women also regard the work they do at the community level as more valuable and more specific to local needs. Clare echoes this belief and says, *I think we make more of a change down here anyway...things move faster in the communities because this is where the real issues are.*

A study conducted by Eilish Rooney and Margaret Woods on women in politics and local groups, reports that women believe they could potentially play a significant role on councils and as Members of Parliament, but that women will only be encouraged to become involved if parties adopt issues related to their concerns at the local level (Rooney, 1995, p.545). Clare says, she does not believe that politicians are tackling the real issues, and does not see herself as part of the structure of formal party politics—

present or future. The 'real issues' such as childcare, housing, and unemployment are issues women understand well and feel they are the most qualified to address.

Ironically, in the same study by Rooney and Woods, they discovered that men and women councillors believe their work does focus around issues of employment, housing, education, and poverty in spite of women's perception that the issues that concern their communities are not represented.

If local issues are being addressed in the formal arena, however, clearly women are not regarded as occupying a significant presence. Karen Snoddy makes reference to a social audit in North Belfast that failed to recognize women.

> *I'm not saying women were excluded, but they were not given any recognition—there was no mention in any shape or form in the original audit document. The word woman was not in the audit once—not once.*

She goes on to describe what transpired at the launch of a social audit in North Belfast that she and 300 other women attended. When Karen asks the conference facilitator where women fit into their strategy of health, education, housing and the economy, she describes his response.

> *He fumbled and mumbled and said it was something to be discussed within the workshops...and we said which one, where do you want the women to go, and he fumbled again and said health—and there was an uproar in the hall and they said don't be ridiculous, housing is equally as important as employment. They did not see women as having a role to play in the economy or housing.*

Women feel their efforts have gone unrewarded for so long that this may explain why they feel disempowered by a process of politics that continues to exclude them. Clare demonstrates these feelings of disengagement from a system she views as exclusionary.

> *Politics is not the way for women to change things. We have been making a difference for years and no one seems to take any notice, so it would be even more demeaning in politics I think.*

Eilish Rooney, whose work focuses on women and politics, writes that "women are ignored because they are assumed to be powerless and, being ignored, they may be affirmed in their sense of powerlessness" (1995, p.3).

A tutor at the Ulster People's College, who teaches Political Education, points out in an interview and argues, that it is not only women who remain excluded from a formal political structure, but also that elected male politicians in Northern Ireland have not experienced real power for thirty years. *They go to Westminster, and they are never anything more than opposition, and small, insignificant opposition at that—so they are basically lobbyists—they have no power at all. Normal politics just hasn't happened here.* She believes the general consensus is that the more talented an individual, the less likely he or she will enter formal politics. She goes on to say that *People who have political drive have taken them to other places and taken them into community groups—into grassroots organizations. The more political you are the less likely you are to join a political party.*

The issue of participation at the formal level in Northern Ireland affects both women and men, but the fact remains that women are underrepresented in Northern Ireland at the higher levels of power, and although this is a global problem, women's representation here remains astonishingly low.

I spoke with Bronagh Hinds, the current Director of the Ulster People's College. Bronagh is from North Belfast, has a law degree from Queen's University where she was involved in the Civil Rights Movement, and her involvement with organizations in the informal and formal sector are far too long to list here. Bronagh is also Chair of the

Northern Ireland Women's European Platform, the group that brought the Women's Coalition together. The Coalition is the first women's party in Northern Ireland and was formed to promote a women's agenda in the elections. She believes a new understanding of politics needs to emerge. *It's about broadening that base, in a sense, to give permission to engage politically at a whole range of different levels.* Bronagh believes political training and confidence-building for women's groups would assist women in understanding how the system operates but admits that even though the Women's Coalition, for instance, was proofed for class and religion, voters will vote for the media-savvy, the articulate.

The Women's Coalition is a good example of what women have been able to accomplish in the last few years. Bronagh believes the party has provided a good training ground for women who have been relegated to the sidelines. *Almost all the women, bar one or two,* she says, *had no experience so they were starting from zero base—but we learned in leaps and bounds.* At the top of their agenda was a demand for women's presence at the Peace Talks table; seventy candidates ran in the last election and two women were elected as representatives at the All-Party Talks. Rooney writes that "critical debate amongst women's networks and local women's groups" occurred, and although its future is yet unclear, "women in local groups and women in other political parties will be listening and watching" (1997, p. 548). Eilish Rooney credits the formation of the Women's Coalition to the numerous women's grassroots groups. *The place to start for women,* she told me in an interview, *is those locally based unthreatening local groups.*

Bronagh believes that if women choose not to be involved in politics with a big 'P,' *They need to be in the wider realm of politics, they need to be part of that debate that is cracking open the notion that democracy is more than just elected representatives—they need to lobby, how to engage and how to influence that debate, and those are not any less accessible to working-class than middle-class women.* Therefore, it should not be either women become involved in formal politics or nothing happens, but rather, women become involved in issues that directly affect their communities and build skills that will enable them to lobby and influence those who are part of the political process. *Women are survivors,* Bronagh told me, *and if you have the stamina, not everybody has it, some men, some women have it. It is not about misleading people, but it is about enabling people to reach for what they can reach for.* Bronagh goes on to say that she believes the level of stamina exists in working-class areas, but that it is a matter of recognizing people with leadership skills. *You need to play to people's strengths*, she says.

Perhaps a link between local and broader struggles will emerge. Both the local and the broad political process must extend the definition of what is political, allow for more inclusive participation, and give recognition to other forms and other ways of doing. Both participatory democracy and representative politics have the potential to be mutually beneficial: one does not have to exist at the expense of the other. The challenge for communities is to find ways to be heard within the accepted structures of power and build a new form of democracy. The voices of 'ordinary' people needs to be acknowledged as worthy of listening to.

Women will continue to be motivated to work and improve their communities, but they will also need to strengthen their skills and raise their voices in order to mobilize for change. The success of community organizations will erode without some degree of institutionalized political power and the perception will persist that there is nothing the ordinary citizen can do to effect change in the broader political context. If their work continues to be ignored and deemed irrelevant, they will remain at the margins.

The North Belfast Women's Forum, an idea generated by the women who participated in the Leadership Program, does have a political agenda in that it seeks to collectively organize to influence the decision-making processes in Northern Ireland and inspire social change in communities. Women will work on issues that unite them such as childcare, housing and unemployment. The Women's Coalition and the Forum are possible avenues for political and social change in communities and have the potential to dismantle and demystify the structural forces that dominate and render communities voiceless.

Social change comes in many forms, and everyone's contribution needs to find a way to be valued and respected. Different imaginings of what is democracy and the deconstruction of traditional ways of knowing and doing will be necessary to shift the focus of women and community work to the forefront.

Beyond the Walls: Adult Education

Gramsci, the Italian political theorist, intellectual and activist, believes that the everyday ideas of the working-class are subordinated by beliefs maintained by the ruling class of a capitalist society. He argues that the key to social change lies, not only in the ability of people to develop critical awareness, but also in their ability to vision

alternatives. Those with the least power, the most disadvantaged, tend to be the least politically active. Conscious of this powerlessness, they lack the ability to develop an alternative vision for the future. Challenging the predominant ideas of the status quo, Gramsci maintains, and developing alternatives, "are the key to the process of social transformation" (cited in Mayo, 1997, p.23). Either adult education legitimizes the hegemonic structure or, as Gramsci proposes, it can challenge it by encouraging discussion and questioning existing social conditions.

Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator who developed an innovative approach to literacy development and adult education, based on his experience with deprived and oppressed groups in Brazil, follows on Gramsci's work and argues that education is a tool, a means whereby individuals can creatively and critically explore how to participate in the transformation of their world. Education is an important link to the battle over ideas, and in order to challenge the dominant ideas of the status quo, people require the skills and confidence to vision the possibility of alternatives.

Eduard Lindeman, who wrote over a half century ago, supports the idea of education as a site of political struggle. Lindeman, a philosopher of adult education, believed that the chief purpose of education is "to discover the meaning of experience." Social justice can only be achieved through adult education that encourages "increased awareness of the self and other selves, directed toward social justice." Adult education is, he says, "social education for purposes of social change." He argues that "when the distance between life as action and life as reflection becomes so great that experience loses its organic wholeness societies begin to disintegrate." Lindeman views relieving societal tension as one of the primary functions of adult education: "It is the function of

education to understand the ideas and the needs which have precipitated the tensions," he says and, "to evade social tension is to invite trouble" (cited in Briton, 1996, pp. 3-5).

The Ulster People's College builds on the ideas of Freire, Gramsci and Lindeman in practice by extending participation in their programs to local groups and individuals who may not otherwise have had the opportunity, thereby fostering capacity-building in some of the most disadvantaged communities. Tom Lovett, one of the founders of the Ulster People's College, and from a working-class housing estate in North Belfast, began his career in the labour and trade movement and eventually won a scholarship to Ruskin College at Oxford. He became a "graduate of that popular adult education movement, fully aware of the role it had played in movements for social change," he writes (1995, p.284). He is currently Director at the Ligoniel Improvement Centre in North Belfast where I spoke with him about adult education, community development and its role in the peace process. Lovett believes adult education has an important role to play in a participatory democracy.

> *More and more people are actively involved at a local level and getting the support and education and training to enable them to do so. Adult education has an important role to play in assisting people with that process, and also, I suppose, you could argue, it has a role to play in getting over the fears and prejudices that formal politics have in that process.*

People examine communities Lovett suggests, "in all their complexity in order to encourage the embracing of options which improve people's sense of identity, integrity, security and dignity" (1995, p.286). Exploring alternative ideas de-legitimizes the status quo and shifts the responsibility of democracy back to the people. Through education, individuals become more aware of the social conditions and forces that serve to exclude

them and thus begin to take an active role in directing their lives. This is how change is fostered.

Sites of Possibility: Community Education

Hugh Frazer, a member of the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council, says that community development is "fundamentally about enabling people to enhance their capacity to play a role in shaping the society of which they are a part" (1997, p.15). It is, quoting Officer, Price & McQuade, tutors at the Ulster People's College, "about maximising the participation of people in society's decision making processes" (1997, p.35). Key words here, 'enabling' and 'maximising,' mean that community education needs to play a significant role in facilitating the participation and access to both formal and informal learning—a holistic approach that addresses issues of alienation, powerlessness and low self-worth. Empowerment is central to the process of education and development, and Frazer maintains that communities that remain voiceless and powerless have less to do with income and resources than lack of skills, confidence and motivation. "They lack the information, education and opportunity to analyze the situation in which they find themselves," he says, and goes on to say, that "structures and processes which promote the active participation and involvement of all citizens must be developed" (pp. 13-14). Not active in their own future, communities become disempowered and victim to policies that do not adequately address their needs.

This is consistent with the ideas of Paulo Freire and his philosophy and approach to adult education which encourages people to transform their reality by engaging in reflection and action. A culture of silence develops due to the structural relations between the dominated and the dominators," Freire suggests (cited in Coggins, 1973

p.12). Reflection cannot end at the verbal stage, Freire cautions, and must be followed by action. People are mobilized to action when they assess and re-evaluate the forces that oppress them and become carpenters of their own lives.

If community development builds self-confidence, esteem and worth, then individuals within the community who develop skills, as well as increase awareness and capacity, enhance the ability of the community to collectively oppose the structural forces under which they have been oppressed. Numerous testimonials of improved personal growth and commitment to community are evident in the women's transcripts. Amanda remembers a time she could barely move from her bed and credits the Leadership Program as the origin and foundation upon which she bases her positive attitude.

> *It helped me along, pulling me out of a hole...I see me coming down here on days I couldn't breathe...there was just something that was calling me—I have to be there.*

Because Amanda believes strongly in her own self-worth and fulfillment, her community also emerges as a site of possibility.

> *I like to know now what's all going on in my community, what's happening in it, who's doing what in it. I ask myself if I can do something else for my community. I can see a community now, whereas before I didn't.*

Clare's sense of responsibility increases, and although building skills was her primary motivation for participating in the Leadership Program, the collaborative spirit of the women, and the friendships that evolved, encouraged Clare to commit to the well-being of everyone in her community.

> *Of course I want my community to be safer and better for my children and grandchildren, but I also see others now where I didn't see them quite as clearly before. I used to feel so alone sometimes and thought it was just me working, but now I know I have support for my ideas.*

Community education contributes significantly to increasing community participation and increasing access to other levels in the democratic structure. Colin Neilands, who presented a paper at a conference on community development, believes that as more activists participate in educational programs, the role of community education will extend to a role of "demystifying the various structures of government, building confidence and experience and, if possible, supporting those who rise to the challenge" (1997, p.49).

Women seek education for a variety of reasons. They want to express themselves more effectively, write better, develop job skills, and achieve personal growth—all of which contribute to a community's capacity to regenerate itself. Community development relies on the skills and personal growth of community activists. Karen Snoddy agrees, but told me in an interview that she also believes it will be a slow process.

> *You have to build up on the women on a personal level before they can play key roles...I think that education can give women enough confidence that they realize they can make a difference—I think a lot of that lack of recognition even comes from women themselves.*

Safety in Numbers

I was positively green when the bus stopped in front of *An Teach Ban* (The White House). The drive from Belfast to Downings in County Donegal was not long—three hours at the most, but the endlessly winding roads, so characteristic of the Republic, and the smoke that continually filled the bus was so overwhelming that I was gasping for air by the time the bus stopped. After a quick walk around the gardens and the colour in my

face finally restored, a woman, the only other non-smoker in the group, caught me by the arm and said, *It's the curse of the working-class you know—all this smoking.*

I knew none of the women who had come away for this residential weekend. Residentials are common in Northern Ireland, and community groups regularly escape Belfast where issues and tasks can be tackled away from the local environment. *An Teach Ban* is a popular site of retreat and is situated in the Republic on the West Coast overlooking the sea—an ideal spot for inspiring conversation and ideas. Mary, Peggy and Julia were all here—Amanda stayed away because she was ill, and I do not know where Clare was, but I had not yet interviewed the women and was meeting them for the first time. Despite my newness, I felt at ease and relaxed immediately. The festive atmosphere spilled over from the bus to dinner, but this did not prevent the group from immediately setting down to work after eating. With cups of tea in hand, we all piled into the conference room and began the process of establishing an agenda for the next few days.

The object of the weekend was to create a mission statement, values, and a management structure for the Forum. The North Belfast Women's Forum arose out of an identified need for the more than sixty women's groups in North Belfast, who traditionally work in isolation from one another, to come together to communicate ideas and support each other on issues common to all. Karen Snoddy told me in an interview about women's community work that women need to come together—*There needs to be some collectivity to actually lobby.*

The ultimate goal of the Forum is to collectively develop a voice in the community that will influence the bodies that make decisions on behalf of the area.

There is safety in numbers, I recall a woman saying at one of our meetings. She explained that, with a collective approach, the issues that divide and isolate communities could be addressed more adequately. The women were mobilized to action out of a need to gain voice on issues they felt were not represented at higher levels of government.

Vivienne Anderson, Director of the North Belfast Community Development Centre, and who spoke at the first conference on the North Belfast Women's Forum makes the point, that despite women's contribution and pioneering efforts in local communities, they are often overlooked. She went on to say that "a woman's voice in North Belfast will strengthen any future developments for this area—a women's forum should seek the diversity and wide ranging views of women in North Belfast" (1998, p.6). Women's issues, she believes, need to be redefined and extended to include education, health, economic development, housing and political development.

Despite the fiercely social nature of the Northern Irish women, or maybe because of it, all the objectives laid out in the agenda were met by Sunday morning. Lack of sleep and breaks for "Coronation Street" aside, the social atmosphere fueled conversation and facilitated the group's ability to attend to the tasks on the agenda.

On Sunday afternoon, just as the sun was hitting the hills, we again scrambled onto the bus. The mood was more somber this time, out of respect for those sporting headaches from the night before. My place by the open window secured, and this time prepared for all those twists and turns, I feasted my eyes on the stunning beauty of the Donegal countryside.

If Karen Snoddy is correct when she predicts the Forum will play a vital role in North Belfast, then the Forum promises to be a constructive tool for effective social

action and a vehicle for liberating women in communities from that culture of silence. Changing social worlds began here with the formation of a small group of women who identified a need, acted, and remain committed to challenging the social conventions that seek to exclude them.

The end of my journey to Donegal had just begun, and so too had the beginning of my journey into this research process. I thought about how the vision of a Women's Forum was formed by a group of local, non-formally educated women participating in a twelve-week Community Leadership Program. Peggy told me later that she regarded the Leadership Program as, *A step...a foundation* to everything that followed.

If awareness leads to social action and social change, as Freire proposes, and if developing alternative ideas lies at the heart of social transformation, as Gramsci says, then the Leadership Program and the Women's Forum are the genesis—that first step to improving lives in communities.

Preparing the Ground

Informal educational programs and meeting places such as the Leadership Program, the North Belfast Women's Forum, and the North Belfast Community Development Centre are key sites for individuals and women to share some of their daily concerns and problems; they are also sites where an ideology of challenge to dominant power structures can be created. Professor Griff Foley, a radical educator who believes important learning takes place within the framework of voluntary organizations, says "Consciousness and learning are central to the process of cultural and social reproduction and transformation" (1999, p.16). Such sites of learning present individuals with an opportunity to articulate alternative ideas, increase the organizing capacity of working-

class groups, and enhance the knowledge, abilities and skills that will increase their participation in building a democratic society. "The struggle itself is an opportunity for learning," Foley points out (p.63); learning of a truly transformative nature often occurs in informal, unstructured environments, where people are motivated by mutual purpose.

At the individual level, women have the opportunity to break out of their isolation and escape the confines of the household to a place where they can receive support, socialize experience, and gain a sense of community. The family and the community are the beneficiaries of the strengthening of confidence, widened-awareness, and the acquisition of new skills and options. At the community level, a sense of community and common purpose is achieved.

The Community Development Centre is a site of liberation, inclusion and learning. The activities required to organize the Women's Forum created an opportunity to develop skills and knowledge beyond the ones learned in the Leadership Program. The meetings and social group activities became places where people from both sides of the divide learned from one another. For instance, the women I interviewed developed confidence and leadership skills; consequently, their roles were enhanced within their respective grassroots organizations. Within the context of the residential weekend in Donegal, women learned how to organize, plan, write agendas, and articulate ideas. While the women did not directly express this learning, the idea of the Women's Forum itself was the result and development of a new way of thinking and doing.

Silence is a form of resistance, and marginalized and disenfranchised peoples commonly respond to their feeling of powerlessness by withdrawing or retreating.

Perhaps the resounding unwillingness of women to move beyond the local into the 'public' sphere is a form of resistance.

But also, the cross-community work women engage in, the rise in women's groups, and the Women's Forum and Coalition are all examples of acts of resistance to prevailing ideologies. Foley argues that "the unlearning of dominant, oppressive ideologies and discourses and the learning of insurgent, emancipatory ones are central to processes of emancipatory change" (p.16). Women, excluded from the decision-making process, created new ways of attempting to be heard. The Leadership Program was the setting of the stage, and the Women's Forum the action.

Even though the impact of informal educational programs and grassroots organizations are less visible at the broad level of politics, the Women's Forum and the Women's Coalition promise to be significant factors in working to effect change in government legislation through their lobbying efforts and continued presence. The Women's Forum is the result of the foundational work of education at the local level. The Women's Coalition is testament to the fact that recognition is beginning to emerge in the form of new forces growing from the struggles in the communities. A constant presence and pressure beyond the spheres of the community are required by community groups to ensure a participatory democracy and inclusive society. Common needs and concerns need to be addressed outside the 'private' and the 'personal' spaces of the community and move into the 'public' sphere. As well, daily activities, domestic life, the home, the community and the social relationships formed therein, should also be embraced as important contributors to life in Northern Ireland.

The challenge for adult education operating in community groups is to develop the potential of everyone working at this level, but women in particular, because their presence in numbers is so impressive. Knowledge and skills need to be broadened, and for people to become active, a change in consciousness must occur. Foley points out that "they must see that action is necessary and possible" (p.103). When people are convinced they can shape their social world, they begin to vision themselves as creators and transformers of their social and cultural reality. Informal learning and community groups, therefore, are important sites of preparing for social action. Educational programs are a vehicle for empowering disadvantaged and marginalized people and creating a consciousness sufficient to challenge the status quo and build more democratic structures.

Emerging Horizons

There is never a final reading, but I have attempted to provide some meaning, some understanding, and give rise to voices in waiting. I intended not to speak with automatic authority for others, but to open dialogue and discussion and perhaps raise awareness about issues and concerns about which 'ordinary' people feel uncertain.

Answers are not provided in this thesis in a conventional sense. There are only points of departure from which new understandings and insights may be embraced. My purpose is to provide a space where people, with ways of viewing the world from a position of disadvantage, could present ideas and commonsense understandings—it is a place to be heard. "The quest for certainty is hopeless," maintains Joe Kincheloe, a critical educator and proponent of educational reform. Certainty can be replaced with the creative imagination of constructing what is possible. Power is reinforced by the

reproduction of knowledge based on dominant ideologies, and powerlessness at the grassroots is reproduced in the continued absence of the everyday stories of people. "If knowledge is the prerequisite for social change," Kincheloe argues, and "if social action transforms knowledge, then knowledge cannot be conceived as static and certain" (1991, p.28). There are many voices that continue to be excluded, but I believe new vistas and insights are on the horizon if we learn to listen and acknowledge all those who seek to be heard.

I cannot predict or speculate on the future educational endeavours for these working-class women from North Belfast or what path they choose to venture down. Julia hopes to continue working in community development by participating in courses at the Ulster People's College. Mary plans to become a reflexologist, and Peggy's goals include working at a women's shelter. Clare and Amanda will continue to work in the voluntary sector. My only hope is that all these women continue to speak and make their presence known in a way that will shatter that culture of silence. As they gain in confidence and self-awareness, so too will their communities experience growth and empowerment. Margaret Mead reminds us: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has" (cited in Theobald, 1997, p.119). I shall never doubt it again.

AFTERTHOUGHTS

I return to where my story began—that little house by the sea in County Kerry. It is a long journey from Belfast, and I miss my stop in Mallow and have to go all the way to Cork. I do not actually miss my stop. The train stops, I stand by the door ready to disembark, but the car I am in, at the back of the train, is too long for the platform. The train, oblivious to my presence, merely shuts all its doors and proceeds on its way. A young man standing next to me, obviously readied to disembark as well, looks at me in quiet confusion but smiles anyway. He doesn't seem as worried as I do, and I take comfort in knowing I have a partner in misadventure. When I speak to the conductor and explain our dilemma, he says, *But sure, that happens all the time.* He winks and says, *Don't worry, we won't charge you the extra fare.*

We discover it is a four-hour wait in Cork for the next Dublin train to come through on its way to Tralee. I am already fatigued by the early morning rising and the long journey, but my new-found stranger and I find a comfortable spot by the window in the terminal's coffee shop. We settle in for a long, extended stay. Within minutes, this young man, whom I had met not twenty minutes before, digs into a long, elaborate story about a just-passed reckless weekend in Dublin. He begins to tell me about his fling with a French girl over for the weekend. It seems simple enough to me, but it doesn't end there. A current girlfriend of seven years complicates the picture—neither girl, of course, knows of the other. He realizes his immediate problem is the girl on home soil and contemplates all sorts of options and scenarios: not telling her, telling her but staying, telling her and not staying, not telling her and not staying. He devises plans of escape in the night. *I could tell her I found a job in France*, he says, but quickly dispenses with

that idea. *She knows I have no skills and can't speak French,* he reasons. He courts with the idea of changing his name and disappearing entirely, but I convince him this is a tad dramatic and he agrees.

What should I do? he begs me. *Should I stay here and go on as before, or should I move to France and begin a new life?* He is in such agony and pain that I long to put him out of his misery, but memories of previous unsuccessful attempts at advice-giving come to the fore. I resist the temptation to grab him by the lapels and say: *Look, do the right thing—be honest. Tell your old girlfriend you have a new girlfriend. Go off and have an adventure.* But I don't. I know he needs the opportunity to discover for himself. This is perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of teaching—not giving students the answer.

Perhaps he mistakes the glazed and fatigued look in my eyes for wisdom, because he continues to tell and re-tell, devise and scheme, organize and re-organize the details of each possibility. In the dialogue he invents more questions and more dilemmas for future positing, but by the time our wait is over and we reach Tralee, he has come to a decision of sorts I think. He seems a little more relaxed and thanks me for all my help. I insist I've done nothing, but he reassures me and says, *It gave me a chance to think about what I'm doing—thank God for the delays of Irish Rail.*

By the time I reach home I am exhausted and frustrated by all those hours on a drafty train. Listening is hard work. I immediately venture to the back strand—my place of refuge and sanctuary. As I curse Irish Rail, I watch the waves fiercely crashing against the sandbanks. My anxiety and stress diminish with each succeeding wave. I always feel so small and humbled in the presence of such irrepressible strength. A few years ago my

cousin found a body on the shore. It had bounced in with the waves as the tide came in. It was the body of a sailor, so he removed the dog tags and reported his finding to the Garda. He later discovered the body was a Chinese sailor from a sinking ship that had gone down several months earlier.

Lots of things come in on this beach. My mother said that during the war barrels of sugar and crates of canned food from torpedoed ships, I suppose, helped keep them alive. My uncle once found a bottle with a note in it from California. I found some foreign money years back; I still don't know where it is from, but I have kept it all the same.

I am always on the lookout for something unusual and out of the ordinary when I come back here, but since my cousin's finding I now see every wet log or cluster of seaweed as the possibility of something else. From a distance, objects no longer seem as they are, and I am curiously aware of things that aren't there at all. I am not waiting for a dead body to surface, but the prospect alone that something interesting and novel will emerge is enough to keep me back here for hours.

It is Christmas and the news reports the worst storm in eighty years is on its way. The water tank blows off the roof, one of the barn's roofs caves in, and there is no electricity for two days. Even the cows are in disbelief. There is no time to think of Belfast now—it is a million miles away. There are matters of survival to attend to.

Because the bedroom above conserves more heat, I am compelled to move. I try one night in the room below, but the cold drives me out. I am reluctant to move because I believe there are ghosts in this room—out of respect for all those stories I heard when I was young. My grandmother died in this room, and who knows how many more, and as I

gaze into the fire with both eyes wide, I wonder what she would think of me now. My world is not one she could possibly imagine. Women of her day did not go to school beyond the lower grades and universities were not sites of possibility for women, never mind the peasant classes. She thought reading was a waste of time and constantly berated my grandfather for staying up until all hours reading in bed when there were cows to be milked and fields attended to. My grandmother was born and married in villages within miles of each other, and she raised twelve children—two of them stillborn. Her life was distinctly different to mine, which is one of constant movement, no children, and a particular passion for reading in bed. There was no time for analysis, or assessing the situation back then, I imagine. I am speculating of course, but I doubt that women of my grandmother's generation had the time, the energy, or the desire to think about matters beyond the practical—beyond survival. The world is now a different place. I wonder how her life informs mine and I have no answer beyond believing that remembering honours the past and in so doing influences who we are.

My mother told me that my grandmother, in her final days, said she did not mind dying but what she would miss the most was her home. I remember initially feeling surprised and insulted for my mother at these words. It is only years later, in my own quest for community and just a little certainty, that I understand and respect the full value of her words and what she meant.

****

I am miles away now from North Belfast, Northern Ireland, and write this thesis from another North—the Yukon Territory in Canada. As I complete this writing, I hear

on the news that the Good Friday Agreement has collapsed, and for the time-being anyway, there will be no Assembly of elected representatives from both sides of the divide in Northern Ireland. I speak with my mother in the Republic, and she reports possible blockades at Drumcree, riots, more shootings. *It'll never be fixed,* she says, echoing the words of my uncle more than twenty-five years before. Despite her words, I am confident that the scene in Northern Ireland has come far enough along that a return to the former state of violence will not take place. I am reminded that social transformation is fragile and should never be taken for granted.

I feel I have moved beyond ideas as I complete the writing. I have sought for understanding of the lived experiences of others, but I also seek to understand my own place and position in this world. In this other northern environment, with communities also disenfranchised and disempowered by post-colonial disruption, people search for ways of approaching education that inspires and motivates. I have confronted my own practice of delivery and will continue to search for a way of teaching that awakens, stimulates, provokes, engages, and moves people to search for meaning within the context of their lives.

My own sense of community has been challenged. Despite the obvious hardships of the neighborhoods I walked through each day in Belfast, I am envious of their sense of place and locality. I am impressed with the commitment and devotion the women I interviewed share—not only to their communities, but to each other. I admire their honesty, sincerity, and ability to enjoy life to its fullest. It is their laughter I will miss.

I have learned, through the women I encountered in North Belfast, Northern Ireland, the many others I met along the way, and through this process of emergent writing and inquiry, to listen more, take risks, redefine limits, search beyond the obvious, trust what I know, speak with integrity, and look for the story in everyone's life.

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Appendix A: Guidelines for Interview Questions

Community Leadership Program

1. What programs have you participated in at the Community Development Centre or through the Ulster People's College?
2. What motivated you to become a participant?
3. What were your goals, objectives and expectations before you entered the Program?
4. What have you gained as a result of participating in the Program? What do you feel was not particularly beneficial?
5. Can you identify outcomes that will result in both short-term and long-term benefits for yourself? Your community?
6. Do you have any concerns about any part of the Program? About the process?
7. What has been the impact of this Program on you personally? Has it changed how your perceive yourself? Other community members?
8. Do you believe the Program was successful in reinforcing a common purpose and commitment in the participants?
9. Do you think you have further contributions to make to your community as a result of participating in these Programs?
10. How do you feel about your journey through this process?

Appendix B: Guidelines for Interview Questions

Community Leaders, Academics, Tutors

1. Community development work is often unrecognized and excluded from formal political structures. What must be done to change this?
2. What role does community education play in promoting work in community development? What is the link between education and social and political change?
3. There is a gap between community level politics and formal politics. How can more women be encouraged to participate in politics? How do women form alliances when political structure is divided along religious, class and gender lines?
4. How does women's presence at the grassroots level change things? How does their presence matter?
5. What role do women and women's groups play in the future of Northern Ireland and the Peace Process?
6. In order to move toward a participatory democracy in Northern Ireland, what must community organizations do to achieve this?
7. What has not yet been said about women and the work they do in the communities? What must they do to achieve recognition? What needs to be said?

Appendix C: Guidelines for Interview Questions

Focus Group Meeting

1. How has the Leadership Program changed the way you think about yourself and relate to others?
2. Has the course had impact on the way you do your job, make decisions, relate to your family?
3. What has been the largest impact for you as a result of your brief encounter with education?
4. Does anything you say in your transcripts surprise you?
5. Do you see your role as community activists impacting on the peace process or the future of community development in North Belfast or Northern Ireland?
6. What has been most significant for you as a result of your brief encounter with education?
7. Why do you feel your work has not been acknowledged in the past? What can you do to change this?
8. What are your greatest fears? Hopes?

Appendix D: Letter of Information and Consent

I am a graduate student at the University of Calgary in Canada and my area of specialization is International Education. I work as an adult educator at a community college in the Yukon Territory of Northern Canada where I teach Developmental and College Preparation English at the correctional centre and the main campus of Yukon College in Whitehorse.

I have come to Northern Ireland to conduct research through the Ulster People's College and the Community Development Centre in North Belfast because I believe the programs, projects, and work being done at the grassroots level has something to tell other communities about community development and regeneration.

This research will contribute to my M.A. thesis, the purpose of which is to observe, record and interpret how members of the community in North Belfast perceive the process of community development. This is a research project which will include my observation and participation, but more importantly, I will seek, over the next four months, to include the voices of members of the community by conducting interviews and participating in seminars, workshops or group discussions.

The long-term benefits of such research include possible further in-depth study in the field of adult education, community action and knowledge that informs the record on process and practice associated with community regeneration, and possibly, awareness, reflection and action that benefits the community and participants involved.

Because of my personal belief that research should benefit participants, this project will invite the participants to become co-researchers in the process and have the opportunity to review transcripts and notes and reflect on data collected. However, all attempts will be made to secure the identity of those who choose to remain anonymous and audiotapes from interviews, field note observations and transcripts will be stored in a safe place and destroyed when research is complete. Computer data files will be assigned a password so that I only will have access to them.

Your participation in this research is absolutely voluntary and you have the right to withdraw at any time. A consent form is attached granting me permission to conduct this research. Your signature on the Consent Form indicates you understand, to your satisfaction, the information regarding your participation in the research project. Please feel free to ask for clarification or information throughout your participation.

Thank you for your support and I look forward to working with you.

If you have any questions concerning your participation in this project you may contact Karen Lysaght or Karen Snoddy at the Community Development Centre in North Belfast at 284400 or telephone me at home at 667452.

Isabelle Dumont, M.A. Student

Consent Form

This form confirms the consent of ________________________________
to participate in the research project conducted by Isabelle Dumont under the supervision of Dr. Cecille De Pass in the Graduate Division of Educational Research in Calgary, Canada. The purpose of this study is to examine the process of community development and regeneration in North Belfast.

I have been fully informed about the purpose of this study, how it will be conducted, the nature of my involvement, and any possible risks to which I may be exposed by virtue of my participation.

I agree to participate in this project by doing the following:

* interview ( )
* class observation ( )

I understand and agree that:
* My participation is voluntary and I have the right to withdraw from this research at any time without penalty.
* The researcher has a corresponding right to terminate my participation in this research at any time.
* Participation or non-participation will have no effect on my position within my agency.
* All data will be kept in a secure place inaccessible to none other than the researcher.

Disposition of data will be carried out in the following way:
* All notes, files and audiotapes will be destroyed when the research is over

Confidentiality will be assured in the following way:
* No real names will be mentioned in the results of the research.

Anonymity will be assured in the following way:
* Fictitious names and codes will be used for interview participants.

Data will be:
* Coded in numbers so that participants cannot be identified.
* ID numbers and identifiers will be kept on a separate sheet of paper and in a separate place.

Participants will be included in the process and invited to:
* Review transcripts of interviews.

The benefits involved in participating in this study will:
* Contribute to generation of knowledge.

The risks involved in participating in this study include:
* Identification through comments.

Steps taken to reduce risks:
* Omit specific topics from discussion
* Encourage participant to withdraw from the study

I agree to the tape recording of my interview and understand the tapes will be erased following the completion of the research project.

I understand the results of this research will be used for publication, presentation to scientific groups etc. I do not object to this use of the research data.

I have read the consent form and I understand the nature of my involvement. I agree to participate within the stated parameters.

As an active participant in collaborative research, I would like my input recognized in the following way:

____

____

____

Name of Participant:________________________

Signature of Participant:________________________

Date:________________________

EDUCATION JOINT RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

CERTIFICATION OF INSTITUTIONAL ETHICS REVIEW

This is to certify that the Education Joint Research Ethics Committee at The University of Calgary has examined and approved the research proposal by:

Applicant: Isabelle Dumont

of the Department of: GDER

entitled: "The Ulster People's College: Bridge to a Community Divided."

(the above information to be completed by the applicant)

98-05-18 — Date

Muriel C. Coryat — Chair, Education Joint Research Ethics Committee

Appendix E: Human Research Ethics Approval