

TOMOKO SAKAI

# Humour and the Plurality of Everyday Life

## Comical Accounts from an Interface Area in Belfast

**Abstract:** This article examines self-referential humour in narrative accounts about experiences of conflict and community division, based on fieldwork undertaken in an interface area in Belfast in the late 2000s and in the 2010s. It has been a classic approach within anthropological studies of humour and jokes to focus on their socially or politically subversive nature. Some anthropologists, however, have viewed this approach sceptically, pointing out the Janus-faced nature of laughter that can turn against the weak, or the ambiguity that humour carries. Sharing the understanding that ambivalence and ambiguity are humour's intrinsic features, this article argues that these very features make humour crucial to people's everyday recollections and interactions in a post-conflict, still-much divided, society. Self-comicalisation helps people produce distance, either from themselves or the social group to which they belong, and direct attention to the absurdity of daily life under a long-term conflict in which mundane, day-to-day concerns and intense violence and suffering all flow in parallel. Jokes and comical storytelling capture this plurality of everyday life, which can be shared across the community division. Through attempting to sound out what could and could not be joked about, moreover, people seek out possible interactions in unfamiliar and uncertain relationships.

**Keywords:** ambiguity, conflict, everyday experiences, humour, Northern Ireland

### The Bizarreness of Everyday Experiences of Community Divide

It was the summer of 2007, at a community centre in Belfast, Northern Ireland. I was with five women sitting around a table over tea, following a gathering of a cross-community workshop held once a week during the summer. It was a project attempting to provide opportunities to residents of two neighbouring areas, one Catholic (Area A) and one Protestant (Area B), to get to know each other and nurture mutual understanding. I had started visiting their gatherings – which were attended by approximately 20 people, mostly women – some weeks earlier, for fieldwork. The workshop facilitator had rich teaching experience, and it was likely her dual background – born as a Protestant and married to a Catholic person – helped the workshop run smoothly. Hearing that I was interested in everyday life during the Troubles and community relationships, the facilitator asked some of the attendees to stay after the workshop to share their stories with me.



After chatting for ten or twenty minutes, I asked them if they had had opportunities before the Troubles to interact with anyone from the other community. Some women appeared to ponder this question before one woman in her eighties, Sandra,<sup>1</sup> started talking about an episode from her past. When Sandra was in her twenties, while her husband was away for work, she and her young child had stayed for a few nights with her friend's Catholic family. One day during this stay, when the Catholic family were all out, Sandra, feeling thirsty after doing housework for her friend, picked up a bottle in the sitting room and had 'a wee cup of it'. Later, on coming home, her friend discovered it and expressed bafflement. The bottle had in fact contained holy water.

'Did you, really? The holy water?' The facilitator woman said, unable to help laughing, as were the others in the room, both Sandra's daughter who had accompanied her and two Catholic women. I was laughing too. I asked how the holy water had tasted. Sandra answered, 'I don't remember', then added that maybe it had no taste.

The episode was odd in a heart-warming way, demonstrating the friendship of two women across entrenched political and social boundaries. At the same time, it also exposed the difficulty inherent in familiarising oneself with everyday details of somebody from a different background. Sandra had no idea what a holy water bottle would look like, or, she had not considered that drinking the holy water would bewilder her friend that much. And it did not occur to the friend that somebody could ever think of drinking from that bottle. The story is not about the tragic community divide, nor about the noble love for peace, but instead hints at the strange, fragmented and contradictory everyday reality experienced in a divided society.

Presumably, Sandra's story felt relevant to the women who were at the scene. At the time of the workshop, in 2007, nearly nine years had passed since the Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement that had marked 'an end' to the thirty years of political-ethnic conflict in Northern Ireland. This conflict, fought between the British Army, Irish republican paramilitaries and Protestant paramilitaries, had killed over 3,500 people, including many non-combatant civilians. On one hand, armed violence was still fresh in the memory of people in Belfast, and some paramilitary groups were still active. On the other hand, media reports were flooded with references to 'reconciliation' and 'peace building', and EU-funded cross-community activities were happening all over the city, one of which was the above-mentioned workshop. Although many of the people taking part in these activities would have sincerely engaged in finding ways to communicate across the divide, they would have occasionally flinched at the stark differences between the two communities. Sandra's self-referential humour captured the perplexity shared by participants from both backgrounds.

While conducting fieldwork or interviews on experiences of war or conflict, ethnographers sometimes encounter scenes in which the storyteller inserts comical episodes, or jokes, in the midst of their stories about the violent period. Not

much analysis, however, has been conducted on such accounts.<sup>2</sup> This may partially be due to a fear that emphasis on laughter may lead to a failure to engage seriously with people's suffering. This represents a deep-rooted view, traceable back to Ancient Greece, that comedy represents an insignificant type of human experience (e.g. Aristotle 1927). Nevertheless, there are some aspects of war or conflict-related experiences, and everyday practices of people living in conflict situations, which are approachable only through a focus on humour, jokes and laughter.

It has been a classic approach within anthropological studies of humour and jokes to focus on their socially or politically subversive nature. In the much-cited *Weapons of the Weak*, Scott (1985) placed laughter in the context of the power struggle between the ruling and ruled classes, considering the humour of the lower class as a disguised form of challenge to the status quo, together with folktales, gossip, rumours and grumblings that mock elites and their values. While recognising its importance, however, some anthropologists have viewed this resistance approach sceptically, pointing out the Janus-faced nature of laughter that can be also conformist and immoral (Goldstein 2003; van Roekel 2016), or the ambiguity that humour carries (Boyer and Yurchak 2010; Swinkels and de Koning 2016; Kuipers 2016). Sharing the understanding that ambivalence and ambiguity are humour's essential features, this article argues that these very features make humour crucial to people's everyday recollections and interactions in a post-conflict, still much-divided, society. By focusing on self-referential humour about violent periods, in particular, I claim that self-comicalisation helps people produce distance, either from themselves or the social group to which they belong, and direct attention to the absurd, contradictory plurality that characterises everyday life in a precarious situation.

### **Ambivalence, Ambiguity and Self-distancing**

Humour has been an intriguing topic for anthropology, as it 'provides insight into local norms, paradoxes, and taboos, and allows us to understand social inequalities and power relations' (Swinkels and de Koning 2016: 8). Anthropologists have also noted that it is a topic that requires an interdisciplinary perspective (Bateson 1969; Apte 1985; Wasilewska 2013). In speech acts, humour appears in the practices of joking and comical storytelling that cause the interlocutor to find something funny, often leading to laughter. Thus humour, jokes/joking and laughter are all different concepts. They are, however, interrelated concepts and are often discussed together or side by side (Apte 1985; Wasilewska 2013; Sciama 2016). In philosophy and cultural history, the word 'laughter' is frequently used to refer to an overarching concept that includes expressions, accounts and attitudes meant to extract laughter (e.g. Bergson 2005; Bakhtin 1984). In order not to cut off theoretically relevant insights by focusing rigorously on one word, this article sets a relatively wide scope of inquiry, to include humour, laughter, joking

and comical storytelling. This article focuses especially on self-referential types of joking and laughter.

Some influential anthropologists have discussed humour, jokes or laughter through a focus on their liberational or revolutionary qualities. Bateson (1969) has stressed the power of humour to free our mind from rigid logic, a similar argument to that suggested by Douglas in which a joke offers 'one accepted pattern . . . confronted by something else', and 'all jokes have this subversive effect on the dominant structure of ideas' (1968: 364). Scott's (1985) discussion of laughter, mentioned in the introduction, echoes this theoretical line, though he placed laughter more explicitly in the context of the power struggle between the ruling and ruled classes. There is an overthrow of a power relationship when lower classes laugh at the aesthetics and code of conduct that are dominant among the ruling class. It is worth noting that this challenge, a seemingly liberating and empowering practice, is paradoxically based on the classic categorisation of the laughable as the ignoble. Laughter can be a form of aggression through its contemptuous gaze and thus can become a 'weapon of the weak'.

Though Scott's theorisation is gripping, scholars have questioned the extent to which jokes and laughter can trigger social change. First, as Goldstein notes, laughter can be regarded as an 'escape valve', a means by which suppressed sentiments are released, thus making people return to normal conditions of subordination once the pent-up frustration has been released. In this way, laughter merely serves to sustain the existing power structure (Goldstein 2003: 6). Second, jokes can also serve to extract laughter from the immoral and the taboo, for instance regarding violence (van Roekel 2016). Third, humour is intrinsically ambiguous and ambivalent, thus 'the possibility of humour to unite people in a moral consensus' is highly doubtful (Kuipers 2016: 126).

These discussions and criticisms resonate with studies of humour and laughter in other disciplines within the humanities. Michael Bakhtin's (1984) well-known discussion of the carnivalesque in the Middle Ages, frequently cited in anthropological works (e.g. Goldstein 2003; Besnier 2016; Sciana 2016; van Roekel 2016), regarded laughter cast against the values of the ruling class as the central resource of the subversive power of ordinary people. On the other hand, studies have also demonstrated that laughter as a form of aggression can turn against the vulnerable, weak and less privileged. Jokes using and recreating stereotypes of the Other, such as those relating to nationality, ethnicity, race or religion, have an important place in everyday conversations that reconstruct social divides (Weaver 2011; Kessel and Merziger 2012). According to Rürger (2009), historical studies on war-time humour have also seen a contrast between two groups, one portraying it as subversive to authority, and the other focusing on laughter mobilised for the national war effort, or to reinforce existing power structures. The cultural historian Peter Gay points out the 'dilemma' in studies on laughter: 'Wit, humor, the comic . . . are exceedingly ambiguous in their intentions and their effects prudent and daring, conformist and rebellious in turn' (1993: 373).

The undeniable ambivalence of humour and laughter discourages analysis; it appears as if no clear-cut conclusion can be extracted in relation to the subject. Nonetheless, it is still worthwhile exploring the mechanisms through which humour's ambiguity and ambivalence are generated, and the social, political and historical situatedness in which these features become significant and is sought-after, even if 'no one can "pin down" the meaning of jokes' (Kuipers 2016: 126).

Douglas, though often regarded as typifying the 'resistance approach', provides another layer of understanding. When she writes that a joke 'brings into relation disparate elements in such a way that one accepted pattern is challenged by the appearance of another which in some way was hidden in the first' (Douglas 1968: 365), we can interpret this 'challenge' as occurring in various settings, not only in the context of class struggle. Relevant to this is the view that incongruity forms the basis of laughter, as suggested by Kant, Schopenhauer and Bateson. 'Humour disrupts normal communication forcing hearers to make sense of some incongruity, to discard contextually obvious meanings and to look for obscure interpretations outside the current topic and activity' (Norrick 2006: 88). Resonant with this is Boyer and Yurchak's (2010) discussion regarding how a certain type of parody can, unlike direct opposition, break the normal frame of perception and make that which is unthinkable recognisable.

The incongruity introduced by humour, which blurs 'normal' or 'accepted' meanings, opens up a vision for alternative context and interpretations. This awareness of multiplicity places distance between people and the initial (accepted) value, meaning and context. Here, we recall Bergson's discussion of comedy, where he notes that 'the *absence of feeling* . . . usually accompanies laughter' (2005: 2, italics original). Things that conjure-up solemn sympathy, pain, fear and pity would not produce the comical. To laugh at something, one needs to 'step aside' and 'look upon life as a disinterested spectator' (2005: 2). In other words, emotional distance is an essential feature of laughter, and this seems crucial for the practice of talking comically about one's own hardships. Donna Goldstein, who examined humour among women living in extreme financial and family uncertainty in urban Brazil, subtly described its funny, but uneasy, nature and wrote that humour is 'one of the few ways of escaping pain and human suffering' (2003: 15). To Goldstein, her respondents seemed 'to be laughing in spite of their suffering. Or because of it' (2003: 16). An echo is heard in a phrase on the back cover of a pamphlet of testimonies published by a women's group based in West Belfast: 'Sure if you didn't laugh, you'd cry!' (Tar Anall 50+ Group nd). Laughter can be a momentary escape from an unendurable reality of war (cf. Le Naour 2001).

Though self-directed laughter about wartime experiences represents a form of emotional distancing, the fact that humorous episodes are born out of people's awareness of the multi-layered nature of reality and human experience, or emerge as people recognise this nature, means that it also takes on further,

reflective meaning. The absence of feeling explains why laughter can be aggressive when directed at others, but when self-directed provides for that person an alternative perspective from which to see their own situation, and the world more generally.

## **The Troubles in Northern Ireland and Background on Data Collection**

Northern Ireland refers to six historical counties in the north-eastern part of Ireland that remained within the United Kingdom, separated from the other 26 counties that became independent in 1922.<sup>3</sup> The separation was due to the shared interests of Protestant populations that had strong social, political and economic links to mainland Britain. After the separation, Northern Ireland was ruled by Protestant-unionists, and the Catholics, a majority of whom identified as Irish rather than British, lived with many social and economic disadvantages. Against a backdrop of ethno-religious inequality, violent disturbances broke out in the late 1960s, and the conflict continued for 30 years until the Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement was signed by the UK and Irish governments, and by major Northern Irish political parties.

The agreement and the subsequent political process brought about significant changes in Northern Irish society. Power-sharing between the two largest groups, the Protestant-unionist and the Catholic-nationalist, eventually became a reality, even if it has been suspended several times over the last 20 years. The British and Irish governments now publicly recognised the birthright of the people of Northern Ireland to be accepted as Irish, or British, or both. Although paramilitary activity occasionally resurfaces, organised violence is not at the same level experienced in the 1970s and 1980s. However, society remains deeply divided. Most children attend either Protestant state schools or Catholic private schools.<sup>4</sup> Residential areas, especially lower-income ones, are highly segregated. The community labels, British Protestant and Irish Catholic, are still alive in many aspects of social life, although ethnic and racial minorities have become more socially visible (McVeigh and Rolston 2007). The divides are particularly perceptible in interface areas where Protestant and Catholic working-class populations meet. Different from 'sanctuary spaces', or areas that are situated deep inside a large Protestant or Catholic territory (Feldman 1991: 35), interface areas often formed the frontlines of inter-paramilitary violence and were the stage for street riots among residents.

This historical process seems to have shaped a specific atmosphere which frames the humour in Northern Ireland. According to Zelizer, '[I]n many severely conflict-affected societies, joking about war, violence, or trauma may be something at least socially acceptable or tolerated, while these types of jokes might be seen as completely insensitive in societies that have not experienced widespread violence' (2010: 2). In Northern Ireland too, it is publicly under-

stood that the experience of the Troubles redrew the line between the laughable and non-laughable. In a BBC radio podcast released on 4 September 2018 titled 'Conflict Comedy', comedian Diona Doherty claimed that, 'Here in the north, the humour is unique. Darker than both Southern Irish and nearby Scottish, it stands apart'. It would be too 'close to the bone', and those who were from outside Northern Ireland would find it difficult to laugh at such humour. The programme went on to identify two important features of Northern Irish jokes: first that they point out truths unutterable by others, similar to a medieval court jester; and second, despite this revelatory potency, there are certain things that simply must not be joked about. A joke regarding individual incidents in which somebody was killed, for instance, is inappropriate in most situations. Individual killings can be sometimes laughed about, but only in very limited, private settings, and only with a limited range of people. From this, we can see that those who lived through the violent conflict, or are still living in the midst of it, have carefully tried to delineate the ethical boundaries of humour, groping for the edge at which hitherto untold truths can be pointed out, but over which one should never pass.

In his ethnography focusing on a town near the North–South Irish border in the 1980s, Kelleher (2003) writes about the importance of jokes in people's everyday interactions. He describes the way people refashioned history, power structures and the political meaning of local places as they joked about 'what-if' fantasies in their daily chats. His work shows that the ethno-religious divide and power relationships, as history as well as ongoing social reality, were resources for local people to re-imagine, and work on, the world order and social values through joking practices. The stories told by residents examined in this article show similar practices in their negotiation with history and with a physical and social divide constituting their everyday environment, within a precarious political and social setting.

I began field research in Northern Ireland in 2002, interested in memories of the conflict. Since then, I have visited Belfast nearly ten times. I have interviewed people living in several working-class areas, both Protestant and Catholic, and conducted ethnographic fieldwork in one predominantly Catholic interface area, which I call 'Area A' in this article. Area A is populated by a couple of thousand and is surrounded by a much bigger Protestant area. It is enclosed by so-called 'peace walls', with only a few gateways to get in and out. During interviews and in casual conversation, people often joked or told stories in a comical manner. Although I was initially not certain how to examine these accounts academically, after several years of fieldwork fragments of conversations started to cohere into distinct themes.

During fieldwork, I have encountered some jokes that puzzled me. One of these occasions was a conversation between two local women, in which one of them joked about her experience of having lost her own house because of sectarian threats at the breakout of the Troubles. She commented that it had been

taken because she had maintained it in a good condition, to which her friend, who had known the first woman from childhood, laughed cheerfully in response. I was perplexed. I had heard other interviewees narrate similar experiences of displacement and how tough it could be to go through. This joke made me reconsider how everyday life for many people in Belfast, and everyday modes of interaction, differed from my initial perception. This does not mean that this woman's experience was insignificant. Rather, it suggests that people's descriptions of violence are multi-faceted, and that careful attention to the subtlety contained within them is required.

It should be noted, too, that there were occasions in which I did not understand jokes between local people. Comedy is deeply dependent on contextual understandings: '[Comic effects] refer to the customs and ideas of a particular social group' (Bergson 2005: 4). I was a social outsider, a visitor from a distant East Asian country, who did not share subtle understandings with local people about their relationships, community politics and experiences of living through a conflict. However, I believe that some of the features of their humour are noticeable from the perspective of an outsider, and I hope that this article is able to portray these features.

The data examined in this article were collected during the cross-community workshop in 2007, and my fieldwork in 2014 when I conducted research on everyday experiences of community segregation.<sup>5</sup> The data gathered in 2014 are from conversations and interviews with three women from Area A and Area B, the latter of which is a Protestant area adjacent to Area A. None of the three women were active members of paramilitary organisations, to the best of my knowledge, although they indicated that they each had neighbours who were involved, as many residents in their areas did. The respondents who appear in this article are all women, and this certainly limits the scope of the discussion. My fieldwork data suggest that men's and women's humour have different characteristics, largely because their experiences of the conflict were very much gendered ones (Aretxaga 1997). These gender-rooted differences, though significant, are beyond this article's analytical scope, and further data analysis and literature review are required.

At the time of writing (late 2021), seven and fourteen years have passed since the data were collected. Northern Irish society has seen significant political changes since the interviews. A notable change since 2014 is obviously Brexit, which has rendered visible a new social divide, partially overlapping with, but not identical to, the old Protestant-or-Catholic divide (Gormley-Heenan and Aughey 2017). More people may have begun reconsidering their British or Irish identities, seeing them as multi-layered and fluid. Nevertheless, Northern Irish society is still dealing with social divides and the memory of violence, a context shaping the meaning of humour, and the features of war- or conflict-related humour discussed in this article have not lost their significance.



## The Scrap Merchant

The late 1960s and early 1970s saw serious sectarian violence in many interface areas across Belfast. Houses were set ablaze, and stones and petrol bombs were thrown on the street. Owing to fear and intimidation, a large number of people moved from mixed- to single-religion/ethnic areas (Bardon 1992; Shirlow 2003). The violence was so severe and widespread that it was unmanageable by the police, leading to the formation of local vigilante groups in many working-class communities, including Area A. These vigilantes carried out night patrols and erected barricades at the entrances to the area.

An account by Rosemary, a Catholic woman born in the 1950s, demonstrates how distance from community political ideology can be negotiated, after several decades, through the use of comical tone in storytelling. I came to know her through the cross-community workshop mentioned at the beginning of this article (she was present at the scene of the holy water episode) and visited and interviewed her several times. One day in 2014, at my request, she talked about how she maintained her everyday routine in the initial stages of the Troubles when sectarian violence was at its height, stressing that the area had been besieged and was without many facilities and services. I asked her when the peace walls started to be erected in her area, to which she answered that it was not very early.

Rosemary: Back then, the streets were blocked by man-made barricades. And then the Army came, and they were taken down [...] They were barricades made up of scraps and . . . There's a funny story. There was a man who lived down here, and he was a scrap merchant. [...] People brought their washing machines and broken fridges for the barricade, and he used to go and take them, put them on his cart, and [laughing] made money out of them.

TS (Author): Oh, [laughter] so, no matter how many times people brought . . . their washing machines . . .

Rosemary: Yeah. Washing machines. He took them all [laughter]. But to tell you the truth, if a tank had come, I mean, it could have driven through. [Laughing] It was just matchwood, but it was a status symbol, barricade.

The history of intense violence led to the development of a 'self-defence' spirit deeply rooted in each community. Rosemary was also involved in local vigilante activity together with her husband in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Considering this, her funny and charming description of the scrap merchant and her comparison of the community barricade to 'matchwood' are interesting. It is important that she did not criticise the scrap merchant who had not shared the community cause and embezzled goods from the barricade. She made it clear that the vigilante activity was a matter of community pride, but distanced herself from this pride by describing her community in a humorous manner, as people taking seriously something as insignificant as matchwood. Her story shows tol-

erance towards those in the community who did not follow collective action and were financially vulnerable, while also deconstructing the sole righteousness of community ideology, that is, the need for the community to be united for self-defence. This deconstruction, however, was performed without engaging in direct criticism, thus opening up the past towards the plurality of value.

### **'Make Sure You Have a Boy'**

Another story, told by Rita (a resident of Area A, who had been born in the 1940s), concerning the recollection of a joke exchanged in the past, sheds light on memory discordance in her social relationships. Rita has also been one of my long-term informants. On an afternoon in 2014, I was in her dining kitchen and she was telling me about the everyday difficulties she had been through in the 1970s and 1980s. She had lost her husband at an early stage of the conflict, shortly after the birth of her final child. She did not have close relatives nearby who could support her, and it was financially and mentally difficult to bring up children by herself. During her recounting of this period, she mentioned an episode that occurred when her youngest child was born.

At that time, the Troubles had already broken out and the main streets to and from the area were all barricaded. When she went into labour, her neighbour drove her across the barricade to the hospital in the city centre. Approaching the barricade, they saw several local men standing guard. 'Then one of the men said to us when we passed through the barricade: "Make sure you have a boy, Rita, 'cos we need more men to stand here"'.

I laughed. Rita shrugged. She was no doubt thinking, maybe just as she had 40 years before, that this was a ridiculous remark to say to a woman who was about to deliver a child. She expressed, however, neither real frustration nor antipathy towards her neighbour's joke, but fondness, or nostalgia, towards such banter. Such an interaction may have indicated a 'joking relationship' in which one is socially permitted to tease another and the other is required to take no offence, and which signifies the establishment of a social connection, noted by Sciamia (2016: 3) in reference to Radcliffe-Brown.<sup>6</sup>

One could speculate that only those who were untouched by the violence would be able to speak about the conflict with humour. Nevertheless, I encountered people who were violently affected by the Troubles also joking about events during the conflict, including Rosemary and Rita. Rosemary once lived in a house facing 'the other side', a Protestant area, when she and her family were repeatedly caught up in violent sectarian riots. On one occasion, stones and petrol bombs were thrown into her house, shattering almost all the windows on one side. Her daughter told me, 'It was after that we put grills on the window.'

Rita was not only a direct relative of a victim of the Troubles, but her relationship with the community had, for the previous ten years, also been difficult.

Several years after the Belfast Agreement, she discovered that one of the factors that triggered the death of her husband was a failure on the part of someone in her own community, a fact known by many of her neighbours. As a result of this, Rita's trust in the community was deeply damaged. She said she had no interest in knowing who was responsible for her husband's death, but she 'couldn't stand the cover-up'. Rita struggled with this distrust, and every time I visited her she talked about her anger and pain, something which remained unchanged in 2019 when I last visited her.

During the interview in 2014, it was while recounting this story and the agony associated with it that Rita rather abruptly mentioned the joke by the man at the barricade. Responding to her account, I said, 'People here talk about difficult times with humour.' She replied, 'Yes, otherwise we cannot live on'. Even among her painful memories she was able to recall a moment of laughter, evocative of her community life and a relationship she once had with her neighbours where they could crack jokes. This memory neither resonated with the anger she felt over her husband's death nor did it seem to ease her pain. It was as though another tune was playing in her narrative, another aspect of her community life that was overshadowed by what followed.

## Peace Walls

Rosemary and Rita's episodes took place at the beginning of the Troubles in the early 1970s, representing humorous moments from the past. The final story I present here occurred after the Belfast Agreement, and instead represents laughter cast forward, toward the future. The target of the joke in question was the unresolved social division and segregation that was maintained and symbolised by physical barriers, namely, the so-called 'peace walls'.

From the late 1970s, security forces in Northern Ireland began to erect 'peace lines' or 'peace walls' at the community borders to prevent sectarian riots. Made of bricks, steel boards or fences, peace walls became taller and increased in number each year, cutting off interactions between Protestants and Catholics. Most peace walls remain in place across Belfast, and their number reportedly increased after the agreement.<sup>7</sup> Peace walls are widely understood to have blocked off daily communication between communities, recreating a divide between the community visions on history and society (Jarman 2008; Gormley-Heenan and Byrne 2012). There is a shared understanding that they are a negative legacy of the Troubles.

Area A is also enclosed by peace walls, of which the longest wall is over three metres high. With all lanes and alleys blocked at the walls, one needs to make a long detour to visit shops and facilities in the neighbouring areas. According to local residents, furthermore, objects were thrown from across the wall, including golf balls, stones and lit fireworks, when local community tensions were high. I

have occasionally asked people in the area for their feelings about the walls. Not many people gave clear answers; it was not easy for them to imagine a life without walls, especially for those who lived next to a wall and were threatened by possible violence. This does not mean, however, that they believed that the walls should stay permanently.

In 2014, I interviewed a Protestant woman, Alice, who lived next to one of the peace walls, but on the Protestant side (Area B). She was born in the 1960s and had lived in that area all her life. She was involved in a cross-community activity whereby local elderly persons on both sides were invited to share their stories. According to Alice, the peace wall beside her house had been erected around 1995, though it had been repaired and doubled in height several years after the Belfast Agreement. Garbage, stones and other objects were frequently thrown over the wall from 'the other side'. In reality, according to Alice, it was people coming from far away who engaged in violent activities near the walls.

In the cross-community work, we have asked this question: 'Would you like to see peace walls coming down?' And a majority of people are like, 'no, keep them up'. [. . .] Many people don't want to be bothered by the other side but just keep to themselves, and they don't want any trouble.

I was intimidated because of the cross-community work I've been doing. [. . .] my partner . . . He was coming home from work two weeks ago, and there was a bottle; it came flying from the other area. He got hit by a bottle coming over. He was like, 'You're saying these people are your friends, and you work with them.' And I said, 'I'm sure it wasn't the people I work with.' And then, three hours later, there was a group from the Protestant side coming down on my street, and they threw a bottle into the other area. They were not ones in my street.

After the interview at the community centre, Alice took me out for a walk around the wall, which had a locked gate. I asked Alice if she had ever seen the gate open, and she said no.

TS (Author): A shame you have to walk for quite a long time to get to the other area. You would have to take a long way around.

Alice: yeah, why not just . . . When I had my birthday party, girls from across the wall were up at my house. And I was just joking that we could just throw them over the wall, and send them over the gates, rather than have them walk back around.

TS: [laughter] That would be lovely.

Alice: Petrol bombs, bricks and stones are thrown anyway . . . why not just throw ourselves?

The stones and petrol bombs thrown across the wall symbolise the fear and mistrust between the communities and the never-ending ethno-religious antagonism that continues to divide the neighbourhood. Stones or bombs can cause damage to people and property. However, beyond this obvious fact, these objects also

physically travel over the wall with much greater freedom than residents do. Why should residents not be able to do the same?

Through this joke, Alice discarded 'contextually obvious meanings' (Norrick 2006: 88) and presented an ironic paradox that she and many others in society were experiencing.

In this case, Alice's self-distancing stance seems to reflect the speaker's attitude towards the future. At the time of the conversation, fifteen years had passed since the peace agreement, but there were still tall material and psychological boundaries standing between the Catholic and Protestant communities, showing very little sign of being dismantled. Alice felt that her work in building mutual trust and relationships still had a long way to go. The joke exchanged between Alice and her colleagues, humorously picturing themselves flying across the wall, shows their resilience and their readiness for change, without being caught up in helplessness. Even if their work had not eliminated sectarian hatred 'yet', they were 'still' open to trying alternative measures and approaches to make some difference in the community.

## Conclusion

This article has examined some comical accounts dealing with experiences of a violent, difficult period, narrated by women in Belfast. The key perspective used for analysis has been the idea of self-distancing: humour resituates events and experiences outside of its obvious context, shedding light on incongruity and thus suspending one's emotional absorption in the object of laughter. The data examined have shown several ways in which this distancing is expressed through humour and jokes: by placing distance between themselves and community ideology, while simultaneously acknowledging the necessity of community ideology; by recalling social relationships in the community as multi-faceted and contradictory; or by directing attention toward the paradoxical situation in which oneself, and others in their society, are forced to live.

How, then, should we perceive the indirectness of humour? This question reminds me again of the cross-community workshop in 2007, in which people were searching for the ever-changing boundary for where aspects of reality, emotions and experiences can or cannot be illuminated through jokes and laughter. The workshop gatherings were indeed full of jokes and laughter every week. When the topic of school days came up, for instance, the attendees joked about how they had hidden their mischief from strict teachers, which was a common childhood memory shared by many of the attendees, regardless of religion. In another instance, the topic of 'Marches and Festivals' was brought up, on which a Catholic woman remarked that she was born on the Twelfth of July. In Northern Ireland, this is a day of Protestant celebration marked with huge parades and thousands of British flags, which many Catholics considered politically provoc-

ative; the period around the Twelfth, indeed, has seen a number of violent riots. According to the woman, there had been a nurse at the hospital on the day of her birth who, believing her and her mother to be Protestants, had looked for a Union Jack to wrap her in. Everybody laughed.

While the dominant understanding of laughter considers it to be based on shared belongingness, scholars such as Okely (2016) argue that it can serve as a bridge between people from different backgrounds. Sciamma summarises Okely's discussion: 'When different people laugh together, mutual suspicion and reserve thus begins to give way to a positive sense of some common sentiments and outlooks' (2016: 11). Adopting this perspective as a means to understand the jokes and laughter in the above-mentioned workshop may be too optimistic. The attendees at the workshop, including some who were spending time together with people from across 'the border' for the first time in many years, were selecting their stories carefully. Among unfamiliar and uncertain relationships, they were attempting to sound out what could and could not be joked about, over what topics laughter could be shared, and what the possible interactions would be. Although I admire the facilitator and the people at the workshop who were making genuine efforts to dig into sensitive and difficult issues – there was one time when an attendee talked about her family member who was killed in an inter-community riot – in many cases, jokes were told, and people laughed, to avoid serious conflicts emerging (cf. Moore 2016). Beneath a witty episode about a Catholic baby born on the Twelfth of July, and a nurse who searched for a Union Jack to wrap the baby in, possibly lay traumatic memories about life-threatening sectarian violence triggered annually by the marches held on that date. Nevertheless, the laughter did not necessarily indicate that the unspoken experiences were being forgotten. Ostensibly comical accounts, and the women's laughter triggered by such accounts, were rooted paradoxically in precisely what was *not* being verbalised.

Besnier once showed how humorous self-deprecating accounts serve as an 'ambiguous form of engagement with a threatening and anxiety-provoking modern world' (2016: 78). Narrative not only creates order out of a disorderly past but also juxtaposes 'seemingly incommensurable opposites, such as the agonistic and the comic, modernity and tradition, or desire and indifference' (2016: 89). It has often been argued that, even when humour is of a disobedient nature, it does not drastically alter existing hierarchies because of its ambiguity and indirectness. Nonetheless, the accounts examined in this article show that this very feature of humour, that it does not oppose the dominant framework explicitly but rather juxtaposes it with alternative visions and interpretations, makes it meaningful for memories of long-lasting conflict and division, and for interacting with people from across the divide. As Bakhtin (1984) has passionately described, humour and laughter shed light on the sphere of the ordinary and everyday-ness, reminding us of the fact that we humans are all bound to our physical existence and

quotidian routine, even in the midst of highly metaphysical issues, whether theological questing in medieval Europe or during ideological conflict in 20th-century Northern Ireland. On one hand, violent conflict forces people to face unbearable tragedies; many residents in interface areas in Belfast know from experience of the cruelty of armed conflicts. On the other hand, however, people have to navigate their everyday lives during these long-drawn periods of violence. They have and raise children, go to work, care for friends, family and themselves, and occasionally make time for modest entertainment. Jokes and comical storytelling enable people to cast an eye towards mundaneness without denying the gravity of the pain, suffering and fear created by conflict. Through laughing together at such jokes, furthermore, people recognise that this contradiction and the sense of absurdity is shared by people in Belfast on both sides of the divide.

Humour inserts something unexpected into narratives of war or conflict, not only in the context of the powerful–weak hierarchy but also that of tragedy, suffering and everyday life. Long-term conflict renders the reality of life multi-layered, in which the ordinary and the extraordinary, aggression and comfort, and the fearful and the ridiculous all flow in parallel, often without integration or coherence. Humour, jokes and laughter serve as mediums in stories of war and conflict that create space for the mimesis of such plurality of lived experiences.

## Acknowledgements

This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number JP17K13588 and JP21K01082. I am deeply indebted to the people in Area A and Area B who kindly allowed me to be with them, and shared their stories with me. I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments. I am also grateful to Oscar Wrenn for his careful reading and suggestions on phrasings and expressions.

**TOMOKO SAKAI** is Associate Professor at the Institute for Research in Humanities, Kyoto University. She has examined memories and narratives of war, conflict and disaster, especially from the perspective of everyday experiences. She has conducted fieldwork in Northern Ireland, Chile and the Tohoku region in Japan. Currently, she is running a research project exploring impurity, disorder and everyday ethics. Her publications include: ‘Storytelling practices and the formation of collective experience: narratives of the conflict in Northern Ireland’ (*Senri Ethnological Studies* 81, 2013); ‘Trans-generational memory: narratives of world wars in post-conflict Northern Ireland’ (*Sociological Research Online* 14(5), 2009). She has a PhD in Sociology from the University of Bristol.  
tsakai@zinbun.kyoto-u.ac.jp

## Notes

1. The names of the respondents in this article are all pseudonyms. I have also changed some of the respondents' personal information in order to protect their privacy, to the level that does not affect the analysis.
2. Nevertheless, a number of studies have examined the mechanism, structure and details of war- or conflict-related violence and suffering through personal narratives. In the context of Northern Ireland, important works have been written by Lundy and McGovern (2006), Hackett and Rolston (2009), Hackett (2017) and Reynolds (2021), to cite a few.
3. This and subsequent paragraphs were written with reference to a number of studies on the conflict in Northern Ireland, including Bardon (1992), Hennessey (1997), Shirlow (2003), Gilligan (2008), McGrattan (2013) and Robinson (2018).
4. Only around 7% of all school pupils in Northern Ireland attend integrated schools that have a more balanced student ratio in terms of religion and ethnicity (Abbott and McGuinness 2022).
5. I have previously introduced some of the examples analysed in this article in a piece written in Japanese, as cases showing the counter values of the working class (Sakai 2019). Though I believe this analysis was valid, in retrospect the emphasis on the political subversiveness of their accounts failed to capture some important aspects of what these people in Belfast were doing as they described themselves comically.
6. Sciamia (2016: 4) clearly states, however, that Radcliffe-Brown's analysis of jokes was limited to their social function, ignoring their aesthetic and symbolic potential.
7. See, for instance, BBC report on 3 May 2018 (<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-43991851>, accessed 20 April 2022).

## References

- Abbott, L. and S. McGuinness 2022. 'Change management in Northern Ireland's transformed integrated schools: what we want is a school where you can be who you are and it's a safe place', *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 26: 576–591.
- Apte, M. L. 1985. *Humor and laughter: an anthropological approach*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Aretxaga, B. 1997. *Shattering silence: women, nationalism, and political subjectivity in Northern Ireland*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Aristotle 1927. The poetics, in *Aristotle: Poetics, Longinus on the sublime, Demetrius on style*, S. Halliwell (trans.), 4–118. Boston, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bakhtin, M. 1984. *Rabelais and his world*. H. Iswolsky (trans.). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Bardon, J. 1992. *A history of Ulster*. Belfast: Blackstaff Press.
- Bateson, G. 1969. The position of humor in human communication, in J. Levine (ed.), *Motivation in humor*, 159–166. New York: Atherton.
- BBC 2018. *Conflict Comedy*. The Documentary Podcast BBC World Service (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p06k6bq5>) Accessed 18 April 2022.
- Bergson, H. 2005. *Laughter: an essay on the meaning of the comic*. C. Brereton and F. Rothwell (trans.). New York: Dover.
- Besnier, N. 2016. 'Humour and humility: narratives of modernity on Nukulaelae Atoll', *Etnofoor* 28: 75–95.



- Boyer, D. and A. Yurchak 2010. 'American Stioib: or, what late-socialist aesthetics of parody reveal about contemporary political culture in the West', *Cultural Anthropology* 25: 179–221.
- Douglas, M. 1968. 'The social control of cognition: some factors in joke perception', *Man* 3: 361–376.
- Feldman, A. 1991. *Formations of violence: the narrative of the body and political terror in Northern Ireland*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Gay, P. 1993. *The Bourgeois experience: Victoria to Freud. Vol. 3, the cultivation of hatred*. New York: Norton.
- Gilligan, C. 2008. 'Northern Ireland ten years after the agreement', *Ethnopolitics* 7: 1–19.
- Goldstein, D. 2003. *Laughter out of place: race, class, violence and sexuality in a Rio Shantytown*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Gormley-Heenan, C. and A. Aughey 2017. 'Northern Ireland and Brexit: three effects on "the border in the mind"', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 19: 497–511.
- Gormley-Heenan, C. and J. Byrne 2012. 'The problem with Northern Ireland's peace walls', *Political Insight* 3: 4–7.
- Hackett, C. 2017. Struggling with memory: oral history and reconciliation in Belfast communities, in K. Deslandes, F. Murlon and B. Tribout (eds.), *Civil war and narrative*, 77–90. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hackett, C. and B. Rolston 2009. 'The burden of memory: victims, storytelling and resistance in Northern Ireland', *Memory Studies* 2: 355–376.
- Hennessey, T. 1997. *A history of Northern Ireland 1920–1966*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jarman, N. 2008. 'Security and segregation: interface barriers in Belfast', *Shared Space* 6: 21–33.
- Kelleher, W. F. 2003. *The troubles in Ballybogoin: memory and identity in Northern Ireland*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Kessel, M. and P. Merziger (eds.) 2012. *The politics of humour: laughter, inclusion, and exclusion in the twentieth century*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Kuipers, G. 2016. 'Follow the joke: humour and ethnography', *Etnofoor* 28: 125–129.
- Le Naour, J. 2001. 'Laughter and tears in the Great War: the need for laughter/the guilt of humour', *Journal of European Studies* 31: 265–275.
- Lundy, P. and M. McGovern 2006. 'Participation, truth and partiality: participatory action research, community-based truth-telling and post-conflict transition in Northern Ireland', *Sociology* 40: 71–88.
- McGrattan, C. 2013. *Memory, politics, and identity: haunted by history*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- McVeigh, R. and B. Rolston 2007. 'From Good Friday to good relations: sectarianism, racism and the Northern Ireland state', *Race & Class* 48: 1–23.
- Moore, F. 2016. Jokes without frontiers, war without tears: humour, stress and power in an Anglo-German bank branch, in L. D. Sciamia (ed.), *Humour, comedy and laughter: obscenities, paradoxes, insights and the renewal of life*, 98–113. Oxford: Berghahn.
- Norricks, N. R. 2006. 'Humour in oral history interviews', *Oral History* 34: 85–94.
- Okely, J. 2016. Learning from the ludic: anthropological fieldwork, in L. D. Sciamia (ed.), *Humour, comedy and laughter: obscenities, paradoxes, insights and the renewal of life*, 39–57. Oxford: Berghahn.
- Reynolds, C. 2021. 'The symbiosis of oral history and agonistic memory: voices of 68 and the legacy of the past in Northern Ireland', *Journal of the British Academy* 9: 73–94.

- Robinson, J. S. 2018. *Transitional justice and the politics of inscription: memory, space and narrative in Northern Ireland*. London: Routledge.
- Rüger, J. 2009. 'Laughter and war in Berlin', *History Workshop Journal* 67: 23–43.
- Sakai, T. 2019. Sensou/Funsou taiken no Katari ni okeru warai to Yumoa (Humour in narratives about war or conflict experiences), in M. Tanaka and K. Matsushiana (eds.), *Trauma wo Kyoyu Suru*, 55–87. Kyoto: Kyoto Daigaku Shuppankai (in Japanese).
- Sciama, L. D. 2016. Introduction, in L.D. Sciama (ed.), *Humour, comedy and laughter: obscenities, paradoxes, insights and the renewal of life*, 1–26. Oxford: Berghahn.
- Scott, J. 1985. *Weapons of the weak: everyday forms of peasant resistance*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Shirlow, P. 2003. 'Who fears to speak: fear, mobility, and ethno-sectarianism in the two "ardoynes"', *Global Review of Ethnopolitics* 3: 76–91.
- Swinkels, M. and A. de Koning 2016. 'Introduction: humour and anthropology', *Etnofoor* 28: 7–10.
- Tar Anall 50+ Group nd. *Tar Anall through the mill: 50 Plus group recalls memories of the last 35 years in West Belfast*. Belfast: Tar Anall 50+ Group.
- Van Roekel, E. 2016. 'Uncomfortable laughter: reflections on violence, humour and immorality in Argentina', *Etnofoor*, 28: 55-74.
- Wasilewska, E. (ed.) 2013. *Anthropology of humor and laughter*. San Diego, CA: Cognella.
- Weaver, S. 2011. *The rhetoric of racist humour: US, UK and global race joking*. London: Routledge.
- Zelizer, C. 2010. 'Laughing our way to peace or war: humour and peacebuilding', *Journal of Conflictology* 1: 1–9.