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Political Geography

Review forum

Dempsey's *An Introduction to the Geopolitics of Conflict, Nationalism, and Reconciliation in Ireland*, E. Reading Kara. Routledge, New York (2023). xviii+186pp.; index. US 42.36 (paperback), ISBN: 9781003141167

1. Introduction

1.1. Meredith J. DeBoom

On March 24, 2023—the same day, as chance would have it, as the ‘Author Meets Colleagues’ panel discussed herein—representatives of the United Kingdom and the European Union adopted the much-anticipated Windsor Framework. The agreement clarifies the status of the border between Ireland and Northern Ireland in the context of the UK’s ‘Brexit’ withdrawal from the EU. Its delayed and contested arrival may have puzzled those unfamiliar with Irish history; why so much turmoil over the rules for exporting sausages and seed potatoes through ‘red’ and ‘green’ traffic lanes? Such banalities, however, belie the border’s status as a microcosm of the unresolved status of Northern Ireland itself more than twenty-five years after the 1998 Good Friday/Belfast Agreement, which ended the intense period of violence known as ‘the Troubles.’ The Irish border is endowed with multiple and contradictory meanings: it is viewed simultaneously as a manifestation of divergent identities and a catalyst for economic inequality, as a symbolic separation and an everyday obstacle, and as practical intervention that promotes safety and a futile division that prolongs violence, to list only a few possible interpretations. To borrow the understated conclusion of a Belfast resident featured in a recent ‘person-on-the-street’ interview by *BBC News*, “[a]pparently it’s quite complicated” (Stewart & McCann, 2023).

Kara Dempsey sheds light on the historical roots of this complexity and its contemporary manifestations in her new book, *An Introduction to the Geopolitics of Conflict, Nationalism, and Reconciliation in Ireland*. Written with her students in mind, Dempsey’s text integrates big-picture historical context with situated discussions of contemporary street-level dynamics to trace the geographies of identity, division, and reconciliation in Ireland (including Northern Ireland) from the 1916 Rising through the immediate aftermath of Brexit. Its content and style reflect both Dempsey’s long-standing academic research and her personal links to the island. Dempsey’s positionality elides clear-cut distinctions between insider and outsider: she is an American researcher, but also one who spent extensive time during her childhood in the homes and communities of her border-proximate Irish family, participated in Irish peacebuilding programs as a youth, and lived in Ireland and Northern Ireland both before and after beginning her academic career. The style and substance of Dempsey’s book reflects this intertwining of the personal and the scholarly. Her writing interweaves geographic theory on borders, nationalism, and identity alongside ethnographic asides and a

variety of literary, musical, and popular references, from the poetry of Yeats to a scene from the film *Michael Collins* (Jordan, 1996). The text is enriched throughout by her photographs and the type of relationship-based insights that are difficult to achieve outside of a long-term commitment to a place and those who call it home.

Dempsey begins and ends *An Introduction to the Geopolitics of Conflict, Nationalism, and Reconciliation in Ireland* with Queen Elizabeth’s 2011 visit to the Garden of Remembrance, a Dublin memorial to the Irish independence struggle against Britain. She uses competing interpretations of the visit to demonstrate how and why “space and landscape become fundamental elements of conflict, nationalism, and peacebuilding efforts” (Dempsey, 2023, p. 2). The duration of the introduction explains the value of a geographic perspective for analyzing issues of identity, conflict, and territory and provides an overview of Irish history for unfamiliar readers. The remainder of the book consists of chapters on the historical and geographic context of Ireland (Chapters 2 and 3), the multi-scalar spatial characteristics of sectarianism and segregation (Chapters 4 and 5), and efforts at peacebuilding and reconciliation (Chapter 6). Dempsey returns to the Garden of Remembrance in the conclusion, this time using it to consider how Ireland’s contested history shapes debates over its future, including the implementation of Brexit.

The review forum that follows features commentaries from four scholars (Carl Dahlman, Lorraine Dowler, Edward Holland, and Alexander Murphy) and a response from Kara Dempsey. Each essay is a formalized version of remarks shared during an Author Meets Colleagues panel at the 2023 meeting of the American Association of Geographers in Denver. Although the commentators are all political geographers, they approach their scholarship from different theoretical and methodological positions and offer varied regional expertise. This breadth mirrors Dempsey’s intent to produce a text that engages readers both familiar and unfamiliar with the history of Ireland and encourages them to develop their own connections. In keeping with this goal, I asked each commentator to consider the book’s contributions to the debates, questions, and themes of greatest relevance to their own interests.

The commentaries cover a range of topics. They use Dempsey’s book as a prompt to contemplate the contradictions and ambiguities of peace and conflict (Dahlman), to reflect on the intimate and haunting geopolitics of bordering practices and their antipodes (Dowler), to examine the roles of positionality and popular geopolitics in political geographic research (Holland), and to consider the value of a geographic perspective for understanding ethnonationalism and ethnocultural complexity (Murphy). Despite their breadth, two themes emerge. First, each commentator notes the pedagogical value of Dempsey’s book for helping students and members of the public understand the historical and contemporary geopolitics of Ireland. Second, each commentator expresses appreciation for how Dempsey navigates the challenges associated with researching, writing, and teaching about conflict. Dahlman and Murphy, for example, both commend the balance

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Dempsey strikes between historical and contemporary content. Dowler and Holland, respectively, highlight Dempsey's care in attending to the intimate paradoxes and sectarian divides associated with the Irish case.

Given the difficulty of conveying the complexities of an ongoing and long-standing conflict in 186 pages, *An Introduction to the Geopolitics of Conflict, Nationalism, and Reconciliation in Ireland* necessarily leaves some paths untread. The commentators note these limitations with understanding in light of Dempsey's aims. The analysis is limited to Ireland, for example, and the broader comparative implications of the research are not explicitly discussed. The book's introductory approach also means that some of the theoretical inferences characteristic of Dempsey's work elsewhere (e.g., Dempsey, 2020), including connections to peace studies and feminist, intimate, and popular geopolitics, are hinted at rather than extensively explored (though Dempsey speaks to these topics in her response). These limitations may be perceived as weaknesses by readers immersed in Irish Studies or academic theory, but they also reflect Dempsey's non-deterministic approach, which leaves space for readers—and students in particular—to develop their own insights and connections. As a result, excerpts from Dempsey's text could serve as case-based entry points for students to explore a wide range of political geographic topics, from the role of media in the cultivation of subjectivity (e.g., Harris, 2020; Luger, 2022; Steinberg et al., 2018) to the processes through which divisions become quite literally sedimented and embodied—and are undermined (e.g., DeBoom, 2022; Mason, 2021; Raanan & Avni, 2020). Dempsey describes further pedagogical applications from her own classrooms in her response. The text's suitability as a platform for such discussions is a testament to Dempsey's open-ended approach, which embraces ambiguity and cultivates hope for a peaceful future without denying the reasons for cynicism. Accessible and concise yet rich in place-based detail, *An Introduction to the Geopolitics of Conflict, Nationalism, and Reconciliation in Ireland* is a timely exploration of conflict, peace, and identity that renders Ireland's geopolitical complexity comprehensible for a broad audience.

2. Amid the contradictory spaces of peace and reconciliation

2.1. Carl T. Dahlman

Kara Dempsey has written a book that makes several contributions to the literature in our field, not least by providing something of a model for how to approach enduring ethnonational conflicts in all their messiness. These conflicts tend to have had one or more historical periods of large-scale direct violence followed by much longer periods of indirect and structural violence that prevent a divided society from building a more peaceful future. Yet the potential for cyclical periodicity of violent conflict in divided societies presents a scholar with at least two problems. The first problem arises from our efforts to distinguish peaceful trends from conflictual ones, thus obscuring how peace is to be achieved. Like many scholars, I am starting from a now-common insight based on Johan Galtung's work that distinguishes negative peace, or the absence of direct violence, from positive peace, which is the achievement of just outcomes through social institutions, both formal and informal (Galtung, 1965). Dempsey relies on this distinction, if tacitly, so she can more productively relate a contradictory space that is at neither war nor peace. She does so with sensitivity and nuance, most notably in Belfast, by avoiding the strict binarisms that often undermine small books on vast topics. Dempsey leads the reader from the past and into the lived landscape, listening to the words of people living through a messy, confused, and violent history.

The second problem with what lies between war and peace is that we cannot know whether our current moment is on the long tail of post-war settlement or the relative quiet before renewed hostilities. Dempsey smartly eschews the pointless prognostications of quantitative peace studies, which tend to sample datasets using 'armed conflict' as a dependent variable and instead retains the ambiguity and nuance of the

situation on the ground. So while Northern Ireland, and the island as a whole, has a comprehensive peace deal, it marks not the end of conflict but a corrupted peace, leaving in place social divisions amid a conflicted landscape still burdened by the legacies of violence and the threat of its return. Dempsey guides us through spaces of ambiguities and uncertainties. We are shown landscapes of both division and dialogue that point towards both the past and the future to ask difficult questions. Is the past something holding people back from peace or is dealing with the past the way to unburden the future? Is commemoration an opportunity for reconciliation or is it an eternal rehearsal of grievance? These are the same agonizing questions that one finds in the wake of ethnonationalist and sectarian violence, whether in Bosnia, Kosovo, South Sudan, or Rwanda, and that will one day define Ukraine.

I think there is a third problem in how geographers approach these conflicts, and that is how we understand the relationship between the conflict-peace continuum and our objects of analysis such as territory, landscape, and border. Historically, our field has invested heavily in methodological nationalism, which reifies identity and territory as necessarily coterminous and mutually exclusive, even though this nowhere describes humanity. In this logic, boundaries become fetishized, obscuring the constant human cost of making them do the work of division and segregation. This same logic is easily extended to commemorated monuments, gated peacelines, muralled walls, flagged homes, and the myriad banalities that mark these spaces of overidentification. And yet these are the spaces created by ethnonational practice that we must examine. Dempsey is right to guide us through these landscapes while telling the history of intimidation, violence, and outmigration. Tacitly stated in this history is the idea that extreme segregation and prejudice are constructed and imposed rather than natural conditions, which may seem an anodyne point in the academy but which cannot be taken for granted in public discourse.

Amid this landscape of overdetermining division, peacemakers resort to small liminal places, like narrow fissures in the built environment of confrontation (Mitchell & Kelly, 2011). You can find these places in towns like Mostar, Mitrovica, and Belfast or else far-removed from the confrontation lines, in more bucolic retreats. They might adopt Charter House rules to discuss difficult topics without attribution or else engage in constructive dialogue around shared problems. As Dempsey points out, the core of these strategies is intergroup contact hypothesis, which suggests that social interaction between out-groups can promote greater understanding. As she points out on page 175, these efforts are both top-down and grassroots and neither works quickly. Moreover, I would add, contact methods of peacebuilding tend to re-instantiate 'model identities' of each group, seeking participants who are recognizable as typical or generalizable exemplars of the group they 'represent.' It is helpful, therefore, that in Belfast, Dempsey describes the outcomes of one such shared space, the Trust, and how they have successfully brought out-group members together to address common problems including alcoholism or childcare.

Yet I often wonder about the 'third space' required for intergroup contact programs. While intergroup contact focuses on transforming 'hearts and minds' at the individual level in the context of a safe space, the participants live and work in a typically less forgiving and contested landscape where constant affirmation of sectarian identity produces sometimes intense cognitive dissonance with peacework. So are these dyadic *trans*-ethnonational friendships not just a separate peace? While the interpersonal work of transformative peacebuilding makes good sense on one level, how do people change the socially embedded and physical landscapes of alienation and exclusion? Is there a broader social dimension to peace that is more than the sum of each person's private peace? As geographers, we are aware that places are not passive stages but reinforce and shape social relations, so how can we expect a small number of peaceful interpersonal relationships to survive the overwhelming force of a deeply divided landscape? How does peace survive outside of third space?

In the case Dempsey explores, intergroup contact has indeed

generated friendships and common ventures that exceed the small space of the Trust. Identifying common problems is a valuable first step in (re) establishing a non-sectarian public culture because we know that in spaces like Belfast, even the most mundane problem is coded as sectarian by conflict entrepreneurs. It takes careful mediation to break such overcoding and depends heavily on unique figures who understand the subtleties of local interpretation yet can steer participants towards productive reframings. This is not copy-paste policy wielded by outside experts but rather deeply place-based, contextual, and knowing work by locals. It is the sort of work one finds at the Trust or in a retreat space like Corrymeela. The participants in the Trust's programs have produced practices of neighborliness and common cause in a contested landscape of the surrounding communities and Dempsey is right to give over a chapter to this vital work.

Yet it must feel like a drop in the ocean when participants return home through gates, past murals, beneath flags. One must ask if *trans*-ethnonational friendships and group contact are enough to overcome these contested spaces. Dempsey documents that, at least in some cases, they are. So are they then able to transform secondary contacts, a sort of peace-diffusion? And if we are serious about socio-spatial dynamics, can social transformations reshape the built and symbolic landscape that reinforces the codes of conflict? The chapter on the Garden of Remembrance reminds us that if we accept symbolic landscapes and spatial practices as part of how identity operates, then the Queen's visit – on its face a form of reconciliation – actually makes it harder to deconstruct the conflictual identities attached to that space. Dempsey describes another such effort through the removal of a sectarian mural and its replacement with another mural that simply states, "remember, respect, resolution," a sentiment that is curiously bivalent. It could be read as a sectarian call to avenge past grievances or an anti-sectarian resolve to move on. Presumably, locals will pick up on the anti-sectarian intent because they know what the mural replaced, in which case the peace-work is done by shifting a public memory to a private memory of the passerby. Peacework moves glacially, yet in these spaces of glinting hope Dempsey shows us what "might could be."

I close with a few notes of appreciation on Dempsey's book as a pedagogical text. As someone who has been researching and teaching the geographies of conflict and peace for a while, I appreciate a text that strikes the right kinds of balance on complexity, historical scope, and conceptual density. Dempsey's book achieves what I would call 'earned complexity,' by which I mean this lean volume starts as something of a primer on the geography, identities, and history of Ireland as a colonial, contested, and divided space but arrives at a set of grounded stories set in contested neighborhoods that avoid easy binarism. The second balance is historiographical, a problem that bedevils every book about a recent conflict. If an author includes too much history, then the students are lost; too little, and they remain lost. The Good Friday Agreement is already a quarter-century old, older than even many graduate students. So why study an old conflict like this? Simply that the past is not even past so while post-war societies may be 'stabilized,' few achieve positive peace, none are just. Dempsey's book is a 'middle history' of these tensions that skillfully avoids the essentialism of deep history and the ephemerality of current affairs. Third, this book strikes a balance between conceptual complexity and empirical detail. Somewhere between a textbook and a monograph, this volume is informed by the sensibilities of current geographical literature while keeping descriptive fieldwork at the fore. The result is an accessible geography of the conflict that retains 'conceptual openness,' a text that could be joined with either empirical comparatives or theoretical treatises for productive seminar discussions. Or it may be used at a lower level to accomplish just what the title promises: an introduction to conflict and reconciliation in Ireland.

3. Intimate borders

3.1. Lorraine Dowler

Kara Dempsey makes two points at the opening of the book. First, she speaks to the histories and complicated geographies of Ireland and Northern Ireland as starting points for the pedagogies of borders, the in-between spaces of borderlands, and broader geopolitics. I share this experience as I find the framing of the Northern Ireland conflict around abuses of power goes beyond the stereotypical understandings of the conflict as a religious war and allows for a rich discussion of the imaginary geographies of border-making. The historical analysis of border-making at the time of partition through the Good Friday Agreement is a valuable framing for aiding students in understanding the paradoxes of remaking borders to align with the Brexit Agreement. Second, in the dedication to the book Dempsey speaks to her family connections that prompted a lifetime of love for Ireland. I also share that love. This is not a naïve love for 'the old country' steeped in nationalism and blind loyalty to the Irish state. Instead, it is a love infused with generational trauma, plagued by unfathomable distancing from a homeplace, and accompanied by hauntings of everyday Irish life filled with stories of family, friends, and neighbors (Till, 2005; Smith, 2020).

My reading of Dempsey's book was unexpectedly emotional for me. My aim in this mediation is to offer some comments about the book from insights as a feminist geopolitical scholar, not as a critique of the book; I think it is a beautiful teaching resource and a place for reflection and comparison for those people who embody the histories and geographies that Dempsey so skillfully organizes across scales, borders, and power geometries. My training as a feminist geographer requires understanding what *bonds* people and places across various axes of power and precarity and how these bonds challenge taken-for-granted geopolitical borders, boundaries, and the privileging of state actors over the individual. So, despite the violence of British colonialism, war, poverty, and the resulting migrations, the story of Ireland and Northern Ireland is a story of spatial, relational, and political love (see Morrison, Johnston, & Longhurst, 2012). As Ahmed (2014) suggests, love is an emotion that joins individuals, but love can promote nationalistic attachments and foster hatred for differences. Irish border-making is the story of the cruelty of love (see Dowler & Bartos, 2023).

While reading the book, I was haunted by my childhood memories of my parent's stories of the revolution and their accounts of moving to Manchester to work in the mills as the aftermath of the war left limited resources for a new generation of Irish citizens. They later moved on to New York City like so many Irish immigrants, as life for the Irish in England was sometimes cruel. Dempsey's discussion of Éamon de Valera's complicated legacy of once militant republicanism to socially and culturally conservative statesman brought forward recollections of dinner table spats in our one-bedroom apartment in the Bronx in New York City (we were a family of four). My mother's love was a swoony love for the international statesman, while my father focused on his disappointment in de Valera's domestic leadership, often rolling his eyes at my mother. My sister and I were happy New Yorkers but also pained by our parent's sadness for being displaced from the country they referred to as "back home." If they were displaced, then were we not also displaced? Therefore, my experience reading the book was intimately geopolitical, an interaction between the personal and the distant that spans space and scale (Pain & Staeheli, 2014).

An example of the shifting boundaries of the personal and the distant is when Dempsey details the laying of the wreaths in 2011 by Queen Elizabeth and Mary McAleese in the Garden of Remembrance in Dublin. This was a watershed geopolitical moment recognizing the price Ireland had to pay for independence from British colonialism at the hand of the Queen's father. It reminded me of some other intimate moments of reconciliation that can often be shrouded in the pomp of the signing of peace treaties. Most importantly, reconciliation is also embodied by the intimate. For instance, in June 2012, Queen Elizabeth, donned in all

green, and Martin McGuinness engaged in what the press called “the four-second handshake.” This political act between the former IRA leader and the British monarch appeared to usher in a new era in 40 years of a troubled history. It may have only lasted a few seconds, but the intimacy of the touch and the smiles shared between the two ended up on the front page of major newspapers worldwide. But the handshake’s significance was in the intimate details of trauma. McGuinness was a former IRA commander and had held a senior role in the paramilitary organization at the time of the assassination of Lord Mountbatten, the Queen’s cousin. For McGuinness, he was prepared to shake the hand of a British monarch whose right to rule over any part of Ireland was not accepted by the party of which he was a leading figure at the time. Ironically, the violence embodied by both McGuinness and the House of Windsor made “the handshake” a critical moment in peace building.

Dempsey’s discussion of female revolutionaries in the war for Irish independence is important. Too often, in retellings of gender, resistance, and colonialism, there is often an emphasis on the violence against women under colonial domination. However true this might be, Dempsey also points to women’s active engagement in resistance and how they broke ranks with their male comrades on many political issues, including the future of the North of Ireland. However, a deeper reading of the intimacy of resistance points to how their male comrades dismissed their political viewpoints and stated that women were so grief-stricken from the loss of sons and husbands during the conflict that they were too emotional and not rational enough to understand partition (see Ward, 1983). Similarly, Dempsey also details the arrival of British troops in Northern Ireland and how when the troubles first broke out, they were welcomed by Catholic communities who were enduring such violent acts as the burning of their homes by Protestant mobs. A former respondent once disclosed an old photo of her standing with some soldiers to whom she brought tea and biscuits as they stood to guard over her block. She said she kept it because it was the moment before it all went wrong, when they still thought the state would protect them. Over the next few years, her husband and sons would be interned in Long Kesh prison. She kept the photo in the book away from the prying eyes of her family and said, “I think they were good lads, trying to help us. They weren’t all bad; the British government destroyed all our lives.”

Dempsey also includes in her analysis a vital discussion of housing in Belfast and how this became a human rights issue for the Catholic population. Housing is critical to understanding segregation in Northern Ireland and for students to consider how the state can divide a society. I experienced this first-hand when I landed in Belfast as a graduate student doing field research for the first time. As the train pulled into Belfast Station, I was both excited and worried as I went to a taxi and asked the driver to bring me to Divis flats. He warmly explained that he could not take me to that part of the city and, more importantly, no taxi man at that stand would take me there. He said I would have to go to a Catholic taxi stand, which was a significant walk from the station. Instead of lugging a large duffel bag across the city, he volunteered to drive me to the city center free of charge and put me on the bus that stops directly in front of the flats. As I boarded the bus, he shouted the address to the bus driver, who he knew by name, to ensure I got to the right place. As we started up Falls Road, the bus driver stopped and yelled back at me that I should depart the bus. I was admittedly nervous as I stood on the steps of the bus and looked out over a paradoxical landscape of children playing next to a car on fire. The bus driver leaned into me hushedly and said, “It is ok, love; just ask anyone, and they will get you to where you need to go.” As I exited the bus, a young man approached me and asked if I was the American they were expecting. I thought, “The entire housing complex is expecting me,” but that is West Belfast, a complicated space of both proximate and distanced hospitality. I was no longer standing in front of what was considered a notorious public housing complex, the once stronghold of the IRA, or in the shadow of the Divis tower that housed a British military base on its roof. Instead, I was in a place where people from both sides of the community wanted to ensure their new guest got to where she needed to be safely. In

my mind, the static borders of Peace Lines and military surveillance waned in favor of a complicated geography where individuals enacted social mappings of cooperation rather than segregation.

After reading Dempsey’s book, I dug out an old photograph of my grandfather standing on an armored vehicle outside Limerick Castle after the British withdrawal—a ‘mission-accomplished’ image. My mother and grandmother once told me that my grandfather loved Ireland more than his family. They both understood the brutality of war but also the cruelty of love. I want to thank Kara Dempsey for writing a book that will undoubtedly resonate with students trying to understand how border-making is not a banal political process. I am also grateful to Dempsey for allowing me to explore the hauntings the book invoked.

4. Subject, object, and positionality in the study of Ireland and Northern Ireland

4.1. Edward C. Holland

The title of Kara Dempsey’s *An Introduction to the Geopolitics of Conflict, Nationalism, and Reconciliation in Ireland* effectively describes the book’s aim: to introduce the continued challenges facing Ireland and Northern Ireland across time and through space since partition, the end of commonwealth, the Troubles and the Good Friday agreement in 1998, up to the complications resulting from Brexit. To do so, it relies primarily on interviews supplemented by archival research and a close reading of the secondary literature in geography on borders, nationalism, identity, and the Irish case. As someone little familiar with Ireland and Northern Ireland, the book provided an excellent introduction to the topic from a political geographic perspective.

To build on this endorsement, I would like to reflect further on two strengths of the book. First, this book underscores the value of an outsider’s perspective in the analysis of sensitive and nuanced geopolitical questions. The question of objectivity in political geography is settled; as scholars, it is impossible to extricate ourselves from the structures, networks, and institutions that shape the world and influence our worldviews (Herb, 2008). On the other hand, political geographers have less frequently considered the challenges encountered when too close, perhaps geographically but also politically and emotionally, to a subject. Does this proximity result in biases in interpretation that cannot be unentangled from this closeness? Can we instead aim to pursue what Philip (1998, p. 270) has termed subjective objectivity—a positionality that acknowledges “the subjectivity inherent in social research while concurrently acknowledging that most researchers strive to present as realistic (objective) a picture of the world they have investigated as possible”? This is not to say that subjective objectivity in the study of a case like Ireland and Northern Ireland cannot be achieved by a scholar from and of these places; rather, my point is for us to reflect on whether some distance from the site of study makes this type of positionality easier to achieve. As a scholar of Russia and its national minorities who came to the study of Russian language, culture, and politics in university, this question of positionality has always guided my approach to scholarship, if not been something I have explicitly articulated.

In reflecting on this point after reading the book, I drew insight from the person of Bill Shaw, one of Dempsey’s interlocutors and the director of 174 Trust, a cross-communal organization based in Belfast’s New Lodge neighborhood. Shaw and his organization aim to bridge ethno-national division in the northwest part of the city through the creation of shared space and cross-national collaboration towards common aims. In the book, Shaw is described by Kara Dempsey “as a leader who was respected on both sides of the sectarian divide” (Dempsey, 2023, p. 145). This book as written by Dempsey achieves something similar, straddling the sectarian divide in Ireland and Northern Ireland. Dempsey’s background—as former director of the Irish Studies program at DePaul University who lived in Ireland during her childhood but is not herself Irish—positions her at some remove from the events described. Dempsey took up this project at the request of colleagues at Ulster University;

given her background and family experience, she is a close observer of Ireland and Northern Ireland but of neither place. More than two decades after the end of the Troubles, their consequences and legacies still matter to these places and the people who live there. Dowler and Ranjbar (2018), for example, take up how echoes of the Troubles have resonated in Belfast to understand what form a positive security and just praxis should take. The book's aims and its execution necessitate further consideration of what the role of outside knowledge and positionalities are in interpreting political geographies.

The second strength, a thread that is woven throughout the chapters, is the use of media to emphasize how Ireland and Northern Ireland are depicted and come to be imagined in popular consciousness. The literature on popular geopolitics foregrounds specific formats in understanding how media narrate certain geopolitical themes or events. The article format in which most geographers publish lends itself to this case study approach, resulting in a delimited and defined consideration of how a particular media product engenders a popular geopolitical interpretation of events and processes. Such examples are manifold and increasingly diverse; recent interventions into emergent media forms include Whittaker (2022) on memoir, Woods (2021) on digital technologies, and what Laketa (2019) terms "docu-fiction" film. Notable about Dempsey's book is the invocation of a diverse range of formats—feature films, popular music, television shows, documentaries, and even a Twitter account—that have taken up the Irish case and worked to shape how it is imagined geopolitically in popular consciousness. The complexities of Ireland's experience with conflict, nationalism, and reconciliation are reflected in a similarly complex media landscape, where depictions of historical events, those affected by them, and even the anthropomorphic border itself form a set of representations of and in Ireland.

There is value in engaging with a diversity of media formats in an introductory text such as this. Readers coming to the text without any background knowledge about Ireland—and I include myself in this category—can nonetheless draw on songs they've heard (e.g., U2's *Sunday Bloody Sunday*) and films they have watched (e.g., *Michael Collins*) in implicit acknowledgement of Ireland's effect on culture globally beyond the island. Dempsey's engagement with a wide range of popular media is implicit as a heuristic device for introducing and understanding the Irish case both domestically and internationally (Fagan, 2018).

Despite the expanding scope of work on popular geopolitics, both in terms of topical engagement and formats considered, to my knowledge there have been no case study articles focused singularly on the Irish case (though some such works take up topics ancillary to Ireland and Northern Ireland and of importance to the countries' geopolitics, including Whittaker, 2022). Dempsey's book effectively addresses this absence in a comparative fashion across multiple formats. Feature films like *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* (Loach, 2006), *Michael Collins* (Jordan, 1996), and *Hunger* (McQueen, 2008) are quoted in the book to underscore how movies shape public perception of historically relevant events. Another example discussed in the book, the film '71 (Demange, 2014), depicts life in Belfast's segregated neighborhoods in the early years of the Troubles and in turn "provides insight into some of the complex geopolitical mechanisms that provoked violence and segregation, especially for those living in sectarian ethnonational enclaves" (Dempsey, 2023, p. 100). Songs have been less frequently considered in the popular geopolitics literature than film and other formats (although see Gibson, 1998; Boulton, 2008), though U2's *Sunday Bloody Sunday*—the lead track on the band's third album, *War* (U2, 1983)—is referenced by Dempsey as a medium to memorialize those killed while participating in a civil rights march in Londonderry/Derry in January 1972.

Although not discussed explicitly in Dempsey's book, the success of Netflix's *Derry Girls* (Leddy et al., 2018–2022), a situational comedy that draws from director Lisa McGee's upbringing in Northern Ireland during the Troubles, has brought the complexity, confusion, and banality of this

time to a wide audience (Dixon, 2022). Prominent in Dempsey's book is the Twitter account The Irish Border (@BorderIrish), which is invoked multiple times to underscore the same types of themes considered in *Derry Girls* (Leddy et al., 2018–2022). Dempsey (2023, p. 9) describes the account's aims: "Through humor, the 'border' critically mocks the spatialities of governance and power in post-colonial Ireland as well as the British–Irish–EU strategies of statecraft."

Another format that Dempsey considers in the book is documentary film. *Shoulder to Shoulder* (Williams, 2018) is a documentary film about the Ireland National Rugby Union team, which draws players from both the Republic and Northern Ireland. Unlike other national teams, including soccer (football), that are divided within the island, rugby draws players from Ireland in its entirety. Sport as a unifying element of identity represents the potential for inclusive forms of nationalism. And documentary films such as *Shoulder to Shoulder* (Williams, 2018) offer another venue in which geopolitical discourse can be unsettled and questioned (Holland, 2020). Ultimately, the variety of media formats in which the history of Ireland and Northern Ireland has been represented creates the possibility for a nuanced and complex reading of Dempsey's central themes of conflict, nationalism, and reconciliation across geographic space. The potential of popular geopolitics to serve as an analytical entry point to grounding and understanding geopolitical complexities is on full display throughout the book.

5. Geographical perspectives on the Northern Ireland story

5.1. Alexander B. Murphy

Conveying the complexities of the fraught modern ethnocultural history of Northern Ireland is no easy task. Much of the scholarly work on the topic focuses on specific circumstances or developments, with a view toward elucidating certain particularities of conflict, nationalism, and reconciliation. More general treatments are available, but they tend to be somewhat encyclopedic in nature—marching through a chronology of shifting political circumstances and events. Kara Dempsey's book charts a different course. She has crafted a narrative that gives readers an overall sense of the Northern Ireland story, viewed against the backdrop of the socio-spatial circumstances that have shaped what has happened there over time. Moreover, she has adopted an approach and style that makes the book accessible to a broad audience—particularly students outside of Northern Ireland, who are the clear target audience for the volume.

It is only fair to keep the latter point in mind when assessing the book. Those who are deeply immersed in the intricacies of Northern Ireland's political, social, and cultural history may not find many new revelations in the book (though they might come away with a greater appreciation for what it means to bring a geographical perspective to bear on the subject). Students and curious onlookers, however, will find it to be an accessible, insightful discussion of the ethnonational dynamics that have shaped Northern Ireland's recent history and a study that shows what can be gained from looking at an ethnoculturally complex place through a geographical lens. Viewed in this light, the book is clearly a success. It is the kind of book I would recommend to students in a geography class seeking a better understanding of the Northern Ireland situation, and it is a study I would commend to almost anyone seeking a balanced, well written account of what has been going on there.

The book's accessible prose does not come at the expense of conceptual depth. Dempsey skillfully weaves in references to many ideas and theories—particularly in the early going—that help anchor the study theoretically without overly muddying the water for the uninitiated. In so doing, she provides depth to her focus on how spatial arrangements and strategies reflect and influence ethnonationalism, a depth that will be appreciated by those accustomed to thinking in those terms and a set of ideas to contemplate on the part of those less familiar with geographical ideas and perspectives.

Dempsey's study reflects clear familiarity with the literature on ethnocultural tensions in Northern Ireland; indeed, her bibliography could serve as an excellent resource for those wanting to delve more deeply into the situation there. Her book is also the product of field research of considerable breadth and depth. In preparation for writing the book, Dempsey spent time exploring archives, engaging in participatory research, and conducting a wide range of interviews—undertakings that allowed her to weave the voices of the people she interviewed into her narrative and produce a study that conveys many of the complexities that have shaped, and continue to shape, Northern Ireland's socio-political environment.

It is perhaps only fair to note that I am not entirely an outsider when it comes to this book. I provided a quote for the back cover, and (at the publisher's request) I reviewed an early draft of the manuscript. The latter engagement, while normally not something I would mention, gave me insight into the seriousness with which Dempsey approached her work on the book. Over many years of reviewing book manuscripts, I have almost never served as a reviewer of a volume where my input was taken more seriously. It is clear that virtually all of the suggestions I made, whether organizational or substantive, were given careful consideration, and I am confident that was true of the input she received from other reviewers as well. Moreover, she responded to input in a timely fashion, making it possible to publish the book just as scrutiny of the Northern Ireland situation was at a peak in the wake of the effort to carve out a new Brexit-driven border arrangement with the Republic of Ireland. The situation has continued to evolve after the publication of the book—it appears a deal has now been reached on the border—but Dempsey's study will have enduring value, both as a contribution that sheds light on the historical-geographical context that influences current events and because ethnonationalism will no doubt continue to be an important political and social issue in Northern Ireland for the foreseeable future.

No book is without some shortcomings. The maps and other figures were relatively few in number (surely a product of publishing requirements), but the number of figures was not the only limitation on the illustration front. Many of the maps were not particularly visually effective or insightful (e.g., maps that fail to provide much sense of surrounding context). There were also a few organizational oddities (it was unclear to me, for example, why a discussion of flags as territorial markers belonged in a chapter titled "The Walls Within" rather than in a chapter on "Ethnonational Spatial Strategies and Transgressions"). And there were places where a little more context would have been useful. The many textual references to the literature on Northern Ireland were appropriate and helpful, but at times I found myself wondering what was new in the discussion and what was more a summary of what others have concluded. It would have been illuminating, for example, to have seen more extended discussion of what Dempsey's interviews revealed that is not part of the general wisdom that is out there about Northern Ireland.

I also thought the author could do more to drive home her take-home points and explain the larger significance of her study in the conclusion. To be sure, the conclusion opens with a paragraph reiterating in general terms the idea that spatial arrangements and understandings matter, but there is no real discussion of how or why. What would the author like us to remember when considering how the locational character of contested spaces plays into conflict and cooperation? Under what circumstances can interwoven spaces of cross-cultural interaction serve as catalysts for cooperation? What lessons does this study hold for those seeking to understand fraught ethnocultural dynamics elsewhere? Attention to questions such as these could have made the book a more obvious springboard for future work at the intersection of political and cultural geography.

Making the foregoing points risks ignoring the very claim I made near the beginning of this review: that the book is fundamentally an account aimed at non-specialists that seeks to elucidate important geographical dimension of the Northern Ireland situation and should be

evaluated accordingly. Seen in this light, asking for more explicit elucidation of the study's novel insights or more discussion of its larger implications is arguably beside the point. Indeed, whatever picky points one might make, in my view the book clearly stands as a welcome contribution to the literature on Northern Ireland, one that will benefit students and teachers of geography and Irish Studies alike, as well as curious members of the reading public. It is an informative, insightful account that, in relatively succinct fashion, captures the key forces shaping ethnonational dynamics in Northern Ireland over time—one that illuminates how geographical context reflects and shapes ethnonationalism there and, by implication, carries with it ideas that are suggestive of how studies of ethnonational dynamics elsewhere could be productively pursued.

6. Moving from conflict to peacebuilding

6.1. Kara E. Dempsey

I would like to thank Meredith DeBoom for organizing this forum and all the participants of the Author Meets Colleagues session in Denver at AAG 2023.

When I teach about Ireland, my students often inquire about the origins and impacts of the partition of Ireland and peacebuilding efforts across the island. Consequently, I hoped *An Introduction to the Geopolitics of Conflict, Nationalism, and Reconciliation in Ireland* would serve as a teaching tool that examines some of the geopolitical articulations in which Irish political territoriality manifests elements of conflict, border-making, and place-identity formation. Case studies included throughout the book also encourage the exploration of broader themes including practices of statecraft, nation-building projects, sectarianism, war, and, as Lorraine Dowler highlights, resilience and peace. In this way, the book reveals how the layered meaning(s) of space and landscape—like peace and place-belonging—are dynamic, contested, and redefined.

I also saw the book as an opportunity to examine the island's geopolitical transformations during key stages: its nationalist roots, Europeanist turn, and the critical juncture in a contemporary, post-Brexit world. The impact of Brexit is particularly relevant in relation to border (re)negotiations and the role of the European Union in Ireland's fragile peace. In many ways, the island continues to become increasingly diverse and globally oriented. Yet, territorial identities remain strong and the precarious political condition of the Irish border infuriates many—proving to remain a contentious multiscale issue. I argue that investigating border processes at various scales and across physical or societal manifestations is vital to understanding complex and changing productions of nation, identities, and power dynamics throughout Ireland. To elucidate these forces, the book traces how competing and exclusionary representations of place forge geographies that weave memory, landscape, and identity into nation-building projects in Ireland.

When exploring these themes, this book also brings to the fore how space is employed and reterritorialized in peacebuilding efforts. As peace and conflict are manifestations of intersecting constructions of geography and politics, this book explores some of the agencies of war and peacebuilding that are produced through the banal, multiscale politics of power and statecraft. By highlighting the spatialities of these forces, this book elucidates how these correlating transformative elements are geopolitically situated and repositioned over time and across various scales. In this way, I hope the book fosters productive dialogues about these themes and processes, such as how societies move from divisions and conflict to that of productive cross-communal dialogue, security and social justice—what [Galtung \(1965\)](#) identified as "positive peace."

In terms of material examined, I conducted extensive archival research and in-depth interviews in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland that focus on the 1916 Rising to post-Brexit Ireland. I wanted to highlight interwoven connections that link historic events with varied

interpretations of the present. While I interviewed prominent community leaders and elected officials, I also wanted to include community members, both in the Republic and Northern Ireland. The broad scope of interviews was not intended as a homogenous representation, rather as an avenue to highlight some of key experiences and narratives. For example, in Northern Ireland, I included voices of individuals living in enclaved segregated areas. While many of these local peacebuilders, educators, and community members may be overlooked when examining peacebuilding efforts at the state level, my book elevates their experiences and celebrates their agentive actions as grassroots peacebuilders who recognize the dignity of the 'Other' (Dempsey, 2022). I believe there is great value and insight for us as educators, activists, and global citizens to access examples of local peacebuilding efforts that serve as teaching tools and sources of hope for other post-conflict sites. Additionally, I wanted to remind readers of the difference between a government and the individuals that strive for an everyday peace living in contentious, post-conflict spaces. Through cross-communal classes, sports teams, or the removal of sectarian murals, peacebuilding is forged spatially by banal, local actions and actors.

Indeed, there are important lessons to be learned from peacebuilders in contested spaces, as Alexander Murphy's question regarding how interwoven spaces of cross-cultural interaction can serve as catalysts for cooperation suggests. This year, we witnessed the twenty-fifth anniversary of the 1998 Peace Agreement, which fostered an 'everyday peace' for a large portion of the island's inhabitants. However, in some parts of Northern Ireland certain enclaves remain highly segregated. Many individuals in these places experience what Galtung (1965) classified as "negative peace"—the absence of physical violence as well as the lack of social justice and structural equality. How these places of exception and division formed and persist alongside integrated places that are interwoven within the same regional borders is significant. As one Northern Irish peace worker observed, "When I first moved to north Belfast, I was astonished by how habitually sectarian narratives are drummed into individuals here by family and community members. In this part of the city, the divided communities have segregated themselves – they attend separate and segregated schools, churches, clubs and shops, which further reinforces the divisions here" (cited in Dempsey, 2023, p. 140).

Such statements highlight the fact that segregation is not universal, but socially constructed and unevenly manifested throughout Northern Ireland. To offer insight into how peacebuilders combat such divisions, I employed a multiscale approach to describe various sites and experiences. For example, I included case studies of grassroots cross-community centers (e.g., Corrymeela and 174 Trust) that employ various methods to forge more integrated programming and interactions across enclaved communities. Carl Dahlman identifies these peacebuilding sites as 'third spaces' and judiciously asks if peace efforts within such spaces can survive outside of these centers. There is evidence to suggest that peace work conducted in third space is maintained across post-conflict space, especially when examined at the local and neighborhood scale. For example, the director of 174 Trust shared examples of cross-communal friendships that continued after individuals moved away or no longer participated in their programs (discussed in Chapter 7). There are similar stories from other cross-communal peacebuilding programs throughout Northern Ireland. If one extrapolates the presence of these relationships to Northern Ireland's regional scale, there is arguably a significant (and potentially exponential) impact as a result of efforts first established in third space. Additionally, while peace is a set of place-specific processes, there are key transferable elements that can be learned and adapted from these community centers. For example, working together for a shared goal (or addressing a shared local concern) is a critical foundation for forging an integrated society. Additionally, deeply rooted, place-specific work led by knowledgeable locals can help underpin new productive cross-communal relationships and reinterpretations of past events.

This leads to Dahlman's observation of the potentially cyclical nature

of violent conflict in divided societies. One hopes that the "everyday peace" that many in the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland experience is, as he writes, the "long tail of post-war settlement" instead of a "relative quiet before renewed hostilities." Northern Ireland remains in a perilous political state, failing to restore its devolved government due to the conservative Democratic Unionist Party (DUP)'s refusal to nominate its ministers after the 2022 election. Many fear that radical factions and paramilitaries may try to take control during the region's current political vacuum (Hayward, 2023). Indeed, peace processes are not static, for they are subject to both progression and the potential for regression. As U.S. Senator George Mitchell stated at the twenty-fifth anniversary celebration of the 1998 Peace Agreement, "If history teaches us anything, it is that history itself is never finished." The varying, completing, layered, and cyclical nature of perceived truths regarding political events underpins why I began and ended the book in the Republic's Garden of Remembrance. It is a subtle homage to James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939), which begins and ends in the middle of the same sentence, as I hint at the potential for the cyclical periodical nature of violence and peace in Ireland. Additionally, as Joyce scholars suggest, every sentence of *Finnegans Wake* is open to a variety of possible and very personal interpretations. Thus, returning to Dowler's point about the personal, so, too, are contested interpretations of the geopolitical events and processes of identity, nationalism, and belonging in Ireland.

Additionally, employing Ireland as case study and a teaching tool fosters important conversations about structural violence and racism. For example, I found that asking my students to read Chapter Four, "The Walls Within," which discusses urban segregation and Northern Ireland's civil rights movement (1960–70s), provides a foundation for discussions on race relations in the United States. I begin by asking my students to describe the historic legislative and social repression of Irish Catholics in Northern Ireland (e.g., residential segregation, employment inequality, gerrymandering, electoral repression, targeted police brutality, little/no media coverage of this repression, racist rhetoric, targeted killings, etc.). After discussing such societal and structural violence, I ask students to draw parallels to experiences of African Americans and other minorities in the United States. By building on Ireland as a case study, students are better equipped to engage in more open discussions of racialization and arbitrary divisions within the population, rather than phenotype. Some have even identified the international characteristics of both racial capitalism and anti-racist resistance in these discussions.

Edward Holland's point regarding the role of the media is also significant. By incorporating films, television shows, and contemporary Twitter feeds, I wanted to include materials that offer greater insight into complex and emotional experiences that inhabitants encounter in contested space and peacebuilding sites. Indeed, my goal for the book was to balance the objectivity derived from documented facts and events with the personal, more emotional experiences of the island's inhabitants. I believe that including historic and contemporary inhabitants' perceptions enriches the reader's comprehension of events as well as actors' motivations and aspirations. Returning to Dowler's reflective, affective reading of this book, my aim was to produce a book that informed and connected with readers. These sources also portray various perspectives regarding how events may be interpreted in vastly different ways. This may foster a greater sense of empathy, and as Dowler stated, intimacy. To quote the famous Twitter feed @BorderIrish (2019, p. 249) that speaks for the Irish border: "After nearly 100 years of being a border, the most important thing I've learned is that borders are the most cowardly form of human interaction. Opening yourself up to strangers and the new and unknown – that's bravery." My interpretation of this statement centers on challenging bordering processes that include physical political borders as well as those that are socially constructed. Senator Mitchell (2023) challenges us "to preserve peace ... and never, ever give up on the belief that we all can do better and be better." I believe peacebuilders throughout Ireland will continue to utilize space within their own situated and dynamic geographies to work for positive

transformative endeavors, both at home and beyond their borders. Viewed through this lens, I hope the book demonstrates how space is a fundamental element for repositioning former adversarial relationships and working towards a just and sustainable positive peace.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Meredith J. DeBoom*, Carl T. Dahlman

Department of Geography, University of South Carolina, 709 Bull St.,
Columbia, SC, 29208, USA

Lorraine Dowler

Department of Geography, Pennsylvania State University, 302 Walker
Building, University Park, PA, 16802, USA

Edward C. Holland

Department of Geosciences, University of Arkansas, 340 N. Campus Dr.,
Fayetteville, AR, 72701, USA

Alexander B. Murphy

Department of Geography, University of Oregon, 107 Condon Hall, Eugene,
OR, 97403, USA

Kara E. Dempsey

Department of Geography and Planning, Appalachian State University, 572
Rivers St., Boone, NC, 28608, USA

* Corresponding reviewer.

E-mail address: deboom@mailbox.sc.edu (M.J. DeBoom).