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Fostering Grassroots Civic Nationalism in an Ethno-nationally Divided Community in Northern Ireland

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ABSTRACT

Much of Northern Ireland remains divided as it continues to transition from a prolonged ethno-national struggle during a period of violence known as “the Troubles” (1969–1998). This conflict resulted in the loss of thousands of lives, residential segregation and the construction of “peace walls” that separate the two ethno-national communities (i.e. “Catholic”/republican and “Protestant”/loyalist) in parts of many of its cities and towns. Residential segregation and violent national projects in cities such as Belfast not only reflect wider regional national tensions; they often are the foundation from which the ethno-national conflicts first emerged and continue to persist and reinforce the non-inclusionary fissures between two communities. Exclusionary national ideologies, narratives and practices, manifested through parading, sectarian political murals and residential segregation demonstrate how many embody a restrictive vision of national identity. However, there are a few notable exceptions to these discriminatory practices – one of which is the subject of this paper. 174 Trust is a community centre in the divided north-west side of Belfast that is designed and dedicated to providing an inclusive, safe and “shared” place to foster a new form of civic nationalism. Through an analysis of their contemporary efforts to transform exclusionary historical expressions of nationalism by fostering a shared civic nationalism, this paper interrogates nationalism by focusing on a significant grassroots effort that may be overlooked in general investigations. As I suggest, the lessons offered by this community centre exemplify the potential of a micro-political approach and serve as a powerful model for future development within this and other divided communities.

Introduction

We use different shops, schools, parks, and walking paths. We divide ourselves with walls and stay separated. It’s how we live here. I never would have befriended a Protestant without 174 because I lived here during the Troubles and learned to fear them. When I finally met some Protestants at 174, it took me a long time to realize they are good people, too, and we all call Northern Ireland home (Belfast resident, July 2017).

Exclusionary and competing national ideologies significantly contributed to tensions and conflict in Northern Ireland. Today, nationalist scripts continue

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to be a contentious issue in the region as many manifestations ‘do not nest compatibly within the same state – they are parts of two apparently incompatible nationalisms, the Irish, on the one hand, and the Northern Irish version of the British on the other’ (Boal and Livingstone 1984, 175). Despite the peace agreement in 1998 and consequent internal and external funding to support reconciliation and cross-community building efforts, much of Northern Ireland remains highly divided along nationalist lines with strongly bounded senses of territory and belonging (e.g., McDowell and Shirlow 2011).

Residential segregation due to the tumult and violent national projects in cities such as Belfast reflects wider regional national tensions. In addition, isolation and physical separation, partition walls, and dissonant cognitive maps of national enclaves often form the foundation from which the ethno-national conflicts first emerged and continue to persist by reinforcing the non-inclusionary fissures between these communities¹ (e.g., Dempsey 2021; Shirlow 2001). Indeed, ethno-nationally defined exclusionary national ideologies, narratives, and practices manifest in a variety of ways, including parading, sectarian political murals, and residential segregation that ‘normalize’ restrictive visions of national identity in Northern Ireland.

While the existing literature that focuses on nationalism and nation-building projects often highlights binary or homogenous expressions of nationalism, there are a few significant exceptions to the discriminatory national practices in Northern Ireland. For example, 174 Trust (hereafter 174) is a community centre in the divided northern part of Belfast dedicated to challenging the commonly perceived ethno-national boundaries. 174 provides an inclusive, safe and ‘shared’ place to foster cross-community integration through the production of a deterritorialized and more inclusive form of civic nationalism. Due to a number of its initiatives and its impact in a highly segregated and fractious part of Belfast, the centre gained local, national, and international recognition for their work. Framed within the context of production of nationalized imaginaries, work to foster a civic national ideology that attempts to circumvent the ‘conventional’ binary and rival categorization of Northern Ireland’s ethno-nationally territorialized communities is significant. Through an analysis of 174’s efforts to modify exclusionary historical expressions of nationalism by fostering a shared civic nationalism, this paper interrogates the activation of national scripts by focusing on an extraordinary grassroots effort that may be overlooked in general investigations.

While various previously attempted ‘top-down’ projects to integrate divided communities in Northern Ireland may not have been successful (e.g., Gaffikin et al. 2016; McDowell, Braniff, and Murphy 2017), some local efforts to forge a civic nationalist script that narrates a nation based on territorial belonging have been successful. Because many within Northern Ireland perceive the presence of contested conflict space grounded locally through nationally bounded perceptions of place, efforts to circumvent the historic production of national difference

can be fostered in a ‘shared place’ in which to forge new relationships and a more inclusive description of national tropes. Instead of attempting to expunge the past, this community centre offers an alternative, non-binary approach through programming designed to foster the production of an inclusive civic nationalist ideology for a diverse community. By emphasizing common goals, a shared ‘homeland,’ and highlighting elements of a shared past, the impact of 174’s local grassroots cross-community programming has been significant. 174 and its expanding network of collaborators exemplify the potential of a micro-political approach and serve as a powerful model for future development within this and other divided communities.

The following discussion is built from field research in Belfast (2014–2017) and consists of ethnographic interviews combined with a semiotic analysis of relevant historical archival, recent government, and media reports compiled during fieldwork. The 56 interviews were conducted at 174 Trust. The ethnographic and semiotic fieldwork figure centrally in this discussion of how, in contrast to nationalist ideologies that are regularly underpinned by tensions and contradictions, this community centre forges inclusive, civic nationalist practices and perceptions in Northern Ireland.

Competing Nationalist Constructions of Belonging

Many scholars have investigated deliberate efforts² to construct nationalism from above through commemoration, myths, monuments, and events (e.g., Gellner 2006; Herb and Kaplan 2018; Johnson 2018; Smith 2006), all which are intended to foster a shared sense of national identity and territorial belonging (e.g., Anderson 1983; Dempsey 2018; McDowell 2008). McCrone and Bechhofer argue, nationalism and subsequent forms of national identities should be framed in performative terms which people ‘do within particular contexts’ (2015, 25) ‘and treat it more as a verb, ‘to identify with,’ which implies a more active process of doing, which varies according to context’ (2015, 17). Political geographers and other scholars of nationalism commonly divide nationalism on a spectrum between ‘civic’ (more inclusive of ethnic or national difference, often emphasizing territorial belonging) and ‘ethnic’ (more exclusive of ethnic difference) frameworks (e.g., Smith & Hutchinson 1994). Although these classifications are not mutually exclusive, Koch argues, ‘they can be useful in shedding light on the tensions over inclusionary and exclusionary modes of narrating belonging and constructing place-based identities through a range of, often contradictory, ‘scripts’ (2016, 46).

While this paper examines civic nationalist constructions that emphasize territorial belonging, it is important to briefly contextualize this effort within the pervasive exclusionary ethno-national context in Northern Ireland. The construction of Irish and British nationalist scripts preceded the establishment of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland; and, examining the official national

narratives and highly selective national memory reveals complex, layered and competing nationalist tropes within Northern Ireland.

When Northern Ireland was formed in 1921, the Irish who fought for Irish independence from British rule during the Anglo-Irish War/Irish War of Independence (1919–1921) simultaneously controlled the remaining part of the island (Irish Free State within the Dominion of the British Commonwealth) through a nascent Irish government that strove to present Irish national identity as distinct from the British ‘Other’ (e.g., Hayes and McAllister 2013). More specifically, Irish national identity is a process commonly framed with key constitutive components, including an ethno-national connection to the Irish language, culture, sports, history, Roman Catholic faith (whether ‘culturally’ or spiritually), and non-Britishness (e.g., Todd 2018). Similar national discourses resonated among ‘Irish’ in Northern Ireland as well. In addition, the newly established Irish border further stoked nationalist tensions across Ireland as Irish nationalists and republicans demanded complete independence from the British Commonwealth and a united Ireland via the dissolution of Northern Ireland. In contrast, British unionists³ and loyalists, fought to protect Northern Ireland’s political union with the British state and commonly mobilized nationalist tropes promoted by the new regional parliament in Stormont that revered their contributions to British history and identity, as well as a suspicion of Irish desires to undermine their link with London (e.g., Poulter 2018). Despite the common utilization of these classifications, these terms do not signify homogeneity or universality (e.g., Tonge and Gomez 2015).

The Northern Irish parliament pitted its British Protestantism against its ‘enemy within’ – Irish Catholicism – with ‘anti-Irishness and anti-Catholicism as central defining tenets of the new region [Northern Ireland]’ (Brewer and Higgins 1998, 87). The political structures in Northern Ireland made Irish residents second-class citizens and an alienated minority within its borders, just as many British were within the new Irish Free State. The tumultuous nature of the Northern Irish government resulted in a wide-scale civil rights movement in the 1960s that eventually descend into three decades of violence (1969–1998) known as ‘The Troubles’ until the Peace Agreement in 1998 (McDowell and Shirlow 2011).

These turbulent years further reinforced polarized perceptions of ‘Irish versus British’ nationalist ideologies (McKittrick and McVea 2002) and the 1998 peace agreement did not attempt to foster a new, inclusive civic form of nationalism within Northern Ireland. Instead, it acknowledged the presence of two distinct communities within the region. As a result, many argue that the peace agreement, perhaps inadvertently, reinforced and legitimized the adversarial and divided ethno-national nature of Northern Ireland’s two distinct communities (e.g., Wilford and Wilson 2006). Thus, while conceptualizations of nationalism and identity are complex and contested in Northern Ireland, nationalist tropes

are frequently divided along dualistic Irish (Catholic) or British (Protestant) ethno-national lines⁴ (e.g., Gallagher and Cairns 2011).

It is important to note that the politics of nomenclature in Northern Ireland reflects difficulties embedded within labels and language that often point to particular ethno-national identities in which religious labels are mobilized as ethnic-national categories. For example, while many may be labelled as ‘Catholic/Irish’ or ‘Protestant/British’ these classifications correspond to individuals who were raised with a particular religious background. Despite the utilization of religious labels, research suggests that there are an increasing number of individuals who believe these terms are antiquated or decide to identify solely with national elements, not the religious/spiritual components (e.g., McDowell, Braniff, and Murphy 2017). Others refuse to use religious labels in Northern Ireland, as they do not want to be defined by ethno-religious labels. While religious categorization may have historically served as boundary markers during the early years of the region’s formation, these terms evolved into primarily ethno-national markers in Northern Ireland (e.g., Todd 2018).

Competing nationalist imaginaries are manifested geographically in Northern Ireland in a number of ways. The socio-spatial context of ethno-national segregation can be initially traced to the period of upheaval that resulted from the formation of Northern Ireland. Building on residential divisions beginning in the 1920s, the presence of threats, intimidation, arson and physical violence during the Troubles drove these communities further apart as they ghettoized into a fractured patchwork of national enclaves. The consequent patterns of geographic division is an indicator of the spatial boundaries that persist throughout Northern Ireland and became an incarnation of material and psychological elements that resulted in a ruptured pattern of partition and conflict (Hughes et al. 2007).

Spatial analysis of violence that transpired during the Troubles reveals high concentrations in segregated working-class neighbourhoods, particularly in those with a high rate of unemployment (Cunningham and Gregory 2014). Indeed, ‘conflict-related killings were geographically concentrated in certain places, including parts of Belfast such as the Falls and the adjacent Shankill neighbourhoods of North Belfast, some sections of mid-Ulster, and rural areas near the border such as south Armagh. This meant that the direct traumatic impact of the conflict was disproportionately felt by relatively few communities. This unevenness of experience has heightened and concentrated the local consequences of violence’ (Gregory et al. 2013, 182). Today, over forty percent of Northern Ireland’s residents reside in areas segregated along ethno-national lines (Lloyd and Robinson 2010). This percentage increased during periods of sectarian strife, especially in highly contested areas such as North, West, and East Belfast (e.g., Dowler and Ranjbar 2018).

Individuals born after the conclusion of the Troubles often demonstrate identification along opposing lines as they are commonly ‘exposed to unchecked and pervasive ethno-national sectarian prejudice,’ (Muldoon, Trew, and Kilpatrick 2000, 7) which is reinforced by several factors, including residential segregation and a segregated educational system. Ninety-seven percent of children in Northern Ireland attend government-funded religious schools that are highly segregated, which further reinforces ethno-national perceptions and divisive attitudes (Dowler and Ranjbar 2018). While ‘integrated’ schools exist (see, e.g., McGlynn 2013), none of the school-aged participants in this study attended these schools. Thus, in addition to physical isolation, the highly bifurcated educational system in this area and the academic content of these divided schools often strengthens and highlights exclusionary or one-sided national narratives. This, in turn, reinforces communal identities and bounded perspective of territorial belonging along ethno-national lines (e.g., Gardner 2018; Smith 2006).

Research also suggests that friendships among school-aged children commonly align with those within their ethno-national community (e.g., Gardner 2018; Lloyd and Robinson 2010; McAuley 2016; McDowell and Shirlow 2011). Indeed, many have argued that the educational system is a ‘mechanism for the continued social division that reflect the dominant values of the communities in which they are set’ (Osborne, Cormack, and Gallagher 1993, 5). Thus, the ethno-national conflict in Northern Ireland, at its core, is a result of competing and contested geographic claims of territory, belonging and ethno-national tropes. The resulting sectarian divisions are reinforced by assertions of national heritage and efforts to control space that are commonly demarcated and defined through ethno-national perceptions. As individuals and communities contend territorially to control and claim space along sectarian lines in Northern Ireland, Flint’s ‘spaces of hate’ (2004) lends perspective to how ‘everyday geographies are constructed around Others’ (Graham and Nash 2006, 258), based upon concepts of exclusion, labels, and practices of marginalization. This underpins spatial perceptions that assume space is bounded and defined along ethno-national territorial lines.

While space is highly contested in Northern Ireland, there are local community-based organizations, such as 174 Trust in Belfast, that work to destabilize the binary ethno-national categories by building cross-community collaboration to bridge sectarian divisions and foster inclusive civic nationalist scripts based on universal belonging. Emphasis on a shared homeland is a common narrative within civic nationalism as it highlights territorial belonging in order to transcend ethno-national or sectarian divisions (e.g., Gellner 2006; Herb and Kaplan 2018). By bringing members from various nationalist imaginaries together in a community centre in order to engage in activities that emphasize a shared territorial sense of local belonging, the advocates hope to disrupt binary perceptions of ethno-national identities. As the formation of nationalism is predicated

on a division between in/out-group members (Koch 2016), cross-communal advocates intend to shift the boundary of exclusion beyond the region's border. Thus, despite residential ethno-national segregation, these individuals employ intentionally designed shared spaces to encourage cross-community engagement and the disassembling of the spatial and social impacts of divisive nationalists tropes.

Although there is no universal definition or methodology for creating a successful shared space, research suggests that it must be a safe place in which local residents are empowered with the ability to transform exclusionary nationalist ideology and practices in their peace-building efforts (e.g., Komarova 2008). Indeed, some of the scepticism within Northern Ireland pertaining to the development and efficacy of shared spaces stems from previous failed or ineffective shared projects. However, many early projects failed due to poor planning or a perceived top down imposition from municipal and state government that did not engage or successfully collaborate with local residents (Gaffikin et al. 2016).

In contrast, research suggests local community-based shared spaces can be extremely effective. Such places are deliberately designed, adapted and managed at the local level to foster integration and facilitate exchanges, 'learn' peace and permit discussions of the past. They should also emphasize widespread local empowerment, ownership and engagement for a variety of ages, genders, creeds, economic backgrounds and interests. Without these places, reconciliation and nation-building efforts frequently become foundationless and impermanent (McDowell, Braniff, and Murphy 2017).

Particularly since the Belfast Peace Agreement in 1998, regional, state and supranational governments have financially supported peace and reconciliation efforts in Northern Ireland. Many of these projects are rooted in the legacy of 'contact hypothesis' (e.g., Pettigrew and Tropp 2000), which suggests that complete segregation of diverse groups can protract tensions or conflict. Civic nationalist scripts, despite diversity, can be forged through interaction and contact, particularly if disparate groups or individuals have a mutual goal and a sense of security (Dowler and Ranjbar 2018). Thus, government funding emphasizes and supports programmes that create opportunities for constructive interactions between individuals and groups from different ethno-national enclaves. By focusing on programs that are designed to promote communication, positive interactions and relationships between individuals from disparate national communities, government efforts strive to encourage building inter-community relations (Hughes et al. 2007). Supported by efforts to promote civic national pluralism and cultural diversity, many local grassroots organizations also established or enhanced pre-existing cross-community programming through the creation of shared spaces in Northern Ireland.

Fostering Civic Nationalism in Segregated North Belfast

While much of Northern Ireland is classified as post-conflict space that is strongly localized through ethno-nationally bounded perceptions of belonging and segregation, some actively resist the construction of two mutually exclusive and rival communities. 174 strives to combat hatred, forge new relationships, and re-practice nationalism in a civic form through programming that is strategically designed to help bridge divided national communities.⁵ For example, when the director of 174, Bill Shaw, began to develop its programming in 1983, he engaged local community members throughout North Belfast's divided neighbourhoods in order to assess local needs and foster local proprietorship of many of 174's programs. He believed that effective cross-community work that incorporated disparate individuals had to highlight a common home and shared goal towards which all individuals could collaborate to achieve. As the director explained, 'When I looked around at this divided part of the city, I realized efforts to bridge divided national allegiances could only be built through cooperative work and shared goals. Then, when they started to work together on a project, they see they are all the same – and we all call Northern Ireland home' (personal interview, May 2016). As a result, at its core 174's mission is to facilitate the integration of otherwise segregated ethno-national communities through their grassroots efforts to identify and address their similar localized sense of territorial belonging, needs and goals.

The director of 174 hired staff members that offer instructive/institutional programs, daycare, and sports leagues that were designed to build respect and foster inclusive civic nationalist tropes. The staff consists of individuals from various backgrounds, including members from both of the perceived dualistic communities, and trained in mediation and cross-community development. They also cooperate with similar centres and outreach programs throughout the city and Northern Ireland. For example, 174's programme, 'Together Stronger' is a three-year initiative to integrate community members from four contested neighbourhood enclaves through 'multi-stakeholder programs that are established to discuss, identify, and advance social and physical regeneration in the area ... and aims to boost community cohesion in North Belfast' (174 Trust Newsletter, 2018).

174 aims to forge a new inclusive communal sense of belonging through intentionally designed programming that helped achieve shared goals and highlighting similarities, including a shared homeland – Northern Ireland – in 'an inclusive, safe environment for all individuals, regardless of nationalism, religion, age, gender, or sexual orientation' (174 Trust Newsletter, 2018). Its mission highlights two key narrative themes that are employed to help construct the civic nationalist scripts fostered by 174: common goals and territorial belonging. The first theme is a central tenant of 174 programming and underpins a shared sense of community within a 'mixed' group. The second theme is a commonly

employed element of civic nationalist scripts. The following section examines these two themes in turn.

Common Goals from Which to 'Build' a Civic Nation

The first major theme in this study centres on the discourse of participants working together for a common goal. The origins of this narrative began when the director of 174, a community activist from one of Belfast's loyalist neighbourhoods, believed a shared place where diverse ethno-national community members could find common ground and work for a shared goal would be integral for successful integration efforts in Northern Ireland. As a result, the director established a local community centre to serve the profoundly segregated neighbourhoods of North Belfast. As the director explained, 'Through the Trust [174], I offer a place for people to come together through common goals to forge friendships and new inclusive stories of their community and its inhabitants' (personal interview, June 2017).

The location of 174, in the New Lodge neighbourhood of North Belfast, is significant. This neighbourhood has many residents with strong republican ties while the adjacent neighbourhoods – Shankill, Crumlin, and Duncairn – are associated with strong loyalist ties. These starkly segregated neighbourhoods reflect fear and violence, particularly that which occurred during the Troubles when ethno-national minorities within contested neighbourhoods fled to homogenous enclaves of corresponding national identities. As a result, the New Lodge became a republican enclave closely bordered on the west by loyalist Shankill and Crumlin and on the east and north by loyalist Duncairn. The New Lodge's bounded geographic location and republican affiliations made the neighbourhood and its residents common targets of loyalist violence and other paramilitary activities (e.g., loyalist UVF, UDA and republican IRA, PIRA). The Antrim Road, one of the New Lodge's main bordering thoroughfares, was commonly referred to as 'Murder Mile' as a result of the high number of fatal attacks on local residents.

Driven by fear, communities erected multi-story barrier walls known as 'peacelines' to separate the communities. Even today, the New Lodge's peacelines have gates that are often closed as a result or in anticipation of violence. However, the director of 174 believed that the enclaved New Lodge's proximity to 'opposing' nationalist communities provided a unique geographic opportunity to facilitate local civic nationalist building projects.

Proximity to 'rival' national communities does not inherently result in positive cross-community interaction or community members opting to utilize 174 programs, particularly as boundaries between ethno-national enclaves are commonly perceived as dangerously contested spaces (Gaffikin et al. 2016). Fear of violence produced cognitive maps of a patchwork of dangerous neighbourhoods for residents, who subsequently limit and modify their mobility based on ethno-

national territorial claims throughout the city and particularly throughout North Belfast (Shirlow 2001). Thus, in order to combat such entrenched divisions, in addition to free and appealing programming to attract a variety of local community members, 174 also provided safe transportation via minibus and worked with several local advocates to establish and maintain safe walking and cycling transit corridors.

174 also strategically began its civic nation-building project by offering a shared place and meaningful support programs that focus on inclusive civic scripts and emphasize a common goal. Its first program was a local Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) chapter that requiring a balance of both 'Irish' and 'British' participants. This chapter not only worked to attain and maintain sobriety, but also form nationalist scripts that emphasize their mutually shared needs and goals to reframe the potentially antagonist nature of separate nationalities within the group. In essence, their goal was to help individuals to practice nationalism in a new civic form while maintaining sobriety. Because these meetings included participants from both sides of the sectarian divide who were battling the same addiction, several members began to forge cross-community friendships through the spirit of comradeship as they battled together to confront their common addictions. The chapter's spokesperson explained:

No one in the chapter would have befriended anyone from 'the other side' had it not been for this mixed AA chapter. But they come here for support and share their personal stories and struggles, and learn to see beyond national divisions. They see their shared battle is against addiction. If there's an enemy here, it's addiction, not someone from the 'other' neighbourhood (personal interview, June 2016).

Overtime, the chapter's leader strategically introduced the narrative of participants' shared homeland (Northern Ireland) to the group. The intentional emphasis of the imagined community centred in Northern Ireland was included throughout chapter meetings to extend the carefully designed civic nationalist script into the praxis of its participants that relocated the borders of belonging beyond binary categories within the region. This second nationalist theme focusing on a common home will be discussed in the subsequent section.

After the AA chapter was established, 174 secured funding for a support group for parents with children with disabilities. Again, the common narrative from which to forge a cross-national group was a common goal and shared needs. Notably, the leader of this group suggested that the parents' desire to support their children forged a common ground that united many of the participating families across ethno-national divisions. She explained that despite their different cultural and political backgrounds, the group has quickly grown to foster mutual respect for members underpinned by a common concern for their children and their shared connections to Northern Ireland.

Additionally, as a result of their children's friendships, many of the adults have begun to host playgroups, dinners, and other social events at home to which nearby neighbours and friends who are not affiliated with 174 are also included. The leader believes these additional cross-community gatherings are evidence of a newly forged local grassroots civic national community that is cultivating localized inroads into an otherwise segregated landscape. 174 programs assemble a diverse group of individuals and gave them the support and tools to work together for a shared goal, instead of focusing on elements that divide them. As one adult participant explained, 'At first, we came here for the good of our children. But through this group, many of us [parents] learned the importance of supporting our children and our entire community. We realized that in order to make our society a just and inclusive civic society, we have to reach across the divide, work together for the good of our shared future' (personal communication, June 2017).

'Northern Ireland Is Our Home': Territorial Belonging in Civic Nationalism

The second theme that appeared in this investigation is 174's efforts to invigorate a set of inclusive civic nationalist scripts that emphasize territorial belonging within Northern Ireland. The national narratives employed do not suggest that all community members are equal or homogenous. Rather, they stress that despite the diversity and unique experiences, all deserve equal treatment, inclusion, and belonging. New symbols and narratives are carefully fostered through its programming, such as the emphasis on Northern Ireland, despite its troubled past, is today a shared homeland for all who live there. For example, 174 offers a shared-reading program that is led by an instructor who is trained in literary analysis as well as cross-community and cross-border discourse facilitation. Their carefully selected reading list is designed to encourage participants to critically evaluate universal themes of conflict, loss, grieving, reconciliation, and the idea that Northern Ireland is their shared home. The corresponding discussion questions are intended to be a medium through which participants in this integrated group have the opportunity for self-expression, self-reflection, and critical examination of a shared civic Northern Irish society.

Despite initial hesitations, members of the group began to share opinions on the readings and relate them to personal experiences from life in Northern Ireland. Over time, several members began to develop relationships through a better understanding and mutual respect that supported an inclusive form of civic nationalism that emphasized a common homeland. Members have reported inviting their group members to dinners, social gatherings, and even to attend religious services with members from other segregated neighbourhoods. When the group was interviewed regarding the role of 174 in shaping their civic nationalist perceptions, many members of the shared reading group noted they

were surprised to learn, through the stories they shared in the group and their subsequent interactions, how similar they were despite their initial perceived ethno-national differences. As one participant explained, ‘after all the time we spent together at 174 we discovered that we have more in common than what divides us, and it turns out, the more time I spent at 174 with this group, the more I realized that other members might be from different backgrounds, but Northern Ireland is home to us all’ (personal interview, June 2017). Another stated, ‘Foreigners who visit 174 like to ask me why I stayed in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. The answer is always the same – this is my home. But, for the first time, this group helped me see that what I call home is also home for my Irish neighbours too’ (personal interview, June 2017).

Perhaps one of the most notable programs offered at 174 is their Youth Football team,⁶ which deliberately assembles a group of local boys from the New Lodge, Crumlin, and Shankill onto a single team. For each practice, match, and outing, the director drove a mini-bus to pick up each player. This not only provided safe and free transportation for each participant, but Shaw utilized their mobility to introduce them to other cross-community workers living in other republican and loyalist enclaves. He also took the players to more integrated neighbourhoods in South Belfast and outside of the city, all the while emphasizing that Northern Ireland is home to everyone. He strategically incorporated discussions and programming for the team that focused on overcoming sectarian divisions. In addition to exposure to the inclusive civic nationalist script, the carefully choreographed instructional excursions provided the young players with experiences and positive relationships throughout various communities and transcend sectarian lines (personal interview, May 2017).

The intentionally ‘integrated team’ technique has also been successfully utilized as a way to dismantle sectarianism and forge cross-community relationships in other segregated societies. The mixed team approach encourages teammates to cooperate together against a ‘new opponent’ (i.e., another team), thereby moving the borders of their national in-group beyond ethno-national divides. The resulting solidarity has worked to foster a sense of community for all team members, regardless of one’s ethno-national background. Over the years, their supportive experiences together resulted in longstanding cross-national friendships that are remarkable within North Belfast. For example, since teammates practiced, played, travelled and often ate together several times a week for almost a decade, many maintained their friendships while attending different schools.

In regards to some of the new nationalist practices formed as a result of 174, the group elected to leave the area every 12th of July instead of participating or protesting the ‘Twelfth parades,’ which celebrates Dutch protestant challenger, William of Orange’s victory over Catholic King James II of England, Scotland and Ireland. Instead, the team participates in inclusive community-building activities

or travels to watch professional football teams practice for the upcoming season. During this time, they are not only removing themselves from the events encompassing tumultuous ethno-national celebrations and subsequent protests, but under the direction of a 174 staff member, they deploy multiple scripts that narrate a more inclusive vision of Northern Irish society. As one teammate explained:

This year my football mates from Shankill invited me to join their friends for their sixth form formal dance. Nationalism or religion isn't an issue for my mates because we're all friends and we know we're all from here ... He [pointing at another interviewee] might be British and I'm Irish, but we're both from North Belfast and we all call Northern Ireland home (personal interview, May 2016).

It is notable that the young men commonly included their teammates from other schools to join them for otherwise segregated events, which suggests the potential impact of 174's ability to promote meaningful civic national integration. Their civic nationalist scripts have entered public discourses in the North Belfast community via 174 participants. A notable symbol of this locally fostered civic nationalism was the removal and replacement of a sectarian mural in an adjacent neighbourhood with a monument to peace and solidarity. The project, which was initiated by 174 and local residents, removed a mural depicting Oliver Cromwell's conquest of Ireland. In its place, they erected a tripartite shrine with the words 'Remember, Respect, Resolution' to honour their dedication and determination to continue to create an inclusive and peaceful civic nation where all are respected and honoured (174 Trust Newsletter, 2018). While this action may seem trivial, the director of 174 commented on such demonstrations stating:

Twenty years ago, you would never have seen anything so inclusive in North Belfast. But many of us here are decided to share a narrative of an inclusive place where we work together to reach our goals. In the end, this is our shared place and Northern Ireland is our home. I know we still have a long way to go before we see widespread tolerance and inclusion in Belfast, and particularly in enclaved places like New Lodge and Shankill, but victories like this mural continue to give us hope for the future (personal interview, May 2016).

Conclusion

174 Trust provides local residents with shared space and integrated civic nationalist building programming to address the needs of North Belfast and beyond. While its impact is still highly localized, it endeavours to empower their members through participation and proprietorship of many of the free programs that comprise a community centre dedicated to building cross-community relationships and a sense of shared homeland in Northern Ireland. Instead of focusing on efforts to expunge or erode individuals' well-established cultural and national roots, 174 aims to incorporate an additional element to forge a framework for civic nationalism – to find unity among its diversity. Its comprehensive message of 'respect and dignity for all' also transcends the gulf between the divided national communities

to celebrate individuals of all faiths, gender identification(s), sexual orientation(s), and citizenship status. The highly mixed relationships of all ages and genders that result from programming via 174 are substantial. As research suggests, 'cross-group friendships' in Northern Ireland decrease prejudice, promote new friendships with individuals outside of individual enclaves, and provide the framework for a larger 'snowballing effect' of cross-group alliances (e.g., Pettigrew and Tropp 2000).

Research on post-conflict reconciliation and civic nationalism also suggests that these focused efforts can have a significant impact (e.g., Cairns and Hewstone 2002; Gaffikin et al. 2016), particularly as 174 promotes cooperation as individuals work together to achieve a shared goal. Indeed, collaboration at the local, grassroots level in contested space, such as North Belfast is crucial in a place where ethno-national territorialized identities are common. While space may be a fundamental part of the conflict, 174's work demonstrates how the construction of social places that seek to reshape individuals' socio-spatial imaginaries of the city as 'divided' can also be utilized to foster cooperation to overcome the territorialized consequences of nationalist segregation in Northern Ireland. Their carefully developed programs integrate members from multiple communities, frequently in partnership with other community-building 'shared' space programs throughout Belfast, Northern Ireland and across international borders, thereby transforming the centre into more than a physical structure. This shared place reterritorialises the fractured geography of ethno-nationalist enclaving by fostering shared civic nationalism, while simultaneously grounding an ever-expanding network with connections that extend beyond its doors.

While 174 exists in a contentious and challenging environment, amidst Brexit-related uncertainty and recent political changes in the Republic of Ireland, it continues its work to forge a shared civic nationalism. Its efforts illustrate the value of a micro-political approach and provides an effective example for future civic development in Northern Ireland and other segregated communities. Through its carefully designed programming, this shared place has become a beacon of hope for many residents within this beleaguered and highly contested area. As Northern Ireland continues its transition as a post-conflict society, various interconnecting mechanisms, including shared governance and state reconstruction are necessary, as are local grassroots shared places that aim to erode the embedded geographies of ethno-nationalist division (e.g., McDowell, Braniff, and Murphy 2017).

Such efforts may also be further reinforced by political actions outside of Northern Ireland as well. As McAuley, a researcher on political violence in the region argues, 'In Northern Ireland, as elsewhere, memory is open to interpretation, to levels of assumption, manoeuvring and appropriation' (2016, 122). For example, the Republic of Ireland has recently launched a government initiative to 're-remember' the Great War as part of shared, national Irish memory by publically commemorating the war. Honouring Ireland's role in the war had

previously been officially discouraged and avoided within the Republic, as disputes regarding political affiliations with Britain resulted in the Anglo-Irish War and the Irish Civil War (e.g., Dempsey 2018; Dolan 2003). These recent state-driven efforts both encourage a ‘re-investigation’ of ‘Irish’ national identity and political memory as well as provide an opportunity for a greater alliance with Britain and ‘British’ in Northern Ireland. Indeed, these politically choreographed shared celebrations highlight and remember collective experiences to emphasize a shared past.

These ritualized actions may help foster the development of new nationalist narratives that perhaps do not require ‘Irish’ and ‘British’ nationalism to be framed as diametrically opposed within Northern Ireland. Indeed, Northern Ireland’s *Shared Future* initiative contends that national division is no longer an option as they promote an inclusive sense of belonging (Graham and Nash 2006). Bolstered by external reformations of previously exclusionary national narratives and regional power-sharing efforts in Northern Ireland, 174 continues to work to foster a civic national identity that incorporates diverse residents in North Belfast and throughout Northern Ireland. While the director received the Order of the British Empire in 2011 for his peace work with 174, he believes the cross-community friendships forged through 174 are a more significant symbol of its achievements in North Belfast. Amidst a protracted legacy of exclusionary national ideologies, 174 demonstrates how a micro-political approach can forge a grassroots initiated vision of inclusive civic national identity in Northern Ireland.

Notes

1. Despite the perception of two rival homogenous communities in Northern Ireland, there is notable diversity within each of the groups, including significant generational, socioeconomic, political, ideological, gender, and spiritual differences. There are also disparities within the categorical divisions of these communities (i.e., among and within loyalists and unionists as well as republicans and nationalists).
2. While the state is framed as the predominant driver in such constructions, key stakeholders, situated individuals and political organizations can also become mobilizing forces that can effectively promote selective nationalist narratives.
3. While the majority of unionists identify as ‘British,’ others include ‘Northern Irish’ or ‘Irish’.
4. While there are a small number of individuals in Northern Ireland who self-identify as ‘Northern Irish,’ this group primarily consists of young ‘British Protestants’ and does not necessarily suggest the presence of an integrated, multi-national development (Hayes and McAllister 2013.)
5. 174 has a number of local, regional, national and supranational funding sources including: Northern Ireland’s Community Relations Council, The Heritage Lottery Fund, and several grants such as the International Fund for Ireland and the EU’s PEACE Programme.
6. Political geographers have recently drawn attention to the interconnected nature between sport and nationalism (e.g., Bleakney and Darby, 2018; Koch 2017).

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