‘WALKING WOUNDED’ – THE PEACE PROCESS AND OTHER COLLATERAL BREXIT DAMAGES
Sara Dybris McQuaid

Abstract
The difficult transition from war to peace which has been ongoing in Northern Ireland at least since the peace agreement in 1998, is now further complicated by the indeterminate status of Brexit. Drawing on three conceptualizations from first aid, triage and psychology, the paper uses the metaphor of the ‘walking wounded’ to explore how Brexit interacts with the political culture of the staggering peace process in Northern Ireland. First, understanding ‘walking wounded’ as injured persons of relatively low priority allows us to discuss Northern Ireland as a place apart in the British body politic. Second, determining the ‘walking wounded’ by requesting those on the scene who may self-evacuate to do so immediately to a designated refuge, affords ways in which to understand the Republic of Ireland as a foreign policy actor and ongoing attempts to assign Northern Ireland a form of special status in relation to the EU. Third, psychologizing the ‘walking wounded’ as those who long for closure but do not think they can find it, directs our attention to the plight of those who wanted an undiluted version of the nation state rather than the more multidirectional hybrid that is emerging into view as a result of the peace agreement and European cooperation.

Keywords: Northern Ireland, peace process, Brexit, unionism, nationalism, metaphor

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Banner image: Rita Duffy, Soften the Border, 2017 (detail). Recycled fabrics, installation on the Belcoo, Blacklion Bridge - Co. Fermanagh / Co. Cavan border, 2.5 x 30m. Image credit: Copyright of the artist, Rita Duffy. Photo credit: Stanislav Nikolov
‘WALKING WOUNDED’ – THE PEACE PROCESS AND OTHER COLLATERAL BREXIT DAMAGES

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Introduction
In significant ways, the protracted violent conflict that lasted from 1968–98 in Northern Ireland has been succeeded by what we might call a protracted peace process. Northern Ireland has somehow been stuck, if not lost, in transition, where ethno-national conflict is managed, but not necessarily transformed. The title of the recent conference, Brexit Wounds, inspired this article to explore the term ‘walking wounded’ as a metaphor for a peace process that is staggering on amidst the debris of Brexit, with the injured parties seeking evacuation or closure, while they can still stand up and walk. The overriding motifs of Brexit are those of leaving and remaining, of continuity and change. What the metaphor of the walking wounded does is include both motions at once, rather than making them mutually exclusive. The walking wounded are on the move yet held back by incurred trauma; they want to leave but remain marked. Therefore, the metaphor of the walking wounded provides a different register in which to think about Brexit and its consequences in Northern Ireland. The article uses the metaphor to explore how Brexit interacts with the political economy of the peace process for a variety of actors, in an increasingly fluid political landscape across Britain and Ireland, where nationalisms of all hues are raised or reawakened. With a twist on Lakoff and Johnson’s (2003) classic work Metaphors We Live By (where conceptual metaphors are understood to shape action as well as communication), we might think of this as metaphors we leave by.

Pushing beyond the metaphor, it is important to note that there are many in Northern Ireland who are walking wounded in a more literal sense. Dealing with the violent past is obviously one of the main areas of contention that the peace agreement of 1998 failed to deal adequately with, and which is now being dealt with – or rather delayed – in the context of Brexit. Thus, Brexit also works to marginalise those who were seriously injured in the conflict and are still awaiting recognition and compensation.

This is not a matter of the economy taking a hit, wounded feelings or national sensibilities. Instead it is about unexamined violent deaths and actual life-defining injuries sustained in conflict. Victims and survivors are still waiting for the Northern Ireland Assembly to agree and implement mechanisms to deal with the past in progressive ways. The difficulty in reaching political agreement around such issues predates Brexit, but is now made almost impossible because of it.

Background
While the peace agreement in Northern Ireland critically rests on British and Irish cooperation, this cooperation itself has been nested within European cooperation in important ways. Accordingly, the article opens with a brief consideration of how joint membership of the European community since 1973 has provided a critical context for developing the core principles and practices of the political culture of the peace process. It then considers three different understandings of the term ‘walking wounded’ to show how a variety of actors have positioned themselves and been positioned in negotiating the space of Brexit and the Northern Irish peace process. In lieu of a conclusion, the article finally considers what ‘Brexit Wounds’ have been sustained.

‘The (Peace) Agreement’ of 1998 was reached at the end of painstaking negotiations between most of the political parties in Northern Ireland and the British and Irish Governments. It is widely considered a success, and it has worked not least because it has conceptualized national identities, affinities and
institutions in the plural. However, post-nationalism is also a challenge in political, cultural and emotional terms.

In the following, the article outlines some of the ways the EU and its predecessors (EEC, EC) have framed and driven this peacebuilding project, and how Brexit now threatens to upset the delicate balancing of nationalism and unionism across the Isles.

**A shared political space**
Before Britain and Ireland joined the European community in 1973, little shared institutional political space existed for their respective parliamentarians and governments to engage. This meant that when violent conflict broke out in Northern Ireland in 1968/69, there were few established and stable political relationships which could be comfortably built upon to discuss responses and solutions. One of the most important indirect contributions of European cooperation was to provide this shared political space for British, Irish and Northern Irish politicians and government officials (Phinnemore et al., 2012, p.569).

As fellow members of the European Parliament, they could meet regularly and informally across national and party lines exchanging ideas, exploring alliances and building trust over numerous issues. This trust and familiarity could then be transplanted into working together on solving the conflict in and over Northern Ireland. In this sense, the EU provided a framework for the political work of peacebuilding performed by British and Irish politicians.

**Removing borders**
The break-up of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and the subsequent partition of Ireland during the period 1920 to 1922 saw the two parts of the island grow steadily apart over the twentieth century. For example, the south developed into a professed Catholic country and remained neutral in the Second World War, where Northern Ireland became a country dominated by Protestant unionism which proudly participated in the war effort on the British side (Kennedy, 1988). Public and official values, ideals and power were differently conceived and distributed on either side of the border. Common British and Irish membership of European cooperation from 1973 onwards, began to bring the two parts of the island on a more converging trajectory. However, the border remained firmly in place since violent conflict raged throughout the 1970s, 1980s and into the 1990s. During this period, the British army sealed off border crossings and removed cross-border infrastructure, reducing hundreds of access points, to a couple of dozen (Nash, Reid & Graham, 2013). The experience of conflict has been particularly fractured in the border region, borne out in experiences of militarization, harassment, executed victims dumped on border roads, deteriorating relationships between neighbours and communities and heightened fear and insecurity among those living on isolated farms (Dawson, 2007). During this period, the Protestant population in the border area was drastically reduced (Murtagh, 1998).

This changed significantly in the early 1990s. The European Single Market was introduced in 1993. A year later, the paramilitary ceasefires were announced in Northern Ireland and the political peace process got under way. Together, these two developments allowed for the demilitarization of the border in Ireland and the free flow of goods and services in what became one ‘EU territory’ across the member states. The functional integration of the EU became the functional integration of Ireland, not primarily as a result of political ideology, but as pragmatic business. The national border question, over which so many battles had been fought, could to some extent be defused in this context. Here then, the EU could be used as a motor for peacebuilding, through its focus on breaking down borders for the free flow of goods.

**Regional investment**
In one of the more direct European contributions, Northern Ireland was identified as an ‘Objective 1’ region in 1989. An objective 1 region is a region singled out for economic regeneration because of otherwise low investment, long-term patterns of unemployment and poor infrastructure and services for businesses and people alike. On top of this targeted funding, Northern Ireland, with its large agri-food sector, has also benefitted immensely from regular European common agricultural policy (CAP) funding.

However, the most direct material link between the EU and peacebuilding in Northern Ireland began in 1995 after the introduction of the Single Market. Following the paramilitary ceasefires in 1994, the European Community has very actively underpinned the political peace process, by delivering a special funding programme for Peace and Reconciliation. This programme has poured around €2 billion into Northern Irish civil society, in an effort to rebuild psycho-social, economic, cultural and political relationships (European Parliament, 2020). Thousands of projects have dealt with the legacy of conflict by providing trauma counselling, investing in local start-ups, building not just metaphorical but actual bridges as physical symbols of change and eradicating
sectarianism in football. A large number of these initiatives have been specifically endowed to repair, restore and regenerate the border region between Ireland and Northern Ireland. To some extent, these borderlands have gone from being the absolute periphery of respectively the UK and Ireland, to much more dynamic spaces, filled with positive exchanges and co-mingling (Hayward, 2018a).

Sharing power in a Europe of the regions
One of the main obstacles to solving conflict in Northern Ireland, has been the conceptualization of national sovereignty as absolute and borders as exclusion zones, instead of contact zones. In the 1990s, ideas about a ‘Europe of the Regions’ flourished. This involved rethinking the centrality of the nation state and refocusing on the supranational and regional level as dynamic protagonists in political, cultural and social arenas (Loughlin, 1996). Importantly, this also reduced the significance of national borders in recasting them as interregional zones for development. During the same period, power relationships within the UK state were also reconfigured in the shape of devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in 1999. While, these new ideas of ‘post-sovereignty’ were certainly contested they still provided a ‘post-national’ imagination for solving ethno-national conflicts (Kearney, 1997). Since the conflict in and over Northern Ireland can very much be conceived as a conflict over national identity, the move to more regional and stratified thinking within the EU and the UK meant that Northern Ireland could better be conceived as a place with overlapping identities and interests open at once towards the United Kingdom and Ireland. Despite successive British governments’ resistance to ‘pooling sovereignty’ at the European level, they began to ‘do’ sovereignty differently in relation to Northern Ireland (Meehan, 2014).

A pivotal part of the peace agreement was precisely to give the people of Northern Ireland the right to identify as both British and Irish, not necessarily either or. That is, the softening and layering of sovereignty and identities inherent in the European project enabled the conceptualisation of Northern Ireland as British and Irish. We might say that becoming partners and joining forces in Europe made it possible for Britain to move beyond Northern Ireland as an ‘internal problem’, to one in which Ireland could stake a legitimate claim in being part of governing a solution. At the same time, it made it possible for Ireland to transform the traditional nationalist claim to self-determination into an aspiration, with the peace agreement an instrument to handle at once the political status quo and a future constitutional swing. This is the context in which the peace agreement could be negotiated and make sense.

It is true that the peace agreement itself makes little reference to the EU, but what was agreed is made possible through the common British and Irish membership. This was clearly set out in the preamble to the peace agreement of 1998 where it says that the British and Irish Governments wish to ‘develop still further the unique relationship between their peoples and the close co-operation between their countries as friendly neighbours and as partners in the European Union’ (The Agreement, 1998).

Maintaining this framework should not be low priority. While the peace process looks like it is capable of staggering on, the internal injuries are severe. Brexit has effectively reintroduced the question of sovereignty as a live political wire in British-Irish relationships across the isles.

Metaphorically speaking 1: Injured persons of a relatively low priority
In first aid and triage, the walking wounded are injured persons of a relatively low priority.

That Northern Ireland has been a comparatively low priority in the public hive of British politics, is an understatement. Being considered as ‘a place apart’, as less integral to the Union than England, Wales and Scotland, has gone with the territory, particularly since the Home Rule movement developed in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The recognition of the ‘Irish dimension’ of Northern Ireland in successive attempts to solve the more recent conflict is a crucial part of the current peace agreement and marks out Northern Ireland as different in terms of territorial and political governance. Being on the edge of the union has fuelled abandonment issues, a sense of being under siege on the island and betrayal by the British government amongst the unionist population. It means that unionists in Northern Ireland have to find ways of existing after mainstream UK unionism has waned (cf. Coulter, 2001). Similarly, situations of discrimination and neglect have, both in historical and contemporary terms, encouraged the Irish nationalist community in Northern Ireland to seek their grievances addressed from elsewhere, notably by the Irish government and state. These points will be developed further below, however, at this stage it is enough to flag up how the low priority of Northern Ireland, does not simply reflect its size (at present constituting roughly 3% of the UK population), but is part of a more complex peripheral political economy.

For most people who were already conversant in
the politics of conflict and peace in Northern Ireland, it was pretty shocking that the potential consequences of Brexit for the peace process were hardly discussed by the British public during the referendum debate. The low priority given to this, not only reveals how marginal Northern Ireland has been to mainstream British politics, but also reflects the decreasing interest of Conservative governments in Northern Ireland since coming back into power in 2010, after thirteen years in opposition. A new guard of politicians do not seem to have the same grasp of the stakes in the peace process and the role of European cooperation underpinning it. In general, the Conservative Party has been less interested in appreciating the European dimension of the peace process, because European cooperation has been a toxic issue for party unity since the late Eighties. In Northern Ireland this has been compounded by consecutive Secretaries of State (whose job it is to ‘represent Northern Ireland interest in the cabinet’) emerging as prominent Brexiteers – for example Owen Patterson (2010–12) and Theresa Villiers (2012–16).

In the referendum, Northern Ireland voted to remain in the EU, but this outcome has not exactly resonated in the actions of the Conservative government since. In a stark demonstration of its poor understanding of the political economy of the peace process, the Conservative government stayed in power after losing their majority in the General Election of 2017, by entering into a ‘confidence and supply’ agreement with the Democratic Unionist Party of Northern Ireland (DUP) (Cabinet Office, [2017] 2019). Not only was the DUP the only major party in Northern Ireland advocating a leave position, and did not as such represent the majority position in Northern Ireland, but the peace agreement stipulates that ‘the power of the sovereign government […] shall be exercised with rigorous impartiality’ (The Agreement, 1998, Art.I(v)) which is of course difficult if your position of power is based on one of the conflict parties. Paradoxically, on the one hand this development means that Northern Ireland cannot easily be ignored and on the other, these governmental choices arguably reflect the broader cognitive disconnect from the tenets of the peace process and the fact that relying on the DUP is a means to one end: Brexit.

This ties in with the argument that the Conservative Party has ceased to think about the UK in unionist terms (Gamble, 2016). To underscore the low priority given to Northern Ireland and UK unionism, a recent YouGov poll found that a large majority of conservative party members would rather have Brexit than preserve the union (Smith, 2019). The overall negligence by the British government of course also stands in striking contrast to the importance that Ireland and the EU have attached throughout to the importance of protecting the peace process and representing the majority position in Northern Ireland.

Metaphorically speaking 2: Self-evacuate to a designated refuge

In this use of the metaphor, the walking wounded are determined by requesting those on the scene who may self-evacuate to do so immediately to a designated refuge. Here, the agency and ability of the walking wounded are flagged up, as well as the sense that there is some space of refuge. There are some immediate ways to translate this into discernible action since the referendum:

The first is about Ireland as an extraordinarily well-prepared national and foreign policy actor. Here, Ireland, ‘the country’, is cast as one of the walking wounded, because it is generally accepted that Ireland is the remaining EU member state that will potentially suffer most from Brexit, in economic terms and in terms of the political damage it might wreak on the peace process and wider British Irish relations. This allows for an interpretation of the actions of the Irish state pre- and post-Brexit as one of self-evacuation and to discuss an EU special status for Northern Ireland or indeed a United Ireland as forms of ‘designated refuge’.

When the history of Brexit is written, a key narrative thread will be the role of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Irish diplomats in propelling Ireland to the top of the negotiating agenda. A year ahead of the referendum itself, in June of 2015, the Irish Oireachtas published a report discussing the potential consequences of Brexit and set out for the Irish Government to have a voice in relation to the future of Northern Ireland and the necessity for Ireland to feature centrally in EU negotiations with the UK (Connolly, 2017; Hayward, 2018b). As became evident, the detailed preparation before the referendum and the non-stop lobbying of Irish diplomats in Europe after the referendum were instrumental in making Ireland one of three key issues in phase one of the negotiations – the so called ‘divorce settlement’, which had to be brought to a conclusion ahead of charting the future relationship in phase two – ‘the future relationship’. In April 2017, the leader of the European Council, Donald Tusk, had stated that ‘people, money, Ireland must come first in the Brexit negotiations’ (Staunton, 2017) and
in September 2017, the EU guiding principles for the ‘Dialogue on Ireland/Northern Ireland’ were published, making it one of three key priorities in the negotiations. These guidelines followed a particularly volatile period in which the executive in Northern Ireland had collapsed and local government went into limbo (January 2017); the new Prime Minister, Theresa May, triggered article 50 (March 2017) and a disastrous (for the Conservative Party) general election where the government had become reliant on the MPs from the Democratic Unionist Party in Northern Ireland (May 2017). The political economy of Brexit had now become firmly tied up with the political economy of the peace process, in ways that made compromises hard to come by.

In early December 2017, the joint report from the negotiators of the EU and the UK government was launched (European Commission, 2017). In it the progress of negotiations was detailed, making it clear for all to see that a hundred years later ‘The Irish Question’ was not about to go away. In many ways, the joint report mirrored the contradictions in the peace agreement of 1998, which at once worked to ‘copper fasten’ the union, in recognizing the legitimate status of Northern Ireland as British, whilst also providing a ‘stepping stone’ to a united Ireland by making provisions for a change in the constitutional status to happen in the future, if a democratic majority in Northern Ireland wished to make that change.

The joint report set out a number of propositions that could hardly be possible at the same time: There was to be no hard border on the island of Ireland and no border in the Irish sea – at the same time the UK would leave the Customs Union and the Single Market. Immediately after the publication of the joint report, it became clear that the parties disagreed on the legal status of it – whether it was binding or simply a statement of intent (Stone, 2017). In February 2018, the EU published a legal draft of the withdrawal agreement, which was rejected as unacceptable by the UK government (Boffey & Rankin, 2018; Tolhurst & Clark, 2018). This was because the way in which the EU made sense of the Joint Report was to make Northern Ireland part of the EU customs territory, if no other solution had been reached through trade negotiations. This is what has since been developed further into the so-called ‘backstop’ of the withdrawal agreement. Here special status works to enforce fears and indeed hopes about Northern Ireland being recognizably a place apart – and special status or not - is used to identify possible designated refuges in the future.

The UK government joined forces with the DUP to reject the EU definition of the backstop as attacking the constitutional integrity of the UK, with Downing Street suggesting that the EU was effectively annexing Northern Ireland (Boffey & Rankin, 2018). This recovered sense of unionism on the part of the Conservative government was of course to do with their reliance on the DUP for a parliamentary majority. In order to understand why the Democratic Unionist Party was so set against having a bespoke arrangement which might work very well in Northern Ireland’s interest, we return to the question of sovereignty. The DUP was the only party that did not sign up to the peace agreement in 1998. They were also the only major party in Northern Ireland campaigning to leave the EU. In Northern Ireland, the question of immigration was not really a live wire, as it was in England – but the question of sovereignty can still be. Taking back control, particularly of borders, means something specific in Ireland and Northern Ireland, which will be returned to below.

Conversely, for nationalists (and some unionists) in Northern Ireland, it seems to have become more and more clear that the state that holds their best interests at heart – their designated refuge – is not the UK state, but the Irish state. This is not just evident from the incredible spike in Irish passport applications (another instance of the walking wounded self-evacuating) but also in recent polls that show public support for a united Ireland radically increase depending on the shape of Brexit (Devenport 2018; Garry et al, 2018). So, some kind of special status for Northern Ireland, or a United Ireland is to become a designated refuge for the walking wounded, albeit, a very contested one.

As part of preparing for Brexit, the Irish government launched an ongoing ‘All-Island civic dialogue’ in 2016. The all-island dialogue is not political in the sense that it deals with very pragmatic questions for pig farmers, academics, tourists and young people. But it is of course taking place in a completely new strategic environment and political economy – in the context of Brexit. Also, precisely because it is framed as an all-island dialogue, initiated by the Irish government, unionists are boycotting it – in this respect it mirrors the New Ireland Forum of the 1980s that sought to put an end to violence and chart a course for the future of the Island, but

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1 It is worth mentioning that in the Belfast Agreement or the Good Friday Agreement, the parties could not agree on this form of language and so cooperation between North and South is described both as ‘all-island’ and ‘cross-border’ cooperation, with unionists insisting on the latter to emphasise the border.
Metaphorically speaking 3: Longing for closure

This final understanding of ‘walking wounded’ draws on psychological approaches that see the walking wounded as those who long for closure but do not think that they can find it. Here, the relations of the walking wounded to closure may be conceived in at least three different ways:

1. They may never find what they consider closure but continue to seek it.
2. They may go on to ‘find closure’ through creative processes or redefining closure.
3. They may decide they do not need what others have defined as closure.

In these three uses of the metaphor, we may think of the walking wounded as British and Irish nationalists. Those who wanted the undiluted version of a nation state rather than the more multidirectional hybrid that is emerging into view as a result of the peace agreement. Those who want their singular national identities to be protected and demarcated by exclusive territorial and mental borders. As the sister of the Irish Republican Hunger Striker Bobby Sands, Bernadette Sands McKevitt, said in 1998: ‘Bobby did not die for cross-Border bodies with executive powers. He did not die for nationalists to be equal British citizens within the Northern Ireland state.’ (Breen, 1998).

However, it is fair to say that the population in Northern Ireland before Brexit was stratified across the three definitions of closure set out above.

To begin with those who may go on to ‘find closure’ through creative processes or decide they do not need what others have defined as closure: for many people, the peace agreement offered a creative way of redefining closure — they gradually found that Northern Ireland did not need to be exclusively British or Irish, but could be both, and the main political challenges and preoccupations could shift from constitutional questions to wider socio-cultural ones concerning equality, like gay marriage and abortion. Sovereignty and self-determination could remain on the long finger. This is the positive, pluralist, plus-sum-game version of the peace agreement, where nobody loses, and everybody wins. An understanding of Northern Ireland and the people in it as both British and Irish, not either British or Irish.

But the agreement can also be worked to entrench differences and be used to facilitate a cultural war beyond constitutional conflict (McCall, 2006). Nested in the peace agreement is a key sectarian device for reproducing conflict parties. Power-sharing between unionists and nationalists was a measure of inclusion and a way of ensuring that no one community would dominate the other, as had been the case during unionist one-party rule between 1921 and 1972. However, it also means that all politicians must designate as either unionists, nationalists or ‘other’ in the local assembly (and those designating as ‘others’ have an inferior status in weighted cross-community votes). Having power shared, or split, along differences of constitutional preference obviously keeps the zero-sum constitutional issue alive — if for nothing else, as a source of electoral mobilization to maintain power. Furthermore, the politico-constitutional battle has continued as clashes of identity politics around the questions of flags and language, marking Northern Ireland in cultural terms as more British than Irish, or vice versa.

Even if many people have accepted the agreement as a creative way of ending violence — if not actually resolving conflict — the electorate was further polarized by Brexit in two snap elections (one for the local assembly in March 2017 and one for Westminster in May 2017) which were both fought on Brexit and the border question. In political terms, we cannot be sure that the centre will hold — things may indeed be falling apart and there seems to be a return to the politics of antagonism and nationalism. This was of course compounded by the DUP underwriting the conservative government between 2017 and 2019, through which they enjoy a main line to power, even in the absence of functioning political institutions in Northern Ireland. Being the only major party which advocated leaving the EU in Northern Ireland, and elected predominantly in the north east (and therefore
not representing any border communities), they could not speak comprehensively for Northern Ireland as a whole at this critical juncture.

Indeed, the increasing polarisation of unionist and nationalist parties in Northern Ireland prevented them from forming a power-sharing government between January 2017 and January 2020. At the same time, those parties that designate as ‘other’ have surged in recent local and European elections. The Green Party doubled its representation at the council elections in May 2019 and the Alliance Party historically took one of the three MEP seats later the same month. A centre ground different from simply moderate unionism and nationalism is taking shape, but with precious little political infrastructure to launch alternatives from in the absence of a functioning local assembly in Northern Ireland.

So, here the exploration returns to those that may never find what they consider closure but continue to seek it. In certain ways, the peace agreement did not transcend nationalism but offered a holding pattern for transcendence to maybe happen in the future. Exclusive and separate nation states continue to be the ultimate end goal for some. The ongoing transition since 1998 from war to peace has also been about gaining the interpretive upper hand of what happened during those thirty years of conflict and what the future should look like. In this narrative struggle, unionists feel like they are losing the argument; they feel as if they are in a double bind of low priority walking wounded. That the transition is working to marginalize them, their history, their future (McQuaid, 2017). This feeling is reinforced by their new status as another minority in Northern Ireland since their demography has fallen below 50% of the population (NILT, 2018). Consecutive peace monitoring reports reveal how particularly working-class unionists are increasingly alienated from the peace process and the state in Northern Ireland (Nolan, 2014). Support for Brexit should also be read in this context. For some, Brexit offers ultimate unionist closure.

At the other end of the same scale, Brexit finally offers the ultimate opportunity to push for a united Ireland, and for those who did not die for cross-border bodies. Sinn Féin was quick to identify this. Right after the referendum the Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness said:

The British government has no democratic mandate to represent the views of the North in any future negotiations with the European Union and I think there is a democratic imperative for a border poll. […] I think the fact that we have seen a situation where 56% of the people of the North – who are unionists and nationalists and republicans – voted together to stay in Europe, further strengthens the case for a border poll.

(BBC News, 2016)

But Sinn Féin were not the only ones making overtures about Irish unity. The leader of Fianna Fáil Michael Martin said Brexit was a defining moment that could lead to unity (Press Association, 2016), and later, as reported by the Irish News the Minister for foreign affairs Simon Coveney from Fine Gael said that he would like to see a united Ireland in his political lifetime (Manley, 2017).

In the UK, the tabloid press has made big noises about how the Irish border is used politically to impact negotiations, and that the parties in the Republic are engaging in a form of nationalist outbidding because of the growing force of Sinn Féin as a political power there. The old school imperial approach to Ireland is at play in some of this news coverage – right down to The Sun suggesting the ‘naïve young Prime Minister’ Taoiseach Leo Varadkar should ‘shut his gob’ (2017) and The Telegraph referring to ‘little Ireland’ (Arnold, 2019). National identity politics have been raised not just between unionists and nationalists in Northern Ireland, but between Britain and Ireland, and the creative processes of closure that had been established beyond the nation are challenged.

Conclusion: Beyond the metaphor
In this article, I have used the metaphor of the ‘walking wounded’ to complicate the common, mutually exclusive binary of leaving or remaining when thinking about Brexit and the Northern Ireland peace process. I have done so in order to open up a wider variety of perspectives on the issues, showing how Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and indeed British nationalists each may be conceived as ‘walking wounded’ in the aftermath of conflict. The first line of the Everything but the Girl song ‘Walking wounded’, which I have used as an epigraph, brings to mind the injury and sacrifice of the conflict and the temporal weight of ongoing Brexit negotiations. It speaks to the squared relationship between ‘you and me and him and her’ (which we could think of as Britain, Ireland, Northern Ireland and the EU) and the sense of loss connected to knowing you will never comfortably abide in a nation state of ‘us’ again, or the sense of losing part of the us that is the European Union.

It is clear then that Brexit has wounded more than a few political subjects across Great Britain and
Ireland in ways that are specific to their local contexts, as I have argued here. It may be useful to summarize these ‘Brexit wounds’:

British-Irish relations have deteriorated over the past three years, as the governments have been locked on opposite sides of the Brexit negotiating table. Since the 1980s, official British-Irish cooperation has been key in undergirding the peace process. When parties in Northern Ireland have been dragging their feet or engaging in destructive brink politics, the joint engagement of the two governments has paved the way for solutions. During the first phase of the Brexit negotiations, the communication between Britain and Ireland was more often reduced to megaphone diplomacy, which spiralled into toxic allegations, taunts and ridicule on numerous occasions, where historical tensions and mistrust became airborne again. Brexit further polarized the two main political parties in Northern Ireland, who abandoned a power-sharing government in Northern Ireland and instead turned towards what they perceive as their respective nation states for exclusive solutions. Sinn Féin has become a major party in the Republic of Ireland, and continue to focus on consolidating power there while abstaining from taking their seats in Westminster. The Democratic Unionist Party, on the other hand, was effectively thrown under the bus when Boris Johnson renegotiated Theresa May’s withdrawal agreement to accept border checks in the Irish Sea. The split focus does not bode well for relations, even if the Northern Ireland assembly was constituted in January 2020.

The peace agreement operated on a Principle of Consent, that is, that any constitutional change in the status of Northern Ireland, could only be decided by a majority in Northern Ireland. The change that was envisaged in 1998, was whether Northern Ireland would go from being constitutionally part of the UK to being constitutionally part of a United Ireland. While this would be an important change, it would still be in the context of common membership of the EU. Nobody in 1998 had imagined that the constitutional change would be the UK leaving the EU and taking Northern Ireland, where a majority voted to remain, with it in the process.

The success of the peace agreement in 1998 rested on addressing British-Irish relations at three levels: 1. an internal political solution in Northern Ireland (devolution with power sharing), 2. institutionalised North-South cooperation (Ministerial Councils) and 3. institutionalised cooperation between Britain and Ireland (The British Irish Council and the British Irish Intergovernmental Conference). By applying a wider appreciation of the historical and structural relationships that needed to be transformed it was possible to accommodate contested national, political and cultural identities.

In the case of a hard Brexit (i.e., the UK leaving both the Single Market and the Customs Union without a deal in place), we would not just have the prospect of a hard border as a lightning rod for violence, or the severance of conscientiously (re)built relationships within Northern Ireland and across the island of Ireland. It would also mean that the United Kingdom and Ireland would grow apart again, no longer in a common market, or on a common journey.

The ambition to ‘develop still further the unique relationship between their peoples and the close co-operation between their countries as friendly neighbours and as partners in the European Union’ set out by the two governments in the peace agreement (1998), seems to be thwarted in the context of Brexit.

Twenty-two years after the peace agreement, all these relationships are now in peril, as the walking wounded, injured both in a protracted conflict and by the unfolding process of Brexit, stagger on.


