



## Intervention

*Critical Geopolitics/critical geopolitics 25 years on*

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## 1. Introduction: critical Geopolitics@25

### 1.1. Sara Koopman, Simon Dalby and Nick Megoran

Gerard Toal's/Gearóid Ó Tuathail's *Critical Geopolitics* was published in 1996 in the University of Minnesota's book series on borderlines, a series described as one concerned with the task of revisioning global politics. It was entirely appropriate that he was the first geographer to contribute to this series given his role in what was then the nascent field of critical geopolitics. In its pages he launched a trenchant critique of the representational practices of international politics that mapped global space. The book subjected the taken-for-granted geographical specifications of power and territory to critical review from a wide range of theoretical perspectives all designed to render strange the geographical constructions of the world map.

The book in places reads as a manifesto for multiple critical engagements across geography, international relations, and post-colonial studies. The opening vignette remains especially apposite. In it, Toal (1996), p. 1 recounts the fate of Richard Bartlett, an early cartographer sent to 'draw a trew and perfet mapp' of the north parts of Ulster to facilitate their governance by the English state. The locals resented the attempt to make their spaces known to this mode of governance and responded by removing the unfortunate map-maker's head. Knowledge is power, and cartography is a particularly powerful part of state knowledge deployed, in this case, for processes of colonization, as well as for warfare. The British state was subsequently to create an institution

called the Ordnance Survey to produce detailed topographic maps of many places, all the more effectively to control or wage war in those territories. Disputing this colonial mapping with its militarist heritage, refusing the imperial gaze, and contesting imperial knowledge together form the intellectual impetus behind Toal's text and much of the literature that has followed under the rubric of critical geopolitics.

That the colonial gaze shapes the way we know the world and each other in it comes home in the shifting spelling of Toal's name. In a forum on the book in 2000, Jo Sharp and Matthew Sparke suggested that the work seemed disembodied. In response to this critique, he related that he grew up as Gerard Toal but began publishing in 1986 under his Gaelic name, among other things, as a way to "write back against the empire that had rolled across Ireland violently erasing Gaelic *dinnsheanchas* (place knowing) and anglicizing the landscapes and identities" (2000: 388). The multiple spellings of his name persist in scholarly writing, highlighting the ambiguities in identity and location involved in the writing of critical geopolitics. As such, we retain them in these texts too.

In organizing this forum to mark a quarter of a century since the publication of *Critical Geopolitics*, we are considering, in part, the legacy of Toal's volume. But more importantly, as the title of this collection indicates, we are also raising questions of how the field now labelled 'critical geopolitics' has picked up some of his early concerns and how, in a present moment troubled by territorial squabbles, xenophobic political rhetoric and great power rivalries, it has renewed the challenge to modes of geographical knowledge that subjugate people and eviscerate complex histories. Gerard Toal's early work was partly a response to

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what Les Hepple (1986) termed a ‘revival’ of classical geopolitical language in the late Cold War. The world looks rather different in 2021 than it did in 1996, but ethno-territorialism and mappings in the interest of power remain tragically persistent. Likewise, the fracturing of post-Soviet political space and the rise of Chinese ‘Belt and Road’ geopolitical infrastructure have effected new revivals of classical geopolitics to explain the complex new political geographies of post-Cold War Eurasia (for example Sloan, 2017). This forum is motivated by a desire to ask how the intellectual toolkit of critical geopolitics, as set out a quarter of a century ago, has changed, and how it needs to change further to stay up to the task of critically interrogating contemporary geopolitical imaginations.

Since Toal’s volume was published, the use of critical social theory to interrogate traditional geographical concerns has become widespread in Geography as a discipline. The intellectual ethos sketched out in *Critical Geopolitics* has informed myriad explorations of the political cartographies of violence in the ‘war on terror’ and its spin-off conflicts, and of the numerous bordering projects of states and of other wall-builders in subsequent decades. Feminist and post-colonial critiques populate the pages of scholarly journals much more so than they did in 1996. Studies specifically focusing on peace and modes of mapping that might facilitate it, rather than solely on the divisions and confrontations of traditional geopolitical rivalries, have also appeared in recent years. The sheer geographical complexity of peace processes is likewise a matter for disciplinary discernment—a topic to which Gerard Toal has subsequently devoted considerable attention. Methodologically, the field has been enriched by ethnographic and other fieldwork-based methods.

On one particular point Gerard Toal was very clear back in 1996: critique in the academy is about multiplicity, not univocality. As such this forum does not attempt to forge a consensus, nor does it suggest that there is one mode of doing critical geopolitics. The richness of the many critiques over the last quarter century has made political geography a thriving venue for intellectual activity, even if at times the label of ‘critical geopolitics’ has been applied very loosely to many diverse research projects.

But what are the prospects for critical geopolitics now, a quarter of a century later? How might scholars who ponder the knowledge practices that underpin contemporary violence build further on the provocative critical analysis that Toal’s manifesto inspired? Where to now for critical scholarship on geopolitical themes? These are the questions we posed to scholars who have engaged with critical geopolitics in recent years. We present here their responses: five commentaries from a diverse range of perspectives and locations that illuminate the path we have travelled since *Critical Geopolitics* was published, and where scholarship may be heading in terms of how it addresses space, power, and geographical representation. In inviting contributors, we sought to recognise that *Critical Geopolitics* is a theoretically and empirically ambitious text that has been widely read within and beyond geography. We therefore have included scholars with longstanding theoretical and disciplinary engagements with critical geopolitics (Jo Sharp and Gerry Kearns) as well as, in Rachael Squires, an early-career scholar who is taking critical geopolitics in new directions. We invited Alex Jeffrey because of his extensive work on Bosnia, one of the key venues for Gerard Toal’s subsequent research, and Vicki Squires (no relation to Rachael) for her engagements with critical geopolitics from a disciplinary position in international relations. We hope that readers will agree that this set of interventions, and Gerard’s response, indicate that a quarter of a century on, *Critical Geopolitics*, rather than setting a canonical limit on debates, has helped mould a field that remains intellectually vibrant, empirically open, and politically important.

## 2. Critical geopolitics: still masculinist after all these years?

### 2.1. Jo Sharp

The early 1990s were an exciting time for political geographers like

me. The critical alternative to conventional, realist geopolitics was newly emerging in a discipline just encountering poststructuralism. The newly articulated critical geopolitics of Gearóid Ó Tuathail and Simon Dalby inspired my own PhD thesis, which was to become the book *Condensing the Cold War* (Sharp, 2000a). Ó Tuathail’s 1996 *Critical Geopolitics* was the first full-length exposition of what this approach might achieve (although, of course, this was anticipated by Dalby’s 1990 *The Creation of the Second Cold War*).

In the time since, critical geopolitics has become somewhat solidified into a subdisciplinary identity, but at its inception, both Dalby and Ó Tuathail were clear that the yoking together of “critical” and “geopolitics” was intended as an oxymoronic tension that could not be settled – critique must be restless and unending. What I think this has meant is that it is not just the contents and intentions of *Critical Geopolitics* itself that have had a significant impact on political geography in the last 25 years; equally important have been the many productive critical engagements generated around the work. The forum on *Critical Geopolitics* published in this journal in 2000 included the seeds of many of the key discussions and debates that have shaped political geography over the last quarter of a century.

My research at the time focused on the role of popular culture on geographical imaginations, and hence on geopolitical discourse, and so I was critical of Ó Tuathail’s focus on the formal politics of statecraft. My commentary on the book suggested that Ó Tuathail’s view of popular culture was too limiting, rendering it little more than propagandistic and its consumers as unquestioning cyphers for the values of the elite. Since then, there has been a flourishing of work on the ways in which geopolitics is created and reproduced through different aspects of popular culture. This work draws out some of the “sociology of knowledge production” that highlights how certain ways of knowing the world come to dominate, but also recognises that there are always multiple ways of knowing. Indeed, there have been critiques of the very distinction Ó Tuathail made between formal, state and popular geopolitics. As Ciută and Klinke (2010) have put it, the sorts of popular geopolitics studied at the time – such as my own work on *Reader’s Digest* or Klaus Dodds’s (e.g. 2005) analysis of the James Bond films – were still the products of elite interests rather than emergent from a wider range of people. Those who have sought to study resistant forms of geopolitics, most notably Sara Koopman’s (2011) exploration of the alter-geopolitics of protective accompaniment, show much more effectively the ways in which non-elite practices and understandings of the politics of space can have challenging and transformative geopolitical outcomes.

My own reflections instigated another direction of travel that has kept me occupied to this day. Reading *Critical Geopolitics* crystallised for me the sense that the approach was being dominated by men. I was often the only woman on critical geography panels at conferences, sharing the stage with the likes of Ó Tuathail, Dalby, Dodds, John Agnew, David Atkinson and James Sidaway. Others had commented upon the domination of political geography by men (Stæheli, 2001), but it seemed that this was even more the case for critical geopolitics. Of course, being dominated by men is not necessarily the same thing as being masculinist. And yet, *Critical Geopolitics* was overwhelmingly a book about men, with the effect that the book reproduced geopolitics as a masculinist practice. Ó Tuathail’s intellectual history of geopolitical practitioners and critical geopoliticians is a history of Big Men (in order): Mackinder, Ratzel, Mahan, Kjellen, Hausehofer, Spykman, Bowman, Lacoste, Ashley, and Dalby. A few women are allowed into the footnotes, but the central narrative is one of the exploits and thoughts of men. The history of struggles for space and representation reduced to a male genealogy, not just when discussing the masculinist history of geopolitical strategies of elite practitioners, but also the interventions of “critical geopoliticians” (Sharp, 2000b, p. 363).

Even the recognition of a popular form of geopolitics – to me clearly linked to the feminist insistence that the personal is political – was made without reference to feminism, such that even the pioneering work of feminist international relations scholars such as Cynthia Enloe (for

example her brilliant *Bananas, Bases and Beaches* from 1989) was apparently excluded from critical geopolitics. Moreover, the very approach taken seemed to reinforce this implied elite masculinist subject. Again, as I argued in the forum:

Just as the geopoliticians that come under Ó Tuathail's scrutiny present themselves as all-knowing observers of the world and predictors of its political future, so too does he stand apart, detached and all-seeing of their works (2000: 362).

I developed these initial ideas further with Lorraine Dowler for a special issue of *Space and Polity* the following year that sought to make the case for a specifically feminist version of critical geopolitics. We felt that the privileging of decoding political texts was indeed a continuation of the masculinist practice of defining particular spaces as political, dynamic and important and thus excluding other practices by labelling them as every-day, reproductive and inconsequential. We argued that we needed to extend the range of spaces and performances considered to be political, and that to think in terms of a feminist geopolitics, it is necessary to think more clearly of the grounding of geopolitical discourse in practice (and in place) - to link international representation to the geographies of everyday life; to understand the ways in which the nation and the international are reproduced in the mundane practices we take for granted (Dowler & Sharp, 2001, p. 171).

Importantly, we proposed the idea of a feminist geopolitics where the discursive, representational nature of geopolitics is held in tension with the embodied experiences of everyday life, to challenge discourses of hierarchical politics (that there is a "more" political sphere), and to recognise the otherwise invisible work done to reproduce "the international" by those outside the formal sphere of statecraft. We sought to put the body at the heart of geopolitics as a counterbalance to the overwhelmingly discursive nature of critical geopolitics at the time. But this was not a proposal for a non-representational geopolitics; we did not seek to dismiss the discursive nature of geopolitics, but to recognise the connections between everyday practices and the discursive creation of national and global spaces.

However, in the 20 years since the introduction of the concept of "feminist geopolitics," perhaps because of a fear of masculinist grand theorising or of falling into the same God's-eye position for which critical geopolitics has been critiqued, this focus on the material and embodied has meant a shift of attention away from what we might imagine as the other 'end' of the entangled geopolitical spectrum: the production and mechanisms of domination of the global geopolitical gaze and of dominant subjectivities.

In his reflections on the nature of critical geopolitics in 2010, Dalby expressed concern that the focus of critical geopolitics has shifted too far from the global ambitions of geopolitics. A focus on the "small things" of the everyday, he argued, without attention to how these were intimately entangled with the global projections of the "infrastructure of military violence [...] eviscerates the political purpose of critical geopolitics precisely ... by leaving out the "big things" (Dalby, 2010, p. 282).

While feminist geopolitics has insisted on the very inseparability of the "little" and "big" things, Dalby's assertion of the need to foreground the connections between apparently little and big things offers an important reminder. Feminist geopolitics has produced excellent accounts of the *consequences* and *impacts* of geopolitical processes into everyday spaces providing a clear sense of the power of hegemonic geopolitics to inscribe identities and morality onto the bodies of various communities. But this is often presented (most often implicitly) as a one-way process. To address these challenges, new configurations of feminist geopolitics are emerging that draw on different feminist traditions and on new feminist materialities, to think through the ways in which the materiality of the everyday, of bodies and of things, are made together into geopolitical systems (Dixon, 2015; Sharp, 2020; Squire, 2015).

There is no doubt that the stimulation of debates around the nature of critical geopolitics has driven this to become the most dynamic part of political geography in the subsequent two decades. The concept has been interrogated through the language of resistance (anti-geopolitics

and alter-geopolitics), through critical examination of the spaces of geopolitics (popular geopolitics and domesticating geopolitics), and exploration of alternative geopolitical traditions (small state geopolitics, feminist and subaltern geopolitics), amongst others. If the original intention of "critical geopolitics" was to generate critique, there is no doubting its success.

### 3. Beautiful the shaking of heads

#### 3.1. Gerry Kearns

Brecht (1981, ll. 16–17) raised his poesy "In Praise of Doubt": "O beautiful the shaking of heads | Over the indisputable truth!" In this spirit, *Critical Geopolitics* is a marvellous exercise in sustained scepticism. It destroys the pretence of objectivity in geopolitical writings from Ratzel to Kaplan, encompassing likewise the empiricism even of its critics, from Wittfogel to Dalby. To honour its legacy, let me trouble just a little the terms and consequences of the way Gearóid Ó Tuathail rejects this objectivism.

The book contextualises and deconstructs, relying upon "Foucault mostly, but sometimes Derrida" (p. 18). I'll start with the "sometimes". Writing of Mackinder's emphasis on training British schoolchildren to see the world as imperialists, Ó Tuathail notes the contradictory senses loaded upon the "natural", as when Mackinder wrote of a "visualizing power which in rudiment is natural to the child and the savage" (p. 102). Reading pulls the eye and the mind towards signs rather than reality, and in socialising and civilising also dulls that scopic capacity so necessary to the strategic gaze and ambition of an imperial people. Ó Tuathail deftly returns to the conflation of child with savage in elaborating the imperial gaze, for the global reach of Britons required less the playful arts of the child than the martial arts of the savage. It's only natural, then, that the civilising mission of empire required the civilised people to become savage in order to prevent the savage people from practising their own savagery upon the civilised. If, by nature, humans are both child and savage, then, in following the dictates of nature, the civilised adult acts with the natural innocence of the first when using a violence of the second to counter the immaturity and primitiveness of the latter's own violence.

Less satisfying, to me at least, are what I would describe as word-games that perhaps only look Derridean. When Ó Tuathail writes of "sighting sites, placing places" (p. 104), I am intrigued by the second but not the first. To place a place holds my attention because of its inherent contradictions. To put something in its place requires that the something already belongs somewhere; but to place something is more volitional, as if the act assigns a belonging that follows but does not precede it. This sort of contradiction, very much like the amalgam as identity of nature, child and savage, can serve to absolve colonial power of responsibility for its violence. Acting in the name of a future it claims already to have founded, the imperial power aggressively resists challenges to its control in the name of the values it asserts its rule has secured but will establish. This, I think, is why colonial rule so often takes the form of the exception (Hussain, 2003; Kearns, 2006). Yet, lacking an affiliation by etymology or by common use, "sighting" is not related to "site" in quite the manner of "placing" to "place". Perhaps I am pushing the word-games too far, or taking them too seriously, and so I now follow Ó Tuathail's advice to "avoid the narrow textuality of the more literary uses of Derridean deconstructionism" and move instead to the ways Ó Tuathail engages "not only geopolitical texts but also the historical, geographical, technology, and sociological contexts within which these texts arise and gain social meaning and persuasive force" (p. 73).

Ó Tuathail attends closely to the recursive and dialectical relations between words and things. Concepts always presume frames of meaning and connote as norms far beyond the literal sense of what they denote as objects. This is the core of Ó Tuathail's criticisms of the empiricism of both classical and radical Geopolitics, as when he concludes that "Mackinder's texts are blind to that which makes sight possible, to the

codes of signification that designate a field of vision and establish conditions of visibility, and to the rules of administration governing objects, events, and processes within this field" (p. 105). Yet, these conditions of possibility of meaning are more fluid perhaps than Ó Tuathail finds them. In other words, more work is done to make meaning within texts than I think Ó Tuathail allows, and the material setting is less constraining than I think he imagines. For example, when Ó Tuathail talks about the classical geopolitical gaze, he suggests that it "has its origins in the emerging geographical conditions of world order at the end of the nineteenth century" (p. 24), as if this functioned as a set of objective constraints upon what could be said or at least heard. In this context, he asks how Mackinder "addressed the imperialist dilemmas faced by Britain in a post-scramble world order" (p. 25). In a footnote, Ó Tuathail writes of the "global" view of Mackinder as "not a manifest but a produced condition" (p. 264). Yet, it seems to me that Ó Tuathail is suggesting that around the end of the nineteenth century there was a real change in international relations that can meaningfully be described as a shift from an open-to a closed-space system. I think this way of reading context underplays the work done within ideology or by the essentially contestable terms and hierarchy of concepts that make up closed-space theories, of which Mackinder's was only one (Kearns, 1984). Colonialism did not switch from uncontested to contested in the manner Mackinder suggested. Even in Ireland, England and then Britain had to fight off invasions from Spain (1588) and France (1798), and the occupation of North America not only involved wars against indigenous peoples but also conflicts there with France, as with King William's War (1688–97) and the Seven Years' War (1754–63). Rather than a response to a new crisis with the novelty of competition between colonial forces, Mackinder figured a crisis in the form a transition to closed space so that the evolutionary biology that was the ideological structure of the day might be adopted by his discipline of Geography and adapted to the promotion of the colonial strategies that he wished to promote. Desire precedes description.

Ó Tuathail comes closer to this conception of desire driving description when he writes of the founders of co-called realist International Relations who, in the 1950s, were busy "codifying what policymakers needed or, perhaps more important, were already thinking and practicing" (p. 169). In this respect, the struggle to define a national interest is always more than military. As outgoing US president Dwight Eisenhower remarked (1961) in his final televised address to the nation, the United States "annually spend on military security more than the net income of all United States corporations." Such material interest could readily distort government priorities and dictate what policymakers need, or, indeed, think and practice. Just as the projection of closed space could capture Social Darwinism for a geographical reading of empire, so a projection of existential crisis and permanent insecurity was needed for what Eisenhower termed the military-industrial complex. Endless variations on the inherent incompatibility and mutual hostility of rival civilisations accompany paranoid projections of the dimensions of violence that impend doom for the United States. Faced with this complex and the intellectual servants it can command, it was late and lonely for Eisenhower to propose a global community "of mutual trust and respect", a "confederation [...] of equals." Ó Tuathail sketches some of the ways this military-industrial complex works when discussing Edward Luttwak, who was a "defense intellectual" (p. 231), a "consultant to various American and European corporations" (p. 232) and an affiliate of the CIA-funded Tevel Institute in Israel. What, then, is the task of a critical geopolitics in the face of this?

I think a critical geopolitics must develop an alternative normative framework to that which drives realist International Relations, and which also cramps the critiques that develop symbiotically alongside it. Ó Tuathail poses to himself this question: "How is the spinning globe disciplined by a fixed 'imperial' perspective, by mapping projects that reduce the indeterminacy of place to a homogenized surface of space?" (pp. 185–6). Ó Tuathail responds by insisting on the messy specificity of places. In this way he counters this erasure of local difference—this

"sucking [of] meaning out of the new global indeterminacies and contingencies" (p. 231). There is a danger that asserting complexity in the face of ideological generalities breeds a new empiricist critique that avoids the task of developing bases for its own politics. I have taken small steps towards an alternative politics by returning to the essentially contestable terms of classical geopolitics and showing how even as they were being formulated, they were bent to quite different purposes by thinkers critical of the politics of what we now call classical geopolitics (Kearns, 2009). In his wonderful exposition of the metaphors of holocaust and quagmire as frames of meaning for a debate in the United States about, respectively, intervention and non-intervention in Bosnia in the period 1990–94, Ó Tuathail remarks on the humanitarianism that "corrupts humanitarianism" (p. 222). State-centric conceptions of international relations contain the victims of conflicts within formal state boundaries, beyond the reach of international agency and screened by the sovereignty of independent states. Ó Tuathail wants a moral stance that can condemn ethnic cleansing in its own right, but there is precious little purchase for this human-rights perspective in the state-centric ideology of classical geopolitics.

It seems to me a problem that *Critical Geopolitics* conceives of the world in broadly Westphalian terms. It thus presents the fundamental issue as the relations between states and, following the Social Darwinist logic of the classical geopolitics it critiques, understands conflict as the essence of those relations. In this regard, the book almost concludes with the observation that "[i]f geopolitical discourse is organically connected to one social phenomenon above all others in the twentieth century, it is militarism" (p. 255). Perhaps there are more entities than states, and more relations than conflict, and indeed more to economies than the capitalism that Ó Tuathail sees as producing the vertigo of postmodernity. Finally, if I had to yoke geopolitics to one primary set of social forces as determining its agenda, rather than militarism, I would choose colonialism with its racism, and its making and unmaking of states, but also with its anticolonial and antiracist struggles that from time to time and place to place have checked colonialism and provided materials for a properly sceptical critical geopolitics. As Brecht, 1981, ll. 20–23 suggested: "the most beautiful of all doubts | Is when the downtrodden and despondent raise their heads and | Stop believing in the strength | Of their oppressors". Perhaps Ó Tuathail would agree, for his book begins in colonial Ireland and finishes by promising that critical geopolitics "is a small part of a much larger rainbow struggle to decolonise our inherited geographical imagination so that other geo-graphings and other worlds might be possible" (p. 256).

#### 4. 'Making the tent bigger and better': reflections on critical geopolitics

##### 4.1. Rachel Squire

I am grateful to have the opportunity to reflect on the field of critical geopolitics, some 25 years after the publication of Gerard Toal's seminal text of the same name. Making my way in the field a quarter of century after the book was written, it is noteworthy how it continues to be a formative text, facilitating understanding of the evolution of the sub-discipline. Throughout this time, it has also been exciting to see how the boundaries of critical geopolitics have been pushed, extended, and punctured in different ways. Often spearheaded by feminist scholars challenging what does and does not 'count' as critical geopolitics (Mountz, 2018), hegemonic norms have been unsettled and the realms of the political expanded. To borrow the words of Toal (1996), this forms 'a small part of a much larger rainbow struggle to decolonise our inherited geographical imagination so that other geo-graphings and other worlds might be possible'. Continuing to expand and make the tent 'bigger and better' in this struggle (Hyndman, 2019, p. 22) is a both a key challenge and opportunity for political geographers. Here I briefly outline two key areas of expansion that warrant further attention, each centred upon care-full and more diverse approaches to this process.



Whilst Toal (1996:256) writes of the ‘multiple overlapping networks of power’ that constitute the geopolitical, these networks could still better account for non-human lives and worlds. As many have noted, the Anthropocene requires a radical re-assessment of our relationship with the environment and natural world. Notwithstanding this urgency, there is a need more broadly to attend to animals and other forms of non-human life that have remained relatively marginal (with a few exceptions) to scholarship in critical geopolitics. Just as Halberstam and Nyong’o (2018) call for a rewilding of theory, there is a need too to rewild critical geopolitics to account for the ways in which questions of power and space intersect with animal and non-human life. As demonstrated in my work on the Cold War Sealab projects (Squire, 2020), this is important in accounting for the violence that often occurs at these intersections, in cultivating a sense of care for lives that are inadvertently or very deliberately embroiled and enmeshed within geopolitical projects, and in understanding how ‘new forms of wildness call to us’ and speak back ‘on all sides’ (Halberstam and Nyong’o 2018:453). No geopolitical worlds exist, after all, that are not already inhabited by life beyond that of humans. Moreover, as Jackman et al. (2020) have highlighted, other forms of non-human life are important in this wider process of re-wilding and re-animating the ‘rainbow struggle’ referred to by Toal.

These might take a number of forms, whether that be sea spirits of Papua New Guinea (Childs, 2019) that proved instrumental in the push back against deep sea mining, or invisible beings in the forest hinterlands of the Philippines who actively shaped conservation practices (Theriault, 2017). Such actors remain in the margins of critical geopolitics, or as Theriault (2017) highlights, are deliberately sidelined in Western hierarchies of knowledge. One reviewer asked Anna Jackman, Johanne Bruun, Pip Thornton, and me, as we revised our paper on feminist territories and terrains (2020), what would happen if we approached geopolitical questions with the starting point of ‘birdsong instead of guns and maps’? We might also ask what critical geopolitics might look like if we started with perspectives, agencies, and often invisible non-human entities that exceed Western ontological frameworks (see Sundberg, 2014). In addition to offering an opportunity to radically re-orientate approaches to geopolitical questions, such interventions also speak to the continuing need to decolonise critical geopolitics and to the importance of embracing and ‘walking with’ multiple epistemologies and ways of knowing and being in the world (Sundberg, 2014, p. 42).

Beyond the intellectual exercise of further expanding the remit of critical geopolitics, there are practical considerations too in ‘making the tent bigger but more importantly better’ (Hyndman, 2019, pp. 7–8). Twenty-five years on, and critical geopolitics could play a larger role in participating in the ‘rainbow struggle’ described by Toal. It could be argued that critical geopolitics is itself still relatively monochromatic. As has been documented, this greyscale results in part from the white, often masculine, and heteronormative underpinnings of the sub-field. While feminist and decolonial scholars have done much to challenge these norms in political geography more broadly, the question of who is able to participate in the process of breaking down existing power dynamics remains an important one (Grove et al., 2020). As has been highlighted by Radcliffe and Radhuber (2020), Jackman et al. (2020), Naylor et al. (2018) and others, this question is particularly pertinent in relation to calls to embrace ‘multiple knowledge holders’ (Radcliffe & Radhuber, 2020, pp. 1–2). As Desai’s (2017:322) work also demonstrates, however, such calls can only go so far in a discipline that is distinctly white. In the case of the United Kingdom, from where I write, people from Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds make up only 4.3 per cent of UK academic geographers.

Whilst receiving less attention within geopolitical discourse, precarity and casualisation within the academy only compound this issue, disproportionately affecting BAME scholars (Desai, 2017). Alongside this, casualisation has other important intersectional effects. As Hughes (2021) and Ivancheva et al. (2019) powerfully illustrate, women, those

with caring responsibilities, and LGBTQ + communities (Zheng, 2018) are also disproportionately affected. This is important as these are voices, perspectives, and bodies that are already underrepresented in critical geopolitics. The prevalence of fixed term contracts (see Megoran & Mason, 2020; Peters & Turner, 2014), expectations of being endlessly available, highly mobile and unattached to ‘one’s care and love relations’ beyond work (Ivancheva et al., 2019, p. 450, Mazi et al., 2019), the overloading of precarious staff, and the perpetual anxiety experienced by early career scholars (Butler-Rees & Robinson, 2020) are increasingly damaging to efforts to secure a vibrant and diverse sub-discipline. The future of critical geopolitics rests on innovative thinking and ideas, and on a capacity to be agile, responsive, and engaged with contemporary challenges. It therefore also rests, not only on diversification, but on taking a step back to recognise the many stifling effects of casualisation and in cultivating an ethic of care and responsibility to colleagues operating within these contexts.

## 5. Geopolitical continuities and change

### 5.1. Alex Jeffrey

*Critical Geopolitics* is a landmark text that is an essential read for any scholar of political geography. While a touchstone for research, I also use the book as a foundation for my teaching on both the history of geopolitics and critical approaches to international relations. Students love it, welcoming its conceptual depth. It leads on to an investigation into Toal’s later works examining the reconstruction of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Toal and Dahlman, 2011) and the geopolitics of Russian militarism (Toal, 2011). Its sophistication and breadth introduce the reader to a history of geopolitical thought and identify the significance of the ‘geopolitical gaze’, a term that draws attention to the prominence of the visual register in shaping normative accounts of international relations.

In this brief intervention I want to consider one element of the book’s narrative, that is the chapter examining the US government’s approach towards the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s (*Between a Holocaust and a Quagmire: “Bosnia” in the U.S. Geo-political Imagination, 1991–1994*). The chapter identifies the considerable ambiguities and misinformation that shaped the construction of geopolitical imaginaries of the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina within US Government circles. For Toal, such uncertainty oscillated between two poles: on the one hand the Bosnian war was represented as a potential repeat of the ill-starred US military intervention in Vietnam; and on the other a modern-day genocide for which the international community had a moral obligation to intervene. One of the benefits of writing twenty-five years later is we can place this discussion in a historical context, and in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, it allows us to view how threads of Toal’s observations and analysis can be viewed in the present.

Twenty-six years ago, in December 1995, every effort was made to demonstrate the end of the Bosnian war. From the choreography of negotiations in Dayton, Ohio, to the theatricality of the signing ceremony in the Palace of Versailles, through to the final text that opens with a self-description as “a comprehensive settlement to bring an end to the tragic conflict in the region,” all attempted to convey a sense of finality. The chief negotiator even wrote a book called *To End a War* (Holbrooke, 1998). Such an ending also marked a set of ‘beginnings’, not least the rise to prominence of the Office of the High Representative (OHR) as an international organisation responsible for implementing the civilian aspects of the Dayton Peace Accords. Two years after the signing ceremony, the OHR assumed legislative and executive powers over the Bosnian state, a move justified as necessary to challenge domestic political opposition to the agreement. In these terms Bosnia and Herzegovina became a ‘post-conflict’ environment, where the challenge became one of ‘reconstruction’ of fragmented political and social institutions.

The problem, of course, is that the war did not end. The physical

violence largely ceased, but the geopolitical strategies that underpinned the war continued. As is well-established, the Dayton Peace Accords only entrenched the imagination of a fusion between territory and identity by dividing Bosnia and Herzegovina into two sub-state entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska (RS) (Campbell, 1999). In a sense it was an act that constitutionally enshrined precisely the ambiguity that Toal recognised in the US governmental response to the violence: a *realpolitik* that recognised the division of Bosnian space coupled with a moral duty to protect a multicultural state and to refute ethnic cleansing (i.e. through the retention of the international borders of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the right of refugees to return to their pre-war homes).

The considerable scholarly scrutiny of the international-sponsored efforts to reconstruct the Bosnian state in the years since the Dayton Accord continue to support a sense of ambiguity concerning the nature and purpose of intervention. The echo of imaginations of ‘quagmire’ and ‘Holocaust’ reverberate into the present, where they continue to shape institutions while undergoing reformulation. In institutional terms, attempts to hold individuals to account for the violence committed during the conflict appear to facilitate an end to impunity for atrocity crimes and to support the desire among international agencies to implement humanitarian law. Certainly, commentators have seen the creation of institutions such as the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) as an exercise in ‘norm change’, where the operation of an international court – however remote – generates compliance in Bosnia and Herzegovina around the conventions of human rights (Nettelfield, 2010). While this could be taken to align itself with Toal’s invocation of the moral outrage of the Holocaust, the wider enactment of such legal redress has, at times, only emphasized international reticence at involvement in Bosnian affairs. The limited mandate of the ICTY, the barriers to its initial operation and the contested processes through which the jurisdiction over war crimes trials were ‘localised’ to Bosnian institutions can all be seen as a lingering specter of the ‘quagmire’ (Hazan, 2004; Jeffrey, 2020).

But with continuities come change. Updating the analysis of *Critical Geopolitics* today could involve looking beyond the decision-making in Washington DC to recognise new constellations of international presence in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the 1990s and early 2000s there was an emerging post-Cold War consensus as to the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina: it was on a trajectory from its Dayton past to a future within the European Union. In a sense, the conditionality that surrounded European membership was imagined by external actors as a replacement for the powers claimed by the OHR (ÓTuathail et al., 2006). In the intervening years the political consensus in Bosnia and Herzegovina around a ‘European future’ has disintegrated, a consequence of, *inter alia*, animosity towards continued external governmental authority, the divisions between (and within) the two entities, the consequences of the European financial crisis, the response to increased refugee movement, and new geopolitical affiliations. This latter point has taken a number of forms. Perhaps the most prominent has been the closer diplomatic relations between the RS and Putin’s Russia. RS leaders have drawn on shared cultural traits, notably Orthodox Christianity, to build diplomatic and economic ties with Russia and perform cultural distinction from other communities within Bosnia and Herzegovina (Jackson & Jeffrey, 2019). Alongside these public performances of allegiance, Bosnia and Herzegovina has also played a role in China’s Belt and Road Initiative. Notably since 2012 it has been a member of the *Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries* initiative, an agreement that has helped fund power plants near the cities of Banja Luka and Tuzla.

It is a rare geopolitical text that remains relevant a quarter of a century after its original publication. In the face of changing theoretical and methodological approaches, *Critical Geopolitics* remains a powerful account of the significance of external geographical imaginations in shaping geographical realities.

## 6. Materialisations of critical politics

### 6.1. Vicki Squire

In 2014, I wrote an article asking how the insights of ‘the materialist turn’ might contribute to the critical reshaping of geopolitics as a field of research (Squire, 2015). This was not intended to discount existing calls for a critical appreciation of materiality, which had already been advanced from various angles (e.g. Dalby, 2002; Dowler & Sharp, 2001; Ó Tuathail, 2003). Rather, it involved a series of reflections questioning what challenges a renewed emphasis on materiality might pose for scholars focusing on the representational, cultural and interpretive dimensions of critical geopolitics.

While my discussion was not directly focused on Gearóid Ó Tuathail’s seminal book, *Critical Geopolitics*, it did raise questions about the field of scholarship within which the text has been so influential. One of the key questions driving the article was why many works in the field of critical geopolitics had been relatively slow to engage debates about posthumanism or the ‘new materialisms’ (Coole & Frost, 2010). Another was what it might mean for the field if the insights of a ‘more-than-human’ approach were engaged more fully. Contributions to these debates at that time were nascent in the field, and have, of course, advanced since my original article was written (e.g. Dittmer, 2015).

To pose these questions again here will, I hope, shed light both on the enduring importance of *Critical Geopolitics*, and on some key issues that might benefit from further elaboration. Specifically, I hope to provoke discussion about the role of representation, the qualities of interpretive analysis, and the status of culture in the production of critical knowledge across the broad field of geopolitics. Reflection on these issues is not only beneficial for scholars in the field of political geography, but also across a range of related fields – including those toward which my original article was orientated: International Relations and critical border studies.

Let me summarise the somewhat complicated argument advanced in my article as succinctly as I can. Accepting that critical geopolitics was – and remains – a rich and diverse field of scholarship (and, indeed, that *Critical Geopolitics* is a complex and sophisticated text within that field), the article nevertheless posed the question as to whether a concern with challenging the geographical determinism of conventional geopolitics had led to an overinvestment in representation, culture and interpretation in the field during the 1990s and early 2000s. It also asked whether a focus on the ‘geopolitical gaze’ facilitates a full enough appreciation of the generative dimensions of physical as well as social forces in relations of power.

The article developed this argument through a closer engagement with the work of Karen Barad and Annemarie Mol. Barad (2003) provided the conceptual tools with which to reject a distinction between discourse and materiality, while Mol (2002) prompted a consideration of the merits of rejecting epistemological perspectivism in favour of an ontological appreciation of ‘multiple realities’. Together these works led me to propose an engagement with the concept of *enactment* rather than *performativity*, both to avoid any misunderstanding the latter term might engender, and to facilitate analysis of the social-physical forces that are implicated in the constitution of political boundaries. The article also asked what might be missed in an emphasis on plural perspectives over ‘multiple realities’, and in an emphasis on counter-narratives to hegemonic power as opposed to contestations over the messy dynamics of power and domination.

I would like to elaborate these questions further here, as Gearóid Ó Tuathail reflects on the context and text of *Critical Geopolitics* twenty-five years after its publication. While my questions extend beyond the scope of the book itself, they nevertheless remain relevant to some of its core concerns.

First, I would like to press Gearóid on the concept of *performativity*. As a classic text in the field, *Critical Geopolitics* inspired various deconstructive analyses of the ‘geopolitical gaze’ manifest in a range of

popular and political performances. These have been crucial in exposing practices of statecraft and in challenging objectivist representations of global space. However, I would appreciate some further reflection on the potential *limits* of the concept of performativity, particularly at the contemporary juncture, whereby post-truth politics complicate the performative, and whereby a deconstruction of ‘performance’ (in its more conventional sense) may even risk distracting attention away from key dynamics of power. This also stands as an invitation to address the question of materiality and the ‘material turn’, insofar as this is a development that Gearóid accepts in the terms I have set out.

Related to this, I also want to press Gearóid further on the question of power. *Critical Geopolitics* played a crucial role in highlighting the effacement of state violence on a global scale and the naturalisation of processes of imperial expansion and militarism through their representation as inevitable and eternal. One can hardly overlook the enduring relevance of this ‘enforce [ment of] the vision of space and power of a certain metropolitan spatial and political order over those marginalised groups ... who would contest that order’ (1996: 55). Nevertheless, I wonder if a hegemonic perspective on power overlooks some more complex dynamics that are not simply contested via counter-narratives, but also in a range of more ambivalent and messy ways. In turn, might these belie more complex boundary formations than those of inside/outside to which *Critical Geopolitics* gestures? I pose these questions with an open invitation to reflect on the legacy of *Critical Geopolitics* as a classic text within the field. The twenty-fifth anniversary of the book’s publication is an opportune moment to consider how it fares under changing times. *Critical Geopolitics* was of course published only seven years after the fall of the Berlin wall and five years before 9/11. Since this time, concerns such as those surrounding the impact of climate change and digital technologies have given new impetus to discussions about materiality in the shaping of politics and global space. The questions underlying my article have, in this sense, become more pressing over time.

## 7. A quarter century of critical geopolitics

### 7.1. Gerard Toal/Gearóid Ó Tuathail

I want to thank the editors and contributors of this forum for the opportunity to revisit *Critical Geopolitics*, to respond to critiques of critical geopolitics more broadly, and to comment upon the future of critical geopolitics. After devoting most of my energies over the last two decades to field research on territorial conflicts in post-communist contexts, I find myself circling back to the theoretical foundations of geopolitics. Presently, I am working on a book that seeks to elucidate a set of concepts for the critical study of geopolitics on a planet that faces proliferating crises to the future of humanity. Critical geopolitics has its origins in a late twentieth century moment of existential crisis, the heightened tensions between the Soviet Union and NATO states in the early nineteen eighties, and the real prospect of a nuclear war and potential toxic fallout and nuclear winter thereafter. While in university in Ireland during these years (distant from Cold War frontlines but not from potential radiation fallout), I sought to educate myself on the broader issues. Indeed, as Geography Society President, I managed to get E.P. Thompson, then the leading intellectual for the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, to visit our university and speak on the Cold War and exterminism (Thompson, 1980). For me at least, the moment was formative.

I mention this as background because by the time *Critical Geopolitics* appeared in 1996, the geopolitical context that generated the need for a pressing critique of dangerously militaristic geopolitics – the so-called second Cold War, trenchantly analyzed by two fellow countrymen, Fred Halliday (1983) and a trailblazing Simon Dalby (1990) – was transformed by the extremely fortunate end to the Cold War and the relatively peaceful collapse of the Soviet Union (though not in many of the places I subsequently ended up researching). Interstate war was still

a reality as the first Gulf War underscored, but the stakes in wars over the control of hydrocarbon reserves did not seem existential. How wrong this proved to be. The ‘great acceleration’ in the human consumption of hydrocarbon fuels that began after World War II kicked into an even higher gear after the Cold War. The year I was born the carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere (measured at Mauna Lao in parts per million) was 318.44. The year *Critical Geopolitics* was published this had risen to 362.61. Today the figure is 414.18 and rising.<sup>1</sup> We all know and feel the results, though we find ways to ignore the matter. The year 2020 rivalled 2016 as the hottest year on record for the planet, with near record lows in Arctic Sea ice and unrelenting coral bleaching. By many global environment measures, the last twenty-five years have been the most destructive to the foundations of human habitation on the earth of any in our species history (Wallace-Wells, 2019). This is astounding. While gaining a reprieve from a potential existential threat caused by great powers deliberately waging or tripping into nuclear war, our globalized capitalist modernity has sped us toward a reckoning with the geophysical and biogeophysical foundations of life, human and more-than-human, on planet earth. Great power geopolitics waned as a source of existential risk to humanity only for earthly geopolitics to turn up the dial on a heretofore ignored source of danger. Today we have multiple sources of existential risk entangled through each other: renewed nuclear war fears, a raging SARS CoV-2 natural pandemic, the prospect of engineered pandemics more conceivable than ever, unaligned artificial intelligence as a very real emergent risk, and the multiple cascading consequences of climate change and a hothouse earth scenario coming at us fast (Ord, 2019). Geo-politics is all around. Geo-politics is all the way down.

This is the unavoidable context within which we debate critical geopolitics. As noted in the Introduction, critical geopolitics is an approach that is open. It lacks a textbook statement and core set of concepts, a disposition I saw as a strength at the time, but I now understand also proved to be a weakness. Students wanted thinking tools and methods to use it, and critical geopolitics provided no systematic account of these. This is one reason, among many, why it gained little traction within International Relations. Critical geopolitics did, however, prove to be a general inspiration to many within Geography while attracting growing criticism over the years. Let me briefly respond to the excellent questions raised here concerning feminism, normative politics, and materiality while underscoring that all deserve greater discussion than is possible here.

I begin with feminism and the diversification of critical geopolitics. Jo Sharp revives a critique she made in 2000 that critical geopolitics is masculinist. “Reading *Critical Geopolitics* crystallised the sense I was developing of the approach being dominated by men.” While stating that “being dominated by men is not necessarily the same thing as being masculinist,” she then writes that “*Critical Geopolitics* was overwhelmingly a book about men, with the effect that the book reproduced ... geopolitics as a masculinist practice.” Sharp and Dowler felt the need to announce a ‘feminist geopolitics’ in contradistinction to it, pulling the critical study of geopolitics toward greater considerations of the body and the everyday.

Feminist geopolitics has been a gathering point for some fantastic research. I do, however, believe that the assumption that critical geopolitics was implicitly anti-feminist is not accurate. It is ironic that Sharp should cite Enloe. *Bananas, Beaches and Bases* was a text I used multiple times in my teaching. I also wrote a piece alongside *Critical Geopolitics* about what a feminist perspective meant for consideration of geopolitics as a gaze (Ó Tuathail, 1996). Perhaps this piece should have been included in the book. I did not write *Critical Geopolitics* as a survey text so criticism of what it neglects is somewhat unfair. It is fair to suggest that the book is tethered to traditional understandings of geopolitics, namely as geo-strategy and as great power competition,

<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.sealevel.info/co2.html>.



even as it tries to expand how the concept is understood and used. Critical geopolitics at the outset was in a dependent relationship with the object of its critique.

Importantly, deciding to research the ‘big men’ of the geopolitical tradition or the high politics of statecraft is not evidence that critical geopolitics is a masculinist practice. The book cites many feminist scholars – Pratt, Merchant, Harding, Jeffords, Fox-Keller, Kristeva, Irigaray – while my research on the high practice of statecraft has long noted the significance of gendered understandings and practices. Critical geopolitics is not masculinist and Sharp’s own valuable contributions and significant place in the tradition is evidence of this.

I share Rachel Squire’s excitement at how critical geopolitics has been “pushed, extended, and punctured in different ways” over the last quarter century. Her own work on submarine life is a stimulating part of this. Clearly, we are in a moment of considerable flux in terms of hegemonic identity complexes in the US, the EU and the United Kingdom, and with traditional privileged hierarchal structures in full backlash mode. Universities partially suffer because of this while their leadership adjusts to ‘market forces.’ What must also be noted is how traditional bastions of hierarchal power are now more open to diversity without significant challenge to militarism. Minorities have risen to top positions across the US state but the foreign policy consensus around massive defense spending and global power projection has remained. Feminism and NATO expansionism are not incompatible (Doyle et al. 2021, p. 9).

Second, I wish to address normative frameworks. Kearns highlights some crucial issues on this front. Megoran’s (2008) incisive questioning of normativity and critical geopolitics forced the question: is critical geopolitics itself a form of geopolitics? I think being geopolitical is unavoidable for any intellectual endeavour built around critique of power structures and power practices in world politics. Certainly, critical geopolitics is an alternative normative framework than political realism, which is a pliable and contingent tradition of advice to great power statecraft, and which tends to ignore the condition of distant strangers. Critical geopolitics does not have a country, but it does have a primary cause, which is ameliorating the looming existential risks we (and I will come back to this) currently face as earth dwellers.

This cause requires alliances, one of which can be with political realism. In the US today, the dominant form of political realism is the rhetoric of restraint and retrenchment—a rhetoric that challenges nationalist exceptionalism and global militarism (Walt, 2018). In the past, it was a rhetoric opposed to NATO interventionism in Bosnia-Herzegovina (because Bosniaks were distant strangers). I welcome Alex Jeffrey’s revisiting of the chapter on US policy on Bosnia, underscoring its ambivalent character, and updating the geopolitical context to today. As he knows, the history of the Bosnian war became a wellspring for further interventionism by the US state, in Kosovo in 1999, in Iraq in 2003 and in Libya in 2011. Preventing Benghazi from becoming ‘another Srebrenica’ justified a bombing campaign that toppled Ghaddafi and plunged the country into chaos and civil war. The ‘new cold war’ between NATO and Russia now runs through not only Bosnia, Kosovo and Libya, but many other countries, as well, with deleterious results. Here we need to grasp how political realism can be a useful check on interventionist impulses that can too easily become vehicles for utopian schemes, or a will to power disguised as virtue.

Much more needs to be done to build out critical geopolitics as a normative framework. Its collective subject, the ‘we’ cited above, can easily reproduce familiar Western hubris and privilege (not to mention Anthropocentric worldviews). But with relentless climate change forcing major states to respond, debates on global security are here already, and progressive scholars should participate despite the compromises involved. I have sought to present critical geopolitics for policy debate in my own immediate context as a ‘thick geopolitics’ that is preferable to the moralized militarism that too often accompanies US liberal internationalism (Toal, 2017). Perhaps this is empiricist critique as Kearns’s noted. I suspect he will agree that militarism, colonialism and, as we saw with Trump’s Capitol Hill insurgents, nativist Christian nationalism are

not separate social forces in the US context today. God, guns and glory are the affective pistons of settler colonialism. Challenging this locally and globally is imperative.

Finally, I address materiality and critical geopolitics. Obviously, with atmospheric carbon and coronavirus variants shadowing our lives today, questions of materiality and of relational dependencies with more-than-human others are fundamental to critical geopolitics. I appreciate how carefully Vicki Squire laid out her challenge in 2015, refusing all-too-easy distinctions between materiality, discourse and texts that others used to criticize critical geopolitics. To me at least, critical geopolitics puts together discourse and political economy materiality. It always had concerns with ground-level material realities in conflict zones, a concern that endures in my research on attitudes in conflict zones. Our initial elemental fear was radiation from nuclear war or catastrophic failures like Chernobyl in April 1986 (Brown, 2019). On these innately materialistic questions, I found Beck’s risk society work helpful (Ó Tuathail, 1998). Certainly, questions of lively matter require engagement, most especially through a classical geopolitical literature that simultaneously recognised and restrained understanding of earthly forces and relations (Latour, 2018). Again, Simon Dalby is a trailblazer here, with work that helpfully wrestles with the challenge of the Anthropocene in ways that advance critical geopolitics (Dalby, 2020).

Specifically, in response to Vicki’s two challenges, I would accept that the concept of *political performativity* has significant limits as an account of “key dynamics of power” (though I expect we differ on that which we hold to be key). Focusing research on great power competition and physical violence is understandable, but also limiting. As Beck and many other argued, we have a government of technological orders, commitments and machines that was built around, beneath and beyond structures of accountability. They have their own agency. Lively materiality is not something novel to those long concerned with accidental nuclear war or automated cruise missiles (a final image in *Critical Geopolitics*). Nor is the realization that our lives are ruled by unsustainable energy systems, economic rationality models and digital algorithms that build in concentrations of power and environmental degradation as routine and rational. We are remarkably dependent upon biogeophysical processes and lifeforms that are almost completely invisible to us. And we are relative upstarts next to the geological timescale of the planet, other life forms and the space of the cosmos. The future of critical geopolitics lies in wrestling with the material manifestations of the existential crises that face us all today. The specter of extermination, deeper and more pervasive than Thompson knew, haunts the world.

### 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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