

A STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND

IN 1989, AMERICAN KIMBERLY MACK WAS CALLED “A NIGGER” FOR ONLY THE SECOND TIME IN HER LIFE. IT HAPPENED IN GALWAY. 14 YEARS LATER SHE RETURNS TO IRELAND TO SEE WHAT A DIFFERENCE IMMIGRATION HAS MADE – AND TO REFLECT ON HOW RACISM CAN BE COVERT AS WELL AS OVERT. PHOTOGRAPHY CATHAL DAWSON

he second time in my life I was called a nigger – at least to my face – was when I was in Ireland, studying at Trinity College in Dublin. – It was an uncharacteristically hot summer in 1989 and I was walking in County Galway with my Irish-American housemate, having just seen The Waterboys in-concert. –

It all happened so fast, a torrent of expletives hurled by a young boy of no more than 12 or 13. – Although details of the boy’s face were indistinguishable in the darkness, I could almost feel the sneer on his face, as he spat out the words “bleedin’ fuckin’ nigger”... My heart raced suddenly; shock, and then hurt, overtook me. I thought I might respond in some way, but the kid was there one moment and gone the next. The words hung in the air long after I returned to my cozy B&B near the water, and well past the next morning when I packed my things to return to my host family in the Dublin suburb of Malahide. In fact, I held on to that incident for many years to come.

Unfortunately, that brief moment tainted an otherwise positive experience. After two months in Ireland, I had grown accustomed to the stares of ordinary folks on the street. – “Are you from the Caribbean?” – “Are you Indian?” – “Are you British?” – “What are you?” – At first, I was embarrassed and even somewhat offended. While it was common to see African and Spanish students each summer, from the reaction I got, it’s safe to say, in 1989 most Irish folks had not previously met a Black American and they seemed eager to take advantage of the rare opportunity to do so. –

The moment I opened my mouth, and it was clear I was an American, I was instantly embraced with warmth, and it seemed that my dark skin took a back seat to my nationality. – This is why the boy’s use of the word ‘nigger’ was so disconcerting for me. – I was used to the curiosity and I had accepted my quasi-freak status, but I was clearly reluctant to distrust the intentions of the people of Ireland. I wanted to believe they wished me well.

Of course, that summer turned out to be the tail end of a long chapter in

Irish history. – In just a few short years, profound economic growth paved the way for more jobs and widespread immigration, as well as an increase in political asylum seekers. – A few years back, one of my good friends, Edel, an Irish woman from Dublin, told me that the relentless attention I’d encountered back in 1989 had already, unfortunately, been replaced with full blown racism.

As sad as that revelation made me feel at the time, I was not surprised in the least. Though the Irish have a protracted history of emigration to places like the United States and Britain, immigration into Ireland is a different matter altogether. Human nature dictates that some Irish people might feel threatened by immigration, as Ireland was Irish for so very long.

On Friday, August 15, 2003, I travelled back to Dublin to visit friends, and even planned to make a return trip to Co. Galway, after a 14-year break. As I sat on the plane from Newark, New Jersey (already 3,000 miles away from my new home in Los Angeles, CA) to Dublin, Ireland, I felt a mixture of excitement and apprehension. What if my vacation turned out to be more aggravating than enjoyable? I wondered if I would be glared at on the street this time, rather than experiencing the friendly, though sometimes surreal, conversations of 1989.

I wondered if I would see evidence of right wing Aryan Nation type paraphernalia tucked in post boxes around town or perhaps I would see skin heads with t-shirts reading “Welcome to Ireland, now go home... nigger.” The advance buzz about race relations in Ireland was not favourable. About a year ago, one of my closest friends, an African-American woman who has lived in a handful of major European cities, including Paris and Amsterdam, was looking for a place to work on her novel for a few months. After some consideration, she decided against Ireland, because of its reputation for ethnic intolerance. Her romantic notions of securing a quiet, remote area in which to write, as well as Ireland’s rich literary tradition, were not



Kimberly Mack: “In the Dublin of today I barely rate a glance”

compelling enough reasons for her to risk three months of racial tension.

My short stint in immigration at Dublin Airport was uneventful as they never fully engaged. Having grown up in New York City, all of this felt familiar, and therefore, comfortable for me in a way, but I couldn’t help but feel that something had been lost.

During my first visit to Dublin I had been mostly bewildered, nervous and unsure of how handle myself in such a strange, foreign land. I was nineteen and I hadn’t previously been out of the United States or even flown in an airplane. I stayed with a middle-class family in Malahide, along with my Irish-American housemate Shannon and a Spanish student. Our house mother cooked breakfast and dinner for us daily and the three foreign exchange students were treated as close to family as was reasonable. I also enjoyed my Irish studies course at Trinity College, as I had always had a weak spot for Irish history and literature.

However, despite my access to Irish family life, I never actually felt included. Because of my skin colour, no matter how nicely or warmly I was treated, I remained an outsider. I unwittingly found myself involved in

many conversations about skin tone, black hair, racism in the US hell, even the subject of Michael Jackson was a potential landmine! My house mother had no idea why I was offended when she told me Michael Jackson looked better with white skin. Having to be a “spokesperson” for an entire race of people is never any fun, but trying to discuss race with a person who had never met a Black American before, was especially challenging. My house mother had probably never directly experienced racism (certainly not in her own country), so she almost always challenged concepts, ideas and situations that seemed clearly racist to me.

I lived for many years with the rose-colored-glasses belief that my first Ireland trip was perfect. When I would look back at my time in Ireland, I would, inevitably, block out that incident in Galway. The country was beautiful, the people warm and friendly. While this is all true, the fact remains that while some of the attention I got was born of ignorance, a lot of it was also racist. Just the very nature of the assumption of otherness is inherently racist. If a person’s differences really don’t matter

to you, then they are unlikely to even become a topic of conversation.

I spent a lot of time pondering this while I was in Ireland for the second time. What is racism exactly? A lot of people, mainly members of the majority in any society, have the luxury of not having to think about racism or notice racism. Usually members of the majority think that racism is limited to racial epithets or perhaps racial profiling (the practice of the police force to use race as an indicator of probable criminal intent) in urban cities in the United States. Job or housing discrimination also rates high in most people’s imaginations of what racism looks like.

As a member of a minority group, I have come to understand that any stereotypes and assumptions about race, however benign they may seem, can be just as dangerous and damaging as the more overt forms of discrimination.

Though I am a Black American, born and raised in Brooklyn, New York in the 1970s, my experiences might not be the most predictable example of the “Black American Experience.” I was educated at a predominantly Caucasian, private, liberal, hippy school in a wealthy section of Brooklyn. I grew up lower middle-class, at best, but my mother made sure I was able to wear the same clothes my friends wore and that I had access to the same extra curricular activities. I am currently pursuing a master’s degree in creative writing at a prestigious university in the United States.

The first time I was called a nigger I was seven years old, by a girl who was a year older than me. We were in the playground and I distinctly remember playing with my Barbie dolls. I think she tried to take one of my dolls away and I wouldn’t let her, so she called me a nigger. I already knew what the word meant and I felt like crying, but I didn’t. I don’t think I said anything at all. She ended up apologizing to me two years later, when I was nine and she was ten.



Kimberly: a face in the crowd

Aside from that, I went through my school years unscathed. Oh, unless you count that time in the third grade I played master and slave with my one of my little girlfriends. Guess who was the slave? She tied a jump rope around my neck (not too tight) and led me around the school playground. We only played it once and it was undoubtedly connected to the recent television event known as *Alex Haley’s Roots*. I wasn’t allowed to watch it, as I was only seven years old and my mother feared I might be traumatised. I went along with the game, because, honestly, I didn’t know any better. I do remember a slight recognition that the game might be wrong in some way, but that misgiving quickly gave over to my need to just fit in and be liked. And, of course, when it became time to like boys, my friends always assumed I should be with one of the two Black boys in my class. It was a given that I would like Kayode or Tolan. Little did they know I had a crush on the Irish-American kid who sat behind me in French class.

Much to my surprise, assumptions and stereotypes seemed to me to be the main manifestation of the racism I encountered in

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TAXING MATTERS

PAYING TAXES FOR SERVICES THAT WORK IS ONE THING. BUT WHAT ABOUT THE SERVICES THAT DON’T WORK? WORDS The Whole Hog

Well, by the gods, this is turning windy. Gale day is no day to thatch, as my grandfather used to say, and the Government of this neck of the woods is finding that out. Ooops, did I say Woods? I did, I did, and funny that I should, but he’s been in the firing line for the deal he did with the religious orders on compensation for victims of abuse in institutions run by those self-same religious orders.

It is reported that he took personal charge of the negotiations when they looked like stalling and the orders (no, not ordures, silly!) were about to walk away. The then Attorney-General, one Michael McDowell, wasn’t informed, and he’s not shy about telling all and sundry.

It’s a bit of a mess, and the State’s financial watchdog, the Comptroller and Auditor General, said as much. He estimates that the cost will be higher than the man Pat Rabbitte calls Woodsie does.

But alongside that good old-fashioned political battle, there’s loads of other things. For example, there’s a bit of slap and tickle with a Government member of the Senate revealed to have sold ads for brothels while working for *In Dublin* – big deal! On a more serious note, a member of the Fianna Fáil parliamentary party was involved in an accident while apparently over the alcohol limit. And deputy Michael Collins has been revealed to have had a bogus non-resident account for the purposes of avoiding tax.

The hits all add up. Nothing fatal in any of those, but the attrition has begun.

On the other side of the house as it were, we have the anti-waste charge brigade. According to their spokespersons, these people can’t afford to pay any more tax, these charges are double taxation, and they won’t pay.

Most people have resisted the temptation to ask them to set out exactly what tax they actually pay, and that’s a good thing. We actually have a very low tax regime in this country. At first glance. But when you add up the road tax, the tolls, the VAT, and especially the duty on alcohol and cigarettes, not to mention the Vehicle Registration Tax, and so on and on, actually we pay a lot.

Okay. But why do waste charges in Dublin trigger such rage in the big housing estates? After all one of the campaigners claimed that more tax should be paid by the big companies whose corporation tax was reduced by Charlie McCreery. Fine, but they pay rates, we don’t. You could say, in fact, that this tax on business pays for a lot of the local Government that we get, both good and bad.

And whether the local people would prefer the big companies to up roots and go somewhere else, where rates are lower, taking their jobs with

them, is another matter. It’s one thing to refuse to pay your bin tax. It’s another to lose your job. Joe Higgins might be less thanked then.

And another thing, people who won’t pay their bin charge seem to find no problem in paying motorway tolls. Seems to me that this is another double tax. But of course, refusing to pay a toll might mean that you couldn’t get to work. Which would mean losing money. And you wouldn’t want that, would you?

With all due respects, anti-bin campaigners often appear pretty selfish and anti-democratic. You mightn’t like decisions arrived at by democratic process, but the deal is clear, you accept them.

But there is a strong thread of thought in Dublin of opposition to the Guvvaint and Pollitishans no matter what. I’m all right Jack. Get yer bleedin’ hand out of my pocket bud. They know their rights, but go all numb at the mention of their responsibilities, and I mean their responsibilities as citizens of a democratic republic.

Personally, I think they should be girding their loins for another battle because economic consultants Inceon have recommended to the Government that they introduce water taxes and toll more roads. Taxes on petrol, motor taxes, and now tolls? Arrah, come on! That’s triple taxation!

Meanwhile, the anti-smoking drive by the Minister for Health reminds us that the Government can be just as intransigent as a garrulous community. The smokers in Fianna Fáil won’t forget the favour that Micheál Martin has done them when the time comes to replace Bertie. And if every smoker remembered him at election time, his party would suffer badly.

While Martin’s prohibitionism may be acceptable to a majority of the population, many of these people don’t go to pubs. Of those who do, a far higher number smoke, and will be a lot less affirmative.

But of course, there’s also the view that the row with the publicans is a distraction from the woes of the health service which has, as we speak, fallen into even greater disarray, with Accident and Emergency wards closing or refusing individuals.

Makes ya wonder. Why do the people who are so cheerful about going to prison chanting we-won’t-pay-the-bin-tax not get angry about this? Isn’t the issue here that the health service gets a lot of that precious tax money that the anti-waste chargers resent paying, and gives back very poor value indeed? Shouldn’t this be the focus of their anger?

Personally, I don’t mind paying taxes for services that work. It’s paying for services that don’t work that pisses me off. b

THE HOG

GERRY ADAMS

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What's been the lowest point of your life?

Apart from this interview? [*glares fiercely for a moment and then bursts out laughing*] Ha! Ha! No, I'm only joking! Em... I don't know. The lowest point of my life? I don't know. Other than my mother dying, in my personal life.

You write in the book that you couldn't visit the hospital on the night she died because of security reasons.

Well, that didn't actually so much phase me because I'd sort of made my mind up and that was it. I was settled on it. Just the fact that it's a very human thing. I don't know if your parents are still alive or even if you have parents, but it's an experience that people have to go through – unless you die before them. So that would've been a low point. Clearly at times when friends were killed or when there were big atrocities. Whether it be Omagh – I mean, the Omagh bombing was *after* the Good Friday Agreement – whether it be the Shankill bombing or in Enniskillen. So serious things were happening in the course of all of this.

Do you not become inured to these kinds of tragedies after a while?

No, never. Not at all. Sure, the Shankill Road is only over there [*gestures towards wall of office*]. Enniskillen, I drive past the site regularly. So this is happening all around you and you don't forget. I mean, Yeats wrote about, '*Too long a sacrifice makes a stone of the heart*'. That isn't true, in my view. Maybe if you're on the margins or maybe if you're very young or just blinkered in some way. But if you're a serious human being who wants to lead a useful life and try and bring about change, try and be of some service, then each one of these incidents in which people have been killed – either a single person has been killed or groups of people have been killed – each one of them just sort of *whacks* ye. So have no doubt about that, at all. And the fact that we're so surrounded by it. Even just here, in this office, just down the stairs, when three people were killed there [*in 1992 an RUC officer, posing as a journalist, entered the building and shot three SF office workers before committing suicide*]. I mean, Nora McCabe [*young mother shot*

with a plastic bullet] was killed just two streets from here.

There's been a lot of recent controversy over Martin Ferris, Caoimhin O'Caolain and two other Sinn Fein TD's having their photo taken in Castlereagh prison with the killers of Detective Garda Jerry McCabe. Was that not an insensitive move?

Well, you see there's a campaign for the release of the Castlereagh people, for the people who are in for the killing of Jerry McCabe, and I was one of the people who negotiated it. And when I negotiated for the release of prisoners, I negotiated not just for republican prisoners but also for loyalist prisoners. So I negotiated for the people who killed people around here, who killed our party members, who killed family members. And we also made very, very clear, and the governments agreed, that people who're members or supporters of qualified organisations would be able to avail of the early release scheme.

The Castlereagh prisoners fitted into that. The High Court recently said that the government is in breach of the agreement. Now the campaign to get their release is being opposed by a campaign to keep them in prison. And the McCabe family, and particularly Mrs. McCabe, are now caught up in all of that. I made the case that I am sure that this is hugely traumatising for them, and there's no way just of dealing with that from my point of view except to express concern and compassion for her.

Neither do I want, as a political leader, to be every second interview talking about the Castlereagh prisoners or Garda Jerry McCabe's killing because I think it was reprehensible, it was something that should not have happened. So I just think that until this issue is brought to a conclusion that every so often there's gonna be some controversy. And without sort of... Em, I just don't buy Sunday papers anymore.

I don't blame you!

Yeah! [*laughs*] I just stopped buying Sunday papers but the controversy started when the *Sunday Independent* carried the photographs. It was in the *Phobloch* and there wasn't any great squall about it and then the *Sunday Indo* went

and used it. So as part of campaigning in all of this you're gonna find that people involved are gonna use photographs just to try and keep the thing running. And you're gonna find other people arguing against it.

Do you think that Bono has been useful in the peace process?

Well, first of all, I think he has done *huge* work on debt cancellation. I think he deserves great credit for that. I've listened to him speaking on it and he's hugely informed, he speaks for quite a long time without notes and in great detail, and he is using his status for the benefit of other people – and people who wouldn't have a voice. So I thank him and respect him and commend him for that. I like his music. But I think that he came at the issue of the North wrongly and I disagreed with him on that.

Surely bringing Trimble and Hume together on stage in Belfast in front of a massive U2 audience at such a pivotal moment was a good thing?

Well, I'm talking about before that. When the peace process kicked in, I think then that he showed a different side to his character. And I think it's good that we can do that – that somebody who would have been seen as anti-republican was then able to come out and support a peace process. And I think what he did with David Trimble and John Hume was a good thing because he was obviously appealing to U2 fans and young people and lovers of music to come out and give this a bit of support, because that's the future. So yes, I think he has been good.

Your son is in his early twenties now. Has watching him grow up over the years changed your attitude towards the whole thing? Obviously you want your children to have a better future. . .

Not really, because I come from a big family. See part of this, if I may say so, is there was always a notion that you were sort of half-mad and then you had kids and got a bit of sense. And then they have kids and you get a bit more sense. I come from a large family so there's always kids around. So you're always conscious of the future, you're always conscious that there has to be hope in this situation.

What's your greatest regret in life?

My greatest regret in life? I don't know. I mean, I wouldn't call it my greatest regret but I suppose the fact that it took so long to get a peace process together. The fact that so many people have been killed. The fact that people are still hurting would all be part of, I suppose, a sense of where we're at. But I said this to you earlier, I do feel extremely lucky and I do intend to use whatever sort of influence or whatever little talent I have to try and continue to bring about change. And when I come to the end of all of that then I may be able to make sense of your question. But I don't sit back and consider over things and put up a list of pluses and minuses. We have been part of bringing about change and that's been good.

Do you see permanent peace in Northern Ireland happening in your lifetime?

Absolutely! But I think it should not be taken for granted. I think if we underestimate the difficulty, we will just make awful mistakes. I think we have to be single-minded and the micro-management is hugely important, and we have to be very cautious, because what we're trying to do is unprecedented. But I think if we continue to do it and continue to apply ourselves that we will succeed.

And I certainly see peace in my lifetime and if we just for a second reflect that while for some people, particularly families who've had loved ones killed in the last five, six years, and for a year or two there people living in interfaith areas had things made much worse, but for the vast majority of people things are much better. There are hundreds of people still alive who would've been dead and there are kids now who have some hope, where beforehand they were going into a prison cell. And I think all of that's to the good so we just have to keep at it.

Do you have a motto in life?

Always look on the bright side... That's where you're supposed to go [*starts humming the Monty Python tune*] *Da-Doo... Da-Doo-Da-Doo-Da-Doo!* [*laughs*]. b

Hope and History: Making Peace in Ireland by Gerry Adams (Brandon, 27.99) is available in all good

KIMBERLY MACK

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Ireland this time. That is not to say that my experience is representative of all of the Black people who live in Ireland. In fact, I met a young Nigerian immigrant who seemed pleased to have the opportunity to share stories of racial hostility and aggression. While he noted he felt physically safer in Dublin than when he lived in London, he still described incidents of racial profiling by the police, as well as plenty of verbal abuse by members of the community. As an outsider, who offers no threat to the majority in Ireland, I wasn't called a nigger this time, but I did witness and encounter certain assumptions about race that were alarming.

For example, after meeting with another good friend, an Irish woman named Paula, for tea at a café in the city centre, we went back to her house via the Summerhill section of Dublin. We also walked down Sean McDermitt Road and for the first time I sensed hostility as I walked about the town. In the city centre, no one so much as glanced at me, but as I walked with Paula, I noticed stares. At first I thought I was imagining things. I thought maybe I was being paranoid. After Paula and I had passed, I could feel the tingle of a stare on my back. Then I looked back to be sure and I saw a young Irish woman looking back at me. Paula talked to me about the hostility some people in Summerhill feel about what they perceive to be the preferential treatment immigrants get in government funded

housing in the area. She told me the bulk of the hostility came out of feeling that their housing, jobs, security have been taken away one by one. Then I noticed another person staring. This time it was a man and his glare was undeniable. Just because I had dark skin, I wondered if he assumed I was an immigrant or maybe a political asylum seeker. What are the chances he thought I might be a tourist or a native?

I also visited Galway during this trip. One night in Galway I went to a pub with Edel and took in a traditional Irish music "session." It really was a fantastic night. The pub was packed with friendly faces and good vibrations and I felt wholly welcomed. There were some stares, but they were from men and seemed more like the friendly kind than those born of hostility. A young, very drunk and very tall man from County Donegal even picked me up (literally) and carried me around while dancing to the music. Once again, I was the unwitting centre of attention, but at least it was all in good fun.

Later that night, at the hotel bar, an older man came up to me and started in on the changes in Ireland and how I felt about them. He assumed, at first, that I had immigrated and wanted to know what my experiences had been. When he realized I was American, he was undeterred and felt I might have some opinion on the subject. At some point Edel wondered aloud why it was necessary to discuss this in a hotel bar at 1:00 AM. She also wished aloud for the day when the

colour of a person's skin didn't warrant such a conversation.

Sadly, I've grown used to all kinds of assumptions being made about myself and other people of colour I know and love. While I still lived in New York City, I tried, ultimately unsuccessfully, to produce a documentary about National Hockey League fans. In North America, ice hockey has traditionally been a White, male sport, so despite my filmmaking experience and childhood love of the sport, my legitimacy as a Black, female hockey enthusiast was continually in question.

New York City is a melting pot and so is Los Angeles, but because of the size of each city, the different ethnic groups have historically splintered off into their own neighbourhoods. In Dublin, because of its size, this is not possible, so everyone is forced to live, work, and go to the pub together. I see this as only a good thing. The more exposure folks have to "the other," the better. However, I wonder how long the relative calm will last. In some ways, Ireland of today feels to me like how pre-civil rights America in the 1950s and early 1960s must have felt. The minority population seems almost resigned to the tension that exists just beneath the surface. And the majority interacts with "the other," because it has to, but still puts each minority in a particular racial box. People interact, but don't necessarily get to know each other. Where is all this heading? For good or ill, or both, the next 14 years will tell an interesting tale. b