**Readings on Multi-Cultural Ireland from Metro-Eireann**

(Discussion Questions at the end)

**Letters to America: The streets may look the same, but the faces of Dublin are changing** [**By Caitlin McGough**](http://oldweb.metroeireann.com/authors/caitlin-mcgough,128) **Tuesday, July 1, 2014**

**In the first of this summer’s new series by students on the DukeEngage programme, Caitlin McGough explains how working amid Dublin’s migrant communities has given her a new perspective on integration**

It was a simple question with a short answer, directed towards the Nigerian-born Irish citizen for whom I am working all summer: “Is there no provision for equal protection in Irish law?” The quick and, upon reflection, obvious answer was: “No.”

This is what I know. The Irish know the proper way of saying my surname. Nowhere in America can I go to Starbucks and expect ‘Caitlin’ to be spelled correctly. Despite a month of sunshine before arriving, I blend in on the streets of Dublin, and I feel no stares curious about my ethnicity or country of origin. A Claddagh ring rests on my right hand, the design of which originated near Galway in the west, where my family members saw their last glimpse of home before departing for New York.

I grew up hearing stories of my family’s immigrant past, Irish from my father and Slovak from my mother. As I got older, I learned the history of the places those generations came from. Famine, poverty, and war made the decision to emigrate easier, but the promise of a new life and a safe community in America drew them away. I have read Oscar Wilde, applauded Beckett’s masterpieces, and attended plays at the Gate Theatre. A week ago, I stepped off the plane to receive the second Ireland stamp in my passport.

Dublin looks exactly the same. The lush, rain-fed greenery of St Stephen’s Green stands as it has for hundreds of years. There is a comforting permanence in the eternally damp stones of the streets, a sacred mysticism in the houses of worship. The buildings along the canal are right where I remember them.

**Not quite the same**

And yet, Dublin isn’t quite the same. Last time I was a tourist, on a pilgrimage of sorts with my family to the homeland; this time I am working to serve the migrant community.

I spend most of my days north of the River Liffey, which is both a geographic and social barrier that tourists only traverse as passengers on double-decker sightseeing buses. Historically a region of working-class housing, in the past two decades the northside has become home to much of the city’s migrant population. Immigrants stand out on the streets, but there are not enough from any single country to make uniformly homogenous communities within Dublin.

For an afternoon I sat with two other students at a café, watching rush hour traffic and listing all the ethnicities we thought we could discern: Brazilian, Thai, Polish, Filipino, Nigerian, Chinese, Hispanic, Japanese, Hungarian. Our categories broadened: Asian, Arab, African, South American, Eastern European, Arab again. The streets may look the same, but the faces of Dublin are changing. And to an American, the circumstances are deceptively familiar.

**Failure to prioritise**

There are superficial similarities between Irish society today and the challenges the US has faced. The current Irish discussion is centred on the principles of equality and integration, as was the civil rights agenda in America 50 years ago. For instance, voting in the recent local elections was open to all residents of Ireland, but many ethnic minorities say they were stopped and questioned at the polls based on their accent, or the colour of their skin.

There is a shallow push for integration in many institutions. The Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) and the Football Association of Ireland (FAI) have had their own elaborate integration plans in place for years, yet the will to prioritise those strategies is lacking. In fact, the failure to prioritise and the tendency to ignore migrant communities seems to be the Government’s current strategy.

Let me be clear: I am not arguing that America did it better, and I am not implying that our battle for equal rights and opportunity is finished. I am saying that cultural context and historical precedent render it shallow to apply one nation’s solutions to another’s unique set of challenges.

**What I know now**

How would America perceive outsiders today if we had not always been a nation of immigrants? How would we admit to our oppression of others if we ourselves had historically been the victims of foreign imperialism? And the biggest question: how would the federal government have enforced civil rights legislation without the 14th amendment, which had already been around for a hundred years?

I have been here for less than two weeks. I don’t know how Ireland’s past will determine its treatment of immigrants. I don’t know what the uphill struggle for equality under the law will bring. But I do know this: despite my name, despite my pale complexion, and despite the Claddagh ring resting on my right hand, I am more a stranger here than the Nigerian-born Irish citizen for whom I am working all summer. And he knows all too well that there is no provision for equal protection in Irish law.

*Caitlin McGough is a student at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina in Ireland as part of the DukeEngage programme.*

<http://oldweb.metroeireann.com/article/letters-to-america-the,4267>

‘It’s my second home - even more than a home’

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By Chinedu Onyejelem, posted on Metro Eireann

Fifteen years ago, Moldovan-born journalist Domnica Lazar made the difficult decision to leave her homeland over political reasons. While she arrived safely in Ireland without her two daughters, she also ended up spending her first two weeks in a Dublin hospital. She speaks to Metro Éireann about her experience, and her wish to meet again one of the doctors who treated her in her time of need

‘On my way travelling to Ireland, I badly hurt my leg in a motor accident. It was an open injury which required immediate surgery.” That was how Domnica Lazar recalls beginning her life in Ireland – at the doorstep of a Dublin hospital.

“It was a very hard job for the doctors from St Vincent’s Hospital,” she recalls, “as I was five months pregnant, did not speak any English and there was not any background information about my health issues, vaccines, etcetera.”

Despite being proficient in Romanian, Moldovan, Russian and Italian, the challenge of lacking the English language and the ability to communicate with the doctors and other hospital staff terrified her.

“I remember laying on a portable bed and Dr Dara O’Cavanagh asking me different questions on the way to surgery. I was looking at his lips to understand at least something, but nothing.”

She still remembers one particular word - “live” – used in a question by Dr O’Cavanagh at that time. While she did not understand what it meant or the reason why he used it, she said she memorised it with the hope she would one day find out its meaning.

**Bridging the gap**

Domnica was soon relieved to find the communication gap was bridged by an immigrant hospital staffer.

“There was an Armenian worker called Gary Barcegean in the hospital who spoke Russian, and the doctors called him each time to translate for me. We became friends after that.”

In the operating theatre, Dr Stevie Richards joined Dr O’Cavanagh to tend to Domnica’s injury, which required 14 stitches. Fifteen years on, she remains full of praise for the doctors who saved her life and that of her unborn child.

Following the successful operation, Domnica was moved to St Teresa’s Ward to recuperate, and later to St Rafael’s Ward, where she was lucky to meet two “lovely Irish women” with whom she later became good friends. “One of them became godmother to my daughter Maria when she was born later,” she says, recalling that with her Italian and that woman’s Spanish, they were able to converse in basic fashion.

Upon her discharge, Domnica says she felt she could not express her gratitude to the medical staff at St Vincent’s. When one of the women she‘d befriend brought her flowers, she in turn gave them to the doctors in appreciation for their efforts.

This prompted some confusion from another woman in the ward, who wondered why she was giving flowers to a doctor who was only doing his job.

Coming from a working-class family of 14 children, Domnica explains that she was taught by her mother that thanking anyone for their help, even doctors whose job is to do just that, was very important.

Her challenging situation, the success of the operation, the pregnancy that was not affected by her injury, and the death of her mother in a Moldovan hospital – all of these things made her feel grateful, and made it important for her to show this gratitude.

Thinking back to her homeland, she describes a situation of serious corruption in the health system where lives hang in the balance. “There was a story of a medical doctor in Moldova who refused to see an accident victim because he had no money,” she remembers. “It later turned out that the patient who died was the doctor’s son.”

While she had good experiences with the Moldovan health system, particularly with the birth of her second child in 1996, in general she believes doctors in Moldova are not transparent with patients’ families. During the time her mother was seriously ill, her father learned from a meeting with the Moldovan health minister that she was actually dying when the doctors where saying the opposite.

**True to her word** As Domnica left St Vincent’s, she says she promised herself that she would one day return to thank her doctors, once she has learned English. Within a few months she was well on the way to doing that, besides giving birth to her third daughter Maria. Even with all the challenges of motherhood, Domnica says she was fluent in English just three years on.

“I bought a television,” she recalls of how she picked up the language so quickly. “I looked at the teletext for English words and watched Fair City to find out the way people thought and acted. I spoke a lot to people on the street. Being an extrovert also helped me a lot.”

Another useful strategy was memorising words she heard and then looking them up in a Russian-English dictionary, which helped her breeze through English classes at the Adult Education Centre on Dublin’s Mountjoy Square.

True to her word, Domnica returned to St Vincent’s, where she met Dr Richards. Dr O’Cavanagh had moved on, but ever the dogged journalist, Domnica resolved to find him.

“Then suddenly I got very sick with active Hepatitis B,” she recalls. “I had my liver biopsed. It took time to recover. Since then, I feel that I haven’t finished my job, so now it’s the right time.”

As her daughter Maria turned 15 years old recently, and is sitting her Junior Cert this summer, Domnica says now “is the perfect time to go with my daughter to meet those doctors who saved my life at that time.”

**Mostly a rebel**

It’s a life that Domnica says has been “hunky dory” for the most part, despite troubles with an unscrupulous landlord, and an abusive gang of girls in Mountjoy Square.

“People are friendly and warm-hearted,” she says of Ireland at large. “It’s my second home – even more than a home. That’s how I felt when I arrived here 15 years ago.”

One of the reasons why she is so passionate about living in Ireland, she says, is that “you get what you deserve”. It’s an attitude so unlike that in Moldova, where she says people are often discriminated against for their beliefs.

But Domnica stresses that Moldova is not quite the backwards country many in western Europe might believe it to be. Her two eldest daughters, with whom she was reunited in Dublin 10 years ago, are back home in Moldova progressing in their different careers – thanks in part to their Irish upbringing.

Moldova also allows for diaspora participation in politics, and Domnica has used that opportunity to continue to take part in activities promoting her country’s overall development, both here in Ireland as well as on visits home.

She says she was very active during the 2016 presidential race, and in the last two parliamentary elections in 2010 and 2014, writing and campaigning for the Alliance for European Integration, which has since put the Communist Party in opposition. That party’s regime, she says, is one reason why she and so many fellow Moldovans had left their country for a better life abroad.

Domnica – who sees herself as “a historian and journalist but mostly a rebel” – says she hopes one day that her small contribution would help in realising the positive change Moldova needs. But she also fears that the current establishment makes this process very difficult.

One example of this is when Domnica’s history teacher denied her the highest mark in a final school exam because “she had no Communist belief”. This was one of the reasons, she adds, why she did not accept an offer from her old school upon leaving to become a part-time history teacher herself, while studying part-time, with a full-time post following her graduation from university.

It’s this kind of corruption, she says, that must be fought for the good of the country.

**Discussion Questions**:

1. Caitlyn McGough uses her perspective as an Irish American college student to reflect on how contemporary Ireland’s difficulties with smoothly and equitably integrating outsiders. What message does she have for the Irish? What might Americans learn from this, too, now that we’re living in the Trump era?
2. As someone familiar with Silicon Valley’s situation with a rapidly globalizing population, how would you respond to McGough’s essay?
3. In his profile of Domnica Lazar, who came to Ireland from Moldova, Chinedu Onyejelem offers an immigrant’s perspective on the same situation—Ireland dealing with an influx of newcomers from other countries. What seems to be the theme of this profile? What details or quotes struck you as particularly interesting or persuasive?
4. In the Lazar profile, what emerges as the attractions of Ireland to those who come from Eastern Europe, a former communist bloc? What are some drawbacks of emigrating to Ireland for this population?
5. If you could speak to either Ms. Lazar or Mr. Onyejelem, what more might you want to know about this person and/or this subject (Ireland’s rapidly diversifying population)?