

# 'And so, I seem to find myself back home'

A poet and writer studying in Cork, **Kimberly Reyes** compares and contrasts the life of Irish people in Ireland with the experience of black people around the world and back in the US. And what she viewed as a 'home court' problem, racism, is to be found everywhere



I AM a black American woman, a poet, here on a Fulbright to study Irish writing and film at University College Cork. Coming to Ireland was a lifelong dream of mine as I've always believed it to be "the land of poets". The literary and cultural influence that this small island has on the world is remarkable, and not unlike the cultural offerings of black Americans.

For that reason, I'm also here to compare and contrast the lived experiences of the Irish in Ireland and black Americans. I say the Irish in Ireland, as a separate entity from Irish-Americans, because becoming American means taking on all of our baggage and structural systems of oppression.

I also wanted to experience living in a formerly colonised, white country, as I'm interested in the idea of race and how it intersects with sovereignty and borders. From my experience so far, I'm less and less convinced that nationhood is as distinguishing to a people as their proximity to power.

The planes of people flying in from the US (Americans currently can't fly in to the rest of the EU) mean that American privilege and exceptionalism managed to reach me in Ireland.

I've lived here for a year and, like everyone else, I've adhered to every rule of each Covid-19 phase the Taoiseach laid out.

In that process, my Fulbright year was cut short and so many of my plans for this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity were cancelled. Still, my sacrifice pales in comparison to the people who couldn't attend loved one's funerals or be present for births, all in the name of public safety. But now Bubba, fresh off the plane from Texas, can tour Blarney Castle, possibly detonating a Covid-19 bomb in Cork?

Eamon Ryan, the transport minister, said in July that Irish airports remained open during the Covid-19 crisis "to ensure critical supply chains have been able to remain operational, and citizens have been able to return home".

But why would larger, more populous countries such as Germany and France not have the same concerns? Perhaps because their economies are also larger and less dependent on the two richest countries who have handled this crisis the worst — the US and the UK. And, as I've always known as an American, the global wing-makers can be the rule breakers.

The US is so prejudicial at adhering to its own rules that in June the United Nations Human Rights Council deemed that some of its citizens met the international legal standard for refugee status. As Leila Morsy reported for the *New York Daily News* in July, "African-American men have such a 'well-founded fear of persecution' that they could be eligible for asylum in other countries".

Michelle Bachelet, the UN high commissioner for human rights, stated that police brutality "has come to symbolise the systemic racism that harms millions of people of African descent — causing pervasive, daily, life-long, generational and too often, lethal harm".

Black men, however, are certainly not the only victims of systematic racial injustice and its effects.

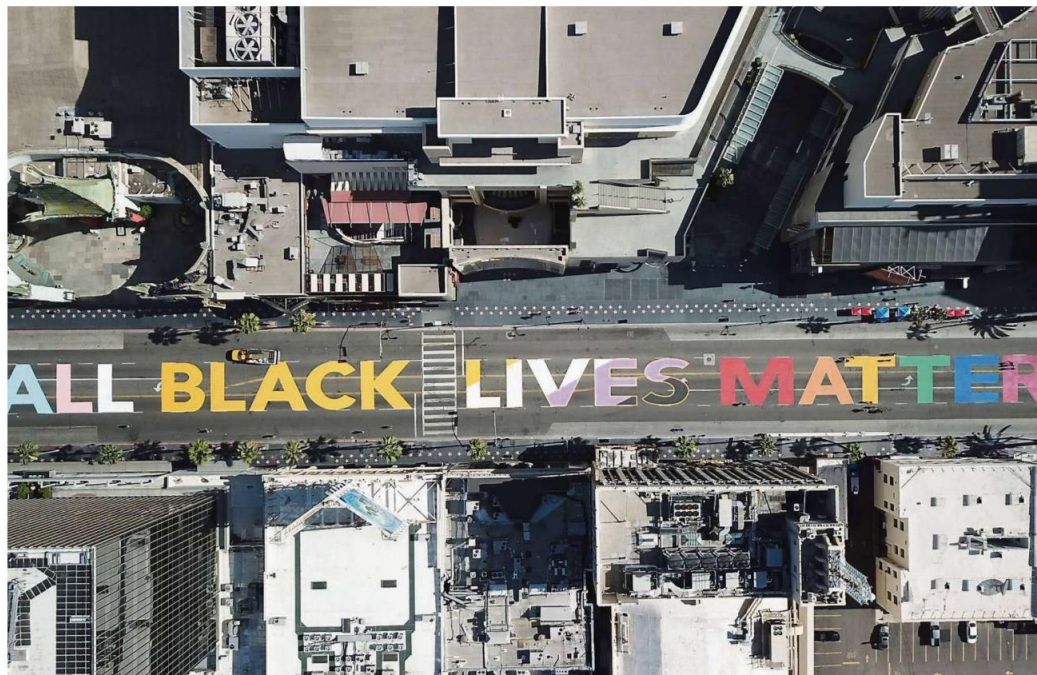
Black women also face state terrorism and systematic disenfranchisement. The stress of racism and what it was doing to my body is largely why I left America (the disparity in black women's mortality rates during childbirth — we are two to six times more likely to die from complications of pregnancy than white women — is a great example of how stress kills).

There's also the environmental racism (from living in food deserts to redlined, substandard housing) that disproportionately causes obesity, diabetes, asthma, cancer, and many of the ailments that make black bodies more vulnerable to Covid-19 than non-blacks.

LIVING in my black American body largely contributes to my constant nervousness and social awkwardness.

I feel like I'm "a visitor" on a short leash everywhere, including the US — the country to which my ancestors were literally bound. I came to Ireland carrying 18kg of excess stress flesh, my own alcohol-based therapy to calm my anger and anxiety.

This only exacerbated my low-grade depression and agoraphobia, issues I was battling before the pandemic hit. Still, I stayed here during the crisis because the US became unbearably unhealthy, on the world stage, for all of its citizens. But some of us have always known that there is a deep, deep sickness



The words 'All Black Lives Matter' painted on Hollywood Boulevard in June prior to a march against racism and police brutality in the wake of the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police. Picture: Robyn Beck/AFP

in the soil there. And Ireland has a special relationship with the US. Most Irish emigrants landed in America (there are an estimated 33m Irish-Americans compared to the roughly 6m people in Ireland) and the Irish lobby on Capitol Hill, of which possible future president Joe Biden can be counted, is ubiquitous — from Steve Bannon to Brett Kavanaugh, the Irish are very powerful back home.

Still, many people in the US, including Irish-Americans, are often unaware of the strength of contemporary Ireland. Before leaving San Francisco, I went to the doctor to get the go-ahead to travel. While making small talk, the doctor inquired about what I'd be doing next. I told him I was moving to Cork. He balked and yelled: "My God, why? My people ran from abject poverty there, why would you go there?"

A lot of people, who perhaps haven't travelled to Europe, may think this way because they don't see how capitalism has benefited most EU countries. Many people don't see or

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don't want to acknowledge how continued, structural racism keeps money centred in the "West" and with (white) Western-approved allies and trading partners. I came to Cork, in particular, because it is the Rebel County with a proud history of insurgency against the Brit-

ish. But pro-democracy, anti-racist rebellions aren't always lauded.

ONE of the most impressive rebellions in history was the Haitian revolution (1791-1804), the first successful slave uprising following the transatlantic slave trade.

The self-liberated people went on to form a sovereign state, but Haiti became the poorest country in the Western hemisphere because of Euro-American banishment from trade, as well as insurmountable taxes and tariffs. As Marlene Daut of the University of Virginia stated, "with the threat of indefinite violence, on July 11, 1825 the new Haitian government agreed to pay its former colonisers (France) the sum of 150,000,000 francs".

That debt proved catastrophic. "In metropolitan France 14.1% of the population lives below the poverty line... The poverty rate in Haiti is... at 58%," Ms Daut reported.

"And whereas the median annual income of a French family is \$31,112 (€26,000), it's only \$450 for a Haitian family... Moreover, researchers have found that the independence debt and the resulting drain on the Haitian treasury were directly responsible not only for the underfunding of education in 20th-century Haiti, but also lack of health care and the country's inability to develop public infrastructure."

There are many examples of uprisings crippling black countries. Zimbabwe's government recently agreed to pay \$3.5bn (€3bn) that the country doesn't have as reparations for Robert Mugabe's controversial land seizure programme in which he, often violently, reclaimed land from colonising white farmers, to give back to the indigenous black population.

Ireland didn't suffer the same fate of its uprising. I know atrocities happened here — I've studied them in depth — but Ireland's economy was largely spared the further horror of extreme generational marginalisation following independence. Sure, there has been corruption, as well as recessions and post-colonialism

internal wars, but Ireland has largely been able to map out its own destiny, free of staggering international debt, CIA-planted coups, and sabotage.

Black nations were not Black Americans who tried to build affluent communities within their country were not (the best-known example is the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre that destroyed 'Black Wall Street'). In fact, Ireland is now the European home to many American tech giants (much to the chagrin of Dublin and Cork residents).

The ability to build a stable country isn't something I begrudge the Irish, I just wish there was more widespread acknowledgement and memory here that emigration isn't always a choice.

The American-born Black Lives Matter movement is now international, and I'm heartbroken to hear some of the painful, and recognisable, stories of alienation shared by some of the black Irish. I'm also worried that Covid-19 may exacerbate cultural rifts as many historians have noted that the

1918 influenza pandemic has been linked to the rise of the Nazi party in Germany, and there is plenty of literature documenting that minorities of every stripe were blamed for medieval plagues.

These historical models could further compound internal inequality and the EU's rising nationalism.

As David Leonhardt recently reported for *The New York Times*: "Europe... has a rising autocratic movement that the continent's leaders have no clear strategy for confronting. If anything, the pandemic has strengthened the most autocratic EU governments, in Hungary and Poland. Other countries have put a higher priority on fighting the virus and helping the economy than trying to stop the erosion of democracy."

And so, I seem to find myself back home, with all of what I thought were my home-court problems wherever I go. I came here, in large part, due to my exhaustion with American capitalism, a system built on my ancestors' bones, and one that I too can't help but be implicated in, because we all are

— we just don't all reap the same benefits.

I WANTED to escape to Ireland to see how we are alike, because I knew I'd be safer here, and because I adore Irish culture. But it is dangerous to deny all of the ways in which we are, and have always been, different. Without that acknowledgement, it will be impossible to pave a new way forward.

I went for a walk along the River Lee yesterday and someone honked and yelled "go away" out of nowhere, as I crossed the street. I didn't know if I was walking too slowly or taking up too much space; if it was personal or not. My heart raced as I quickly got out of their way. Later, I spotted a black man on a bike in a mask. As we got closer, from a safe distance, he lowered his mask to smile at me, and kept cycling. I teared up. Recognition is the most powerful alleviator of tension. He gave me a much-needed reminder that "home" isn't always a physical destination

■ Kimberly Reyes is a poet, essayist and Fulbright scholar.



While police violence against black people in the US has shocked people around the world, debilitating racism is everywhere, as author Kimberly Reyes has learned here in Ireland. Picture: Johannes Eisele/AFP

After George Floyd's killing, Michelle Bachelet, UN commissioner for human rights, stated that such brutality 'has come to symbolise the systemic racism that harms millions of people of African descent — causing pervasive, daily, life-long, generational and too often, lethal harm'.



