BELFAST
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01 *Welcome*

"Sir, - Ireland is an island surrounded by water. It has 32 counties and four provinces. One of these provinces, Ulster, has nine counties, six of which are occupied by a foreign country. The occupation of these six counties was forced on this country by a threat of war. This all happened in 1922, after the first World War when many Irish men had been killed and the Irish leaders had been executed in 1916."

Reader's Letter to the editor of the Irish Times, 18/06/1996



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Welcome to Northern Ireland, The Occupied Territories, The Six Counties, Ulster, Our Wee Country, or the North of Ireland, where the use of place names indicates where your allegiances are and whether or not you think that the British presence on this part of the island is legitimate. Without having expressed any political view, you give yourself away. Thank goodness there's a wee bit of leeway for the immigrant, caught up in this terminological minefield. The island has been colonised. The loss of personal, national and ethnic identity has ignited many violent conflicts – wars – with the most recent one lasting a good 30 years. About every aspect of cultural, political, societal and personal life is somehow defined by US and THEM.

Despite the ongoing peace process, the Good Friday Agreement, the lack of reporting on the region abroad, peace and quiet it is not. I've been in Belfast for three years now. I've spoken to many people, read book after book, worked with local NGOs, got in touch with organisations dealing with legacy issues, walked the city from north to south and east to west. I'm doing my best to understand the pun, the craic, Belfast-English, and I've discovered a rich place. Full of history, ancient and not so ancient. Wonderful people, funny, with stories to tell that are not funny at all and empty buildings, waste land, unobstructed boardwalks along the river, the city with the most car parks in the world, thanks to the steady bombing campaign back in the time, as the local saying goes. There's so much here and I love every aspect of it, even if there's a lot to despair about. Political zero-sum-situation. Numbness. Exasperation. Injustice. Poverty. Mental health issues. The solidarity within communities and sometimes cross-community, the grass root activism across the age spectrum, the protest culture and unions that still deserve the name are an answer. It feels like people care.

The neighbourhood I live in has had it bad during the war. The Troubles. There's murals, plaques, a Remembrance Garden, annual commemorations and the Hunger Strikers on top of the tower blocks to remind and remember. On my way to a meeting with ex-prisoners I was chatting to a neighbour. She lived in this neighbourhood all her life and she was almost disgusted that I, a Swiss woman, wanted to get involved with any of it. She just couldn't understand. I've been asking myself this very question many times and never found the one catchy explanation. But it made me remember a photograph of my uncle's first child's christening – or was it his wedding? However, my grandparents stand at the very edge of the frame and don't look too happy. Apparently they were extremely upset with their son marrying a protestant girl and raising the children in the protestant tradition and they only attended the christening because my uncle threatened to cut all ties with them. I never thought much of this until I came to Belfast. It's here that I've learned about inequalities and oppression on sectarian grounds. And it's here that I've started to ask more questions about my own family background. This is not the answer to why I'm getting involved with a culture that's not mine, but it's an unexpected result of it.

I grew up in Basel, a border town to France and Germany. There was a house where you had dinner in Switzerland and went to bed in France – it's always this bit of fascination with borders. But you cannot underestimate the power of borders as well. Especially if it's an arbitrary one. People's livelihoods and human rights are in question and the consequences of that can be seen in Ireland as well as in other places of the world, such as Palestine or Cyprus. Politics are everywhere, in health, education, sports, festivities, environment, architecture, city planning and economics.

It's a question of identity.

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