

# Reflecting on My Experiences as a War and Peace Workshop Series Participant and Fieldwork in Belfast, Northern Ireland

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I received the Ansari Travel Scholarship in Religion and International Affairs which made it possible for me to attend the War and Peace Workshop Series (Critical Deliberations on Peacebuilding, Memory, and Narrative). The workshop had two parts for me: a colloquium at the University of Oxford and a fieldwork experience in Belfast, Northern Ireland. The time in Oxford consisted of a conference-style week with presentations from Oxford faculty and professors, which helped bring the workshop title to life. The week following, I traveled to Belfast to dive deeper into a conversation started at Oxford and at ASU: why Protestant/Catholic labels are important to people in Northern Ireland and what the political legacy of the Troubles is, especially post-Brexit and for young people who have no memories of it. A few participants from the program and I organized a separate trip after the conclusion of the field experience to travel to Dublin, Ireland for one week to explore the same questions but across the border.

The Oxford Initiative for Global Ethics and Human Rights organized this program. The Oxford Initiative houses the Global Women's Narratives Project (GWNP), whose executives help to curate the workshop and the field experiences. In Belfast, the GWNP connected me with a woman from the Shankill Women's Centre to interview about her life and how the Troubles affected her. I am in the process of transcribing and editing that interview to be published in the GWNP database.

Originally, I was drawn to this workshop for the opportunity for field experience in Northern Ireland, but the high caliber of excellence I was around at Oxford during the first week made me doubt how the workshop could get better in the second week. The most memorable talks for me were on high-risk feminism in Latin America, post-conflict gender-based violence in Liberia, and an art collection that showed the reality of life in Syria for the people who stayed after the civil war broke out. Other unforgettable moments came from when we were visited by a key negotiator in the Good Friday Agreement who spoke about his forecast for the future of Northern Irish politics and the newly appointed United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief who gave us a crash course on international human rights law.

My takeaways cover the spectrum of what I was hoping to get out of the experience, plus more. A few moments during the field experience stand out. One was during my interview when the woman brought up a topic that we had just been discussing at Oxford. She shared that her family was forced to move to England when she was a child and that this was especially hard on her upbringing. She went on to say that the reason they moved was that they were being threatened by the Ulster Defense Association (UDA), a loyalist paramilitary group in West

Belfast. Though, what caught my eye about this was that her family is Protestant. Another memory is seeing the Palestine flag mounted above the Free Derry wall in Derry/Londonderry, Northern Ireland. This was the day after being surprised by a mural in Belfast that compared the violence by the Irish Republican Army to the international attacks by ISIS. A more fun memory is when our group would ask the young people we met if they used special location settings on dating apps to ensure they were matching with people of the same religion. Mostly, the responses were that religion was not a salient part of their personal lives and nor in a dating scenario, but in the same breath also said that knowing the other person's name or school can already inform what the other person's religion is.

I am extremely grateful I was able to attend this workshop and make the connections I now have. This was my first time traveling to Europe, and nothing about it disappointed me. My notebook is filled with questions, stories, and personal asides that I plan to continue revisiting and using as a jumping-off point for, hopefully, a long career in policy-centered research. Big thanks to the Center and the Ansari family!