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Another Country: When Your Nation Doesn't Consider You To Be a Citizen

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Another Country: When Your Nation Doesn't Consider You To Be a Citizen

Another Country by James Baldwin exposes the fallible nature of hetero-normative and racial ideals that narrowly define a model citizen of a nation-state. The existence of interracial (and queer) relationships that occur throughout the novel reveals the invalidity of society's assumed and unquestioned protection against abnormality. The queer interracial relationships in the novel transgress the boundaries of nation, race, and sexuality, thus revealing the illusionary nature of categorizations that are defined and applied by nation-state apparatuses in order to discriminate and maintain uniformity. I plan to show how the characters in *Another Country* uncover the inherently racist and homophobic requirements for citizenship in a nation.

The ideals of a uniform nationhood often lead to repressive and discriminatory classification of perceived citizens and illegitimate interlopers. One of the main characters from *Another Country* is Rufus, who is a black, queer, lower class Jazz musician from Harlem during the year 1960. Rufus describes a sense of isolation and national alienation, when he says that he feels "estranged from the city in which he had been born," a "city for which he felt a kind of stony affection because it was all he knew of home" (60). Rufus has ambivalent feelings

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about his homeland because it's his native land, yet it refuses to treat him as a citizen. His feelings of alienation in his home county may be related to the nation-state's need for coherence of national and individual identity, and the state's need to control and dominate its populous in order to maintain power. In his essay, "A Nation Is a Nation, Is a State, Is an Ethnic Group, Is a...," Walker Connor discusses the differences of definition between "Nation" and "State." He defines the state as a political subdivision of a physical landmass, while seeing the nation as defined by a psychological bond that joins people together. America is cited as a special example of a nation, because its inhabitants don't share a common ancestral origin. I believe that this lack of common origin in America has led to aggressive policies of assimilation and erasure that have negatively affected the cultural differences of its minority citizens.

Nations by and large define themselves as a homogenous unit, which usually leads to repression and expulsion of racial and sexual minorities. Rufus eventually commits suicide because of national estrangement by jumping over the George Washington Bridge, which happens to be a national symbol. The various reactions of his friends and family serve to structure the novel. His death on the bridge symbolizes ambivalence toward the nation-state, because his death exposes the contradictory treatment of racial and sexual minorities in America. As he jumps off the bridge named after a founding father of the country, he asks,

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“ain’t I your baby too?” (87). The categorization of racial and sexual minorities, which leads to discrimination, is used as a tool of authority by the nation-state. The reasoning for these groupings is for the nation-state to retain control, coherence, and domination of its populous.

Roderick Ferguson’s *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* illustrates that formations of racial and national identity are inherently linked. Rufus’ sister Ida explains the reason for his death when she says, “my brother would still be alive if he hadn’t been born black” (351). The intense discrimination that he faced left him with two options, to either “die or go mad.” His sister expresses her frustration with the racist and homophobic nation-state when she says that she wants to “grind this miserable country to powder. Some days, I don’t believe it has a right to exist.” The nation is thus defined by racial and sexual conformity. Ferguson believes, “that legitimacy cannot be separated from the needs of elites to construct themselves as ideally heterosexual and patriarchal, and therefore fit for governance. Constructing themselves as such has led to the criminalization of lesbians, prostitutes, and any others who deviate from heteropatriarchal ideals” (144). The term ‘American race’ is an example of how classifications of race and nation can sometimes be conflated. Connor’s definition of ethnicity, which is occasionally mistaken for race, is a “group characterized by common ancestry” (44). Connor criticizes that American

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sociologists define an ethnic group solely in relation to a majority group, thus conflating the term minority and ethnic group (43). In this way, the American nation-state doesn't consider its ethnic minorities to be its 'true' citizens, they are merely interlopers.

Nationalism and ethnic group formations have some similarities because "a group of people must know ethnically what they *are not* before they know what they *are*" (45). Connor defines a nation as a self-aware ethnic group. He considers that "an ethnic group *may*, therefore, be other-defined, the nation must be self-defined" (46). Connor makes explicit the link between self-identification with both ethnic group, and nation. With a nation's need for coherence of identity, citizens who don't fit into the majority category of ethnic group often face intolerance and exclusion.

In the United States, the ideal citizen is neither black, nor queer. In his essay "Narrating the Nation," Homi Bhaba discusses the "narratives and discourses that signify a sense of 'nationness': the *heimlich* pleasures of the hearth, the *unheimlich* terror of the space or race of the Other" (307). African Americans in the United States are viewed as unwanted interlopers, because as a minority they represent 'the Other,' the hidden space occupied between citizen and non-citizen. Leona who is Rufus's white girlfriend, implies that he's being overly sensitive to matters of racial discrimination when she says that, "he's all

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the time looking for it, he see it where it ain't, he don't see nothing else no more"

(58). Rufus's friend Vivaldo voices a similar outlook, but Rufus refuses this simple rationalization when he replies that Vivaldo "knew so little about his countrymen" (35). The sense of national ambivalence comes from the sense of homeland and national belonging, but it is based on an antagonistic relationship to the hidden control and subordination of sexual sensibilities and racial diversity. The contradictory official memory of the American nation-state is that the citizens that were once legally disenfranchised through the state policy of Jim Crow laws eventually get subsumed into the official history, which congratulates itself for conquering laws of discrimination that it had itself previously installed. Roderick Ferguson describes it as "injustices of racial exclusion" that promotes "the state's ability to assimilate that which it formerly rejected" (preface viii). According to Homi Bhaba, the nation-state tries to "rationalize the authoritarian," and thus reveals the "normalizing tendencies within cultures in the name of national interest or cultural prerogative" (309). This leads to inquiring of how the nation-state has had to historically rationalize its discriminatory laws.

The U.S. has a problem of nationwide structural racism and homophobia because of prejudiced nation-state institutions, and their policies of classification. Institutionalized discrimination is carried out in the U.S. because it's a country

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founded on slavery, the ongoing local and global police repression of the racial and sexual marginalized, and economic principles, which limit mobility of minority citizens. The nation-state of the United States was founded and funded by means of economic dominance made possible by slavery. Rufus' sister Ida explains to a friend the link of ancestral slavery, to the current crisis of racism in America. She asks a friend what she would do if slave owners, "kept you here, and stunted you and starved you [...] And not in a hurry, like from one day to the next, but, every day, every day for years, for generations?" (351). Ida expresses the revulsion of African Americans who are forced to absorb nationalist patriotism that hides the truth of a discriminatory nation. She says about jingoistic patriots, "they go around jerking themselves off with all that jazz about the land of the free and the home of the brave. And they want you to jerk yourself off with that same music, too, only keep your distance" (351). This explains the two-tiered status of African Americans of occupying an abject position of semi-citizens that is simultaneously feared and violently repressed.

Police repression of minorities can occur because it's an institution of the nation-state that uses aggression to express unconsciously learned values about national purity and exclusion. Rufus's friend Vivaldo wonders what life may be like for blacks that publicly express interracial affection. Vivaldo says that, "he had never been afraid of policemen before; he had merely despised them. But

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now he felt the impersonality of the uniform, the emptiness of the streets. He felt what the policeman might say and do if he had been Rufus, walking here with his arm around Leona" (59). In the 1960s interracial relationships were illegal, and thus justification for police brutality.

During the same time period in the U.S., gay people had an equally antagonistic relationship with the police. Before Rufus committed suicide, he was in a short interracial queer relationship with Eric, who came from a wealthy family in Alabama. After Rufus' death, Eric moves to Paris, he says that the "street boys in Paris [...] hated the cops because the cops like to beat the shit out of them" (290). Homophobia and violence against queers in France, but also in the United States, was carried out by the institutionalized police force of the nation-state. When talking about the connection between the state and the police force, the narrator says that, "For all policemen were bright enough to know who they were working for, and they were not working, anywhere in the world, for the powerless" (290). During the 1960s, black and queer people shared a common connection of classification and suppression of difference by authority figures. Ian Barnard's *Queer Race* illustrates the historical connection between race and sexuality, which were invented categorizations and markers for difference and thus subordination. These classifications of sexuality and essentialism of racial difference were founded on racist scientific discourses of the late nineteenth

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century. Ian Barnard states that, "black culture constructed and influenced homosexuality in the United States [...] in the early twentieth century, homosexuality was conceptualized in terms of race. Black and homosexual geographic spaces blurred, and social scientists argued that color difference substituted for gender difference in homosexual relationships" (115). White queer relationships were construed by racist scientific discourses as a kind of aberrant and unnatural interracial miscegenation. These scientific discourses continued into the late twentieth century, and were then used as a rationalization for the criminalization of homosexuality, and subsequent police brutality.

The unequal economic structure of the American nation-state can lead to an enmeshment and perpetuation of racial, class, and sexual discrimination of minorities by the elite. In 1960, under the current restriction of mobility of minorities, interracial (queer) relationships seemed unconceivable unless they were happening in another country. Interracial queer relationships transgressed the boundaries of race, sexual orientation, and nationalism. This transgression of boundaries revealed the invalidity of discriminatory categorization. Travel was seen as one of the only ways for interracial (queer) relationships to survive.

Rufus viewed travel as a way of escape from the racial and sexual oppression he experienced in America. When envisioning escape he says that, "wouldn't it be nice to get on a boat again and go someplace away from all these nowhere

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people, where a man could be treated like a man" (68). Rufus can't afford travel, so he is forced to face daily intolerance and harassment by fellow citizens. In the 1960s, couples in heterosexual interracial relationships were often told to emigrate in order to avoid criminalization in America, but this advice often doesn't acknowledge the expense of travel. Immediately before Rufus's death, when he was in an interracial relationship with Leona, he told her that they would "make it to Mexico, where [...] people would leave them alone" (41). The fact that this statement happens so close to Rufus's death reveals that he didn't view a viable or perceivable future for himself in an interracial relationship in America. Rufus' sister Ida is also in an interracial relationship that deals with a lot of prejudice. She is told that to avoid intolerance she should think about moving, her friend tells her "there are other countries – have you ever thought of that?" [...] Ida laughs and replies, "Oh, yes! And in another five or ten years, when we get the loot together, we can pack up and go to one of those countries" (350). Ida's friend naively assumes that to avoid bigotry they can simply move to another country without considering the financial factor. The only options available to minorities who face discrimination, is to either relocate or continue facing unfairness.

Migrating to other countries is seen as one of few existing options in order to avoid discrimination from your homeland. Nations other than your own are

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usually idealized as utopic places, and some travelers maintain naïve viewpoint of the perceived tolerance of unfamiliar lands. Just before they prepare to return from Paris, Eric warns his boyfriend Yves about the homophobia of the U.S. when he says, "it's going to be worse in New York" (224). Eric also warns that France isn't a utopia either, when he metaphorically describes Paris as, "sweet on the tongue and sour in the belly" (215). His statement can be interpreted that even though Paris may be less homophobic than the United States, it still isn't a utopia. In New York City, a friend of Rufus talks to cab driver about the poverty of the Caribbean when he says, "In Puerto Rico? There can't be very much to sing about." And the cab driver replies, "There is nothing to sing about here, either" (364). The cab driver explains to the customer that things aren't always as nice as they seem in NYC, because there is also poverty and unfair treatment of minorities. Lorenzo, a friend of Vivaldo, says that he'd rather live in Spain with the peasants, instead of America. Harold considers to this to be a naïve statement and replies, "you think all those uniforms that *we* help Franco pay for are walking around Spain just for kicks?" "That doesn't have anything to do with the people," said Lorenzo. Vivaldo replies, "I'm sick of all this jazz about happy Spanish peasants" [...] "I bet you wouldn't want to be a nigger here, would you?" (307). Vivaldo not only connects the plight of the Spanish peasants who are terrorized by Franco to the black community in the United States, he also

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explains that one shouldn't naively fetishize the life of peasants solely because they exist in a seemingly exotic locale. Other countries cannot be assumed to be safer than one's own homeland, even if your native land doesn't consider you to be a rightful citizen.

Globalization has made apparent the permeable boundaries of the modern nation-state, which can serve to reflect the amendable laws of criminalization of interracial and queer relationships. These laws can be viewed for what they are, arbitrary, and only in place to retain national conformity. Homi Bhaba writes that, in order to solve "the problem of outside/inside" we must always be in a "process of hybridity, incorporating new 'people' in relation to the body politic" (309). The new transnational culture has to transform and transgress rigid categories in order to demolish discriminatory classification and repression of racial and sexual minorities. *Another Country* can be seen as a novel that does just that, its characters are so polymorphous that they can't be contained in simple boxes of marginalization. James Baldwin writes a modern novel that shows how the effects of transnationalism can serve to question boundaries and reveal the discriminatory practices of cohesion that most modern nation-states employ. The characters from the novel reveal the intrinsically homophobic and racist requirements for an ideal national citizen. Their queering of sexual and racial categorization unsettles the nation-states' narrative of homogenization. The

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interracial (queer) relationships in the novel exist to confront the perceived normality of the way in which the nation-state systematically discriminates against its minority citizenry. The characters in the novel remain vigilant and defy categorization, despite local and global institutionalized discrimination from the nation-state.