

NATION-LESS: THE UNNATURALNESS OF NATIONALISM AS SHOWN BY THIRD-CULTURE KIDS

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For a twenty-three-year-old, Erika has had a life comparable to that of an eighty-year-old. She has danced to Ecuadorian flutes in fiestas, gone sailing in Singapore, and spent vacations visiting the Malaysian rain forest and Karen tribes in New Zealand. Yet for all the cultural knowledge Erika has gained by growing up in countries far away from her native New York, she lacks something few go through life without: a feeling of home. Erika was one of the young adults interviewed by David Pollock, a social anthropologist who studies third-culture kids, children who “have spent . . . at least part of their childhood in countries and cultures other than their own” (6). Erika has no single nationality but rather a “third nationalism”—she feels no real attachment to her birth nation, the United States, but has no legal ties to the country that captured her heart, Singapore. National attachment is the focus of Benedict Anderson’s book, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, in which he states that “nationalism, [a] cultural artifa[ct]”(4), arises from citizens’ common history and shared cultural markers, such as language, appearance, and ethnicity. For Erika, however, these represent the mechanisms that prevented her from establishing a connection with any country, leaving her displaced and nation-less.

Whereas language can foster feelings of connection among citizens of a nation, in the case of third-culture kids such as Erika, language often prevents nationalist feelings from arising. Erika explains how language alienated her from her birth country, relating “how strange she had felt the first time her American cousins had asked her to go ‘cruising’” during her vacation-stay in her native New York. “She presumed they [had] meant some type of boat ride. . . . [I]o her amazement, cruising . . . meant endless driving about town with no apparent purpose” (Pollock 11-12). Her inability to understand what her cousins had meant by “cruising” caused Erika to feel distance from her home country. As a result, Erika disassociated the United States, stating that “for her, ‘going home’ meant returning to Singapore at the end of summer” (Pollock 12). Erika thereby challenges Anderson’s argument that language is responsible for creating “horizontal comradeship,” (7) and that “the nation was conceived in language, not in blood” (145). In fact, it is language that distanced Erika from the citizens of her “imagined political community,” (6) breaking the connections she had to the country rather than forging them.

Just as language can serve to exclude, so can appearance. After living most of her teenage years in Singapore, Erika had come to think of this country as her home, introducing herself to peers at her American university as being from there. Yet she was distressed when they replied, “Really? You don’t look like it” (Pollock 12). She

didn't fit in with her American counterparts either, due to her foreign fashions, expressions, and gestures. It was not until she adjusted by taking on more American clothes and tastes that "others accepted her as one of them" (Pollock 12). Thus it seems that outward appearance is important in the determination of one's nationality. However, even after Erika changed her clothing style enough for her peers to invite her into their community, she did not fully fit in. Erika continued to feel that Americans "couldn't understand her world . . . [and that] she couldn't understand theirs" (Pollock 13). While being outwardly recognized as American due to her Caucasian features and clothing, on the inside Erika didn't feel American at all.

More telling than clothing, gestures, or accents, are skin color and racial features. While Erika associated herself with Singapore, upon a trip back to the country after college, Erika found out that she did not belong there either. Erika was distressed to find that as a young white woman she stood out from other Singaporeans. She came to the realization that "here, in the world she had always thought of as home . . . she was seen as a foreigner" (Pollock 16). Anderson posits that one's ethnicity plays a big role in the formation of ties to fellow citizens. He gives the example of Javanese villagers, who "have always known that they are connected to people they have never seen," aware that they have "indefinitely stretchable nets of kinship and clientship" (6). In other words, the fact that we will never get to see everyone in our community, and much less our country, does not prevent us from feeling connected to our fellow citizens based on our cultural and ethnic similarities. Erika's foreign ethnicity, however, prevented these national ties from being fully formed.

Thus the country Erika legally belongs to does not feel like home and inspires no nationalist feelings, yet she has no ties with the country she chose to be hers—and even she had, she would still stand out from the population due to her skin color. No matter where Erika settles, she will always be a foreigner, preventing feelings of "horizontal comradeship" from arising and preventing her from developing any sense of nationalism. Anderson, however, argues that nationalist feelings form because of the immediate attachment between those who share a culture, language, or ethnic markers. He sees these feelings as inherent and natural, and argues that "in everything 'natural' there is something unchosen" (143). He compares the "disinterested [feelings of] love and solidarity" we have for our families to the feelings we have for our nations since we can't choose either (144). Anderson even asserts that "everyone can, should, [and] will 'have' a nationality" (5). While this may be true for those who have remained in one nation for most if not all of their lives, Erika's experience growing up in several nations troubles the concept of a "naturalized nationality."

Erika's lack of a definite nationalism shows that one is not born with roots to a country but rather with an ability to develop nationalist feelings. Erika's attachment to Singapore is a demonstration of this, but it also reveals the pains and challenges that result from developing ties to a country other than one's own. Indeed, if nationalism has "proved notoriously difficult to define" (Anderson 3), then Erika's "third

nationalism”—in which no relation is established with one’s birth country, and all relations to other countries are uncredentialed—is perhaps impossible to define. The belief held by Tom Nairn that “Nationalism . . . [is] as inescapable as neurosis” (qtd. in Anderson 5), may be correct after all; it might just be that Erika has no country to put her nationalism in and has to awkwardly carry it around without ever finding a place to place it. Confronted with no nation to call her own, Erika is left to ponder, “Where [is] home now?” (Pollock 12). Perhaps what she should ask is, “Will I ever have a sense of home?”

The experience of third culture kids is a difficult one, especially due to the lack of connection that these children feel for their home country, to which many return. In addition to the difficulty of forming bonds to countries to which one does not legally belong, they face living with a second-rate status compared to real citizens, and constantly worrying about when the next move will be. Benedict Anderson’s “natural nationalism” is hard to apply to such children, whose homes change so often that they are ultimately left with none. Yet while nationalism is not a naturalized feeling, it can, as Anderson states, be considered a creation of our environment that requires constant upkeep and reassurance from the threats that are imposed by such anomalies as third culture kids.

WORKS CITED

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- Pollock, David, and Ruth E. Van Reken. “Where Is Home? Erika’s Story.” *Third Culture Kids: The Experience of Growing Up Among Worlds*. London: Nicolas Brealey Publishing, 2001. 5-17. Ebrary. 2008. 2 Feb. 2008
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