The Chauvinistic Nation: A Critique of U.S. Exclusionary Politics through Audre Lorde’s Biomythography

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Abstract

Nationalism influences the lives of every individual within both its imagined and geographic boundaries. Through a critique of hyper-racialized and hyper-sexualized surveillance as a modality of state control, this analysis utilizes both auto-ethnographic experiences and Audre Lorde’s biomythography, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, to deepen the understanding of the effects of the exclusionary politics on American nationalism and its populace. Drawing on historical and literary readings of nationalism and Afro-pessim’s insights into racism and state violence, this thesis uncovers the required relationship between nationalism and exclusion. Finally, in recognizing that the nation loses coherence without the exclusion of the hyper-racialized, hyper-sexualized “other,” I propose ways in which the nation can move forward, in a more humanistic, egalitarian manner.
Introduction

“For the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white.” - Franz Fanon

I am not philosophizing about destiny when I hear “Someone needs to move their car before the cop has you towed!” from the barista behind the counter. I glance outside and see my car parked in the “Tow Away” parallel spot that seems to hide among the “normal” spots in the area. Sitting behind my car, I see a police officer, parked just close enough to make me uncomfortable. Slightly embarrassed I make the short trip out of the coffee shop and to my car. I back it out of the parallel spot and drive away. One minute goes by before the cop blasts his lights and follows close behind. Rolling down my window, and glancing back at the shop, the police officer comes up to me sporting a small smile. We exchange pleasantries; I smile too much, adjust my seat belt, and ask why he stopped me. “Well, miss, if you ever see a cop behind you, make sure you always come up to him and ask if he is writing you a ticket.” Always? Before I had time to muse over the possibility of approaching every cop car that was near to me on a daily basis, I quickly respond “Of course, I apologize for that.” He reacts with a curt “Good day, ma’am,” and I am back on my hunt for a new spot.

With a hasty exhale, I drive away- were my hands shaking this whole time? Backing into my new parallel spot, I mull over the last five minutes. Why do I feel so negatively affected? I was innocent after all. Recognizing the experience today, I realize the encounter frightened me, for the day, or maybe a few hours. But, coming into direct contact with the state, through this police officer a medium of state power- a few questions came to mind. If I felt terrorized in that moment, how does someone who is constantly under state surveillance navigate their lives? Do they try and contain their hands shaking perpetually, or does it become normal for them?
People in prisons, immigrants, and individuals with low incomes face perpetual surveillance daily. Most importantly, I began to question why this man, the enforcer of the state, needed me to “know” he had power. Why was it vital for him to essentially remind me, with no other purpose or ticket, that he is an officer? He used the moment as a pedagogical tool for me, a reminder that “our” nation has certain customs, rules, and ways of living. In that moment, I was a disrupter of those terms, and he made it clear that my actions, my way of living, stood counter to the standards of the state civil society.

In this work, I will observe how the supremacy of cisgender, white, male, bourgeois bodies is the prevailing logic of the U.S. nation. Since sexuality and race are mutually constituted, there is no logic of American nationalism that operates without white heteronormativity and its attendant exclusionary authority. I felt excluded in that moment, but the nation could not exist without my exclusion. The moment was harmful to my boy, my mind, but it was necessary for the nation, in that moment, to maintain power of its rules and authority. If I wanted to fight to become a part of the nation, I could not do it there, or ever, in the current context of U.S. nationalism. After encountering the state directly, in this context, I realized that to fight to become a part of this is to pass on the exclusion to another racialized of sexualized group. For, if the nation does not employ exclusion, it will not remain a nation. I smiled, I answered quickly, and I did what was “proper,” what years of informal and formal schooling have taught me to do. But, there is no nation without proper surveillance; and encounters like mine, are just one medium to achieve its desired cohesion.
It is not important how many times I tried to convince the cop I that was not a law
breaker. LGBT activists gaining the freedom to marry will not translate into autonomous
freedom and rights. Prison guards being punished for mistreating inmates will not change an
inmate’s sentence, inability to vote, or status as a second class citizen. Surface level activism
can lead people in the U.S. to believe that the concept of Americanism, nationhood, and
citizenship will be equally claimed by all. The reality is, the American nation was never
constructed for anyone other than the white, hetero, wealthy man. There is no destiny, no
citizenship to obtain for those who do not fit the mold. The only avenue to true liberation, is
space extricated from such chauvinistic forms of nationalism.

Evolving in ideology and practice constantly, nationalism affirms and reaffirms itself
through surveillance and the controlling of bodies. While the terms nation and nationalism date
back to the late 19th century, the concept itself has expanded, grown, and created a foundation
of power dynamics that define current modern ideas about the governance, justice, and nature
of reality. The nation-state, dating back to Max Weber’s initial articulation of the term, has
changed greatly in definition and practice. The modern construction of the term enforces more
than just the explicitly terrorist bodies; it regulates culture, race, ethnicity, and political
mobilization. In order to more deeply understand the nation, before reconstructing the
formalist conceptions of it, it is important to look at the creation of the nation from a variety of
lenses, namely the racial, the sexual, and the political, in order to deconstruct the boundaries of
its formation.
In practical terms, the nation includes a population within a geographic or political boundary; but, scholars have expanded this meaning to consider culture and political economy. Benedict Anderson, most widely known for his book, *Imagined Communities*, a historical approach that accounts for the major factors contributing to the emergence of nationalism. In it, he argues that “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members. . .” (49). His thesis highlights the importance of the imagination in nationalism. The vitality of nationalism relies on seemingly artificial boundaries between people and lived experiences. Anderson defines the nation as “an imagined political community” that oscillates in size and being but always has finite boundaries, “beyond which lie other nations” (49). The nation, for Anderson, always contains a “deep horizontal comradeship,” that gives meaning to war, killing, and sacrifice in the name of community (49). Most salient in Anderson’s argument, is that although the nation is a sociopolitical construct, it is not false or invalid. Anderson proposes that the initial fostering of national consciousness in Europe relied on the creation of the printed word as a commodity (in the form of newspapers, books, etc). Anderson analyzes the developments of these new advancements to outline the ways that modern nationalism depends on capitalism for its vitality. He asserts that nationalism is a direct material consequence of capitalism, rather than nationalism as being a creation of modernist political necessity.

To expand on the conceptualization of nationalism in racial terms, Frantz Fanon, a physiatrist, political radical, and humanist, focuses on the cultural consequences of decolonization, from his perspective as a Martinique born Afro-Frenchman. Written while he was in France, *Black Skin, White Masks*, takes an orientalist approach to the nation. He defines
the nation and its construction, in terms of the “other” and its effect on the Western European, specifically French, self-formation. His work illuminates the colonial racialization of the black male and the self-division within the black psyche that results from this psychological violence. This determination makes his work integral in understanding how nationalism not only governs the creation of communities, as Anderson clarifies, but has the dominion over one’s self-identity. He speaks to the relationship between colonized people and their European colonizer by exploring the ubiquitous tension between being a part of the colonizer’s world, yet being the living foil to the colonizer’s self-construction - remaining separated from the respect and human dignity guaranteed to the European subject in civil society. His discussion of this stress is vital to understand the problematic relationship between the “other” and the colonizer. In other words, Fanon sees the European nation conception of humanity as becoming coherent through the exclusion of the black man, in order to construct what is civilized in the mother-country; which eventually disallows the black man any self-identification, despite his understanding of this binary. His work creates an important framework to understand the binary distinctions of human/non-human, savage/civilized, that undergrid much of post-Enlightenment modernity.

For the purpose of this paper, nationalism will be engaged in Anderson’s constructions: the nation here will be an imagined, created space and identity that does not rely on geographic boundaries; and, through Fanon’s understandings: the nation, in this sense, is an assemblage of binaries, primarily between the subject and other.

Concurrently, when considering these theories of nationalism, it is important to understand how a specific, exclusive form nationalism sustains the coherence of American civil society. T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, a feminist scholar, in Frantz Fanon: Conflicts & Feminisms
and Jasbir Puar, a queer theorist, in *Terrorist Assemblage: Homonationalism in Queer Times* explore the nuanced ways that nationalism injects itself into the construction of identities, affects relationships between the individual and the state, and forms one’s internalized self-identity in relation to civil society. These authors aid in expanding the above scholars’ theoretical contributions while continuing to shape our understanding of how nationalism operates in the West. Puar and Sharpley-Whiting problematize nationalism, and begin to demonstrate not only how it complicates identities, but why its very existence demands the exclusion of problematic identities.

In *Conflicts & Feminisms*, Sharpley-Whiting points to Algerian veiled women as an important focal point for reconsidering nationalism. Like Fanon, Sharpley-Whiting sees nationalism as an instrument for political mobilization and a way to invoke a sense of strategic essentialism, reclaiming one’s cultural identity, and pushing back against colonial forces. Specifically, she complicates nationalism in her discussion of the reclamation of the veil during the French-Algerian War. Because the colonizer denounced the use of veil, calling it harmful to women, and created an “othered” spectalization of it during the conflict, the veil began to serve as a Algerian led symbolic push to take back Algeria’s culture from the French colonizer and dismantle the Euro-centric ideas surrounding gender freedoms and norms. Women began using the veil to fight the war, both practically through hiding weapons and politically by refusing the colonizer’s spectalization of it. Sharpley-Whiting is essential here because while Fanon analyzes the symbiotic colonial relationships through psychoanalyses in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Sharpley-Whiting shows how nationalism can be both a strength and a weakness to a nation. Nationalism bolsters a perceived strength through its invocation of strategic essentialism,
especially in terms of political mobilization towards de-colonization. A significant pitfall of nationalism lies in its ability to invoke dangerous relationships between one’s self-identity and the colonizer’s creation of how the “other” should identify. Her piece, especially its discussions of political mobilization, will be discussed later with an evaluation of whether this strength reinforces or erodes egalitarianism within the nation (Sharpley-Whitin 53-65).

In an important parallel, Jasbir Puar, in *Terrorist Assemblage: Homonationalism in Queer Times* speaks extensively on the reclamation of the turban by Middle-Eastern men in order to contest American constructions of terrorist bodies following the 9/11 attacks. She discusses the dual construction of identity between the person of identification and the identifier, where the identifier (the subject) both constructs the identity of the other and consumes that very classification. In other terms, the identifier (we can read this here as “subject”) both creates and consumes the “other.” All of the above constructions share an important feature: each identity that the “other” is given emerges within a matrix of white, bourgeois, heteronormative society. If the desire, ultimately, is to liberate one’s self from excluding institutions and practice, can nationalism remain a real and imaginative part of life?

To understand nationalism’s infiltration on the lives of individuals, to illuminate its terrorizing exclusionary practices, and to provide an ethnographic look into the realities of a queer woman of color, whose life is directly affected by the state, I will use these scholarly accounts, in a direct critique of nationalism by engaging Audre Lorde’s *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. By focusing on how queer women of color negotiate their identities and interact with the state and civil society, I argue that the modernist, Western construction of nationalism
only applies to white, heteronormative, bourgeois, bodies; and, leaves no space of life for those that do not fit this typology of existence, while simultaneously using these bodies to generate capital (from slavery to mass incarceration). This contradiction ultimately traps human beings into unrealistic, exclusively Western European connotations of identity, safety, liberation, and manners of living.

**Surveillance and political mobilization**

Through an analysis of the state’s surveillance tactics, I will demonstrate the constant policing of hyper-sexualized and hyper-racialized individuals which the nation uses to create a space that only includes white, heteronormative, bourgeois, male bodies. In earlier sections, I outlined a few seminal configurations of nationalism, some of which take sexuality and into consideration and others that do not. Further analyses of sexuality and race can nuance the less critical interpretations of nationalism, encouraging a more acute discussion of the exclusions necessary to retain the coherence by the nation state.

Both Puar and Michel Foucault, a French philosopher known widely in queer studies for *The History of Sexuality*, present the policing of sexuality and race, through surveillance methods, as a process to facilitate the coherence of the Western nation. Through surveillance the state works to construct and define sexualities according to the prerogatives of the white, bourgeois, heteronormative, civil society, and capital. Traditional discussions of surveillance focus on internet use, the National Security Association, surveillance in prisons, banks, and other highly secured areas, many of which claim to work to combat terrorism and terrorist
bodies. But, from the extensive writings of Foucault and Puar on surveillance, it is clear that surveillance spans more than just physical policing. It works to maintain a specific creation of what it means to be human. Surveillance helps to direct bodies on how to act, feel, and survive. As we surveil each other, surveillance enforces a baseline of normatively, respectability, and legitimacy by negating bodies that do fit the mold of white, heteronormative, upper class, and male, as Foucault will demonstrate in his discussion of letting bodies live and a critical discussion of private and public spaces through the Lawrence versus Texas court case.

Foucault explains surveillance as a “new technology of power” in “Society Must be Defended” during which he speaks about biopolitics and “new problem” that is emerging; a problem that infiltrates into the landscapes of life (Foucault 22). Many of his most powerful statements discuss this power as it “tries to rule a multiplicity of men to the extent that their multiplicity can and must be dissolved into individual bodies that can be kept under surveillance, trained, used, and, if need be, punished” (242). While Foucault explains surveillance, its mediums of use, and the implications of its force onto the life and death of bodies (more on this later), I would like to intersect his work on surveillance by analyzing the public and private, placing him in conversation with Puar’s work, and expanding his ideas using Afro-pessimistic interventions into race and sexuality via Saidiya Hartman, and Frank B. Wilkerson’s piece “The Position of the Unthought.”

One manner to further Foucault’s understanding of surveillance, is to observe the differences in experiences with public and private space, both racially and sexually. In traditional liberal feminism, extreme focus is placed on the binary between the public and
private. Liberal, literary critic feminists have gone into detail about the private being a sphere for the realities of their oppressions as well as a space for social change. While historically, the private sphere of the home has been attributed to those who identify as women, it has not been a space for solidarity with women of color. Sharpley-Whiting demonstrates this inconsistency by quoting Linda La Rue, one of the signatories of the *Black Women’s Manifesto*, who states- “the struggle black women face is not between knives and forks, at the washboard, or in the diaper pail” (82). The struggles women face are particular, and depend of the race, sexuality, and class of each individual. Many women of color face oppression every day, buttressed by a nation that perpetuates discrimination, comprising a constant breach of the private, through the surveillance of their bodies. Bourgeois White women face a similar, but different experience of suppression, experiences that are bound solely to her private world, which are not constantly surveilled and watched by the nation state. In other words, it is futile to assume that bourgeois white women’s understanding of their private sphere driven suppression has any correlation with women of color’s institutionalized oppression.

To expand on this discussion of surveillance in relationship to the public and private the historical Lawrence v. Texas case is fundamental. Puar discusses in her critical analysis at the *Lawrence v. Texas* case (which challenged the U.S. law banning sodomy), surveillance itself is not defined by the distinction of public versus private, but rather by the racial and sexual implications that influence the two spheres. She displays this effectively when she states “without an intersectional analysis . . . the private is naturalized as a given refuge from state scrutiny” (125). The case itself, which fought to allow sodomy in private, mistakenly assumes that all people have equal access to the private. We know and have been exposed to multiple
instances where this is not the case. For people of color, the private is eliminated through the constant surveillance of immigrant status to the scrutiny of Black and Latino women’s bodies by the state. The public and private are not equally available for all bodies.

This relationship, the racialized line between public and private, depending on the individual, is the nucleus and foundation of surveillance. The Lawrence versus Texas case illustrates the importance of considering the differences in public and private spaces, when discussing surveillance and regulation by the state. Current surveillance in the U.S. includes an overarching assumption of the lives of people, without taking into consideration their particular race, sexuality, or identity. In order to surveil a body, one must presume a baseline understanding of what is normal for that body. As I discussed previously, this assumption by the “subject” is charged with racial and sexual assumptions about the identity of the “other” that favors dichotomies between civilized/uncivilized, which requires terrorizing exclusions.

Why is surveillance important to the state in the first place? Dating back to Max Weber and the creation of bureaucratic reporting processes, most would say it serves as a way to account for people, keep communities safe, and provide justice when people “break laws.” But, the reality is more nuanced than that. If the state was an individualistic formation that took into account the particularity of every human being who lived within its geographic or imagined boundaries, then pure surveillance for the reasons above would be plausible. This of course is not the case. It is vital to realize it surveils people to regulate an ideology, concerning the right way to live and exist. Surveillance serves as the medium to transport a white patriarchal
construction that ultimately takes capital as its highest consideration at all costs, which becomes clearer through a deeper analysis of Lawrence v. Texas case.

In George Chauncey’s “"What Gay Studies Taught the Court": The Historians' Amicus Brief in Lawrence v. Texas” he discusses a vital aspect of the case, that is not spoken of by the court. If sodomy and homosexuality had existed as labels for centuries, it would be futile to create an argument that the state has a role in policing bodies only for capital and its well-being. But, as Chauncey points out:

“It was only in the late nineteenth century that the very concept of the homosexual as a distinct category of person developed. The word “homosexual” appeared for the first time in a German pamphlet in 1868, and was introduced to the American lexicon only in 1892. As Michel Foucault has famously described this evolution, ‘the sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.’”(13).

In the 1970s, as homosexuality gained visibility, that “anti-vice societies” organized and pressured the police to fight back against its formations (Chauncey 14). As a result police began “using misdemeanor charges. . . vagrancy, lewdness, loitering, and so forth to harass homosexuals” (14). Furthermore, “state misdemeanor or municipal offense laws, which carried fewer procedural protections, allowed further harassment of individuals engaged in same-sex intimacy”(14). It is no coincidence that homosexuality was defined and more largely policed
during the 20th century. Modernization of the industry began, material commodities were at an all time high, and capitalism became an integral part of everyday life as technological, scientific, and societal progress increased at an rapid rate. The global economy was booming and the U.S. had more power than ever. Homosexuality became a force, an “other” that needed to remain controlled and policed in order to maintain order. The private space of homosexuals was breached, policed, and used based off a modernist ideal of the term.

As Chauncey and the Lawrence v. Texas case illuminate the nuanced relationship between racially and sexually charged private and public spaces, Puar also expounds on the difference in public space among immigrants, people of color, women, queer folk, and anyone that does not fall into the white, bourgeois, heteronormative context. She discusses, what she calls, the “militarization of urban space” that is forced upon bodies through the “clamping down on the routine circuits of diasporic connectivity” (149). In these largely immigrant heavy spaces from air travel to financial contributions back home, society mandates a “unilateral nationalism.” She goes further to explain that even in “immigrant success stories” any form of release, money or information to the home country is seen as a threat to the nation. While many parts of the U.S. have areas dominated by immigrant communities, nationalism insists that these communities must consume with the confines of the U.S., only sustain heteronormative spaces, and remain within the confines of the classification and categorization (such as the registration of all men 14 and older from 24 predominately Muslim countries) that the Unites States deems appropriate (Puar 149).
Further, Puar discusses the three dimensional aspects of surveillance that contribute to the public and private. She says spaces “are not removed, abstract, or cohered but viciously intimate: unlike the apartheid, these ‘new and intricate frontiers’ invented for domination demand intimacy, not just penetration but interpenetration” (154). I want to further this discussion of the important of the permanence, infiltration, and internalization of the three dimensional aspects of surveillance, and the ways that three-dimensionality contribute to the breech of private space in communities of color. In Saidiya Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson’s work, “The Position of the Unthought,” they discuss sexuality as a mode of existence that does not apply to the othered community, but is rather reserved for white civil society. White civil society’s ideology imposes its definitions of sexuality along onto black male bodies, in all aspects of their lives. Hartman and Wilderson’s discussion in conversation with Puar and Foucault’s expands upon the above ideas of sexuality and race, and its disproportionate relationship with the public and private. They show the realities of a constant white, heteronormative imposition of power over people’s lives.

In “The Position of the Unthought” Hartman and Wilderson discuss and unpack the white dominant framework that shapes the reality of the United States. Hartman explains a contradiction in living under nationalism’s gaze and existing between “captive community’s” desire to obtain sexuality that is pleasing to a white society and the reality that this sexuality does not apply to them in the first place. She discusses “whether gender and sexuality are at all applicable to the condition of the captive community” by illustrating their constant paradoxical relationship in the “space of death, where negation is the captive’s central possibility for action” (187). When the captive community can only find action in opposition to a fully created
white imaginative of humanity, the community’s only space is being “anti-human” or in opposition to what is “normal” for humanity. This is what Hartman means by “space of death,” for if an individual’s existence is in opposition to all perceived normality, they are living in a space that is not seen as truly human or livable by the dominant white civil society. In this space the community cannot obtain autonomy or identity, in terms of the nation, for their entire existence relies on pre-conceived dominant frame.

Just as Foucault’s ideology of surveillance was vital in conversation with the public and private, this “space of death” that Hartman and Wilderson discuss is vital and must be put into conversation with Foucault’s understanding of nationalism, state creation and surveillance in addition to Puar’s reading of biopolitics and what she terms as “data bodies.” First, In “Society Must be Defended” Foucault illustrates the unwavering relationship of the state and individual bodies. He begins by explaining that in classical theory of sovereignty “the right of life and death was one of the sovereignty’s basic attributes” (240). He nuances this understanding by reminding the reader that while this right seems like a right by the state to “put [people] to death or let them live” in a very natural force in the field of power, it “becomes paradoxical” in meaning that “the subject is, by rights, neither dead nor alive” (240). In other words, life is not the neutral state of beings. But rather, the state gives life or death to its subjects, who begin as neutral beings without life or death. He coins this new understanding as the right to “take life or let live” (241), a right that the state uses when redefining bodies as worthy of living, as I discussed early regarding the birth of the term “homosexual.” His reading of biopolitics comes into direct contact with Hartman and Wilderson’s piece. If the state deems who is allowed to live, the politics of exclusion involved will constantly other those bodies that do not contribute
what is understood as necessary, good, or important for capital. Where can society use queer women, who decide not to procreate, to increase the workforce? The nation fears a state that does not keep capitalism as its most important endeavor. A nation ruled by white, bourgeois men would be “harmed” by queer people, people of color, or any human being that does not see obtaining money as the vital focal point for living.

Puar furthers this discussion and speaks of a perception of inclusion that people of color feel. She says the right into the white, heteronormative, civil society is a “selectively permeable” boundary. She states that the “perception of an all encompassing, impenetrable, and infallible surveillance structure affectively breeds fear, terror, and insecurity” (152). Just as Hartman and Wilderson discuss that sexuality is selectively applicable to one type of body, the white, cis individual, Puar illustrates that civil society itself is a perception of inclusion, one that ultimately breeds fear and terror, denying any bodies entrance that do not fit the mold.

Finally, to conclude my discussion of surveillance, through multiple assemblages of racialized and sexualized spaces, I will look at Fanon’s chapter on “The Woman of Color and the White Man” from Black Skin, White Masks. In his work, he wonders if “basic personality is a constant or a variable” (49). He demonstrates that, what he thinks women of color want, namely through Mayotte’s Capecia’s writing, is “whiteness at any price” and a life that is absence of the phobic and full of paradise, intelligence, and acceptance. The black woman wants inclusion into white civil society, without realizing that ultimately her body must be excluded to retain society’s coherence. Her inclusion is an impossibly, if nationalism continues to exist (52). In Sharpely- Whiting’s discussion of this chapter in Conflicts and Feminisms she
delves into Capecia’s negrophobic and negrophilic emotionality. She states, “The desire on the
park of the black to whiten herself or flee the black body. . . [is] a miserable state of affairs”
(40). Similarly, Capecia demonstrates what Hartman and Wilderson discuss in their piece-
namely, no matter how hard this specific black body seeks to become white, strip off blackness,
and delve into white sexuality, she herself does not fit the mold of nationalistic sexuality in the
first place. Capecia demonstrates what Puar says in her work, that the boundary into white
society is selectively permeable, breeding a façade of acceptance but a reality of exclusion. The
mold is created for a white, bourgeois, heterosexual identity, and it is futile to try and become
an image of an imagined identity, that does not apply to black or brown bodies.

If all human beings were represented equally in terms of power, then race and sex
would be observed and controlled in equal ways. But, since I have established here that
surveillance marks and delineates normativity, it cannot be denied that surveillance infiltrates
lives not as an objective force, but as a biased, white hetero-normative creation of control.
Remaining included in the nation means a separation of public and private, the ability to live
not in the space of death but the space of life, and living without attempting to become
anything imagined or different. Surveillance buttresses nationalism, creating a strong
foundation for the state, through a white normative lens.

In conjunction with the theoretical, this assemblage of white surveillance that rules over
most bodies despite the public or private affects each individual in the practical through race
and sexuality. Capecia’s motivation to marry a white man stills plays itself out today. Political
mobilization through strategic essentialism, or mimesis, presents a dichotomy between safety
and liberation. It proposes that minority groups can use a form of nationalism, usually imagined without geographic but with cultural, racial, or gendered borders, to bring forth a group identity that can achieve a certain aim in their society. Most recently this can be seen through the LGBT rights movement or women’s rights movements. Here, this essentialism is vital to bridge the above discussion of surveillance as a mode of presenting nationalism to the next discussion of nationalistic loss. While objectively, the nation is constructed through cis whiteness, we cannot disregard the fact that bodies of different races and sexualities exist currently in the same geographic borders of the United States. Essentialism protects those bodies for the time being, but at what cost? If nationalism is constantly imagined, filtered through race and sexuality, how can the individual ever take part in the creation of arbitrary ties among people?

In other words, political mobilization at many times does not queer spaces or make white spaces more egalitarian, but instead it whitens sexuality and race, to a space that negates the important of particularity and individuality. As Foucault would argue, these bodies are not being “let to live” but rather remain sentenced to a “space of death” that will ultimately remain unchanged, despite any progress to become part of the white, heteronormative, bourgeois society. It forgets that the end goal is not liberation, but to become acceptable to the white nationalist project of U.S. civil society. Human liberation and autonomy is not possible.

If nationalism is exclusionary, then how does it help the state function cohesively? If not to protect its inhabitants and create solidarity, then what does the state lay its foundation on? In this next section, I will observe why certain bodies are deemed threats to the nation, what
type of exclusions are necessary, and what beings can lose by ascribing to a national identity? I pose these questions in an effort to determine why, ultimately, the state exists. Then, I will observe Audre Lorde’s work as an integral aggravation of nationalism through her semi-autobiographical account as a queer woman of color.

**Threatening the nation, imagined identities**

If all bodies that do not fit the mold of whiteness are excluded from the state, then why must nationalism exist to uphold the state? Certainly from the United State’s Constitution to Lee Greenwood’s “God Bless the USA” it would seem that the nation exists to promote freedom, equality, and justice. Yet, the state continues to exclude and create illegitimate bodies through surveillance, feigning acceptance when political mobilization arises.

As I alluded to earlier, some bodies are deemed illegitimate by civil society, and thus excluded from the state, if they do not contribute to “adequately” to capital. Here I will delve more thoroughly into the reasons for which certain constructions of identity are not pleasing to the state expanding on my ideas of capitalism and legitimacy. While there are countless avenues and mediums to determine self identification, because of this paper’s focus on nationalism, I will use immigration, space, and the right to live to understand what the state deems important, in creating and sustaining legitimate, successful bodies. Then, I will continue by providing evidence that the state has no true purpose in existing, besides accruing capital and enterprise.
One dimension of personhood in the U.S. persists in the form of the naturalization test and the citizenship process. Specifically here, I want to focus on “The Value of Citizenship” that the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services paces its focus. Then, I will put this piece into conversation with Puar’s work and her statements on militarized bodies. This connection between citizenship and her work will provide a deeper understanding of American-ness, whiteness, and identity.

From the Bureau’s website, the value of becoming an American citizen is explicit:

“Deciding to become a U.S. citizen is one of the most important decisions in an individual’s life. If you decide to apply to become a U.S. citizen, you will be showing your commitment to the United States and your loyalty to its Constitution. In return, you are rewarded with all the rights and privileges that are part of U.S. citizenship.”

To divulge into this seemingly simple explanation of value, it’s important to understand what exactly the United State is saying that citizenship means. First, citizenship and belonging are important; arguably, according to the bureau, one of the most important decision of a person’s life. Next, citizenship is about faithfulness and obligation to the Constitution. Finally, with loyalty and commitment, there comes a reward: the rights and privileges that are part of being a U.S. citizen. From this statement alone, it would seem that no one citizen is a threat to the nation, unless he or she does not ascribe loyally to the Constitution, in which case there will not be any rewards or privileges.

When non-native born Americans become citizens, they are detached from their home country and promise to promote the Constitution, participate in the democratic process,
defend the country, and respect all laws, among other rights and responsibilities. At this juncture, Americans are “deterrorized”, as Puar would say or fully nationalized. With this understanding, there is only equality under American nationalism, a nationalism that seeks to uphold individual freedoms, rights, and responsibilities. But, the U.S. takes strong measures to re-terrorize, re-militarize, and exclude certain racialized and sexualized bodies that are “threatening” to the nation. It achieves this exclusion through concrete mechanisms of power, such as incarceration, as Puar illustrates. Just as Wilderson, Hartman and Foucault focus on the spaces of death where bodies are forced to live, Puar sees this regaining of control over unwanted bodies as a space where they are “mandated to live” (157). In other words, even though immigrant, racialized, sexualized, and other “unwanted” bodies are seemingly allowed to live and become citizens of the U.S., they are controlled and surveilled at an unequal rate to other races. In terms of incarceration, for example, according to the U.S. 2010 Census, black Americans comprise 13.6% of the U.S. population but 39.4% of all incarcerated individuals. Just as the idea of homosexuality in the U.S. has a clear starting point, as Chauncey pointed out, minorities and women being subjected to harsh surveillance levels while in prison began a steep increase in the 1970s.

To further this understanding: according to the bureau, becoming American is the most important decision of a person’s life. As I said above, the Bureau then states that citizenship is about faithfulness and obligation to the Constitution, a constitution that has its basis in one race and sexuality. Where does a person who is not white, or heterosexual, or a founding father themselves become loyal to a set of rules that are arbitrary to their uniqueness and particularities? With loyalty and commitment, there comes a reward of U.S. citizenship: the
rights and privileges that are part of being a U.S. citizen. This last part biopolitically ties it all together. How can a person have rights and privileges to an identity that was created without every considering their racial and sexual particularities? Thus, the naturalization process can never give a person, who is not white, cisgendered, and of the upper class the ability to become American. If sexual and racial minorities and women have been subjected to re-terrorization by institutions that refuse their personhood, despite claiming they are “U.S. citizens, a person can never “become” a part of the heternormative, bourgeois, white civil society.

Audre Lorde’s Zami and Nationalism

In this next section, Audre Lorde’s biomythmography, Zami: A New Spelling of My Name, will demonstrate the undeniable stake that bodies take in the nation, but the futility of this identity construction because of the state’s irrefutable exclusionary practices. Two highlighted themes in her book aggravate, re-evaluate, and engage nationalism. Here, I will look at her discussions of home and her unique relationship with lesbianism, and their relation to her life, her mother, and her identity, as mediums to comprehend nationalism, or the lack of it, for a queer woman of color.

Lorde’s beginning and background information on her upbringing demonstrates her mother who was “light enough to pass for white, but her children weren’t” (17). She discusses reading children’s books that depicted “people who were very different from us” and a kerosene lamp that her mom lights at night, which reminds her of “home” (18-19). Specifically, Lorde’s relationship with her mother’s understanding of home informs most of the work, as she
states “‘home was a far way off, a place I had never been to but knew well out my mother’s mouth” (13). Her imaginary of home is distant, forgotten, and ambiguous. She engages home as a means of desire, a place that she will someday come to know, through her mother’s scattered remains, as she speaks of Grenada and mumbles in patois.

Lorde’s engagement with her imaginary of home forms a direct critique of nationalism. She resides in the U.S. but constantly connects with an identity that she has not encountered first hand. She oscillates between the blurry lines of homeland, as her mother’s emigration resides firmly in her memory. Her inventive imaginary continues throughout her life. She embraces her mother’s teachings of “If you can’t change reality, change your perceptions of it,” (18) and melts them into her own life as she continues “reinventing the world” through her partners, experiences, and possibilities (209). Her creation of reality, self, and identity is entirely her own. She does not ascribe to solidarity with one nation, one idea, or one way of being; she embraces her particularities and organizing them into a whole creation of herself. She entices the reader with her own creation and journey, and she hand picks each fiber of her being. She talks of “reshaping ourselves” and “exchanging energy” (253). She uses her discussion of space as a metaphor for her world, one that has experiences that she “can no longer separate” in her mind (248). Her work itself could be just an autobiography, but she chooses to write a biomythography to combine autobiography, cultural history, and myth into one space that discusses the “symbols of [her] survival” (3).

Her ideology of self critiques any idea of nationalism, especially that of the United States. She sees her identity as an every-changing, mythological, creation of being that grows
and moves to reevaluation constantly. Nationalism does not work for her. No matter the naturalization, or the citizenship, she feels both torn between and comprised of her identities. Nationalism insists on a required allegiance to an identity that only acknowledges monocultural, heteronormative, cis people, only excludes and denies those who do not fall under that category (and even those who do). Lorde’s account and relationship with “home”, shows nationalism’s pitfall in exclusion, and impossibility of ever existing wholly, as it will always ignore parts or all of people’s identities.

Further, her experiences as a black woman and her encounters with the state, let her know that she was a “menace to the status quo” (121). In one section she discusses the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s appearance at her apartment, which she shared with others. In their invasion of her private space, she feels confused with their presence; but, she recognizes the seemingly arbitrary relationship between the treatment she encounters and the actual necessities of the state. She wonders, “somehow we were a threat to the civilized world (121) as she the “white college students” around her “were obsessed with security and pensions” (121). Despite her manner of living, as queer or straight, she understands that the “the forces of social evil were not theoretical, not long distance or solely bureaucratic” (205). Her life is defined by her realities, and the infiltration of the state into her private space as “pain was always around the corner” even when she was in her “straight clothes” (205). Facing surveillance in her private life at all times, she learns that pain is a normal part of her life as she was “not of that other world” (205). She sought to become free of the “other world’s problems of capitalism, greed, racism, classism, etc” (205). The other world she speaks of is the state’s existence. It is the power of the white, hetero, bourgeois nation that puts her in “pain” and
penetrates her life, without concern of her identity, specificity, or individuality. The nation excludes her and her peers since they pose no real “benefit” to the state’s idea of what it means to be a reliable, good citizen.

In addition, her experience as a lesbian, and her perspective of the world, illustrates the realities of nationalism’s exclusions, which ultimately disallows Lorde to live freely in her own body. Specifically, her first encounter in calling herself a lesbian and her internal monologue demonstrates her tepid relationship with identifying as anything, for fear of the consequences. Lorde confides “. . . my experience with people who tried to label me was that they usually did it to either dismiss me or use me,” and she continues to relate this unnecessary labeling in relation to her sexuality with “I hadn’t even acknowledged my own sexuality yet, much less made any choices about it.” (108)

When her first lover asks if Lorde is a lesbian, she nervously considers telling her, “I was at a loss as to what to say” (135). After they make love for the first time, Lorde wonders where her fears came from in the first place and speaks of love positively, thinking “as if loving were some task outside of myself” (139). But yet reliving the realities of their relationship in her thoughts later, Lorde thinks about the “power and privilege” the relationship gives her, but realizes it is merely “play acting” since Ginger could never regard their relationship as “important” since it was between two women (142). State power infiltrates the realities of their private relationship. Ginger constantly reminds Audre that “friends are nice, but marriage is marriage” (142). Without institutional legitimization of the state (and even with it), the two fall in love, but refuse to acknowledge the relationship as anything more than friendship. Audre
recognizes that two cannot interact with the state in a “positive” way. Without the ability to reproduce and create bodies to contribute to capital, without an institution that legitimizes their relationship, they are left as “others.” And more so, if a woman is not bound by desiring a man, a man loses his power. For, even as Audre recognizing the “power and privilege” of desire, queer women pose no vulnerability through desire of a man. While Lorde’s fear of labeling infiltrates her life and demonstrates the danger she has faced by labels and markers on her life, her eventual acceptance of her lesbian identity pushes back on the state’s control at the time, she recognizes the “repeated battles and campaigns that she would face as a black women without choice” (250).

The state must exclude her, for if it allows her to become a part of the “subject” instead of remaining as the “other” the state with cease to exist. It relies of positioning itself as proper, exclusionary, and essential; as Lorde says “We, young and black and fine and gay, sweated our first heartbreaks with no school nor office chums to share that confidence over lunch hour” (176). In her experiences, she remains in the “space of death” in a world of definitions that do not fit her. She “knew the rules” and constantly fought in quiet circles of “deviant” fellow lesbians. Her body was militarized through surveillance by the FBI, misused by companies that fired her at any moment, misunderstood by her first lesbian lover Ginger, and imagined, mythologized, and “othered” by her society. This is the experience of a women of exclusion, one that the state does not deem fit. She will never fit into white, bourgeois, civil society, because nationalism deems that her body is not meaningful, or necessary for its capital.
Moving Forward

With the above unearthed: Lorde’s experience as a queer women of color under nationalism, the imaginative nature of nationalism, and the realities of sexualized and racialized surveillance, how can the nation move forward, in beginning to recognize the particularities of each individual? Simply put: it cannot. Since I provided evidence here that the nations relies on exclusion, it will not be possible to envision a future that includes nationalism and includes the individuals it geographically contains. Just as Puar’s propositions only envision a nation that includes bourgeois, white, homosexual men, as a means to increase the United States’ transnational presence and appearance, to appear “homonormative,” to ultimately increase capital, any form of inclusion in relation to capital will harm the individuals in it. If capital remains the desired outcome for the nation, nationalism will only exclude all that do not explicitly produce, contribute, or take part in capitalism. When production, surveillance, and material value are the most important foundations for living, Individuals will always lose.

Until the nation and its ideas of nationalism cease to exist, and instead recognize the mythological, temporal, and biological factors that comprise an individual, as Lorde’s biomythography does, human beings will not be free to truly live. Nationalism cannot exist, norms of living cannot rule the private or public, and individuals must only have solidarity with the individuals they personally choose. Until then, exclusion will remain an integral feature of nationalism.

It is true, I was not thinking much about destiny when I heard “move your car before the cop has you towed!” in the coffee shop. I was not analyzing much about the situation, until the
cop insisted that I pay attention to him, despite any charge. Within this experience, feeling my hands shake, sweating even after my response, coming into direct contact with the state- I found it necessary to unearth if my experience was isolated, or if nationalism was a necessary step in the isolation I felt. If I felt terrorized in that moment, I knew that other bodies, queer bodies, people of color; other humans were being and are being terrorized at every moment based off an imaginative understanding of how the U.S. people should live. Why was it vital for him the police officer to remind me, with no other purpose or ticket, that he is a cop, a conduit of the state? Because without constant reminders, policing, surveillance, and mementos of the nationalism that is integral to the U.S., people may begin to live for the sake of living, ignoring capital and thus crumbling the United State’s international façade. The police officer used that moment as a pedagogic tool for me, a reminder that his nation and mine have certain customs and ways of living, and I better not consider anything otherwise.

The existence of cisgendered, white, male, bourgeois ideology is the U.S. nation. There resides no difference between the two terms. In this hyper-sexualized hyper-racialized nation, there is no current United States nation without the idea of white heteronormativity and its powerful exclusionary authority. The exclusions are damaging to anyone who does accrue capital, existing as a white, bourgeois, heteronormative male. I cannot support the nation, I cannot fight to become a part of the nation through political mobilization, unless I am to accept that others will feel the same or similar terror I experienced, as long as the nation persists.
Works Cited


