

ONCE UPON A CHANGE

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Tourists from near and far gather in Times Square in groups of twos and tens. Their big shiny cameras are out, snapping pictures of the moments in front of them. They gawk at the bright starry lights of the marquees, illuminating the evening crowd. There's a rush of people, not knowing where they're going and not caring when they'll get there. It's overwhelming. But you want nothing more than to be a part of the hustle and bustle of the city in front of you.

For journalist Roxane Gay, New York City seemed to be everything she ever could have dreamed of. She saw New York as a place where people learned how to be “chic and glamorous,” somewhere where people “walk fast and wear all black without looking like [they] were about to attend a funeral” (7).

Growing up, Gay was constantly moving around the country. She lived in suburbs and towns, none of which even vaguely resembled the sights and sounds of New York City. Not to mention her family was from Haiti. She was not only a different race, but her family came from an entirely different culture than these rural and suburban towns. To put it simply, Gay felt like a “stranger in a strange world” (4); but then there was New York City.

The city started to turn into a reassurance more than anything for Gay. She *thought* that in New York City, she wouldn't feel like some “freak,” because “the city was full of freaks” (7). Gay thought New York could be her place, as New York is commonly referred to as a place where people finally see themselves fitting in, with “so many different people, so many beautiful shades of brown, so many voices” (6). Gay thought this city would be a place where she didn't feel “so strange.”

However, New York doesn't stop for anyone. As Gay started making her plans to live her life in The City, the reality of New York was changing. The New York City she thought she knew had been nothing more than an idea, an idea that aided the thought of finally finding a place where she could fit in. Gay spent the better part of her life conjuring this idea of New York, planning how she was going to live her life in The City. Only she soon discovered it was nothing like she thought it would be. How does someone accept this? How does someone

accept a change of some big idea or concept that they've so aggressively clung to their whole life?

Unlike Roxane Gay, André Aciman explains how someone can fit the idea of a city to themselves; his essay "Shadow Cities" addresses the ways of "grafting" yourself to a city. Coming from the standpoint of a person who lives in New York, Aciman is an exile who has lost his home and is trying to find a place that can replace what he once knew. He talks about how he shapes his life to the ever-changing landscape of New York City. He saw New York as a home because to him it was an "analogue city" (6). Aciman believed since New York was constantly changing, he could never see the real New York. He only saw "the New York that either sits in for other places . . . the ersatz of all the things [he] can remember and cannot have."

Sure, Aciman could make this changing landscape his home, but he "could never understand nor appreciate New York unless [he] could make it the mirror . . . of other cities [he's] known or imagined." (5). The only way he could ever truly fit into this place was by taking aspects of the life he lost, shaping New York into a different painting from how others saw it. Aciman took aspects of different cities he lived in or was familiar with, and applied them to the environment around him. He "grafted" himself onto New York City, making this strange land not so strange to him. Instead of finding ways he could have fit New York to this life, he enlisted memories of places he already knew and was familiar with, connecting them to the environment around him so he could better find a place in this ever-changing landscape.

Growing up a military brat, I am quite familiar with ever-changing landscapes. From the age of six months old, the longest place I lived was three years. As soon as I grew comfortable in a town, my dad got orders to some new city in a different state and I had to move yet again. I never knew what it felt like to fit in or what a home was because I was always just "that new girl" whose dad was in the military. I had to accept the fact my scenery was changing, and that it would continue to change. Everywhere I lived, I survived by morphing myself according to the environment around me. The memories and life I had from previous places I lived helped me adjust to new, strange lands.

But how might such ever-changing landscapes have affected Gay's views of the city? She was so closed-minded when painting her idea of New York. Gay

saw the city as this *one place*. To her, New York was the one place a person could fit themselves into society. *One place*, someone could finally start seeing pieces of themselves. Sure, she was trying to graft this dreamland idea of New York onto herself, but was that enough? If Gay, like Aciman, created this idea of New York with aspects relating to events she experienced in her daily life, would the reality of New York be more similar to what she thought it to be?

Aciman declares New York is his home “precisely because it is a place from where (he could) begin to be elsewhere.” He lost his home, exiled, but his way of grafting himself to New York City helped him feel like he was back home. Whereas Gay believed this city she was imagining was a home to her because it was a place she could finally begin to feel as if she was somewhere, a part of something. Because of this, because of the fact Gay so aggressively clung to this idea that New York could be this comfort for her, this place she could finally begin to be a part of a society, Gay becomes an exile, too. An exile from the city she always thought could be a home for her. Gay had to leave The City to find the comfort she had always thought she’d find there. Realistically, Gay’s “place” was nothing more than a strange land, constantly changing and rearranging the lives around it.

WORKS CITED

- Aciman, André. “Shadow Cities.” *The New York Review of Books*, vol. 44, no. 20, 18 Dec. 1997.
- Gay, Roxane. “Strange Lands.” *The Nation*, 18 Sept. 2013.