

Wednesday, May 8

Welcome to London!

We know you are jet-lagged, so this will be a slow start. But a big start too.

Buckingham Palace!

What is the difference is between castles and palaces?



A castle is an essential defensive structure, constructed to keep the people inside safe with strong walls and battlements used to repel invaders. Castles are the product of a medieval culture in which you protected your small fiefdom from invaders.

A palace, on the other hand, is an architectural structure that visibly performs wealth and power; it's the product of early modern nationalism and kings that had standing armies to protect the nation's borders. It showcased the wealth of the ruler through its sheer extravagance.

Neither structures, by the way, are very comfortable to live in. Drafty, I've been told (as I have zero experience in being wealthy OR powerful).



So, we are starting the Maymester with a capital "P" performance...the Performance of Nation. We will be gathering with many, MANY other tourists to watch the ceremonial changing of the guard. Soldiers and horses and bands, oh my! With the palace in the background, this spectacle symbolizes the British nation and its imperial might (even if its less mighty now than it once was). It is a regularly performed ritual of militaristic power, a pageant of uniformed state servants trained with pride and precision.

What exactly is the ceremony accomplishing? The King's Guard is handing over the protection of Buckingham Palace to the next guard. They are protecting the King (and the Queen too, I guess, but don't even get me started on Camilla). Dressed in red tunics and bearskin hats, the guard is instantly recognizable as **British**.



The ceremony is repeated four times a week; the same way, over and over. A constant.

A nation needs ritual and ceremony because it is an “imagined community.” In *Imagined Communities* (1983), Benedict Anderson defined nation in this way because the concept of a nation exceeds what a single person, or citizen, can know or experience. Imagined is not the same as fictional, Anderson argues, because the nation exerts very real power on a citizen's life. Ceremonies and rituals—like the changing of the guard—help citizens *see* national power and sovereignty. The costumes, music, and choreography make material the idea of nation. They perform nation for an international spectatorship; citizens can take pride in the idea of power and protection, such that a standing army provides, and outsiders can think twice about challenging Britain's military might. We see pomp and circumstance, but we also, even if subconsciously, understand the power that supports such a regular and precise performance.

#UKinMay assignment 1:

1. Take, caption, and post pictures of one another as spectators for this ritual. Your post should embrace your “insider-ness” and “outsider-ness” to this spectacle. Consider your role in this performance, a tourist who is curious to experience something not readily available in their everyday life.