IDS 142: Living a Life of Significance

Assessment 4: Significant Cultural Communities or Communities

Goal: The goal of this assignment is to research the ways identifiable cultural contexts, or communities, shape individuals and provide them with the means to live according to the values and vision of the life of significance that is prized by that community. You are asked to identify, investigate, and evaluate a specific group or community you would like to learn more about. It might be a professional, civic, social, awareness-raising, or other community or group. Gather as much information about this community or group as you can, including its history, practices, values, priorities, and impact. This is an activity that requires you to draw on the work we have done previously and to gather your own resources similar to those used in previous assignments (e.g., readings, podcasts, interviews). Your aim is to better understand and analyze the kind of person one is invited to be or become through participation in this community and determine how this community enables or constrains the ability of its members (or others) to live a life of significance as you have come to understand it.

Role: You are a social and cultural critic who seeks an understanding and assessment of a specific community or group. To be a "critic" does not mean you intend to find fault with a community, necessarily. It means to analyze, ask questions, research, and provide an appraisal of the gains and losses of a perspective, opinion, worldview, or organization. It means to carefully consider the evaluations of others, and take the time to try to understand the viewpoint of someone who identifies with that community or worldview, and also the viewpoint of someone who does not. To be a critic is to be thoughtful, compassionate, attentive, and also brave; bravery is required because cultural criticism calls for a studied opinion, a refusal of easy answers, and the position of cultural relativism, i.e., "everyone is going to have their own opinion about this and all opinions are equally valuable." Cultural critics assume that some opinions and worldviews are better than others, according to specific criteria. As a critic, you are well-versed in what it means to live a life of significance, and so you seek to investigate a community or social group and assess the extent to which this group exemplifies, complicates, or challenges your understanding of what it means to live a life of significance.

Audience: Your audience is other members of your society, including members of the Birmingham-Southem community and your peers in the first-year class interested in what it means to live a life of significance.

Situation/Challenge: The challenge involves identifying a specific group, developing a deep understanding of this group (its history, practices, and impacts), and evaluating this group against the criteria you have articulated about living a life of significance. You want to understand this group on its own terms (that is, respect it) and then evaluate those terms against your understanding of what it means to live a life of significance (that is, critique it). Effective social critics are not dogmatic; as such, your investigation may prompt you to modify or alter your initial understandings of what it means to live a life of significance. The challenge is to balance understanding the group in its own terms against your assessment of the group's merits and faults for enabling its members and others to live a life of significance.

In general, select a specific, identifiable group that you can research and place in social and historical context. To be workable, your group selection should be locatable and bounded, as well as describable, measurable, or countable. That is, be sure you can pinpoint this group in time and space (where is it and when are the members present?), determine some level of continuity, stability, or self-identification of membership (who is and who is not a member of this group and would they recognize themselves as such?), and provide a reasonable description of the group (can we measure its size and name it with some confidence?). "People who use Apple products" would not be a good group selection for this project because, although there might be some shared behaviors and values of these individuals, membership and participation is transitory, if even acknowledged. However, if there is a student group or local club who focuses on Apple products in some way, such a group would be workable.

Some examples of groups might include, but are not exclusive to: specific student groups, including groups that serve particular identity groups or constituencies on the BSC campus or have affiliations with larger, national organizations (e.g., SGA, Black Student Union, Spectrum, Bonner Leaders, or fraternal or sorority groups); religious or social communities (e.g., a local church, mosque, or temple, a local chapter of Kiwanis club, or a bowling team); professional communities, including academic communities (e.g., chemists, sociologists, social workers); specific sites where professionals practice or conduct their work (e.g., a medical unit in

Birmingham, a particular law office, or the Birmingham city council); neighborhoods or cities (e.g., any of the neighborhood groups representing the 99 communities in Birmingham, each of whom have formal members and meet at least once per month); activist, advocacy, or social service groups (e.g., the United Way, the Birmingham Community Foundation, the Birmingham chapter of Black Lives Matter, Alabama Arise).

Whatever group you choose, you want to maintain both investment and critical distance from the group. This may sound contradictory; it is paradoxical: by investment we mean that you are interested in the group, that you value it for its own sake and want to find what is useful, productive, meaningful, and important about the group for its members and others (you want to believe in this group); by critical distance we mean that you must imagine how the group might be differently perceived, both internally and externally. That is, you will want to evaluate the group on terms separate from those used by the group itself, by criteria that others might employ—namely, the criteria we have developed previously in this course for living a life of significance. Put simply, neither advertising copy (investment without distance) nor judgmental dismissal (distance without investment) will do. The project requires both.

The core aim of your investigations is to determine the extent to which this group enables or constrains the possibility of its members and others to live a life of significance. You should review written materials, conduct direct observations, search archives, hold interviews, and use other means to research your group and place them in the context of other groups like them.

Product/Performance: The final product for this assignment is a paper (4-6 pages, single spaced, one inch margins, 12 point Times New Roman font) that address the questions below in turn:  the history of the group, including its founding and history of membership,

• the practices central to the group's work, including the work they conduct, the structure of the group, the clients or stakeholders they serve, the knowledge or information they hold in common, as well as how one becomes a member, sustains membership, demonstrates membership, and serves as a good member; this section should also identify the rituals and common practices that create a sense of inclusion in the group. In other words: what are the particular practices one learns to perform and value in this group? What are this group's rituals, norms, traditions, symbols, central artifacts, and privileged language?

e the values or priorities that animate this group; why does this group exist? What values does it intend to teach to others or reflect to the world?

* the impact this group has on its members, clients (if appropriate), and the world at large; if one invests in this group, becomes a "member," either formally or informally, what kind of person do they become? To whom does this group appeal? What is the social, political, and/or historical context of groups like this?
* include reflection about how your thinking and understanding has developed during this project. Specifically, talk about how your thinking about research, community, living a life of significance, understanding others, and the practices of critique have developed or changed as a result of this project. Be specific. If you are a member of this community, what difficulties did you encounter as someone who is part of the group, yet asked to stand at a distance from the group in order to research and critique? If you are not a member of the community under discussion, what challenges did you encounter?

Standards: An effective main project will provide the audience with the history, core practices, and impact of the community under investigation. These details will be based on library and other research (including, perhaps, direct observations and interviews with members). It will also provide a reasoned and sound assessment (including consideration of any counter views) of the capacity of this group to enable or constrain the possibility of living a life of significance.

The following are the steps for completion of this project:

1. On Wednesday, November 9, come to class with an illustration of a particular cultural setting/community that you would like to be the subject of your investigation. Use the iceberg metaphor to identify some of the practices of this group, as you understand it now (what is above the water), as well as your initial ideas about the underlying assumptions (what is below the water). Also include in your illustration a list of at least 4 questions you have at this point about this organization or ideas you have for further research. We will share these ideas in class. If you become interested in another idea in class, that is fine. Changes to your topic are fine at this point.
2. On Monday, Nov. 14, meet in the lobby of the library at 9:30 for instruction about research methods for this project. By this point you should have made the final decision about your community to research.
3. On Wednesday, Nov. 16, write and print a research plan for completing this project and bring it with you to class. What are you going to do to discover more about your community? You can acquire information in a variety of ways. Ideally, your research might include:
   1. Peer-reviewed research (books or articles) about the history of the organization, or organizations like the one you are studying.
   2. Analysis of the website/blog/online presence of the group, or analysis of the group's mission statement, literature, etc. What kind of language and imagery is used?
   3. Observation of the group, when appropriate.
   4. Interviews, when appropriate.
   5. Your own experience. If you include your own experience, you should treat that evidence as a critic would; you should ask analytical questions of your experience and consider the viewpoint of someone who would not be at home in or accepted by the community to which you belong.
   6. Note: You don't have to include all of these types of research. But there should be a solid foundation of research in your paper. When you present your research plan, I will offer guidance and suggestions.
4. On Monday, Nov. 21, class is cancelled. Please upload an initial draft of your paper by 11:59 p.m.
5. The final paper is due on Wednesday, Nov. 30. Please upload to Moodle by 11:59 p.m.