

Compare & Contrast Sample Essay 5: Their “Imagined Communities”

The Writing Center at North Park University (Internal Version)

-Stephanie Stultz October 31, 2003

NOTE: You should see colored comment boxes on the side of the essay. If these do not appear, go to the **toolbar**, click **view** and then **comment**.

The best way to read commentary on essays is to begin at the end, because the last comment seeks to sum up the most important strengths and weaknesses of the paper. It gives you a perspective from which to read the more specific comments in the margins.

Stephanie Stultz
NPD 1, Second Essay Assignment
Oct. 31, 2003

Their “Imagined Communities”

Benedict Anderson in his book, *Imagined Communities*, presents the concept that people innately “imagine” themselves as being members of a community. He suggests that people are not inherently members of any given community and that in order for one to be a part of a community, one must think in his mind that he is. While analyzing Barbara Kingsolver’s *Pigs in Heaven* and Esmeralda Santiago’s *When I Was Puerto Rican*, it is apparent that the characters within these stories consider themselves to be a part of different communities and so they come to identify with those different communities. It is apparent that this mindset of connection becomes evident within various aspects of their lives, including their attitudes, their feelings, and thus their actions. Based on Anderson’s concept of “nationalism” being an “imagined community,” Annawake and Taylor of *Pigs in Heaven*, and Esmeralda of *When I Was Puerto Rican*, are not inherently members of a national or ethnic community—they simply “imagine” themselves to be.

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Comment: Nice framing of your topic, Stephanie. You’ve set clear expectations to the boundaries you’ll be working from. Your conclusion makes plain the differences you see between Anderson’s idea and the characters’ self-understandings.

Your style in this paragraph sounds a little as though you’re laboring to get your ideas together. It’s a little wordy in places, maybe a little stiff—but your stretch for language also tells me that you’re stretching your mind, working hard to really think. I know from your earlier paper that you’re a fine prose stylist. You’ve got courage to cut loose from sounding good or saying safe things for the sake of finding out something new.

Anderson argues that people imagine themselves to be a part of several different communities, and all of these communities with which we identify ourselves, affect our outlook on the world. *Pigs in Heaven* tells the story of a young woman, Taylor, who was given a child of Cherokee Indian descent; however, a young lawyer, Annawake, who was adamantly dedicated towards strengthening and protecting “her people,” the Cherokee Nation, fights against the legal adoption of the child. Annawake saw it as being essential that Turtle be raised with and by the Cherokee Nation. In Annawake’s mind, the Cherokee Nation was an established community to which both she and Turtle belonged. According to Annawake, Turtle was inherently a part of this people because of her natural birth connection, her common bond. Annawake, in her own mind, determined the boundaries of the Cherokee community, and she determined who or what people could and should be included within the community. She needed to imagine this community in order to ensure a sense of security for herself and for the people she considered herself to be in connection with.

According to Anderson, one’s identification with a certain community greatly shapes one’s outlook on the world; this is evident within Kingsolver’s *Pigs in Heaven*. Community, and community membership, as understood by Annawake, differed greatly from that of Taylor’s understanding. Taylor’s perception and definition of community was dependant on personal interaction and relationship. In Taylor’s mind, blood relation was not enough to make Turtle a part of the Cherokee Nation; Turtle’s ethnicity was not more valid than her developed connection to Taylor. These differing perceptions of community, and community membership, resulted in major conflict, as it has often times

done within American society. The characters' definition of community, and their identification with a community, helped to form their perception of the issue.

In explaining the notion of an "imagined community," Anderson posed the question, "What makes people have a common nationality?" He suggested that the answer to this question is that we imagine, or believe ourselves, to have a common bond with the people with whom we choose to identify. Santiago's *When I Was Puerto Rican* reinforces the notion of community being conceived and developed within the minds of individuals. Esmeralda reflects on her own childhood, namely the struggles that she encountered concerning identity, as she moved from one world to the next. When Esmeralda lived in Puerto Rico, it was understood by both herself and the people around her that she was a Puerto Rican. Yet and still, there were differentiations that separated people into certain classes or communities. These communities were based upon location, lifestyle, education, and many other classifications. There were those members of her society who were "jibaros" and there were others who were not. This classification confused Esmeralda, in that she was uncertain as to which community she was a part of. In her mind she had not yet decided.

When she moved to Brooklyn, her identification of being a part of both an ethnic and a national community became even more complex. In America, she was not Puerto Rican, she was "Hispanic." In the American mind, people of Latin descent were members of the same community. This disturbed Esmeralda, because in her mind, she

was Puerto Rican. It was later on that she came to identify with being a “jibaro;” she had determined in her mind that that is what she was, and that is what she would always be.

Anderson would argue that Esmeralda was not inherently a Puerto Rican, but in her mind she had determined to identify herself as being a part of that community. Esmeralda did not have direct personal interaction with every individual who lived in Puerto Rico, nor with every person who was of Puerto Rican descent; this would be impossible. Nonetheless, in her mind, there was a perceived connection; this is why her belief, that she is indeed a part of the Puerto Rican community, is an imagined one. It was necessary for Esmeralda to imagine herself as a part of this community. It gave her a sense of belonging and connection to something greater.

According to Anderson, the characters’ identification with these various communities is imagined; they are a part of their communities not inherently, but because in their minds they believe that they are. Anderson does not argue that the “imagined community” is invalid or inconsequential; he simply observes that it is not inherent as many would perceive it to be. These characters inherently believed themselves to be members of a given community; Anderson argues that they were a part of those communities because they believed themselves to be.

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Comment: What a great job you’ve done of wrestling with a tough assignment! Anderson’s not easy to understand, but you’ve summarized well the heart of his argument, and you’ve made a great start of applying his theory to the two characters. Moreover, you’ve fronted your own argument plainly; as it should, it takes precedence over telling the stories or getting sidetracked in Anderson’s details, and readers never get lost or distracted—we always understand where you’ve been and where you’re headed. This paper’s a strong stride into scholarship. You wouldn’t expect me not to have any suggestions for strengthening your work, would you? Just a short supplement to stimulate further thinking . . .

As a reader who appreciates your careful analysis of these materials, I’d love to see you reflect a little on some aspect of the significance of your analysis—some probing of how these ideas might matter concretely. For instance, can you see ways in which Taylor’s and/or Annawake’s presumptions that their nationality is inherent cause them to act in certain ways, to have presumptions about how other people act, or to not see other people very well? Or, do you see Taylor’s approach as closer to Anderson’s understanding than Annawake’s is? Do their respective understandings of community make either of them more able to bridge between communities? Or, does either book seem to support or contradict Anderson’s thesis? I’m not trying to set you questions to answer, just trying to give you a lead on the sorts of applications which might lead you further in your own thinking.

Finally, yes, there are a few tiny, awkward details, but they’re too minor to dignify with written commentary! We can comb through a couple when we conference. I’m looking forward to it!

