1-2018

Thinking Critically About "Community"

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Thank you to the Alumni Chair in the Humanities, Julius Amin, for putting this all together.

Why hold this symposium now? In the past year, we have seen in this country a contest over definitions of community, over the basic rights of immigrants in this country, over the role of the U.S. in the wider world. Tensions are high, demagogues are out in force, and the results have been frightening to those targeted by the state, and frightening to those who see in these developments something too reminiscent of the worst parts of the twentieth century.

It is appropriate in moments like this to appreciate the successes and recognize the problems, both realized and potential, that exist in our own place of work, and in our place of study.

To begin with, the title of the symposium itself: "Global Voices." The title points to the importance of voice, of song, of language, to so much of what we do here at the university, and indeed the importance of voice to what it means to be human. But the voice is more than simply an utterance of sound. When we use the phrase "to have a voice in something," we mean not simply having the ability to speak. We use this phrase to indicate that the voice is heard. More than that, the speaker has—by virtue of this voice—an active power or influence. To speak of global voices is to reflect on the extent to which the world—international students, international faculty, and the cultures and societies from which they come—has the power to shape what we do, what we teach, and how we act.

As we think about the relevance of this symposium and about what it means, I suggest we begin by thinking about this conception of voice and what it means to talk about "global voices" in this community. We have faculty and staff at UD from all over the world. The last decade or so UD, like many universities around the country, has seen a tremendous increase in the numbers of international students, particularly from China and the Middle East. But can we say—about our international students, faculty, and staff—that their voices matter? That they matter in what we teach, what we study, and how we define this community?

"Community." I hear and read this word perhaps more than any other at the University of Dayton. It infuses promotional materials, mission statements, course proposals, and I have heard

it more than a few times from students describing what they like about the campus. At UD we live and learn in community, we serve the community, we are challenged to build community. But I think the way this idea is deployed may need some critical reflection.

I am a historian of China by training, and so when I think about the idea of community, I approach it from this disciplinary perspective. We are accustomed to thinking about community as a positive good: as something that provides support, that provides meaning, that enables the enactment of social change. There are two historical lessons about community I would like to convey that challenge this conception. First, although we romanticize the idea of building inclusive communities, let us not forget that for a community to have coherent meaning, it must necessarily exclude. Community is only meaningful in a relational context of "other" communities. This is why communities are often strongest in contest and opposition to the other, when communities rally against the enemy, whether within or without. The ends of this sort of community can be a liberation. Anti-colonial nationalist movements like those in Asia and Africa mobilized community identities in the struggle against Western imperialism. Alternatively, communities can rally together to perform collective acts of horrific violence. Behind every genocide and act of ethnic cleansing is a strong sense of community identity. Community bonds are in this way critical to enabling the best and worst in all of us.

The second point I would like to raise is that invoking community has the discursive effect of masking the differences within. The community presents a group unified by a defined set of characteristics or principles, but also as a consequence masks the differences, whether of class, race, ethnicity, or gender, within the invoked group. The hierarchies, inequalities, and differences between members are masked but still very much there. This is why communities can be both useful and dangerous tools—they unify us for a common purpose, and enable us to forget the tensions, divisions, and animosities between us. This can help us work towards a common good, but it can also enable the perpetuation of injustice and inequality. Let us not accept uncritically the idea that community in itself is a positive end. It is not. We need to ask: community to what end?

To invoke community is to exclude. It cannot be otherwise. There are borders, whether physical or conceptual, to every community. What does this mean at UD? Two questions: First, where are the borders? Second, what is being masked by the invocation of UD unity in community?

The first question is one way of getting at who gets excluded. The campus and student neighborhood are powerful spatial components of community identity, so it is worth thinking about how the borders of that space demarcate UD's relationship to the city. Asking where the UD police jurisdiction ends is another way of getting at this. If as a student you live off campus—for economic reasons, for family reasons, for cultural reasons—where does that put you in relationship to community? The UD community is an extremely warm and happy community for many. The vast majority of students who come here encounter others who look and dress in familiar ways, who grew up in similar neighborhoods, who went to similar types of schools. This creates a strong and emotionally rewarding community for these students. But what does it look like to encounter this coming from another country, or even a different socioeconomic background? And to be told that this is your community? That this is you?

The second question regarding the role of community as a mask gets at this idea. When we invoke the unity of the UD community, we engage in an act of silencing. UD is an institution grounded in Catholic and Marianist teachings and values. These provide the guiding values of the institution, the curriculum, the approach to teaching. I am not arguing against these values, but rather trying to say that we should not pretend that adherence to this has no cost. When we privilege one faith over others in the core curriculum, when we require that every required course in history, philosophy, or religion be taught through the lens of one faith and not others, let us not pretend that this isn't an act of exclusion. It is. It is what defines our community. When we talk about the UD community, let us remember that there are those among us whose histories, cultures, and faiths are not actively valued here, do not show up in the course offerings, and whose principles do not shape our mission statements. Again, I say this not as a criticism of these values—the Marianist commitment to social justice, the call to devote ourselves to the common good—these ideas that resonate with many including myself. But whereas this framework is comfortable and familiar for our American students coming from Catholic families and high schools, it is can be alienating for those without this cultural experience. And while I wholeheartedly agree that this institution has worked to create an inclusive and open community, students and faculty who are of differing faith traditions, or no faith traditions, are welcomed to join, but not necessarily always to shape this core component of community identity.

To return to the title of global voices, then, is to ask ourselves how this community would be different, or defined differently, if those among us from outside this country had the power to

shape these definitions. It is my hope that this symposium facilitates the conversation about the world at UD and how to make it a more welcome place for everyone.