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WRIT 1301: University Writing

Ethnography

12/23/2016

Phony Has a Good Time

On a crisp late October afternoon, I walked with my head held high across the University of Minnesota Campus. Passing by games of frisbee, study groups on steps, and the occasional student rushing to catch a bus, I stopped to absorb it all. The University of Minnesota had always held an aspect of wonder and amazement for me with its grand libraries, colorful landscaping, and massive student body that never seemed to sleep. This walk from my car to Northrop Auditorium reaffirmed the image I held in my head of a bustling college campus; one with a picturesque quad filled with students and leaves falling ever so gracefully.

Picking up my pace, I realized I was running late to the 5:30pm meeting I was due at. Phony Magazine, a student written comedic magazine, expected me to be at their weekly Friday meeting, and I was not about to be late. Dodging students left and right I came closer and closer to Northrop Auditorium. Whipping open the heavy glass door and bounding up the stairs, I could hear the distant laughter of Phony Magazine members resonating in the empty hall.

After turning a corner, I saw Nathan, my broker, and Derek sitting alone at a single table in the almost empty seating area. It took me a few meetings to learn that Nathan's ponytail and leather jacket and Derek's tattoo sleeve and tie-dyed band shirt were nothing to be afraid of. Conscious that they two of them had water bottles and laptops out, I quickly sat down next to Nathan to grab my water bottle and notebook; the least I could do was try to fit in, or look like I did. Arriving right after me were almost all of the founding members of Phony Magazine. Mechanical motions took over as these students pulled off leather jackets, colorful windbreakers, and scarves as they continued their conversations together.

The wind howled outside, somehow loud enough to drown out Grace's booming voice as she strutted over to our table. The core group of six University of Minnesota college students now all sat clustered around an oblong arrangement of cafe tables and chairs. Coats were strung off the backs of chairs, laptops open with too many tabs to count, water bottles strewn across the table, and an array of cookies and sandwiches were littered about; a constant environment for the group. Austen and Kate, the lovebirds, stuck to the outside of the group to continuously banter back and forth while others took care of business. Grace and Nathan casually chatted about upcoming comedy sketch shows and parties Phony Magazine would hold. While other veteran members, notably Fletcher, Kezia, and Derek, were tucked away in their own worlds, arriving members chatted amongst themselves. Each Friday night at a supposed 5:30pm, these University of Minnesota students would gather to do what they do best: write bad jokes, eat food, and dick around.

Phony Magazine met in the empty seating area of a Surdyk's Cafe, an area shared by few other students from time to time. Mainly used as a study area on campus, the group of tables that the group took over were placed perfectly next to an open stair well allowing their voices to boom throughout the space. A student across the room pulled out a pair of noise cancelling headphones and proceeded on with her work. While Phony Magazine seemed too loud and too large for the space, it seemed to fit the group's style. A convenient and easy to find location seemed perfect for a student magazine like this.

Identical to every other Phony Magazine meeting, this one would start later than planned. Warned at my first meeting about this issue, I still found it entertaining how members would trickle in one by one without a second glance from the others. As expected, Taylor and Summer appeared in the cafe with scarves and coats fumbling in their hands as they struggled to join a cafe table to the already existent chain. We were already up to five tables making an elongated and inconvenient meeting setting. Shouting across tables and laptops, I could see why this group had such a hard time focusing for too long.

"Wait, but do you know what Prince did? He changed his name to a symbol, so he got out of his Warner Brothers contract. Like you could do that sh*t back in the day!" Their welcome chatter rattled in my brain, the topics of their conversation were arbitrary and went off on tangents that I could never follow!

"Kesha should do it! She should change her name to a money symbol! Doooo it!" Another member gawked. My broker, Nathan, rolled his eyes so hard I thought they

would fall out of his head, something I thought happened quite often based upon the dialogue of this group.

Again, my head spun trying to track it all.

“Democracy is f*cked, but Phony is alright!” Austen pointed out. A smile broke out on my face listening to Austen and Fletcher on one side of the tables.

“A message from the King, a message from the King!” all group members sang in unison. I chuckled as my ear turned towards the group of freshmen next to me.

“Max is a racist by the way, very underground though,” someone jokingly tossed out. I full on laughed as I realized there was another conversation happening further away from me.

I marveled at the mix of characters that sat before me. Full of determination, goofiness, and short attention spans, the members of Phony magazine held a certain chemistry that, at first, intimidates any outsider looking to write for the magazine. As an outsider to the group, the playful banter of Phony Magazine is one that intimidated not only me, but other new members. I was not surprised to find this chemistry between the older members. Just like any organization or group, Phony Magazine was bound to have those students who took a core role in leading. In this case, it was clear to see that the creative senses of these people brought them together.

Among the veteran members, a backwards flannel, funky pair of socks, and the occasional sweater vest were perfectly normal for guys like Nathan and Austen to wear. On the other hand, members such as Grace and Fletcher seemed to take their fashion level to a whole new level. Tonight, Grace arrived in pieces that had me do double

takes; a palm tree sweater paired with an exuberant clown bow tie. Grace's larger than life character was more than enough to own her style, don't doubt that! Also tonight, Fletcher paired his calculator wrist watch, 70's styled glasses, and spiked hair with a classic grandma teddy bear sweater.

Newer students to the group noticed this common dress code as well and started to take after their older friends. By this meeting, everyone was wearing a considerable mix of flannel, band t shirts, and old tennis shoes. Yet fashion wasn't the only thing that the few newer members also took notice to. Clustered around the train of cafe tables, newer members all seemed to sit on the far side of the tables while the veterans all crowded around each other on the other end. An unspoken rule at Phony Magazine, but the older members always sat together, usually closest to the only electrical outlet in the meeting space.

The president of Phony Magazine, Nathan Richter, was just about the only one who could keep the group on track, or at least the only one who tried. Enticing other members with the promise of a social setting after the meeting and an array of free food, Nathan attempted to keep the group organized and semi-focused, yet seemed to fail continuously.

Realizing side conversations wouldn't die down, Nathan and Grace discussed an upcoming comedy sketch show and party, an "action item" that needed to be address at tonight's meeting. While I hope that Nathan will be able to keep this group on track, any talk of a party with these college students, especially if not a "dry" party, entails excess side conversations between members.

The side conversations and distractions, while they provided a good laugh to overhear, added too much extra time to the meetings. Because of this, action items were usually left for Nathan and Grace to decide. These two made the decisions about editing deadlines, party locations and times, and what the theme of the next issue would be. This created a tone of separation between Nathan and Grace from the rest of the group.

Like tonight, only those two discussed the planning of an upcoming party while everyone else threw jokes about President-elect Trump. Even as they discussed the writing of their mission statement, an action item on their agenda, Nathan suggested they write it later. "Let's write it tomorrow after our meeting... or maybe tomorrow night... with some beer," he joked... I think. A group mentality of joking around and having fun contrasted the business type mentality of Grace and Nathan which moved the group forward in planning. Later that night, Nathan recounted on the meeting claiming that "this is about as business-like as Phony has ever been and will ever be."

"Alright, let's bring it in guys!" Nathan stated to rally the troops, yet nothing happened. Someone yelled about the bourgeoisie while others exchanged notes on the recent election; all is true chaos. There was buzz in the air, like middle school gossip being exchanged during gym class. Concerned looks placated faces and nervous laughter drifted around the circle.

"Guys! Side conversations aside, let's gooooo," Nathan tried again and somehow succeeded. Laptops snapped open and chairs squeaked as they're turned towards the

center of the group, but the occasional snicker and side smile was still exchanged. What mischief this group was up to tonight, who even knows.

“Guys, we gotta talk. I know we had our emergency meeting on Wednesday after the election results were in, but we’re still in some deep sh*t.” My head snaps up and I realize the group’s situation.

Phony Magazine was in panic mode. Their November Issue had been centered around a parallel universe in which Donald Trump won. Specifically, what type of people would be in office, what abnormal customs could arise or change, what our National Anthem could be rewritten to, along with a plethora of other articles all focused at poking fun at the endless possibilities if Trump were elected. Realizing that this parallel universe could just be the real deal with President-elect Trump, Phony members were now scrambling to rewrite and reformat certain articles.

As Nathan and Grace yelled out edit after edit, I realized that everyone seemed to be taking notes. All of their rewrites, editing, formating, photography, comics, all of it were done by the students themselves, the exact opposite of what I expected to happen. Playing by my biases, I thought one student would strictly be in charge of edits, yet students took responsibility for their own articles from start to finish. The students always dove straight into editing sessions where articles were read aloud and feedback provided article by article, no matter how long it took. Like tonight, the group was already an hour past how long they usually stayed, but they knew that articles needed to be edited, so they all stayed.

As tonight's panic mode continued, their dedication towards Phony Magazine grew more and more apparent to me. All of these students had lives outside of Friday night Phony Magazine meeting times, yet here they all are with completed articles and comics. These students allocated their own time to get things done throughout the week, without even a professor or faculty member to tell them to. The positive peer pressure from each other was enough to push each other on.

With my first introduction to the group a while back, I had thought this group would be one with a faculty member on staff, clear organization with their meetings, as well as goals to work towards. Yet once I met the group, all bets were off the table. No faculty member was present at the first meeting, there was only one introduction of the President and Vice President, and when asked, their goals seemed to be nonexistent or poorly thought. However, as I watched the group grow and progress through their November Issue, it was clear that there was an underlying grit to the group that didn't require clear and concise leadership or goals.

"Fletcher and Austen, do you think you can have those articles rewritten and then edited by Sunday? Then Kezia, can you rewrite the headlines?" Nathan's Dad-voice showed as he set dates and distributed the workload to members. And just like that, the group resolved the conflicting articles.

Wrapping up their quick problem solving pow-wow, the students started to end their night. Laptops were slapped closed and food wrappers crumpled and thrown away. The group reassumed the same mechanical actions as when they arrived. The coats, scarves, and windbreaks went back on, and the tables and chairs magically found their

way back to the edges of the dining area. While cleaning up the occasional inappropriate joke and tangent thought followed. Okay... not occasional, but all of the time.

The usual, “Guys, I carved another spoon!” or “Women pooping, the heart of Phony!” always left me with more questions than I already had about the group. However, because this month’s issue had to do with President-elect Trump, the jokes were flying out of some people.

“Do you ever do that thing where you get too cocky?” Fletcher asked Austen while slinging his backpack over his shoulders. “Cause like, I’ll do that sometimes where I think I’m on a roll and super funny so I just keep telling jokes. But then I f*ck up and tell a bad one and my self-esteem just plummets, man!”

It seemed like tonight, punch lines were shot left and right. After the election earlier that week I could see why these jokes had to be made. Tensions were high in the Minneapolis comedy scene according to Grace, so it wasn’t surprising that liberal college students would also be on edge. Joke after joke spewed out. They were trying to make something out of their current state.

“All good comedy is just like a distillation of the person who is doing it in some way,” Grace told me later that night. If that was true, then the series of jokes and jabs at our current government spoke monumental volumes about the group. Instead of arguing over what they were mad at or ranting to each other about what they hated most, these members took a whole separate turn. By using comedy, the group expressed their thoughts and emotions by making others laugh, it was an outlet for them. No matter

what they chose to joke about, it was a way to make a small difference in the world around them.

Building on this, the group's grit to make their due dates, edit each other's work with honesty, and push each other to develop as great writers spoke volumes to me. Phony Magazine pays out of pocket for their publications, they work on their own time to write and edit articles, and they will dedicate their full Friday night's to hashing out issues and working on edits. With all of the odds stacked up against this student group,

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their dedication to each other and to comedy shows how important it is to them. Fletcher commented on how he views comedy in his life later that night.

“A comedian that came in last year said that like all he tries to do is just add absurdity to daily life, and that really hit home with me. Like that was the most synched way I could think of why I do what I do. I want to make a difference in the world, but I’m not smart enough to do it in writing! My goal is just to be like a warm, nice, little blanket.”

Phony Magazine might not be the biggest student organization at the University of Minnesota, or the most organized, or the most timely for that matter. Despite that, they work hard and play hard. Their determination to create something worthwhile every month shows in the work they do in and outside of Phony. But most importantly, they support each other more than I’ve seen any other group do. They’re developing impressive writers in addition to their brilliant comedy.

Combined, I’ve realized that this abstract and tight knit group of University of Minnesota students is something that I hope to have someday. I hope to be comfortable enough with a group of friends to express my views similarly to how Phony does. Whether Phony’s comedy provides a new perspective on a topic for somebody or a way to release pent up stress for themselves, their comedy can help make someone’s day

better. If anything, this group knows how to make people laugh and have a good time, I certainly did.