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Lecture: Bridgette and Joshua on the Nature Conservancy and expanding opportunity for diversity and inclusion

Description: Bridgette and Joshua both work for the Nature Conservancy. Bridgette explained how the organization originated-land trusts bought and donated by wealthy white people concerned about the decline of preserved natural spaces- and described how she became aware of her own privilege, as a middle class white woman, through LEAF, a program which brings inner city youth to Vermont to work on sustainability initiatives. Bridgette told us how the Nature Conservancy is trying to increase diversity in the staff it employs as well as expanding its view on conservation to include urban natural areas and the interaction between culture and nature. Joshua described his journey from growing up in Brooklyn NYC, going to an environmentally themed high school, attending UVM, studying abroad, and eventually working with the Nature Conservancy.¹

Response: It did not surprise me that the Nature Conservancy is staffed almost exclusively by white, upper middle class individuals. The focus of the group has traditionally been to buy land and preserve ecological wealth. Such a narrow focus in any environmental organization is bound to have repercussions in the employees it attracts and retains. What did surprise me, however, is that the Nature Conservancy is actually changing in real and physical ways. Joshua's career with the Nature Conservancy, and the projects he is working on, are not just flowery statements of intentions; he is working for the organization and developing projects that are aimed at breaking down the socio economic barrier in the environmental movement. Preventing gentrification by creating community land trusts is a truly phenomenal way to address the social and environmental injustice at the heart of the current economic system.²

¹ Give a succinct description of the lecture or reading that summarizes the main points without discussing them.

² Provide initial response to the content. It is important that this response is backed up with concrete information from the lecture or reading. Critical thinking and analysis show that you have processed the information thoughtfully.

My skepticism of progress in the environmental movement, and of humanity in general, is, I believe, a function of the “single story” phenomenon. As Chimamanda Adichie explains in her TED talk “The Danger of a Single Story,” people often make hasty conclusions when they have been exposed to a single story. I have been exposed to many stories that support the idea that the environmental movement has been dominated by white conservationists, so I am more likely to assume that the Nature Conservancy is unlikely to change. Furthermore, I hold onto this single story because I want conclusions. I want to say that “everything is going to hell and nobody is doing anything about it” or that “everything is fantastic and we are on the cusp of real, lasting change.” It is difficult, uncomfortable and near impossible not to create single stories about the world I live in, for without something to hold onto, the existence of humanity is meaningless.³

I have recently come to think the reality of the situation is less important. Whether the world is facing imminent doom and corporations are taking over or we are in the midst of a revolution in which people of all different backgrounds will find common ground in facing the ecological struggle we created is more or less irrelevant. We each rely on others for information and a lot of the information we use to form our understanding of the world is easily manipulatable, so it seems unlikely that anyone can ever come to a universal “truth” that will make sense to everyone. The truth is, we are neither as influential nor as powerless as we like to think.

I recently had a conversation with my godmother about the question of influence and where it is possible to create change. She introduced me to an idea which resonated with me; that we are all cells in the body of the earth. A single cell death will have absolutely no effect on the health of an organism, but the health of the whole organism depends on the viability of every cell. Similarly, the decisions each of us make in our daily life have important repercussions, but none of them will individually “change the

³ Draw on your past experiences or other things you have recently been exposed to. Bringing in other class content can be especially useful as it shows that you have been actively thinking about what you have learned and are making connections between sources.

world.” In this light, it seems important to focus on the simple acts of our daily lives rather than badgering ourselves to “make a difference” or blaming the problems we see on everyone else.⁴

⁴ Because these reflections are relatively informal, you can explore your ideas freely in reflections. The reflections give you an opportunity to take risks and really explore your ideas in a low stakes environment because the assignments are not very structured. Be sure to talk to your TA about format though. Some TAs will want more structure than others. Similarly, expectations about backing up your claims with definitive information will differ. If you have a question about your grade, talk to your TA and figure out what you can do to accommodate their expectations.