ESSAY 2: Ethnography (or ethnographic profile)

In this essay I ask you to step out into the world to examine some subculture (a group of people who share “ritual” behaviors, valued objects, common language, and a set of values). You will be acting somewhat like an anthropologist for this assignment, going out into the world to the fieldsite where these people can be found, to observe, writing down your observations, trying to see patterns in the details, and then writing up your study. Be sure to include description of that place, which may be a physical space or a virtual one. This is one of the more open-ended assignments in the course, which may pose challenges, so be sure to spend a good amount of time meditating to find an interesting focusing question that has a potentially accessible answer.

DECIDE ON A SUBJECT:

You have two options for this assignment: you may write about a group by observing them in their “natural habitat,” or you may profile an individual who seems to represent a group (as Susan Orleans does in “The American Man, Age 10”). Think about your friends and family members and the various groups to which they belong (these groups may be connected to their work or hobbies, religious practices or social ties). Or consider whether you know someone who seems to represent a more general “type” of person (kindergartner, middle school bully, high school Goth, cheerleader, World of Warcraft addict, soccer mom, widower in assisted living facility, to name only a few possibilities). Note that these types may be identified and shaped by a mix of factors such as age, socio-economic status, and cultural influences. Look for someone who seems to you “colorful” in some way, remembering that it’s the writer’s interest that makes subjects interesting to others. (I’m convinced that, with the right kind of attentiveness on the writer’s part, a cubicle worker’s life can be made fascinating.)

OBSERVE AND TAKE FIELD NOTES:

Visit your site or your interview subject with notebook in hand. If you are in an actual field site, you may want to start with a description of the place itself. Map out the space. How does traffic flow? What’s the general atmosphere? What details create that atmosphere? What’s the lighting like? The floor? The furniture? Pictures on the wall? Of what? Remember that you have five senses. What do you smell, hear, taste, touch? Now pay attention to the people in your fieldsite. What are their ages, genders, clothing? How do they interact? Record specific bits of conversation. Are they using any insider language, any unfamiliar words? Make sure to record objective, concrete details. Look for patterns. Ask questions. If you are observing a cyber-environment, consider how people present themselves. How are web pages laid out? Record specific exchanges. How does the community seem to “work”?

If you are writing a profile of an individual, arrange to spend some time with your subject. Bring a notebook so that you can record the details that you hear and notice.
• Physical description; clothing; jewelry
• Daily schedule
• Past regrets, future dreams?
• Psychological issues and challenges?
• Influence of technology/media (cell phones, computer, etc.)
• Social connections (how many friends, where and how do they interact)
• School and/or work situation and attitudes
• Describe their special place(s)—look for DETAILS!!
• Self-image (how does the person describe him/herself)
• Favorite possessions?
Other favorites?
• Consumer behavior—what do they buy?

The target length of your essay is 3 or 4 pages. Remember that the best writing is done from a sense of abundance, a big messy heaping pile of details. If you think your pile is not deep or rich enough, go back to your fieldsite to collect some more data. Even if you are comfortable with the amount of information you have collected, it is often helpful to visit the site more than once.

TRY TO PULL EVERYTHING TOGETHER:
In your draft, try to organize details into paragraph chunks. You may wish to use a narrative framework, telling about your experiences observing this culture or reporting on your interview. Or you may wish to organize by subtopics or some other logical division. If you have a great deal of information to get down on paper, just try in the first draft to get it down on the page. The bulk of the content of your writing for this essay should be observed details.

REVISION:
In revision, work at sharpening both your specific details and your focus. Frame your research question as specifically as possible, and try to articulate the answer you’ve arrived at in a clear sentence or two.

CRITERIA FOR GRADING:
• The degree to which you take on a meaningful question, followed by relevant “leg-work”
• The specificity of the details you collect
• Your success in ordering those details into focused paragraphs controlled by topic sentences