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Africana Philosophy:
Globalizing the Diversity Curriculum

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In the fall of 2007, Africana Philosophy makes its debut at Marquette University. This course provides an introduction to the philosophical traditions of Africa, the Afro-Caribbean, and African America. Marquette has had a course on African American philosophy for nearly thirty years, a fact of which the university, and the philosophy department in particular, should be very proud. Nevertheless, when I came to Marquette, I reconstructed the course with an eye toward moving beyond a narrow focus on African America. I wanted to engage with Africa itself, as well as with the African diaspora in the Caribbean and the Americas.

In making this change, I looked toward the role this course would fill as part of the "diverse cultures" requirement in Marquette's Core of Common Studies. The "diverse cultures" requirement invites students to reflect upon the effect human diversity has on their own identities by familiarizing them with differences and similarities across cultures. In light of this goal, I hope to explicitly draw students' attention to the complicated manifestations of diversity that exist both outside *and* inside their own communities.

Combining "External" and "Internal" Contexts

Often courses that fulfill diversity requirements focus almost exclusively either on "external" or "internal" relations to diversity. By "external" relations to diversity, I mean diversity that stands *outside* of whatever counts as the home or norm for a given subject of study. A course on Chinese history, or African literature, would be "external" since these subjects stand outside of most students' "home" in the history of Western civilization or Anglo-American literature. By "internal" relations to diversity, I refer to diversity that exists *within* the home or norm. Courses in Native American art, or Asian American history, or even African American philosophy, tend to be "internal" in this sense. By making the shift from "African American" to "Africana" philosophy, I aim to explicitly blur this distinction between external and internal relations of diversity.

This "blurring" approach presents important advantages, one of which is discipline-specific. Courses that focus exclusively on African American philosophy tend to place thinkers in dialogue with European and Anglo-American philosophers, thus maintaining the internal and normative structure of the Western tradition. These courses may, for example, explore W. E. B. DuBois's relation to G. W. F. Hegel's philosophy of history or to William James's theory of knowledge. But they may simultaneously overlook "external" (non-Western) influences, including the manner in which African American philosophers engaged with the intellectual and philosophical traditions of Africa and the Caribbean.

By shifting the scope of the course to explicitly include these traditions, I move beyond the narrow focus on African America's encounter with European philosophy. I thus situate African American philosophy within a broader context of *global* (not just Western) philosophy. Here the *external* distinction between African America and the African and Caribbean regions informs the *internal* distinctions between African American and European American schools of thought.

Ultimately, these divisions collapse into each other. To fully understand how African American philosophy differs from European American philosophy, a student must understand African American philosophy's intellectual relation to Africa and the rest of the diaspora. The internal inquiry, then, leads to the external. At the same time, to fully understand the relation between African American philosophy and its African and Caribbean counterparts, a student must attend to the unique relations each of these traditions has with European American philosophy. The external comparison thus leads to another form of internal inquiry.

Shifting Perspectives for Student Learning

As the student realizes the interdependence of the internal and the external, she comes to reimagine her own relationship to the world. For every relation of external diversity, there is an "us" that stands as the *normed* center, and a diverse "them" that stands outside of that center. By blurring the distinction between the internal and the external, diversity education also blurs the distinction between "us" and "them." When diversity education does its job well, there is a kind of *de*centering for the student, where he or she is able to move beyond and call into question the

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position of the normative "us." Diversity education strives to upset our students' tendencies to take their "normal" perspectives for granted. It works to make them to understand one or more "foreign" perspectives, and when things go well, to see how their *norm* is somebody else's foreign *other*. This is an explicit aim of my Africana philosophy course.

Take, for instance, an African American student who enrolls in my course to fulfill requirements both for diverse cultures and for her Africana studies major. Through the course of the semester, I hope that she will relate her personal history, cultural background, and identity not only to the histories, cultures, and philosophies of Africa and the African diaspora, but also to those of Europe. Most importantly, I hope that she will recognize how the unique confluence of traditions that emerged in the United States has affected her identity. If I am successful, my student will be at once a part of and outside of all of these traditions. Her encounter with diversity will not simply evoke appreciation of the foreignness of Africana philosophy or the foreignness of European/American philosophy from an Africana perspective. It will instead lead her to question the very roots of these structural distinctions in the first place. Just as the internal leads to the external (and vice-versa), the norm and the foreign are deeply interdependent.

Similarly, a European American student may expect the Africana philosophy course to expose him to an exotic and exciting "foreign" body of philosophy. He may be surprised to learn the extent to which the intellectual traditions of Africa and the African diaspora have shaped and informed the dominant European/American philosophy. While the contrast he finds in Africana philosophy may deepen his understanding of the European tradition, the depth and breadth of similarities between the two traditions may surprise him. He will find his sense of what is normal and what is foreign challenged. Thus the student will reach a deeper and more sophisticated understanding not only of philosophy, but also of his own place and role within a diverse world.

If I am successful, each of my two example students will find their dissimilarities matched by their similarities. They will find that their differences of background and perspective, which are undoubtedly real and important, are countered by similarities and common ground. Just as external diversity leads to internal diversity, and as the norm leads to the foreign, so difference leads to similarity.

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Rethinking Difference

In the Africana Philosophy class, we will inquire into the very meaning of Africana philosophy itself. What characteristics do the diverse elements of this single tradition share? In order to answer this question, we must attend both to what is different and what is similar about Africana philosophy's individual elements. We will also identify what ties the Africana philosophical tradition to and sets it apart from the European tradition.

As a consequence of these investigations, my students will find themselves at various times on the same and different sides of the increasingly unstable divide between the normal and the foreign. Rather than seeing divisions between groups as hard and impenetrable, students will see that apparently discrete groups are actually interdependent, and that difference is always mingled with similarity. Since students often reflexively believe that "difference" is incommensurable, this revelation of similarity is crucial as they form an understanding of their place in the world.

Diversity education should do more than simply offer students a buffet-style array of exotic intellectual delicacies. Educators must make a conscious effort to bring students into critical confrontation with their own relations to diversity. Students must come to realize that they can not only find themselves in the "diverse" other, but also find diversity within themselves. I believe that almost any class can and should accomplish this outcome. Africana Philosophy simply offers an opportunity to engage these issues with an intensity, focus, and rigor that is sadly uncommon within the general curriculum.

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Marquette University is a participating institution in AAC&U's Shared Futures: Global Learning for General Education project.*

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