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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 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

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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 decentering for the student, where he or she is able to move beyond and call into question the
position of the normative “us.” Diversity education strives to upset our students’ tendencies to take their “normal” per-

Diversity education should do more than simply offer students a buffet-style array of exotic intellectual delicacies.

spectives for granted. It works to make them to understand one or more “fore-

European/American philosophy. While the contrast he finds in Africana phi-

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 dis-similarities 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.

Rethinking Difference

In the Africana Philosophy class, we will inquire into the very meaning of Africana philosophy itself. What characteristics do the diverse ele-

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