**Who am I?**

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Every spring semester I teach *Survey of American Diversity* (PAS 227-50), an undergraduate course offered in the distance education program of the Pan African Studies Department. The course introduces students to the history of the settlement of the United States by immigrants of diverse backgrounds from across the globe and the challenges they faced on their road to citizenship. Because the course is taught online, I generally don’t meet with students in person and would not be able to recognize them if our paths somehow crossed on campus or elsewhere. I learn about them and they learn about me through the medium of our cyberspace classroom. The process starts in the first week of class when each student writes a brief introduction describing their interest in the topic, their academic and professional goals, hobbies, tastes in music and literature, and anything else they care to relate about themselves. Some students volunteer information about family and children. Some discuss their experiences encountering other cultures through travel or military service abroad. A few will refer to their ethnic backgrounds and ancestry, especially if they were born in another country. Since my introduction appears first, many simply follow my lead in choosing what to relate and how to identify themselves.

The class has taught me a lot over the years. I learned, for example, how to create a “safe space” in which to navigate the treacherous waters of the topic of “race” on a discussion board in an online classroom despite not having the option of communicating with body language. In this situation, trust must be built entirely without the gestures and facial expressions that perform essential roles in conveying meaning in face-to-face encounters. Relying on text alone requires far more effort and demands a certain focus and precision when presenting complex topics fraught with controversy (colonialism, slavery, genocide, and racism in the history of the nation’s founding, settlement, and expansion). The instructional challenges are formidable, but the results are well worth the time and energy expended.

Teaching and learning about the development of ideas of human differences, how they change over time, and their impact on human relations, has been central to the coursework. In certain sectors of academia, this topic is referred to as the *social construction of race*. It pertains to how our nation has defined human differences and social status based primarily on false ideas about human biology, and how those notions have been refuted by science but nevertheless remain decisive in our social relations. On our journey in class to understand human diversity in the context of these ideas and how they functioned throughout US history, we travel a road that leads us past Indian wars, slavery and abolition, the Chinese Exclusion Act, and the struggle against Jim Crow for civil rights and equal opportunity. The road passes through Ellis Island in the east, and on the west coast it curves around San Francisco Bay. But when we arrive at the present, after having witnessed key events that define and unite us as a nation, we find we still must check off little boxes on census forms, employment forms, school applications, etc. to divide ourselves into “racial” and other groups that owe much of their social identity, meaning, and value to the legacies of white privilege and social injustice in the United States.

It is my contention the theories and practices that have been developed and deployed around the concept of diversity by institutions seeking to promote inclusion and equity in employment and college admissions are based on the false idea that diversity can be programmed into institutional life and measured by the demographic boxes checked on various forms. Unlike “race”—the false concept that underlies the creation and promotion of diversity initiatives—human diversity is real. It is an ongoing process of nature that distinguishes human beings not as members of artificial groups (racial categories, etc.), but as distinct individuals. Accordingly, efforts to capture our complex identities in little “boxes” are reductive to the point of absurdity (as so-called bi-racial and mixed individuals have noted in their criticisms of census and other data forms). This brings me to my working definition of diversity, which should be kept in mind as we move forward: *Diversity is the normative condition of human existence; it defines the complex nature of human society at the level of the individual*.

According to the standard definition of diversity widely embraced in the US, the term denotes the inclusion in the workforce of people of different ethnicities, religions, nationalities, age groups, sexual orientations, and physical abilities. Its adoption and use in higher education can be traced to *Regents of California v. Bakke* (1978), a lawsuit that sought a remedy for the plaintiff’s claim he was denied admission to medical school due to affirmative action policies at the University of California. It was the first case against affirmative action to reach the US Supreme Court. Justice Lewis Powell, writing the judgment of the court, confirmed such programs were constitutional, and argued that an educational interest in promoting a diverse student body in undergraduate and professional schools was just as important to the quality of the educational experience as a fine faculty, libraries and laboratories.

The concept of diversity thus entered into institutional life through the judiciary—the institution that continues to define it according to the adjudication of ongoing court cases pertaining to affirmative action. The escalation of legal assaults on affirmative action programs in recent years has led businesses and academic institutions to develop diversity programs as alternative means to “race-based” remedies to achieve equal opportunity in employment and college admissions. While the expansive nature of the concept—the inclusion of gender, religion, nationality, sexual preferences, etc.—moves it closer to recognizing the complex reality of human identities, typical approaches to its implementation, however, seem trapped in the moribund thinking about “group differences” that have dominated recent efforts to address historical discrimination and injustice. The cultural stereotypes that have been built up over centuries and that pervade our collective consciousness constitute a major hindrance to progress. In fact, we have been so conditioned by stereotyping that proposed solutions like diversity initiatives often perpetuate—in new guises and disguises—the problems they are intended to remedy. Stereotypes allow us to pre-judge others instantly. They also are reflected in the officially-sanctioned check-off boxes within which we are disciplined by society to self-identify according to society’s pre-conceived ideas about group identities and differences. And, most importantly, stereotypes prevent us from transcending the “group” identities they reify and represent to allow us to be seen and treated as individuals. Thus they prevent us from recognizing that diversity is determined at the micro-level of the individual in society.

An example I give my students—who you should recall have never seen me in the flesh—is often when I enter a room full of strangers I am asked, as a conversation starter, if I played basketball. These days the question is posed in the past tense because in addition to noting my above-average height, my age is another visible characteristic. The assumption is, of course, a tall, black man must have shot hoops at some point in his youth in high school or college. Understandably, the thought does not occur to the questioner that I might have played ice hockey because that idea goes against the stereotypes to which we have been conditioned. The reality when I walk into a room is that I bear with me all the characteristics that comprise my individual “identity.” Those collective traits distinguish me from every other human being including those in my family: first born, native born, male, brown-skinned, above-average height, English-speaking, college educated, medical librarian, historian, playwright, librettist, composer, poet, college professor, musician, married, childless, sixty-something, African American, Kentucky resident, etc. This is my “diversity fingerprint,” so to speak. Like anatomical fingerprints and DNA fingerprints it distinguishes me as an individual member of a diverse society and defines who I am well beyond the narrow confines of those silly little boxes.

To drive this point home in class, I include information about my genetic ancestry. I have had three DNA analyses done by three different organizations for differing purposes. In 2005 I submitted a DNA sample to the Human Genographic Project to support the creation of a global database to advance the study of human origins and migration patterns. The project looked only at the deep ancestry of my male ancestral line, and traced the origins of my Y-chromosome to a region near the Egyptian-Sudanese border dating back approximately 60,000 years ago. In 2012 I submitted a DNA sample to 23andMe, a California-based genetics firm conducting health research and providing genetic ancestry analysis. Their analysis of my mitochondrial and Y-chromosome DNA traced my father’s ancestral line to Nigeria and my mother’s to Senegal. Also, according to what they refer to as an admixture test, they determined 63% of my ancestry came from Africa, 32% from Europe (England, Ireland, Scandinavia), 1% showed Asian (Amerindian) origin, and roughly 4% was left unassigned (my wife insists it is Martian DNA). Last year I submitted a DNA sample to Ancestry.com to see what their autosomal testing methods would identify. The results from Ancestry slightly differed from 23andMe as follows: 66% West African ancestry (with 30% from Benin/Togo); 33% European ancestry (with 19% coming from Great Britain); and 1% Asian ancestry (Amerindian).

Who am I? Like every other human, I am a unique individual. No one else in the world is exactly like me. When I add all my characteristics together (familial, social, and biological) they comprise my diversity fingerprint. However, I am more than just the sum total of these parts. I both encompass and transcend these defining personal traits because they constantly change. Our identities are not fixed or static. Change occurs because change is the one constant in life. Although we generally are not conscious of it, we are still evolving in nature and in society. I was an infant who became an adolescent who became an adult (AARP reminds me a new category of “senior citizen” awaits—although I am not as enthusiastic about this next phase as they seem to be). One day, if I am lucky, “retired” will be added to the list of my characteristics, and still there are other ways my biological, social or familial situation can change over time.

Who am I? By every measure, like every other human being, I am a work in progress. What I have in common, what I share with other humans, is the fact we are all different—not different as groups, but different as individuals. In my opinion, this is where we should begin the search for common ground to solve the problems of social inequality and injustice. The recent effort within institutions of higher education to recognize and celebrate diversity takes a step in that direction. It recognizes our differences will not vanish and that we should not be expected or required to assimilate to an arbitrarily defined “social norm” based on the prerogatives and preferences of a socio-politically dominant group. I am not by any means naïve about the formidable obstacles that exist in the struggle to deracinate “race” and the other stereotypes and social barriers pertaining to gender, religion, age, etc. that prevent us from recognizing the true meaning of human diversity, but I would not be an educator if I did not believe in the power of human knowledge to confront and solve our critical societal problems.