

I Don't Know Who I Am

My semester of assumptions

Probably the worst thing you can do is start out a paper with a cliché or a stupid joke. But you know what? When you assume things, you make an ass out of you and me. I wouldn't start my paper this way if I didn't truly believe that I am proof of this statement.

I'll be honest with you. The first day of class, I thumbed through the syllabus Dr. Flower had passed out, and in all of my preeminent arrogance I had already decided which parts of this class I would like and which parts I would loathe. I am not kidding. I judged the entire class in less than ten minutes, right down to the assigned readings. (Take note that the only information I had on these essays and books thus far was nothing more than a title and a one-sentence description.) But as the semester dragged on through the dreary winter months, I began making the frightening realization that I was completely wrong. About everything.

The readings we were assigned kicked off the semester. I grudgingly read a majority of them. Much to my surprise, the pieces I expected to be biased and lame were exactly the opposite; however the ones I was actually excited about reading left me utterly disappointed—sometimes even angry. As hard as I tried, I simply could not stomach Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands*. I expected to read a masterpiece every time I picked it up, and I honest to God thought that it was going to get better. Unfortunately I finished each chapter feeling either offended or extremely irritated. So much for the hype, I thought. As for Lynell George's "Gray Boys, Funky Aztecs, and Honorary Homegirls," the title intrigued me, as did the subject material, but I found the organization of the essay particularly difficult to wade through. In addition, it didn't seem to say anything I felt hadn't already been said. On the flip side of my wonted negativity however, I will admit to really enjoying "Alternative Ways of Knowing" by Belenky et al., which I originally thought to be feminist propaganda written by a woman on a power trip. I couldn't have been more wrong. Although most of the girls in the class seemed to disagree with me, I found that the excerpt we read did not defend the narrow minded "feminism" many of us have come to fear. Instead it looked at the causes

of such distinct gender division and proposed ways of change. It suffices to say that the assumptions I so foolishly made on the first day were indicative of my complete lack of self-understanding.

The readings aside, I was probably most skeptical about our midsemester paper and our final project. I started really thinking about my paper a week before it was due. I met with my partner, I brainstormed, I tried to freewrite for a half an hour—I came up with nothing. I simply could not think of anything worth writing about. I felt that the assignment relied too heavily on the readings, which in turn all relied too heavily on racial issues. Thinking myself too pure to have faced any real problems concerning race, I had all but given up on the paper. In a last attempt to salvage my English grade, I sat down to mull it over one last time the night before it was due. The minute that I stopped convincing myself I was above racial superiority was the minute that I had a strong topic to develop. I churned out one of the best papers of my life in the next three hours. I wrote it straight from my heart, never hesitating to admit my own shortcomings. From this I learned that honesty and humility are the only real ways to get your point across. My skepticism had gotten me nowhere, and while I had started to realize this, I still hadn't fully grasped it.

Despite my past fallacies, I still thought that our “intercultural networks” were going to be a waste of time. A blunt statement, I know, but I unjustifiably doubted the research abilities of our class as well as the candidness of our campus. I have no qualms admitting my mistake, however. The conclusions we came to on account of these networks were definitely the most interesting parts of this class. I talk to people of all different cultures and races on a regular basis, so I thought that I wasn't going to find out anything new. However, when I actually sat down and dug deep into the issues embedded in the very foundation of CMU, I learned more than what could have been taught to me by a professor. Our presentation and final project was a great experience; it even changed my opinion on a few issues. So in the end, I figure if I have to eat a little crow to become a better person, then so be it.

Talking Across Difference was a class centered on identity—focused on challenging individuals to question how well they know themselves. The most important thing that I learned in this class was not something clearly stated to me in an essay or

even said directly to me during our discussion time. No, I learned something that takes most people decades to discover: I don't know myself at all. Not only that, but I'm changing so rapidly that I probably never *will* know myself to the extent that satisfies my curiosity. My definitions of professionals or religious believers, for example, so often clash with societies definitions that I can't even pinpoint my own identity most of the time. However after a semester of unjustified assumptions, ones that would *every time* leave me with my foot in my mouth, I realized that the first step to truly knowing yourself is approaching every situation with an open mind. Keeping this in mind, I figure that even if I cannot identify myself as a writer or a scientist or even a Christian with any type of certainty, at least I can assert that I am no longer a pompous, judgmental ass.