Menah Pratt-Clark, Vice President for Strategic Planning and Vice Provost for Inclusion and Diversity:

Good afternoon. I am just delighted to see such a wonderful turnout for our first annual Advancing the Human Condition Symposium. This 3-day symposium reflects an amazing and wonderful quality about Virginia Tech. The Community. The people. Today is an example of Ut Prosim in action. This day was just a vision just three months ago. On August 3, before the semester began, a small, but amazing, planning committee came together to discuss the possibilities of this symposium. All we had was a vision. The Equity and Social Disparity in the Human Condition Strategic Growth Area wanted to engage the campus in conversation about humanity; we wanted to ensure that within each destination areas issues of humanity and the human condition would have a place; we felt that there were some common themes that impacted humanity. We knew there were shared theories, methodologies, pedagogies, and communities related to social identities and lived experiences that were important and warranted discussion and a forum. We wanted to bring the best minds together at Virginia Tech to collectively struggle to understand the value that multiple disciplines could bring to questions of the human condition. We wanted to create a space for questions to emerge, for scholars to discuss, and for new ideas to surface. We wanted to engage colleges and destination areas in identifying emerging questions around issues related to the human condition and furthering the role of research and scholarship across disciplines in advancing equity and eliminating social
disparities. We wanted to convene academics, scholar activists, scholar practitioners, and graduate students doing cross-disciplinary, innovative work around these issues. We wanted a format that would further discussion, with discussants planting the seeds of inquiry for the group, drawing upon their own work and demonstrating how it informs understanding of the human condition and respondents extending the ideas put forth by the discussants by listening for emerging themes and generating broad questions that may guide further research, investigation, and reflective inquiry. This was the vision. And because of each of you, today is the realization of that vision. The campus – each of you -- responded to the call for proposals. What has made this symposium, possible, however, was the remarkable work of the equity and social disparity SGA Stakeholder’s group and the Symposium Planning Committee that took a vision and helped materialize it. Can the members of the planning committee and the stakeholder’s committee please stand? This committee has done phenomenal work in short order. I just want to thank each college and DA/SGA for taking time to find a place and space to engage in this symposium. I want to share that this symposium is possible because of the incredible work and vision of one individual who was able to take pieces and threads of conversations and ideas and weave them into today’s masterpiece quilt. Dr. Michele Deramo, Assistant Provost for Diversity Education and Programs literally wove this program together because of her incredible skills as a facilitator, organizer, and scholar. I want to invite Michele to come forward and to share a visual representation that will help set the stage for our conversation this week.

Michele Deramo:

This month, the prestigious Taylor Wessing Photography Portrait Prize announced the winners for its 2017 competition. The top prize was César Dezfuli’s portrait of Amadou
Sumaila– a teenager rescued from the sea off the coast of Libya. The face of Amadou demands attention to one of the most profound challenges facing the human condition in the 21st century: the mass displacement of people. Whether precipitated by geopolitical conflict, ethnic cleansing, extreme poverty, natural disaster or human-facilitated environmental or resource crises, the number of people forced to migrate under dire circumstances is unprecedented.

What can an academic do? Our work in the areas of global systems, integrated security, policy, adaptive brain and behavior, data and decisions—all hold some part of the solution to the complex and protracted issue of forced migration and human displacement. The face of Amadou confronts us with the condition of “bare life”…

Whereas the portrait of Erica, from Maija Tammi’s series, One of Them Is a Human, raises new questions—specifically, what does it mean to be alive? Erica is an android created by scientists at Osaka University. Her inclusion in the contest—and the fact that her portrait garnered third prize—provoked controversy. Is Taylor Wessing breaking its own rules by allowing an image of something that is non-human? Or, does its inclusion require us to consider how innovations in robotics, artificial intelligence, and autonomous systems are altering the meaning of the human?

Robots and refugees—these are two of the faces of the human condition in 2017.

However, while Amadu and Erica are named, the young woman fleeing Mosul who is the subject of the second prize photograph by Abbie Trayler-Smith is unnamed. It is part of a series entitled Women in War: Life after Isis. The image is personal, intimate. It draws us closer to her lived experience. Yet, she remains separate from us—behind the window of the bus that brought her to the Hasan Sham camp in northern Iraq. We can only infer—her lived reality remains
unknowable to us. Without a name, do we render her voiceless under our gaze? The question of who tells the story and how it is told, of who determines what advances the human condition—these questions need to remain central to our collective work toward equity.

Thus, in addition to exploring the emerging theories and technologies of the human condition, we must also interrogate our methodologies to discern how they advance the human condition.

The symposium explores multiple facts of advancing the human condition: theories, methodologies, pedagogies, technologies, communities. The photograph you see now is of Nick Bostrom, founding director of the Future of Humanity Institute at the University of Oxford. The Institute brings the tools of mathematics, philosophy and social sciences to bear on big-picture questions about humanity and its prospects. Similar to campuses across the globe, our approach is interdisciplinary.

The topics explored in this year’s symposium are wide ranging and include: social equity and inclusion in education policy; learning experience that empower and build resilience; embracing one health through integrated dialogue around rural and underserved populations and human-animal interactions; as well as producing ecological and equitable food systems, and advancing food security through community leadership and vitality.

Our symposium also explores human dimensions of the built environment, and interconnected ecologies that are simultaneously local and global in scale, and the intersections between social, economic, and environmental justice.

All of us here add value to this common challenge of advancing the human condition.

Sometimes, the work requires the high-level expertise evident in the sessions on biomedical and neuroscience research; in order better understand something like opioid addiction. Other times,
the solution is simpler—as we can see in this photo from the Burkini Island series by Anna Boylazis—where the design of modest swimwear made it possible for girls living along the Indian Ocean off Mnyuni, Zanzibar to learn to swim safely. Whatever we do, the concern for advancing equity and eliminating social disparity is fundamental to our research, scholarship, and praxis—so that the human condition may flourish…and be lived—and completed—with dignity.

(See AHC.visualreflection to view the photographs that accompanied this commentary.)

Menah Pratt Clark:

Thank you.

This symposium then, is an opportunity for Virginia Tech to distinguish itself as an institution that can be a destination for scholars who are acutely aware of and concerned about social issues, equity, identity, and humanity, blending multiple disciplines, disciplinary areas, and scholarly expertise.

And so, over the course of the next three days, we invite you to engage in these conversations about humanity and the human condition. In addition to the roundtable sessions, we have created time for just being in community with one another. Today there will be an opening reception from 5-6:30 in Latham C. Tomorrow there will be a reception prior to the evening keynote by Navina Khanna at the Alexander Black House at 630. The evening keynote is entitled, “To change everything it takes everyone: Building a multi-racial, multi-sector movement for transformation.
And on Thursday, we will have a lunch gathering where we will share the questions that have been emerging over the course of the symposium. The symposium will conclude on Thursday with a discussion about arts and the human condition and a performance at the Moss Arts Center. Tickets for the performance by Awadagin Pratt can be purchased at Moss. As many of you know he is my brother so I’m thrilled that he will close our symposium and grateful for the engagement of support of the Moss Arts Center.

Feel free to use the hashtag #BeyondBoundaries #AHC17 if you are tweeting about sessions over the next few days. This symposium is part of our efforts to continue to think about Virginia Tech in the future and our vision as a global land grant undergirded by our motto Ut Prosim that distinctly and clearly calls us to serve humanity.

It is now my pleasure to introduce our opening keynote speaker. It has been a distinct pleasure and honor to get to know Dr. Sylvester Johnson. He has only been at Virginia Tech since this summer, and has enthusiastically embraced the institution and its motto, Ut Prosim. We are often running in and of the same committee meetings, as he has willingly stepped in to serve at multiple levels on the Cluster Hiring and Operations Committee; the Strategic Planning Committee; the HBCU Summit Committee, and on this Symposium Committee. I have appreciated the value that he brings to the work of these committees and his willingness to serve and contribute, not only as a scholar, but also a colleague. Sylvester is the Assistant Vice Provost for the Humanities and Professor of Religion and Culture at Virginia Tech, where he is establishing a new center for the humanities. His research has examined religion, race, and empire in the Atlantic world; religion and the US empire; religion and sexuality; national security practices; and the ethical and social impact of artificial intelligence (AI) and human enhancement. He completed his PhD at Union Theological Seminary, where he studied race and
religion with seminal scholar in religion, James H. Cone. He has been a faculty member at Florida A&M University in Tallahassee, Florida; at Indiana University-Bloomington; and at Northwestern University. His scholarship reflects a unique ability to explore connections across interesting thematic areas of race, Christianization, religious hatred, colonialism, democracy, and freedom. His most recent book is entitled, “The FBI and Religion: Faith and National Security Before and After 9/11 (University of California Press 2017). His current book project is on human identity in an age of intelligent machines and human-enhancement. I am delighted that he agreed to deliver our opening keynote on The University and our Human Future: Advancing Equity and the Human Condition.