

Diversity and Inclusion Statement

The wind roared, lashing my eyes with frozen snow—I squinted a little harder to watch the fence line, and with a shudder gripped my gunstock a little tighter.

I had seen little evidence that the hunt would get better anytime soon. Though not ideal conditions, I still had bell hooks to engage me. Listening to “Teaching to Transgress” in the forest gave me time to actively consider how I should organize my upcoming course, *Revising the Celluloid Ceiling*. The class came from a grant to research and develop a course to explore the bias in Hollywood and film school cultures as well as the content each creates.

This chilling moment—pulling off my gloves in the back country to write down notes from the audio book—identifies several of the challenges I would face teaching an intersectional studies course in a fairly conservative state. Many of my students were raised on guns but not on the self-assessment. Toxic masculinity and femininity rippled through the undergraduate population. Challenging long existing cultural beliefs would be tough to say the least.

My own self-doubts multiplied. As a middle-aged white male in a uniformly homogenous state, what response to #MeToo could I offer?

Without mansplaining.

I knew my goal was to get students to recognize that they all carried *blind spots* which would accidentally find their way into their films. But proselytizing would run counter to the course theory. I had to find a way to encourage active student participation.

During pangs of doubt, one of my mentors would mentally pop-up. Dr. Ishita Sinha Roy taught me that it will always be more important to think diversely than to come from a minority group. This thought both reassures and guides me to this day.

One of my central roles in academia is to encourage students to find an authorial voice. I realize that means creating a safe learning space, where students entrust each other and the faculty to judge work and not the artist. To create a space where the mistakes of the past can be atoned for in the present. To empower students to speak—or not speak—as they feel comfortable. To consider how the topics at hand reflect unnamed fears or ingrained assumptions.

“Terrified” came up repeatedly in the first classroom presentation. I shared my fears about trampling voices or to realize I repeatedly had done the things we were chastising in the classroom. Another vivid memory helped settle my nerves.

To research a screenplay exploring xenophobia on a fictional northern-border town, I received a travel grant to visit Macedonia. My protagonists—a Native American woman and a ten-year-old American/Macedonian boy—experience a world that I generally do not given my privilege. And a visit to Macedonia, where I do not know the cultures and do not speak the language, pulled me out of my comfort zone. A lot. People looked at me a little longer than I was used to. I didn’t have my words to get what I want and I felt stupid when relying upon gestures to get what I wanted. And I still remember my first night, having just stepped off the train in Gradsko, where I walked the unmarked streets and peered into people’s yards as I looked for my destination. And how my heart leaped from my chest when an elderly woman pierced the darkness with what I assumed were demands of what I was doing. It terrified.

I would remind myself of those moments of feeling powerless when preparing the course or during the lecture. I would reflect on Ishita's words when I worried about trampling someone's voice. And I entrusted other voices to share experiences or rely on hooks, Phoebe Robinson, Betty Frieden, Ijeoma Oluo's texts to present well-reasoned perspectives about race, gender, socio-economic class, and intersectionality. I invited guest lectures, including Ishita, to meet the students in person or through skype sessions. And most critically, students presented research on critical concepts to each other so that classroom content was coming from everyone.

I have been drawn to addressing equality over the last five years. *Revising the Celluloid Ceiling* become one expression; *The Cookie Bridesmaid*—a short film critiquing toxic femininity—became another. Having recently shared the picture lock of the story at a conference I assuaged my fears that it was a critique and not exploitive. I remember sweating as I sat in the auditorium with thirty film professors, reassessing every nuanced moment for some of my own accidental bias.

My fears keep my work honest, and I do have much for which to be thankful.

In 2018 I participated with one my students during a lavender ceremony, which moved me quite deeply. I posted online that I was a safe person to come out and a student from several years ago expressed his gratitude to gently address a dead name being used. One of my graduating seniors invited me as an instructor with significant importance to a formal dinner at her sorority. These moments give me courage to continue my pursuit to providing equitable opportunities to learn.

None of that offsets old missteps. I am a product of my environment and upbringing. I work to check my privilege and take better steps to be inclusive in all areas of my life.

But that too is part of my approach to teaching diversity and inclusivity. We all have blind spots. Inclusion does not only mean giving a space to groups often oppressed or marginalized; it means that we provide everyone the opportunity to nurture our sense of empathy and seek out our blind spots.

Hunting season recently came to another close again in the Big Sky state. I had *The ABC's of LGBT+* by Ashley Mardell and *The Bechdel Cast* podcast with Caitlin Durante and Jamie Loftus cued up on my phone. I sat ready in the woods with my thoughts about power, privilege, and experience once more.