

Diversity Statement

Christina F. Kolas, B.A., M.A.

I am a second generation Greek-American woman from a working class family. While my mother quit her job as a teacher to stay home to raise my two sisters and I, my father worked three part-time blue collar jobs to make sure his three daughters had access to the higher education he missed. Throughout the last seven years of my collegiate journey, I consciously strive to leverage my privileged position in a way that draws attention to the transformative powers of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in academia and its borders beyond.

As a Greek-American female scholar, I embody an underrepresented category in academia where I am forced to choose between ominous labels of “Other,” “Not Listed,” or “White.” As a European female, I have struggled to find ways to honor my family’s heritage and deep roots while championing for other individuals whose identities are deemed as being outsiders on the periphery of academia’s racial separatism. Social activist and feminist bell hooks has made a lasting impression on my personal and academic discourse. Her passionate politics have influenced me, inspired me, and continuously teach me how I myself can confront and challenge white-centered education with a transdisciplinarity that is collaborative, connective, multi-ontological, boundary crossing, and devoted to combatting wicked problems. It is my avowed goal to equally contribute to this vision of mutuality where diversity, equity, and inclusion are not wishful thinking, but an active practice and cultural lifestyle of *belonging* by welcoming a critical embrace of difference in both theory and in practice¹. My personal and professional experiences have equipped me with the ability to implement programs and events in collegiate settings, teach literacy and literature in a way that decolonializes the canon, build community, and, most importantly, emphasize how to advocate for underrepresented groups.

bell hooks says, “I pay tribute to the past as a resource that can serve as a foundation for us to revision and renew our commitment to the present, to making a world where all people can live fully and well where they can *belong*.”² Her wise words have shown me how past trauma, both historical and personal, plays a role in shaping one’s identity in the present. When I was in the first grade, I was diagnosed with a stutter. After twenty years, I continue to find myself coping with such an underlying brain abnormality. Stuttering, as a fluency disorder, continues to be debated in relation to its classification as a “dis/ability.” Even though I have come far in slowly overcoming my stutter, I find myself searching for a means of equity and acceptance in multiple spaces. When I was fourteen years old, I was also in an accident that resulted in the partial loss of my right pinkie finger. Such experiences with mental and physical disabilities, and later consequences of anxiety and depression, have shaped how I approach my pedagogy to be one of unassuming forgiveness, acceptance, and an openness to emerging knowledge. This is why my approach to engagement in class is to take an asset view of students, not a deficit. We can never tell what students are going through from the outside looking in. It has taken years for me to recover from my vulnerabilities and build the confidence I have today as a Greek-American female scholar. This is why I foster a community of care and love in my teaching. I genuinely believe that gender, race, and identity play a huge role in academia. As an instructor who identifies as a partially disabled non-white cisgender heterosexual woman, I acknowledge

¹ Zidani, Sulafa. “Whose Pedagogy Is It Anyway? Decolonizing the Syllabus through a Critical Embrace of Difference.” *Media, Culture & Society*, 2020. WorldCat.org.

² hooks, bell. *Belonging: A Culture of Place*. Routledge, 2009.

that this is not the only option for identity. I am committed to being mindful of gender disparities and stereotyping in my work. All identities are welcome in my class. I aim to foster such openness by inviting feminist, queer, dis/abled, and race-based theoretical perspectives to counter single stories.

As an educator, I have taught in a wide variety of secondary scholastic cultures like general education, special education, advanced placement, honors coursework, and adult education. As an Instructional Student Assistant Tutor for CSU Fullerton, I gained practical knowledge in equitable and accessible tutoring methodologies by working as an embedded tutor in an English Language Learners (ELL) preparatory course, as well as working closely with students from Disability Support Services (DSS). I am deeply committed to my allyship and fostering an inclusive academic environment where sexual, gender, dis/abled, and racially minoritized communities feel they belong.

Not only do I have experience in working with undergraduates, but also graduate students. My appointment as a Graduate Writing Consultant for CSU Fullerton's Academic Affairs granted me the opportunity to work with the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program to assist graduate students with their writing and research techniques by embracing the transdisciplinarity of a university. Furthermore, as the 2021-2022 Vice President of the Graduate Student Council at Claremont Graduate University, I was humbly afforded the opportunity to further educate myself as to how I can defend the welfare of a higher educational student body by embedding DEI into the fabric of a student-centered organization. An integral part of being a faculty member expands beyond the scope of the classroom walls by actively fostering inclusion and equity in external areas of life. I have championed for and partaken in policy passion projects that represent all, not just the few. For example, I was a Constitutional Consultant for the Graduate Student Council where I pledged a year-long commitment to ratifying the literature and rhetoric of the student constitution to be non-hierarchical and more in line with DEI. I have collaboratively served on committees for Student Affairs, Student Grievances, Student Elections, Academic Integrity, Post-Coursework Success, and Student Commencement that create visionary platforms for engaging in national dialogue at the institutional level. As a scholar, leader, and educator, I attend annual conferences like the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity in American Higher Education (NCORE) to bring back further knowledge on DEI to my institution for future initiatives. I have served as a Peer Mentor for Claremont Graduate University's IGNITE Mentorship Program through the Student, Life, Diversity and Leadership Office to aid in supporting the successful transition of first-year students of historically marginalized communities into the graduate school experience. I also have completed The College Teaching Certificate through Claremont Graduate University's Preparing Future Faculty program to continue my formal training and self-awareness regarding ethical pedagogy and equity-minded positioning in and outside of the classroom.

As an early modern researcher, I am a participating member of the Modern Language Association, Shakespeare Association of America, Renaissance Society of America, Society for Renaissance Studies, The Milton Society of America, The Malone Society, and the Renaissance Conference of Southern California to continue my commitment of keeping abridge of the types of DEI conversations existent in my field. I have presented papers at major conferences like BritGrad, the Pacific Ancient and Modern Language Association, the Renaissance Conference of Southern California, and the Popular Culture Association. Similar to how I approach learning facilitation, I approach Shakespeare (in addition to Milton, and Spenser, and Marlowe) with a means of intersectionality. I find new ways to reinvent the early modern canon by applying a

lens of feminine psychology. By taking a feminine psychological approach, I am directly combatting the methodological blindness in my field and introducing new paradigms of viewing archaic and white male-centered canonical literature.

Many question why my research specifically centers around William Shakespeare. Shakespeare's works illicit themes about race, feminism, and power structures that continuously lurk through our nation today with a powerful means of self-awareness. His plots, characterization, and nuanced subject matter shed light on the present condition, while simultaneously expanding and reclaiming the canon in the twenty-first century. His works serve as another resource and guide to understanding the havoc that wrong beliefs, assumptions, and oppression can cause a society. I juxtapose Shakespeare's works with diverse scholarship that addresses similar concerns and themes to prompt a natural and honest discussion. For example, if I were to teach an early modern canonical text like Milton's *Paradise Lost*, I would also assign Daniel Shore's recently published article "Was Milton White?"³ to probe at how the early modern canon draws links to twenty-first century discussions of white supremacy, racism, and privilege. Even though the early modern canon is infiltrated with white male authors, I aim to draw attention to the few female authors of the period like assigning selections from Aemilia Lanyer's poetry volume *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* in conjunction with Patricia Demers' article "Early Modern Women's Words With Power: Absence and Presence."⁴ These readings can naturally prompt discussions about a lack of female and person of color authorship in the early modern community of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Thus, assigning scholarship from scholars of color and diverse backgrounds further enriches the awareness of a multitude of voices and prejudices based on race, class, and gender. As an early modern scholar and "a humanist revolutionary educator,"⁵ I aim to craft my syllabus with an ethical and future-focused empowerment model of education. By moving away from canonical knowledge, compliance thinking, and the competition-based dominance model of instruction, I invite my students to share authority in the classroom by focusing on knowledge creation and meaningful application. My experience as a Canvas Course Builder for Claremont Graduate University has allowed me to think more deeply about my teaching and course design strategies to be in line with Universal Design for Learning (UDL). My curriculum is equitably and organizationally designed for those in the margins. Rather than treating students as mere vessels, I aim to create a student-focused presence by having flexible and workable deadlines, giving students multiple ways to engage and participate synchronously and/or asynchronously, adopting low stakes grading where emphasis is placed on long-term improvement over knowledge capture, and most importantly, giving students agency over their paper topics to further my commitment to their own self-discovery.

If there is anything I have learned from working with such a diverse student and faculty population it is that everyone has a story that is uniquely their own. My life's work has been centered on understanding the microaggressive history of our nation as one of isolation and striving to dismantle such divisive narratives by making the classroom a place of reciprocity; a place of reciprocal listening, healing, loving, and honoring where every individual feels a sense of belonging – I know too well what it feels like to yearn to belong. As a Greek-American woman finding and fighting her way in academia, I will end this statement in the same way bell hooks ended her book: "I belong here"⁶ and I wholeheartedly want my students to feel the same.

³ Shore, Daniel. "Was Milton White?" *Milton Studies*, vol. 62, no. 2, Penn State University Press, 2020, pp. 252–65, doi:[10.5325/miltonstudies.62.2.0252](https://doi.org/10.5325/miltonstudies.62.2.0252). JSTOR.

⁴ Demers, Patricia. "Early Modern Women's Words With Power: Absence and Presence." *Semeia*, no. 89, 2002. WorldCat.org.

⁵ Freire, Paulo, et al. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. 50th anniversary edition., Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. WorldCat.org

⁶ hooks, bell. *Belonging: A Culture of Place*. Routledge, 2009.