

# DIVERSITY STATEMENT

Growing up in the Deep South, I witnessed first-hand the toll intolerance takes on a society: as a child, I swam in pools that still were “whites only” (with no signs, but the stricture was just as clear), and as a teenager I grieved alone when my grandfather died, because all the black men I had grown up with while at his side didn’t feel comfortable coming to the white funeral home. I grew up benefiting from the cultures of the South having long been porous but their societies being not only fenced but stratified. As much as I would like it all to be different now, it’s not. My goal is to do what I can as a researcher, teacher, and member of my community to make things a bit better here and a bit better there, in the hopes that the bits are a part of that long arc that bends toward justice.

In my past research I have written on African American literature and folklore with the goal of making clear the sophistication behind forms that others have mistaken for simple or inconsequential. One aspect of my current research focuses on online legends and fake news, which are often sites, and acts, that prey on individual fears that can then be collectively harnessed and aimed at inappropriate objects, creating an environment in which it is not only acceptable but forward-thinking to take children from their families and lock them up. (And, if you think online legends and rumors are difficult to accept, you should try doing field research in communities where those narratives circulate.) One possible collaboration moving forward is with Brandeis Marshall who has a robust collection of tweets from Black Twitter: we are interested in seeing if we can take recent advances in sarcasm detection to see if they can reveal uses of African American ways of speaking, and now of tweeting, sometimes known as signifying.

The university where I have taught for some time now has the proud legacy of being one of the first in a deeply Southern state to desegregate and to do so peacefully. Our student population averages about one-third African American, with a small but steady stream of students from Vietnamese and, increasingly, Latin American communities. The joy of being a folklorist is encouraging students to base their projects on things they know from their own communities, however they wish to define it – and it is important to remember that some students, especially those exploring their identities for the first time without close familial supervision, do not necessarily identify in ethnic terms but in other alternate terms that can be just as energizing if we allow them space to do so but also the necessary structure to do so productively. So, yes, I have been there at the birth of projects focused on treasure legends in an all-black town, a study of La Llorona sightings on Youtube, or an examination of cucking on 4chan.

In some cases these students are first-generation, and in others they are from school systems that strain to keep buildings from collapsing, and so one of the things I have learned is important is to assess where students are in order to make adjustments to get them where they need to be in order to do their best work possible. Sometimes this means simply listening, which is a skill I first really learned while doing fieldwork among urban Appalachians in Cincinnati, Ohio and African Americans in southern Indiana. Sometimes listening is the best action we can take.

But addressing students needs is but one task of many at a university, and adjusting curricula to reflect student needs and interests on a departmental committee as well as participating in the oversight of research focused on minority populations as part of the Institutional Review Board are the kinds of activities that begin to address larger, institutional biases and encourage an institution to understand the necessity for highlighting diversity at a variety of levels. The same is true for groups and committees in the scholarly and scientific societies we populate: when tasked with forming a committee, I always sought out a diverse group with the hopes of finding voices that would be critical of everything that we forgot or overlooked or assumed. (The same goes for declining invitations when I felt like a committee already had enough people who were like me: sure I'm aware of the issues, but I don't live the issues the way others do and they need to be there with that experience and not me with my awareness.)

Finally, we not only work in this world but we also live in it. As a member of a family with readily apparent mixed ethnicities, I feel I have a personal responsibility to do what I can to open the eyes of ordinary people who need to understand that things they take for granted or things of which they are afraid are often based on events that never happened or ideas that do not hold up to closer examination. Part of that commitment is a steady stream of workshops or talks or whatever else is called for at area festivals, schools, libraries, and organizations. I have talked about Creole narrative traditions at the Zydeco Festival in Plaisance and about networked creativity to the Jaycees in Eunice. This is not always easy, given some of the things that happen, but it's the only way I know that at least doesn't contribute to making things worse and maybe, just maybe, makes things better.