

Personal History Statement of Max Klein

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(Uncut version at <http://notconfusing.com/personal-statement-in-full/>)

It was during a protest on the steps of Sproul hall that I first awoke to my internalized racism. After a few rebel-rousing speeches a black woman came to the stage and started delivering activist poetry. The poem had themes of being a strong, earthy, celestial woman and was sung with a jazz-swing. I grew bored and criticised the performance. And then I received a moment of self-awareness wherein I saw that I was dismissing the content because of the delivery. I remember feeling compelled to physically run away from the event, but unsuccessfully because I was trying to run from myself. I had been brought up to think of myself as not racist, and yet incontrovertibly I had just been racist.

After the paradigm-shattering realization of how we can hide prejudices from ourselves, subsequent biases came to light more rapidly. My own misogyny became very real upon my reading of favourite academic Joseph Reagle's *Free as in Sexist* deconstruction of sexism in Open Culture. (Of course it took a man to show me that.) I lost my religious dogma at the holocaust memorials in Berlin and Auschwitz, when I saw that accepting unquestioned messages were dangerous – including the ones from my *Jewish family*. Only last month the perusal of a *blog of a woman* I met at a wedding introduced me to the 'fat stigma' I had been harbouring. These continuous epiphanies fuel my wonder at just how many unidentified stigmas I'm still holding?

The feeling I get from a solid attack on my belief-system is so strangely powerful that chasing after it has become the driving force in my life. In fact it is precisely what my proposed research agenda is about. It started from some observational research I hacked together and *posted on my blog* in 2013 on the proportion of female biographies across all Wikipedia languages. They ranged from 8.83% - Slovenian Wikipedia, to 19.97% - Serbian Wikipedia, compared to English Wikipedia at 14.21%. There was a sinking feeling to see these paltry numbers, but also one of optimism to have performed a quantification that could aid the correction of them. These feeling informed my plan to make an algorithmic social-bias detector to run on crowdsourced databases.

Through this detector I am trying to arm underserved academics with data. The aim is to provide a series of inequality indexes like the United Nations Gender Inequality Index. The *prototype* I've already made makes the available inequality data richer because it provides a new source from the Open Data landscape compared to opaque surveys. This will be valuable for academics currently researching inequality, as well as make it much easier for other researchers to include inequality as a dimension in their projects.

The second half of my continuing research, the search for unidentified biases, will address the *other individuals* of the “women, racial minorities, and individuals from other groups that have been historically underrepresented in higher education”. Let's smash a binary. To be underrepresented in higher education is not a binary relationship. A person has many facets, and each facts has a different representation in higher education. As a nod to the work done by those coming from underrepresented backgrounds, let's acknowledge a spectrum of underrepresentedness.

As my project attempts to put it's finger on many more social biases I hope everybody will come to see a part of themselves that is underrepresented. That will be powerful, I claim, because once all people see themselves on that spectrum of underrepresentedness, it is easier to see the validity challenges of groups like women and racial minorities, since they are not in a different category of challenges but rather of the same type of challenge only of a different intensity. Essentially, viewing yourself as a minority to any degree highlights the importance of good allyship society-wide.

When I insert myself into the spectrum of underrepresentedness the main challenge that comes to the surface is the lack of formal education in my immigrant family. Going over my transcript to submit in this application, [the arching narrative it told](#) obviated the difficulties of having no parents that had been to college before me.

At first after high school I didn't go to college at all: I wasn't suggested or pressured to, I was simply left to my own devices. It took years until the social stigma (and here's another one) of having bad grades and perceived low education frustrated me. I then began college with a man-on-fire attitude. Yet as the extrinsic motivations of academic excellence for its own sake waned I slipped into a depression. This was my educational access challenge because my family could not advise me on how to view University as a set-up for a career. I recall at that time of difficulty how my friends could phone their degree-holding family members, and received a boost over the shaky potholes so that they never amassed into a derelict street. I see this difference as a class gap; when you imagine the family as an organism – like how an idea is an organism in memetics – one can see that my family was less fit evolutionarily in higher education.

Still, I overcame the challenge of competing in elitist institutions by redirecting my energy in to real world endeavours, which is where my Wikipedia and Open Source volunteerism stem from – they required no authoritarian corroboration. Now I've used those alternative career-building channels to fully find my niche, and have preplanned for inevitable academic depression by [viewing the PhD as an Open Source "project"](#).

The journey to finding my niche is the same one in which I became a leader in the Free Culture Movement. After college I founded Sudo Room “hackerspace and creative community” along with 23 other Oakland hacktivists. There we [taught](#) and [learned](#) mathematics and technology completely free of institutions for no money and for no ulterior motive. It was precisely because it was free as in speech and beer that we had community members, including children and their school teachers, turning up for our “Today We Learned” sessions.

It was at Sudo Room I encountered the radicals that turned me on to start practicing my allyship seriously. Lapped up all the geek-feminism wiki, I donated to, and took as much training as Ada Initiative would allow a cis male to participate in. Now I refuse be on all male panels, and admonish sexist remarks online and in person with best practices. It was a further humbling realization, to understand that there's no special reward for doing the minimum things to not be sexist. The uncomfortable epiphany cemented my dedication to this sort of DIY social uplift, and meant my being treasurer, the one person backstopping financially responsibility for a not-yet 501c3 nonprofit. Being so serious about making an equitable society I laid down my own bankruptcy.

Two years of pursuing career hackerdom has taught me a lot, but in some areas I've hit a wall which I want graduate study address. Technologically-supported alternative education pathways are championed as a option for those coming from less privileged backgrounds to flourish, but I maintain that is still the exception. The theory breaks down with factors like closed access papers, and being propelled by serious, high quality collaborators. So as much as I might disagree with the concept in the abstract – because of it's bias against women and racial minorities, etc. – I do want and need some thing from the University. This reluctant acceptance is what has caused me to focus my interest in computational social science research directly on unequal representation on the web and by proxy in society. There is no need for me to *translate* my work and history into how it will aid representation in institution because my very work and history is *about* unequal representation in institutions.