

## Matthew Aaron Hernandez – Commitment to Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion

Through the culmination of my experiences in the hospitality industry, and as a student, teacher, and scholar, I have come to recognize the importance of creating an atmosphere that fosters empathy and change. In my research and pedagogy, I do my best to bring my personal and professional experiences to bear on my work in order to create areas of radical inclusion and foster educational spaces of understanding. My scholarship seeks to model how we can use literature to communicate across difference, find solidarity, and directly confront the overlapping systems of oppression still at work in our society, while continuing to recognize and value the distinct positionalities each person brings into the classroom or discussion.

I, like many people, have a complicated relationship with my cultural heritage. Even having grown up in the diverse neighborhoods of Watts and Long Beach in Los Angeles County, my Cuban and Mexican identity has not always been something I have fully identified with. However, identity is a complex and evolving concept, ever in flux, just as we as human beings are. I preface the remainder of this statement in this way to foreground the large personal and career shifts I have undergone in my life.

My maternal grandparents emigrated in their teens from Mexico to Los Angeles, where both my mother and I grew up. My father was a Cuban exile whose family initially helped Castro rise to power and later opposed him both politically and in the Bay of Pigs. Despite this history, there was an ever-present insistence in my childhood on being “American,” which took shape predominately in adhering strictly to the ideals of the Catholic Church and only speaking English both in and out of the house. This left me, like many, wondering where I fit into society – an uncertainty that led me to see only where I did not belong rather than where I did. The lack of connection to the first language of my family and the slow disappearance of cultural traditions, left me feeling unable to connect with other Latine peoples. However, while my own conceptions of belonging were in flux, I came to understand that this was not true for everyone I encountered.

After completing my associates degree, I shifted course away from academia to better support myself and my family financially. I moved instead into the hospitality industry, ultimately managing several high profile bars and restaurants during my tenure. Though successful, to me the work was unfulfilling, and after a time I decided to step away with plans of finishing my bachelor’s degree and continuing on to the professoriate. It was however, while running a bar for a friend, that an incident took place that still, unfortunately, lives in my head rent free.

During a busy event for the outdoor bar, I left my post inside to help the other bar staff. Seeing the manager for that location washing dishes, I jumped in to help. Upon finishing the washing, and getting the bartenders caught up, he turned to me with a smile and said simply, “I bet if my last name ended in D-E-Z I could wash dishes that fast too,” at which point he walked away chuckling to himself. I regret doing nothing, saying nothing, in that moment. I regret still carrying that small event with me while so many others have blurred into the gray of long ago memories. But I am a firm believer that the most important step is always the next one.

Fortunately, throughout my time in hospitality, I continued to work with summer programs in the Pala Rey, Pajaro Valley and Watsonville communities, where I taught reading and literature to children ages six to fifteen. It was during my time there that I first developed the dream of working in academia. However, it was the struggle to find books that represented the predominantly Indigenous, immigrant, and first-generation children in the program, which ultimately directed my research toward narratives that honestly represent their lived experiences.

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And while my path to the professorate was not a direct one, “dreams don’t have timelines, or deadlines, and they ain’t always in straight lines.”<sup>[1]</sup> Instead, it is because, echoing in my mind, I can still hear that manager’s words, and many others like them directed at me and the children I taught, that I have committed to ensuring my classroom and pedagogy create an antithetical experience from the one I’ve described. I want every student, every person, I encounter to feel that they are fully seen and respected. In my courses, this takes shape in the narratives I select, the ways I encourage my classes to engage with them and each other, and my emphasis on accessible modes of education.

My current research is centered on the adaptation of the bildungsroman form, in which the protagonist comes of age and reintegrates into society, by authors from diverse, marginalized, and systemically oppressed groups, who have a disparate vision of what *coming of age* looks like. In my work I confront the historically white eurocentrism of the genre, seeking instead to recognize the liminal space of adolescence as an area of anti-conformity and redefinition. In this same way, I encourage my students to question dominant narratives of maturation, and to set these stories against their own lived experiences and those of people in vastly different spaces than their own. It has thus become a cornerstone of my pedagogy, as well as my life, to enter spaces with consideration, care, and genuine curiosity.

With this mindset, I ask that students do their best to recognize the position from which they are viewing the class materials, an exercise that often involves recognizing and acknowledging the privileges they may possess. I believe that this fosters a unique and liberatory classroom space, one that champions open discussions of the texts and shifts the dynamic to one that deeply values their input not just as students, but as people. My hopes are, through teaching, service, and scholarship, to create spaces of inclusion, promote empathy, and enact social change.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Reynolds, Jason. *For Everyone*. Atheneum, 2018.