

ALSO SISTERS INTERSECTIONAL SIGNATURE INITIATIVE
Building a cinematic narrative through an intersectional lens

FINAL REPORT SPRING 2024
Transformative Intersectional Collective initiative
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SONIA ALBERT-SOBRINO, MFA

Assistant Professor
Film & Media Arts Department
University of Utah
sonia.albert@utah.edu

MIRIAM ALBERT-SOBRINO, MFA

Assistant Professor
Film & Media Arts Department
University of Utah
miriam.albert@utah.edu

The Genesis of the **ALSO SISTERS** Initiative

Before professionally entering the world of film production as filmmakers, we spent a great deal of our time providing professional care to patients who were often thrown, unwillingly, into a space of not knowing what came next—waiting for a test result, a diagnosis or a treatment that would prove effective against some specific illness. As nurses, the caring experience, while extremely taxing, was incredibly rewarding, so much, that there's no doubt that our experiences as professional caretakers have an unquestionable impact on our research, particularly on the narratives we craft.

That said, our film work does not literally reflect from our experiences caring for those in need or sick, put differently, we do not frame our stories within a hospital setting or around

sickness. We do, however, deliberately place our characters within transformative spaces: thresholds and/or transitional states where the character's goal is frequently to embrace the therapeutic qualities of that “waiting room,” of that in-between state where borders are blurred, somewhat dream-like and/or often magical or horrific.

We repeatedly find our work resorting to horror genres or revisionist horror narratives to best encapsulate the emotional status of our characters, humans trapped in the time between the “what was” and the “next.”

As we continue to explore and implement our research, we realize that our experience as female filmmakers within a male-driven industry further impacts the stories we seek to share with our audiences. In this light, we have expanded the focus of our films to producing work with a feminist lens and one that challenges the media representation of women in film.

“Building a Cinematic Narrative Through an Intersectional Lens.”

Inspired by the invitation to join the *Transformative Intersectional Collective initiative at the University of Utah*, we set ourselves to producing our second feature-length project using an intersectional lens as our primary guiding methodology. In essence, rather than solely analyzing intersectional storytelling in films, we actively engaged in research that not only examined but also implemented intersectional perspectives in the actual practice of moviemaking.

This initiative has two major components:

- (1) A public scholarly-oriented element where colleagues, film professionals, students, and the Salt Lake Community at large learn about the importance of intersectional inquiry in filmmaking through two idea exchange experiences hosted in January of 2024. This component took shape in the form of two idea exchange events.
 - a. *Cooper, Melody. “Intersectionality: An Approach to Building Authenticity and Representation in Film.” Master class, Film and Media Arts Department, University of Utah, SLC, Utah, USA. 19 January 2024.*
 - b. *ALSO Sisters. “The Stairwell: Otherworldly Narratives.” Partial Screenplay Reading, Film and Media Arts Department, University of Utah, SLC, Utah, USA. 22 January 2024.*
- (2) An ongoing project at the time of this report's submission that consists of **the production of a feature length film** and a **comprehensive roadmap for intersectionally conscious**

filmmaking. This more ambitious component not only aims to culminate in a professional ready for distribution film, but also equip interested filmmakers with the tools and strategies needed to create cinematic narratives that go beyond stereotypes, challenge biases, and reflect the diverse richness of human experiences.

(1a)

INTERSECTIONALITY

An Approach to Building Authenticity and Representation in Film

On January 19th, 2024, Writer, Producer, and Director Melody Cooper delivered a thought-provoking and inspiring lecture on building authenticity and representation in film.

During her talk, Ms. Cooper:

- Addressed the concept of Intersectionality.
- Briefly explored good and poor examples of representation in Hollywood.
- Offered tools and strategies to develop stories and characters more effectively.

Some crucial overarching ideas worth mentioning from this idea exchange experience are¹:

a. Tools to Help with Story and Character Development

- Conduct extensive research and fact-checking throughout the entire process, even when it does not seem necessary.
- Take an acting class as a means to learn to step into a character's shoes.
- Immerse respectfully and humbly in a country or community, through books, friendships, travel, but most importantly, let the community members take the lead.

- Watch and listen with an open heart and mind.

b. Inclusive Methods of Applying Intersectionality

- Research the script.
- Carefully write the script (work with a co-writer if necessary).
- Use consultants.
- Get feedback on the script for accountability and improvements.
- Cast wisely.
- Employ a diverse crew.
- Involve the community from research through screenings.
- Provide interviews to BIPOC and women's press.
- Acknowledge and thank those who have contributed to the authenticity of your project and recognize their contributions.

A recording of her lecture can be accessed [here](#). Forty-two students attended this event.

¹ Taken and Modified from Cooper, Melody. "Intersectionality: An Approach to Building Authenticity and Representation in Film."

Master class, Film and Media Arts Department, University of Utah, SLC, Utah, USA. 19 January 2024.

(1b)

THE STAIRWELL

A Table Read Session for a Cosmic Film Otherworldly Narratives

The second idea exchange event for our initiative was held on January 22, 2024. This event included a partial table read from our upcoming feature-length screenplay, *THE STAIRWELL*.

Set in the early 1990s, this cosmic horror film follows the journey of two women—an African-American police officer and a white "runaway bride-attired" thief—who find themselves trapped in a stairwell and must work together to escape what gradually unveils as a dreadful space.

Experts who attended the event and provided feedback include:

- [Latoya Cameron](#), EDI expert, SLAC (Salt Lake Acting Company) Audience relationships and dramaturg.
- [Melody Cooper](#), Writer, Producer, Director, serving as a script consultant for *THE STAIRWELL*.
- [Hubbel Palmer](#), writer and Assistant Professor at the Film and Media Arts Department.
- [Whitney Palmer](#), acclaimed Salt Lake City actor.
- [Ava Kostia](#), also an acclaimed Salt Lake City actor.

This event was attended by 63 people.

(2)

THE STAIRWELL

A Feature Length Horror Film

As filmmakers and educators, the act of creating, in other words practicing our craft, is essential to our research program. While intersectional inquiry has long been an organic and integral part of our practice, being named an *Intersectional Signature Initiative* catalyzed our upcoming project *THE STAIRWELL*. Without this recognition, our progress would not have been as expedient or as impactful.

"How did TRIC helped THE STAIRWELL?"

- Engaging proactively in intersectional inquiry from the outset, during the ideation phase.
- Collaborating with intersectional experts, particularly during the writing.
- Amplifying the voices of underrepresented groups and critically examining the question, "Is this our story to tell?"
- Addressing personal connections to the material to enhance the authenticity and honesty of the narrative.

- Facilitating connections between experts and students to enhance the quality of education our students receive.
- Continuously questioning and exploring the nature of the story and character development.

We completed principal photography for *THE STAIRWELL* in April of 2024. In the process of making this film we undertook a number of actionable measures that were inspired by this initiative:

We made **changes to the story** even when it meant a significant revision. In an effort to bring a stronger connection to the material, we shifted the protagonist’s personal journey from that of a mother who loses her child to a daughter who fears the loss of her mother. This change was the result of our collaboration with Melody Cooper and our commitment to intersectional inquiry, which revealed that this new direction would result in a more honest and emotionally compelling story.

Actors were consistently engaged in character development, particularly concerning dialogue and action. At the start of each shooting day, actors were given the space and time to review the script pages and contribute ideas that better reflect the character’s journey. These sessions often resulted in actors suggesting new dialogue lines

or different approaches to the material, which we, as directors, closely reviewed and frequently implemented.

We prioritized diversity in our crew, intentionally hiring individuals from underrepresented groups who, despite their talents, have had fewer opportunities in our industry due to prevalent biases.

We designed an educational, community-based experience with a team that was not only diverse but also actively participated in creating a safe learning environment. This included educational opportunities also held in January 2023 (1a) (1b).

We plan to complement the film release and screenings with educational materials, as well as opportunities to facilitate dialogue and other outreach programs.

ROADMAP FOR INTERSECTIONALLY CONSCIOUS FILMMAKING

Making an independent feature-length film is, without a doubt, an onerous and ambitious endeavor that is not only physically taxing but also emotionally draining. That said, it is a rewarding experience in which cast, crew, and community come together and appreciate the diverse lived experiences each brings to the project. While the film is still in the completion phase with a significant journey ahead in post-

production, the process from here on is somewhat predictable and manageable.

Our goal, however, to develop a blueprint for inclusive filmmaking is both complex and ambitious, yet it is one we are determined to pursue over the coming year. In the meantime, we have listed below some critical questions that we believe every filmmaker must consider when approaching any project, especially in the context of diversity and inclusion.

Exploring Intersectionality: Essential Questions for Filmmakers

- **Do I really understand the concept of intersectionality?**
 - *What makes my characters intersectional?*
- **What is my personal connection to the material?**
 - *Did this happen to me?*
 - *Am I actively involved?*
 - *Is this my story to tell?*
 - *Are there others out there who have a greater right to tell this story than I do?*
 - *Am I financially benefiting from someone else's story or heritage?*
- **Have I conducted thorough research?**
 - *Even if it does not seem required, have I researched it?*
 - *Have I consulted with advisors/experts from that culture or group?*
 - *Have I fact-checked my findings?*
 - *Are my sources reliable?*
 - *Should my sources be included in the writing process?*
 - *Is this an innovative story, or have others tried to tell this story before but lacked support?*
 - *Are there previous works addressing this topic, and if so, are they poor or good examples?*
 - *Have I openly and honestly reached out to the community/group/individuals I am addressing in my film?*
 - *Is my depiction positive, negative, or clichéd?*
 - *Am I ethically compensating or sharing with the communities whose stories I am telling?*
 - *Are there any profit-sharing arrangements in place?*
- **Have I created/fostered an inclusive casting and crew hiring process?**
 - *Am I providing equal opportunities for underrepresented voices in key creative roles?*
- **Have I tested my project before it's tangible?**
 - *Am I representing my characters authentically?*
 - *Have I openly shared it with the community and/or experts?*
 - *Have I created a space for open and honest criticism?*
 - *Have I taken the feedback into account and implemented it?*
 - *Have I deeply considered whether this story is not mine to tell?*
 - *Have I pivoted and involved those who should have originally been part of this project?*
 - *Have I planned any educational or outreach components to accompany my project to facilitate a deeper understanding of the subject matter?*
 - *Am I producing any educational material to accompany the film?*
 - *What are the anticipated social impacts of the narrative I am telling?*
 - *Am I perpetuating stereotypes or misinforming?*
 - *Am I really ready to make changes even if it means significant revisions?*

For more documentation on THE STAIRWELL project please, review the following links.

[The Also Sisters Intersectional Initiative Site](#) (password: TRIC)

Rosen, Peter. Posted - March 11. "First the Coen Brothers, Then the Wachowski Sisters ... Now the Also Sisters." *KSL.Com*, KSL/NBC, 11 Mar. 2024, www.ksl.com/article/50945882.