

“Updating the Narrative: Critical Practice through Gender and Sexuality Studies”
Delivered at the WGSS Graduation Luncheon, May 4, 2017
Trevor Boffone, Ph.D.

First of all, I'd like to thank the faculty of WGSS and the Friends of Women's Studies for inviting me to speak today. I'd also like to congratulate all of the students! It feels like just yesterday that I was sitting in the audience about to receive my graduate certificate while Dr. Rachel Afi Quinn delivered her speech on magic. So let me just tell you, this is a bit surreal.

In my keynote today, I will talk about how my training in gender and sexuality studies influenced my advocacy and research in Latin@ theatre. Put simply, WGSS is a game changer. Like many of the people sitting in this room, WGSS changed my life's trajectory.

As I was finishing my PhD in Latin@ literature and theatre I began to think about how I might bridge my research with my advocacy for theatre-makers of color and women theatre artists. This work of updating the narrative is as important now as it ever was. Let me give you a few stats. For this year's Tony Award nominations—the highest honor in the American Theatre—59 men were nominated in comparison to 33 women. In total, 80 of the nominees were white. Only 2 were Latino. Only 2 out of the 20 musical acting nominees were people of color. 11 of the 20 cast/creative categories were entirely filled with only white nominees. Shortly after the nominations came out, a friend of mine tweeted, “A lack of nominations is a direct result of a lack of opportunities.” I couldn't agree more. And, we see these numbers locally, too. In the Alley Theatre's recently announced 2017-2018 season, 9 out of 11 plays are written by men, 10 out of 11 are written by white people. Only 2 women will direct. Not to mention that the resident acting company—one of the few in the country—is comprised of 12 white actors out of 14 total... In Houston. To make it even more local, in the last twenty seasons, the UH theatre department has produced over 160 mainstage productions and only 2 of these have been written

by a Latin@ playwright. At a Hispanic Service Institution! These are the facts that my work is trying to push against and update.

So, how have I used my training in gender and sexuality studies as critical practice? How does my training allow me to push against the status quo? Among other things, after years of toying with the idea, in early 2016 I finally launched a digital humanities project called the 50 Playwrights Project, or 50PP for short. 50PP is dedicated to Latin@ theatre and specifically Latin@ playwrights, featuring interviews with playwrights and other pedagogical resources. To date, the project has featured interviews with 54 writers in addition to offering valuable resources such as a list of Latin@ theatre companies and a list of over 350 playwrights with links to their personal websites for university students and professors as well as theatre makers.

Branching off from the more scholarly side of 50PP, in March 2017 I released the Top Unproduced Latin@ Plays List. From a national call for plays, we received 70 submissions that the committee narrowed down to a list of the top 8 Latin@ plays that theatres should be producing. This advocacy work has seen playwrights connecting with major regional theatres such as the Alley that have historically denied access to Latin@ writers, especially Latina and queer Latinx artists. My reasons for founding this project were simple. This was a resource that I wish I had had when I was in graduate school and I wanted to update the narrative of the American Theatre to include more Latin@, LGBTQ, and women's voices.

My training in gender and sexuality studies more than informs 50PP, it is the project's core methodology. And I urge you to incorporate these basic tenets in your life's work going forward.

First, in whatever your realm of work, **commit to gender and sexual parity**. As the stats I just read show, theatre is still overwhelmingly white and male—and the same dynamic skews

many fields. Even in places like Houston, the people on and off stage tend to not adequately represent our communities. For Latin@ writers, and especially LGBTQ Latin@ playwrights, the boundaries can be insurmountable at times. On 50PP 35 of the 54 interviews have been women. 22 of the 54 playwrights identify as LGBTQ. These numbers are in startling contrast to the writers who are being produced and the types of stories being told on stage.

Second, **prioritize equity, diversity, and inclusion**. My project has a feminist approach in that I am equally committed to equity, diversity, and inclusion. This easily could have been a roll-call of established playwrights, but the beauty of it is to feature a new writer who is still trying to get produced next to someone who has won a Pulitzer Prize. While people might visit the site for the big names, they stay and keep coming back to learn about new writers in their communities. I never turn people away and am always seeking out unknown names and writers with underrepresented identities such as Afro-Latin@ or Transgender artists. As you know, it is paramount to hear all voices. By learning about different voices, we unlock a lens of critique that allows us to challenge the old and imagine the new. The playwrights I work with are telling new and compelling stories, stories that offer new possibilities for imaging the future. Not only is inclusion necessary to address a lack of representation, but we must step outside of our identity markers to learn about different identities. This is how radical change happens: by listening to others' experiences in order to make change a viable reality.

Finally, **be an advocate**. 50PP is entrenched in digital advocacy, perhaps one of the most important parts of updating the narrative. By and large, whether theatre companies actually perform the work or not, they do already recognize the importance of staging works that are representative of the United States in 2017. I believe a key issue is the lack of accessible resources online. For instance, if a playwright doesn't have a Wikipedia page then, in the public

eye, they don't exist. In 2017, having a Wikipedia page is the bare minimum web presence writers should have. Yet, so few playwrights of color, LGBTQ, and women writers have this sort of digital presence. This is why I think the 50 Playwrights Project has found an audience and has attracted people from outside of the Latin@ theatre community. It is an accessible space that fills the need of a web presence. For some of the very emerging playwrights, the 50 Playwrights Project is one of the only things that appears in a Google search that speaks to their work as a professional playwright.

So, based on my own experiences, I leave you with these final words: **never stop learning, find your niche, and update the narrative.** When I finished undergrad, I thought I knew it all. I didn't. And the more I've learned, the more I've realized that there is always more to learn. Just when you think you've learned enough, had enough conversations, stepped out of your comfort zone, that's the time to **keep going.**

You've already taken the first steps. By learning about women's studies, feminist and queer theory, gender and sexuality you've prepared yourself to be the necessary change makers in whatever environment you move into next—the change makers that our world needs in order to accommodate the skills that so many of us have but historically have not been encouraged or allowed to use.

As you enter the workforce, you can address issues of visibility and representation. While demographic statistics are increasingly on the side of change, we can't take tolerance for granted. We must ourselves create the model for tolerance. Create a world where future generations of people of all genders, races, and identities can come of age in equitable, diverse, and inclusive communities. Let's not wait for someone else to do it for us. Let's update the narrative.