

**“Pursuing Our Magic”**  
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Greetings to all of you! As parents, family members and supporters of our students you are an important part of our growing Women’s, Gender & Sexuality Studies community. It is an honor to get to say a few words to send off our graduates, and congratulate and those completing certificates and minors in our WGSS. I stand up here as an example of our program’s recent growth—as new faculty committed to teaching University of Houston students a range of topics and to building a program that can meet the needs of the many different students on this campus.

I have just completed my third year at UH, where I have the pleasure of teaching feminist theory courses to both graduate and undergraduate students on this campus. Unlike other institutions where I have had the privilege of teaching or studying, the students I teach in UH classrooms are very often working a full-time job, as well as parenting—another type of full time job—or caring for aging parents, and so much more, all while being students. So I want to acknowledge this tremendous labor today, May 1<sup>st</sup>--May Day, or [International Workers’ Day](#). On this day that we are celebrating our students let us celebrate the labor of our community that make these academic achievements possible.

As we come to the end of another semester, you might also be asking yourselves: How will it all get done? At least for today and this moment, my best answer to this question is: “magic”.

“Magic” is something that comes up in my research and writing on Afro-Caribbean women’s identities--- in interviewing singer/songwriter Xiomara Fortuna, when explains to me aspects of her Afro-Dominican identity and experience that I can’t ever fully understand unless I believe in magic. And it comes up when I travel to West Africa to visit my family in Ghana and participate in rituals of mourning that only make sense when I allow myself to believe in magic.

“Magic” isn’t something I talk much about at a Research-1 institution but it is something I have come to accept as real. Here we teach a great deal about logic, fact, and data--but I want to leave some room for magic too, or, which is to say space for unexplainable shifts in reality.

“Magic” is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “the power of apparently influencing the course of events by using mysterious or supernatural forces”.

I’d say at this point in the semester, when we as professors are wondering what and if our students have learned something from all our efforts over the last 14 weeks, and honestly it does feel like magic—when and how ideas and concepts come together for each student in different ways. It is often quite mysterious and feels entirely beyond our power, yet we see that we have had tremendous influence on the course of events when we see you take your own magic out into the world.

So, the title of my talk today is drawn from the work of one of my favorite "black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poets” of all time. That would be Audre Lorde. Her life’s work tremendously influenced feminist thought in magical and radical ways. And I would if I could gift every one of you her collection *Sister Outsider* for your journey in the world. Here’s how she opens her 1985 essay, [“Poetry is not a Luxury”](#) that I think has much relevance on this day:

“The quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives. It is within this light that we form those ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realized.”

These words inform how I teach and how I have taught many of you. I attempt to help you shed light on your lives and circumstances. This type of consciousness-raising is feminist praxis.

You minors and certificate holders and new majors tell us, again and again “Taking your course has changed my whole perspective on my life and my relationships with others”. And I think that’s where the magic lies.

So I ask our honored guests this afternoon: Do you believe in magic? Seeing what you now see, knowing what you now know, what is the magic that you will take out into the world? What would it mean for you to pursue your own magic?

This semester, T.V. Reed’s essay, “The Poetical is the Political” had particular resonance with many of my graduate students—it reflected the meaningful possibility that art can be a place to express and articulate social movement ideas, attitudes, positions, and actions, and get these ideas out to wider communities. I hope that that you see the many ways that you can share your ideas and be creative with your new visions for the world.

Like so many before me, I believe we must see our creative work as feminist practice. I also believe that we must see our scholarship as creative work. And in that creativity there is magic. I am excited that we now have a group of students organizing an academic group and perhaps some creative work will happen there.

I see magic in the world when you are empowered by the materials we share with you that speak to and affirm your own lives and experiences in the world. I experience magic when you turn up months and years later to let me know how readings from courses in Women’s, Gender and Sexuality studies shaped your lives and the choices that you have made for yourself.

At the end of each semester I ask my students to share something they have learned—a sort of quality control check, I suppose. The thing is, you always surprise me with new things that you have learned because each semester you are a new group of students with new needs, new questions and new concerns.

Here are a few of the many things you have told me that you have taken away from our WGSS classes:

- 1) that you are not alone.
- 2) that you can educate others in your community.
- 3) that your ideas do matter.
- 4) that so many communities and individuals are still fighting for their lives.

You are not alone in how you identify yourself or how you see the world, or in your desire to build coalitions across difference, as Audre Lorde and others have taught us. These things are essential to changing the society we live in.

You have acquired skills with which to scrutinize your lives and go out into the world to be of help to those in your community. Particularly in light of the social movement taking place around police violence in Baltimore and throughout the country; and in light of the reproductive justice movement, particularly here in Texas; and the transgender justice movement nationally; and *all* of the intersecting battles against systems of power that repeatedly harm the most vulnerable.

I believe that we do this work in the academy because we want to have an impact; we want our work to matter; we find in WGSS a place that welcomes us—not despite our differences but because of them. We do women’s, gender & sexuality studies because we have hope.

Within the WGSS community, we aim to create a space for change, a space to help you gather the tools you need to create the world that you want to live in. I hope that in your education, with your newfound knowledge, and your future pursuits, there is magic.

And I hope that you will go off into the world able to answer your community when they ask you these questions that I hear so often:

“What is women’s, gender and sexuality studies?”

“What can you do with a women’s, gender & sexuality studies degree?”

Maybe the short answer to these questions is “magic”.