Before I had even started my research process, I was sure that I wanted to write a play that centered the stories of transgender and nonbinary people because I had never felt like I was represented in theatre as a nonbinary person. My initial idea was to make an activist theatre piece criticizing the current gender inclusive housing policy that exists at UNLV, but I was lost on how to move forward with that idea. I set up a meeting with Kate Wintrol who guided me to look into different forms of activist theatre, theories regarding gender and sexuality, and previous plays featuring transgender and nonbinary people in order to find my inspiration. I was having a very difficult time particularly with finding plays featuring transgender people because there simply was not a lot of sources I could find through the library’s database on this particular issue, so I resorted to doing a quick Google search online to give me an understanding of the most recent examples of transgender and nonbinary representation; I soon realized that this was a fairly new phenomenon in the theatre world. There was an article which celebrated the fact that there were a couple shows on Broadway in 2018 featuring nonbinary characters portrayed by actual transgender actors, including the famous actor Kate Bornstein.

I figured there had to have been more details on the earlier developments of transgender representation on stage, and so I thought I might find some of my answers to this question by reading up a bit on the history of transgender people. Believe it or not, there was a book entitled Transgender History by Susan Stryker, and I discovered that Kate Bornstein used to have a show in the 1990s which toured all over the United States talking about the topics of gender. The very same person who had pioneered modern-day representation of transgender people in the United States was the very same person continuing to do the work in mainstream theatre in the present day. I started to get the impression that transgender representation really needed to be diversified, and a play like mine could really add something of value to the world of theatre.

To look into the various ways I could incorporate characters who were not white, affluent, and neurotypical, I found a textbook on feminist theory which discussed theories on gender, race, sexuality, and ability, and I learned how different scholars perceived issues of inequality and misrepresentation. I wanted to make sure I incorporated some of their background knowledge into the piece, and yet, I was not sure how to proceed with how I wanted to write the play exactly, so per Kate Wintrol’s advice, I decided to read up on different forms of activist theatre. I remember in my Theatre History II class, I was randomly assigned to write a brief autobiography of Augusto Boal, the founder of the fundamental form of activist theatre known as Theatre of the Oppressed, and I was interested in looking for more primary sources regarding his practice, so I checked out a few books of Boal’s, and I learned about his ideas of making the the audience active participants of the performance in order for them to critically think about the themes of a theatrical performance. It was invaluable receiving that knowledge directly from the source and understanding his original intentions for Theatre of the Oppressed, but I wanted to see how artists today used Boal’s ideas.
Priscilla Finley encouraged me to search for “applied theatre” in the database, and I found a book on Applied Theatre which emphasized the importance of a community’s involvement in a theatre performance. With that, I knew it was important for me to make my theatre performance interactive. My faculty advisor also urged me to look into verbatim theatre because I had seen shows like The Laramie Project, The Vagina Monologues, and Twilight: Los Angeles 1992, which inspired me for discussing real issues by using people’s word-for-word accounts. Low and behold, Verbatim Theatre was a book, and by the time I had finished reading it, I was convinced that incorporating people’s actual words would be the best way to share an authentic story with an audience. Thus, I settled on interviewing UNLV queer and transgender students of color about their experiences with their identities, and I decided to make the show interactive by having the audience provide advice to the characters during the performance.