

A talk by Dr. Zheng Zhu, Assistant Professor, NYCCT Humanities Department

Review by David Lee

“Ending Stereotypes on the College Campus: An Unending Journey”

On September 26, 2019, the Humanities Department held its first Works in the Works event of the Fall 2019 semester. The presentation was by Zheng Zhu, Professor of Communication, on a topic most relevant to City Tech as a Hispanic serving institution with a 34% Latino student body. The topic was theater as a form of intervention. Specifically, a play called *Las Memorias* (translated as “In Memory”). The play, which was presented at a land-grant university in the Northwestern United States, consisted of Latino high school students delivering monologues about identity, politics, and prejudice. Dr. Zhu began with the question, what can be done to counter negative stereotypes, expectations and assumptions?

Dr. Zhu noted that negative cross-cultural interactions can have an ensuing negative effect on academic self-confidence. An artistic intervention that might positively influence how Latino students are perceived, and improve retention rates for Latino students, would be some of the hoped-for outcomes of this research. Zhu organized his analysis around three theoretical frameworks: threat theory (Stephan and Stephan, 2000), stereotype threat (Steele and Aronson, 1995), and stereotype malleability (Blair, 2002). Threat theory identifies different “threat mentalities,” including realistic threats, symbolic threats, intergroup anxiety, and negative stereotypes. Stereotype threat refers to someone confirming, by their own behaviors, a negative stereotype about their group. Professor Zhu describes the theory as “the struggle between ascribed and avowed identity” and he gave an example of an acquaintance who assumes, because he is Chinese, he teaches math. Blair’s work on malleability shows that, rather than responses being fixed and inescapable, automatic stereotypes and prejudice are influenced by personal motives, the focus of attention, and other factors.

Professor Zhu reported on a survey administered to 125 students who answered questions after watching a 27-minute video, excerpted from *Las Memorias*. He found that, although there were rich and insightful qualitative responses, there wasn’t necessarily strong evidence that the clip lowered prejudice. In conclusion, Zheng Zhu reiterated that, while stereotypes have an automatic quality, they can be neutralized, and so ended on a hopeful note. He closed with the claim that, in order to be effective, intercultural communication could not remain at a superficial level. A lively discussion followed.

