



Honoring Gülden Özcan

“All that you touch you change”

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ABSTRACT

SNAC+ (University of Lethbridge) Excellence in Equity Award Ceremony

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“ALL THAT YOU TOUCH YOU CHANGE”

SNAC+ Award for Excellence in Equity

Welcome to the inaugural awards ceremony for the SNAC+ Award for Excellence in Equity. Today we honour the work and life of Professor Gülden Özcan on Blackfoot Territory, home of the Niitsitapi past, present and future, and Métis Region 3. Before we begin, I would like to welcome Ninna Piiksi – Chief Bird, named after the Eagle. On campus, many of us know him as Mike Bruised Head. He will open the awards ceremony for us with a Blackfoot prayer so that we can begin in a good way and keep this space open to hear each other and be in each other's power with integrity and compassion, without judgement, and in whatever affective register we deliver our words.

Interval: Opening Prayer (Mike Bruised Head)

I could list Gülden's many professional accomplishments, her activism and her work, but we have a long list of speakers who will talk to you about all of those later today. Instead, I want to talk to you about Gülden as a person, a friend, a support system, and I want to talk to you about her unwavering capacity for leadership. But, first I will tell you a brief story about how the award for excellence in equity came about and what it means to me as a co-founding member of the SNAC+ collective. But to do so, in the spirit of Gülden's work, I am going to have to reveal some hard truths that some people might not want to hear.

Science fiction writer and Afrofuturist, Octavia Butler, wrote that:

All that you touch
You change
All that you change
Changes you
The only lasting truth is change
god is change.

When I first arrived here in 2015, there was no equity office or officer and no effective means of redress for abuses of power, discrimination or violence on campus. There was no sexual violence policy, there no was functioning mechanism through which anyone could report sexual violence, and those who were abused were often shunted into mediation and largely silenced; our faculty association's Gender, Equity and Diversity Committee often seemed to work more as an anti-equity group than the other way around, and our Faculty Association, ULFA, was just emerging as a union from under oppressive provincial legislation that was forced to change because of a set of Supreme Court of Canada rulings.

When I first arrived here, being an untenured Assistant professor on the tenure track felt like running a gauntlet to satisfy some kind of bizarre, ableist, gendered and racialized hazing ritual where despite my whiteness, I always had the intimation that I might not be quite white enough, maybe my eyes needed to be bluer, my hair lighter and my behavior more stereotypically feminine, meaning: silent. Yet, in other circles, I was too white. So, I began to ask some very difficult questions and I began to hear stories from faculty, students and staff in units across campus. I began to collect information on attrition rates, and I was part of the early work of ULFA's GEDC in collecting perceptions of inequity on campus, the results of which validated all of my own.

My work culture did indeed seem to be a place where lateral violence, and the negative gossip and slander of cliques ruled; where all the heteropatriarchal, racist, ableist, and gendered social scripts and expectations were fully in force. So, I began to collaborate with others who wanted to not only expose the discrimination, the pay inequity, the clique-based nepotism in awards, invitations to speak, and promotion, but also the deep inequities associated with rank and power at this institution, and do something about them.

My first piece of on campus activism came with supporting students in crafting some kind of sexual violence policy and demanding that this university fall in step with other institutions across the country who not only have equity officers, plural, but equity offices, plural, so that redress without retaliation and something resembling fairness might start to become part of this university's culture—even though change, in this place, at that time, did indeed seem like it might be the stuff of science fiction.

In 2016, a group of people from the university and broader communities who had experienced racist sexism, ableism, and other forms of discrimination came together for discussions at Professor Glenda Bonifacio's events around human rights week and on-campus organizing, special thanks to Olu, Saurya, Victor, and Gideon. Later Rabindra, Jacqueline, and Monique joined us and then Gülden came on board when she arrived as a new hire. Together we all founded the SNAC+ collective because we needed real equity to happen on campus. We now have a sexual violence policy and a mechanism through which to make complaints, they are not perfect; we now have Martha Mathurin Moe and Hernando Ortega as our director and project manager for Equity, Diversity and Inclusion and they are aware of how much work we still have to do. Our Faculty Association is slowly transforming into a union, undergrads, graduate students and faculty are starting to engage in what looks like real collective action against unfair labour practices, human rights violations, systemic, structural and interpersonal violence. We have something that looks like change, and those of us who have been fighting since we got here, have new hope that these are positive changes and that they are not lip service or the stuff of science fiction.

When Gülden arrived at the University of Lethbridge, the first three things she did were to join SNAC+ and become one of our founding members because her insight, experience and knowledge are invaluable to us; the second thing she did was set up a branch of Scholars at Risk to enable the University to sponsor and house scholars whose lives, liberty and well-being are threatened, and the third was to join the GEDC with ULFA, Beth and Andrea will speak to her work on that committee later. She then became an active member of ULFA more broadly, Dan will speak to that shortly.

The SNAC+ award is being presented to Gülden because as my friend and colleague Nisha Nath reminded us in her talk in 2020, equity is not for everyone. True equity work is work that must be done from the inside out, from the heart, not from the desire for power, accolades and gratitude. Those who fight for equity in white supremacist settler colonial societies know that they will not be winning any popularity contests, that their work will go largely unpaid and unnoticed (although this award represents an attempt to change the non-recognition of otherwise invisible labour on this campus), and that often each step forward will feel like one hundred or maybe a thousand steps back. They know that they will never settle for inclusion in a broken system or institution, and that the emotional labor will be significant.

Equity is not for careerists or egoists, because when it is done right, you might get fired for it while someone else swoops in, takes credit for all the hard work, gets promoted and depoliticizes everything—instead of land back, you'll get a land acknowledgement. It is not for virtue seekers because when equity work is done right, nobody is going to pat you on the back and thank you for asking them to think through how they are part of the problem. It is not for dabblers, because only rare people are willing to devote the time and energy to keep up with the sheer volume of legislative changes, court cases, scholarly work, and activist models and social movements. In short, it is not for individuals because no one person can do all this work by themselves. It is therefore actually quite antithetical to the individualistic, careerist cultures of North American Universities.

What it requires is humility, integrity, balance and a sense of justice. It requires the wisdom to know that anger and refusal (as in the work of Audra Simpson and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson), and resentment (or more accurately resentment, in the work of Sarah Hunt, Frantz Fanon and Glenn Sean Coulthard) are necessary and revolutionary sentiments, they can be fuel. It requires the wisdom to know that compromise and dialogue can only work in a room full of equals, otherwise dominant groups and individuals will demand to be made comfortable because they cannot hold space for the anger and grief of those who have been violated, abused and discriminated against by those that uphold a discriminatory status quo that those in our current positions of power still benefit from. It requires the wisdom to also know that too much anger and resentment can lead to reversals where one set of abuse and violence is replaced with another. It requires the wisdom to know that there is no one size fits all, that it is not possible to only focus on single issues because as Audrey Lorde so eloquently reminds us, we do not live single issue lives. Finally, it requires the wisdom to know that equity is not a contest. Nobody wins the oppression Olympics. Just because you may have experienced harm or not experienced harm, your experiences do not negate the experiences or realities of others. To be upset that someone may or may not fit into your bag of stereotypes, that someone has an experience where in your arrogance you have assumed that they have none, does not mean they owe you an apology; it means that you have some psychosocial and psychopolitical work to do.

Güliden recognizes this wisdom. She embodies it, and exemplifies it in her activist and scholarly work, her professional life, and in her personal interactions with others. Both a fighter and a lover, I could always see clearly her commitment to embodying the world that she wants to create. I texted her to tell her about this award and told her she's beloved on this campus, she replied: I haven't been here long enough for them to hate me yet. Our many conversations and debrief sessions about work over the years have shown me the fire that lives

inside Güliden Özcan. My nomination was not for 'niceness,' after all the etymology of that word reveals that it emerged France in the 12th Century and was taken from the Latin word meaning 'ignorant or unknowing', certainly not an accurate description of a brilliant activist, and scholar for social and political change.

I nominated Güliden because of her brilliance, her integrity, her balance, her internal sense of collective justice, her ability to say what needs to be said, and that fact that she's never needed anyone's approval. I nominated Güliden for this award because I have faith that if a miracle happens and she's back at the University of Lethbridge in April, the changes that her work will usher in, will make many who benefit from and proliferate inequitable and violent institutional cultures, that benefit from injustice at the expense of difference, will hate her as much or more than you may already hate me on this campus.

I say this with love, with respect, and with honor. The well behaved who disappear in the dominant personalities and cliques run by charismatic abusers never make history, well maybe Adolf Eichmann was one of the exceptions. It is those who bring us together in integrity, ownership of responsibility, the ability to hold space for all manner of affect and delivery, to not only listen but actually hear what others have to say; it is those who can collaborate rather than sabotage and compete, who can delegate, who can master the fine balance between anger, resentment, compromise, dialogue and desire, and who possess the wisdom to know when to use each; it is those who take responsibility for their actions, who do the work from the inside out, who do not ask others to apologize for failing to, or for succeeding at, fitting in to their bag of stereotypes—those are the ones who make history for the right reasons. These are the marks of leadership. Güliden Özcan is a leader and that is why I have nominated her for this award. I am proud to call her my friend. She has set the bar high for future awards, and it is my sincere hope that like her, we all start to celebrate each other and how our differences are contributions, not deficits, and that we all aspire, like Güliden, to stand in each other's power without feeling threatened, and to be the kind of change that we want to see in the world.

Thank you all for joining us today, our Dean, Matt Letts will say a few words followed by our speakers. When all of those who have volunteered to say a few words have spoken, the floor will be open to anyone who would like to contribute to the discussion.

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