



## Acceptance Speech: Rejecting Silence

The Support Network for Academics and Students of Colour + Allies award for excellence in equity

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### ABSTRACT

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

### KEYWORDS

*SNAC+, Gulden Ozcan, Excellence in Equity*



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Thank you so much. I'm really humbled, and, yes, it's a huge privilege to have this ceremony, and it's very healing. Thank you so much for organizing this. Thank you, Mike, for the prayer, and thanks everyone for your words—it's really good to hear from you. And thank you, SNAC+, for being there when I needed it the most. I felt like the existence of SNAC + has changed a lot for me, and, yes, kept me sane at times . . . Thank you so much, everyone. I'd like to say a few words, but not perhaps too structured.

I've traveled a long way, for sure. Geographically, I come from Turkey. I came to Eastern Canada and now Western Canada, but also I came a long way in terms of coming from a working-class background, from a family that is not formally educated, going to the University for the first time in my extended family, and coming from a marginalized ethnic background, a Kurdish background, from Turkey. I've come a long way. . . to an academic career, a middle-class lifestyle and so many privileges that now I am experiencing. But these kinds of travels . . . are a learning experience, it's kind of ladders that we step up in the socio-economic levels. But for some of us, as bell hooks points out, "From certain standpoints, to travel is to encounter the terrorizing force of white supremacy" (hooks 1997). She is mostly referring to the transatlantic slave trade . . . . But for most of us . . . women of color when we travel, the more we travel, actually, . . . the more challenging the pathways get. It was true for me as well: the more I travelled, the more my paths were filled with rocks and thorns.

Last semester, . . . spring 2021, I was teaching a contemporary sociological theory course and I added a . . . book to my reading list. It's called *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (ed. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa). It's composed of short accounts by radical women of color, and although it has been published 40 years ago, it was great to see how students were engaged with the writings of women of color because most of the problems that they were addressing . . . still exist and they are still struggling. . . It is still at the center of our discussions when we talk about equity, inclusion and diversity and social justice.

I was enjoying teaching the class. I was enjoying how students were engaged. I was also running from one equity committee to the other last semester, from SNAC+ to GEDC [the university's Gender, Equity and Diversity Committee], to the Canadian Sociological Association's Equity Subcommittee. I was helping racialized graduate students with their problems, and although I enjoyed doing all these things, my back was hurting and I was looking at this book called *This Bridge Called My Back*. I didn't know at the time that the pain on my back was cancer-related. I found out at the end of the semester.

As radical women of color trying to exist in these spaces that we occupy, uninvited and often unwelcomed, we don't have the luxury not to build those bridges. We need these bridges, bridges of equity. We need these bridges to bridge our own lived experiences with those institutions that tend to . . . leave our experiences outside. We need those bridges to link our own cultures, . . . our own geographies with those . . . colonial geographies in order to . . . demonstrate to the world the significance of those other geographies that often get treated as if they don't exist. But those bridges don't have to be built on our backs, literally and metaphorically. Our backs are always suffering from long hours of surviving jobs, the violence of patriarchy, bringing new lives to this world and carrying all the burden of inequalities and injustices we witnessed throughout our lives. And as much as the color of our backs may make them seem stronger, they are as fragile as white ones. So this bridge that we need to build,

equity, is now called my back, my spine that has been invaded by cancer . . .

And yes, I think I want to reflect on that for all of us. The same day that I went to see my doctor for my pain and the first time she suspected cancer, that same night we had an anti-racist film series and we were screening *Audre Lorde: The Berlin Years 1984 to 1992* (Schultz 2012) . . . We screened it and Suzanne Lenon moderated the discussion. . . If you haven't seen that movie, I strongly recommend it, as it lays out the relationship between racism and cancer and other illnesses . . . and social determinants of health. . . I remember . . . how difficult it was to watch that movie that night, that particular night that I was in the same fear of being diagnosed with cancer, but also it was so healing and nourishing to see that Audre Lorde so strongly struggled and continued her activism throughout those days.

So [smiles] always, I'm so glad for all the words like "fearlessness" . . ., but it is always difficult to speak for me, not that I don't like to speak, not that I'm shy, but . . . now that I understand more clearly that cancer has sociocultural economic reasons, it is so difficult to speak about them in a foreign language. When I say foreign language it's not only the difference between mother tongue or a foreign language, but it's also the language that doesn't recognize the lived experiences of radical women of color . . . in those academic settings, in those more prestigious white settings. So that's why I've always regretted the things that I haven't said instead of the things that I had said or done. . . . But each time I spoke I found a new connection and probably I lost many unnecessary ones, and I'm so glad for that . . . Today, when . . . each of you talked about different memories, I remember those moments and I'm glad I spoke up at those moments.

And so, yes, that's I think what I wanted to say. As Audre Lorde said, . . . I want to take this award for "that piece in each of us which refuses to be silent" (the dedication to Audre Lorde's *A Burst of Light: and Other Essays*, 1988). Yes, I think this is all I wanted to say for now, and thank you again for everything. And, yes, we should do this more often because this is very healing and very good and we shouldn't wait for tragic moments to recognize . . . different types of excellence in our communities. Thank you.

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