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Finding Our Narratives as New Professionals: The Kenneth P. Saurman Award Reflection

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THE KENNETH P. SAURMAN AWARD

This award honors Kenneth P. Saurman, who will long be remembered for his dedication to the field of student affairs and to the graduate program at The University of Vermont. After his death in 1980, a memorial fund was established for a prize recognizing the outstanding graduate in the program. This award is a reminder of the professional excellence and commitment Kenneth P. Saurman inspired in his students and colleagues.

Each spring, a committee of faculty members in the College of Education and Social Services selects a student, or students, who best display(s) the established award criteria. Those recognized: (a) show a record of outstanding achievement; (b) demonstrate ability to make outstanding future professional contributions at both local and national levels; (c) demonstrate future ability to make outstanding intellectual contributions to the field in the areas of research and scholarship; (d) show evidence of having fostered a sense of community and cooperation among peers, staff, and faculty; and (e) show evidence of outstanding contribution to the University through internship and practical experience.

In May 2016, the Kenneth P. Saurman Award was proudly presented to:

Daniel Fairley, II

&

Atiya McGhee

Finding Our Narratives as New Professionals

As we sat down to write this reflection, we were torn between what we should write about and how we should write it. Subsequently, we looked to previous Saurman reflections for guidance. The powerful voices and reflections of Teddy Walsh and Cristina Vega's (2016) *Catching Up and Looking Back: An Honest Dialogue Between Friends*, Audrey Claire Redmond's (2015) *But I thought it would FIT!: Musing on the Clash Between Expectations and Reality*, and Dirk Rodrick's (2014) *[Re]Centering Voice: The First and Last Domain of [m/y/our] Story*, showed us how we could be personal and vulnerable, as well as connect scholarly perspective to our real life experiences in our Saurman essay. So we do just that. Just as these reflections helped us, we hope our reflection will help past and present HESA students learn from our experiences, mistakes, successes, and all.

The outline of this reflection was prompted the way that many conversations in HESA are prompted, with a question. However, we did not start with just any question. We began by asking ourselves the quintessential question from Dr. Deborah (Deb) Hunter: "What came up for you?" Once we had this in mind we knew that we could tackle this assignment by speaking from our hearts like we were taught to do in HESA. As we pondered Deb's question, we then asked ourselves, "What would Vijay and Kelly ask us?" Naturally, we figured Dr. Kelly Clark/Keefe would ask us to express our feelings about the last six months through art. Since we spent a large part of our time reflecting and making meaning of our

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Atiya McGhee (she/they) is a tattooed and pierced black queer from da bronx. She/they is the Area Coordinator for Multicultural and Identity Based Communities at Oberlin College in Oberlin, OH. She/they earned her/their bachelor's degree from Wheaton College (MA) in 2014 with a major in Creative Writing and Literature and earned her/their master's degree from the University of Vermont's Higher Education and Student Affairs program in 2016. Her/their professional interest include: social and cultural pedagogies, social justice education curriculum, and black queer femme theory.

experiences with Dr. Vijay Kanagala, we imagined he would ask us to reflect on our reflection by reflecting on the last six months, or something like that. Once we had our questions, we were ready to write. In our reflection, you will find the glamorous and not so glamorous sides of being a new professional. As a caveat, our reflections are just that, *our reflections*. They are not meant to speak for all new professionals, all black folks, all of HESA '16, or any one group of people. They are meant to speak for Daniel and Atiya. We hope you enjoy!

Deb's Question: What came up for you (these past six months)?

[Atiya McGhee] How do you build community when you enter a space and folks go silent as if they were sharing a secret you cannot know? Or when you finally do engage in one-on-one conversation with someone and they become jittery around you but not with anyone else in the office? Or when you sit next to someone at lunch and they actively avoid looking at you or in your direction until eventually you rush to finish your food or just get up to leave? For me, these trail of questions is what it means to work in a non-inclusive environment. It means that I always have to ask these questions while others do not.

I cannot tell you what folks actually think or feel about me, but I know that my heart races when I leave my apartment because I am constantly aware that as a black queer new professional my social gaffes and mistakes are more visible. I ask whether I will be seen as aloof or cold for not wanting to eat with my co-workers most days at 11:30am, because eating together is an unsaid cultural norm in the department. I am in a space where I can share the challenges of transitioning and learning the job or campus culture, but I cannot open up about how it feels to be here with my various marginalized identities, specifically as a black queer person. I am “getting along” with folks, but I constantly have to code-switch and explain; I am “othered” for having to do this labor. I miss not having to explicitly describe my struggles or the microaggressions because I was surrounded by folks who had been through those experiences.

My experience thus far has also shown me that I need to re-learn how to be vulnerable in my workplace all over again. In order to cultivate a positive, healthy, and productive community with the folks within my department and the institution, I have to both acknowledge and lean into my feelings of bitterness and disappointment, to name (for myself) that I am also experiencing fear--fear of being rejected by the community, fear of not being enough, fear of not meeting expectations, and fear of placing myself at the center of my work where I am to be held accountable as a new professional. Also, I fear that being vulnerable will put myself at risk. What if I am not seen as strong or competent enough to handle the work? One day it was just too overwhelming and I sat in my supervisor's office and just bawled. I immediately went to rub away the tears (*I hate crying*), but my

supervisor (one of the few folks of color in the division) said, “Get it all out,” and just sat there with me, asked questions, and listened. I have been reminded by him that I am enough. I am competent and that just because I moved to a different geographical location, it did not mean I had to throw my old self out the window. It means loving the mistakes you make and the successes. I hold on to these words.

[Daniel Fairley, II] A lot has come up for me these past six months and not all of it has been great, but I want to focus on the good before I get to the bad. As a new professional, I have the joy and challenge of (re)creating a name for myself. In every place that I have worked or learned, I created a reputation for myself by building on my strengths and adding new tools to my toolbox. This gives me the opportunity to focus on my passions and living my life to the fullest. As a new professional I have more free time, responsibility, expectations, and autonomy than I ever had before. These perks come with many questions about how to navigate this new space. Sometimes I feel a level of discomfort that leaves me longing for simpler times when I was just an intern or student. Not to mention, I consciously added additional responsibilities to my plate. I decided to move in with my partner after I graduated and we adopted a puppy named Ellie. This means my decisions affect more than just myself. My housing is now *our* housing and my income is now a part of *our* budget. No matter how upset I may be at the University system or “the man,” sometimes I have to weigh the decision of my family with what I feel is “right.” I no longer have the safety net of being in school and “just learning” about the profession. I am a professional now and I have to start acting like one, which is harder than I thought.

Receiving these identities of a new professional, dog dad, and live-in partner, oddly enough remind me of my experiences in Vermont when I received the new identity as a “Person of Color.” After living with black people my whole life and becoming a member of Alpha Phi Alpha, Fraternity Inc. in college, I was feeling solidified in my identity as a black man—a feeling that was further solidified with a conversation with Alex Boesch (HESA ‘16) at NASPA Region I. Alex asked, in his philosophical big question way, “If you were given the choice, would you choose to be white over being black?” and I responded, “I would choose to be black.” This was a big turning point for me in my development as a black man because when I was posed this same question eight years ago, I answered without hesitation, “Yes, I would much rather be white than black.” During high school, I hated my skin and thought the only thing that was “wrong” with me was that I was black.

Alex’s question made me realize, I had finally stopped hating my skin and thinking that it made me inferior. I started the process of loving who I am. However, after being at UVM for a semester I noticed that people did not refer to me as black. They referred to me as a “Person of Color.” While I could theoretically understand the term, I thought it was one that could never describe me. I knew I was black

and I would always be black. I thought to myself, “You can call me what you want, but I’m only going to be black.” It took me a while to warm up to this term Person of Color. I fought it hard until I realized my experiences as a black man were not all that different as the experiences of the other People of Color around me. Not to mention, the only other black man I came in regular contact with during my first year was a Residence Director named Kester (#criticalmass). Essentially, I came to UVM with my identity as a black man where I was presented with new information about an identity that I needed to embrace. Moreover, I had to reclaim my former identity while simultaneously embracing my new identity. While this process was initially difficult, I left UVM a stronger person because I am now able to see the incredible value and purpose that comes with the term “Person of Color.” I trust a similar growth and comfort will take place as I transition into my role as a new professional.

Kelly’s Question: How would you describe these past six months through art?



[Atiya McGhee] I originally painted this piece during one of Josephine’s (HESA ‘16) birthday parties. I chuckle, in thought, of what the piece was supposed to be. I selected this piece to describe my past six months as a new professional because it reminds me of a time that I felt most included and most vulnerable. It was either Daniel (HESA ‘16) or Joey (HESA ‘16) who commented at the time that my piece looked like people fighting to the top with a war raging on the bottom. I chuckled because I saw this very awkward tree with different types of branches sticking out and stick figures or branches poking out in a field. Over the past six months I have experienced both interpretations of this image.

I am an awkward tree stuck in the middle of nowhere trying to grow. My growth is not linear nor does it make complete sense, but it is growth. I cannot tell what

plant or image I truly am since I am the dark figure, but the light behind me shows that I am still there. Still here. These past six months have shown me that perhaps it is best to have fun in the dark, in stick figure like wars and to grow in places uncomfortable to me.



[Daniel Fairley, II] My piece serves as an explanation of transition through my life and more explicitly, these past six months. My life runs in cycles where I start off comfortable in structure and rigidity (the top left corner), but somewhere along the way my comfort feels like it spirals out of my control (the bottom right corner). I am then thrown into what feels like chaos and disarray. However, if I take a look at the bigger picture I can see that everything is connected in one way or another. Although I may feel like my life has no structure and that I am completely disconnected from my core, I can always trace it back to who I am. Change is good and necessary, but it is also difficult and messy. I am happy to have my support system of family, friends, and my partner there to stand with me along the way and hold me up when I feel broken

Vijay's Question: What has been a preconceived vision that you had as a student that has been unfulfilled now that you are a professional?

[Atiya McGhee] These past six months have taught me that a large portion of my understanding of how I would function in the field of higher education (i.e. how I would do my administrative and social justice work) was romanticized and not fully embedded in realism. For the last six years, I have mainly occupied white, hetero, and/or male dominated spaces where I was usually one of the few folks of color. As a result of this experience, I fathomed it would be "easier" for me to work in a similar space (i.e. small, private, liberal arts college in the middle of nowhere), but it did not.

During my first six months as a new professional, I sat with a lot of frustration, disappointment, and bitterness because I felt both visible and invisible. I was visible to folks mainly when someone needed something from me, when I made a mistake that needed to be rectified, or if there was a question (not conversation) about race and identity politics. Other times I felt ignored. Yet, when it came to advocating for my professional development, providing feedback on X process, or simply sharing my experience, folks became uncomfortable. There were a few moments when folks did attempt dialogue with me about my experience. However, the dialogue did not focus on how I felt but rather focused on policing my choice of words in a situation or using their words to say how I *must* have felt: “I hear you, but have you considered this?” These feelings still exist, but I found a framework for how to navigate these feelings and the politics of space while recovering my sense of professional self.

My framework for navigating the field as a professional is to situate myself in the culture, dynamics, and political spaces of the institution so that I can identify how the setting can and cannot support me as a person with multiple marginalized identities. Once I was able to identify what support was, I was able to change the space to be more inclusive and connected to my ways of being. Two ways I changed the space to work for me were to explicitly communicate my needs with my supervisor and to alter my physical work space.

First, I explicitly defined my expectations for the workspace and how I would work with my colleagues. For example, although not an expectation, there is an unsaid cultural norm in the department to eat lunch together at 11:30am in a particular dining hall on campus. During these lunch meetings, sometimes decisions were made or processes and items were clarified. It served as a space for quick collegial check-in and a summary of the day’s work. I rejected this norm for various reasons, but my compromise was eating there once a week and making it clear why I did not participate in the culture. Clarifying these expectations (which were really cultural norms) with my supervisor and my co-workers was helpful given my intent/desire not to be portrayed as uninterested or unwilling to adapt.

Second, I changed the space around me to make space for myself was to physically alter my work space so it could feel personal and conducive to my work style. Most offices on campus are not spaces you can play music aloud or decorate the walls. My office, on the other hand, is where I am the Pandora D.J. playing the reggaeton, hip-hop, soca, and dancehall stations, and the walls are decorated with tapestries, photos of my cohort, and inspirational quotes. After some of these small changes were made, my mood uplifted and I was more productive at work. These changes did not address my feelings of invisibility or create dialogue around my experience as a racially marginalized person in the predominately white department. What it did was allow me to carve out a space of my own so that I can build my own

foundation blocks for success that were not rooted on assimilation or erasure. It also gave me space to identify which needs of mine that the department can and cannot meet. If they cannot meet my needs, then I need to find a different community or space for the other needs to be met. Neither community is better than the other; they simply meet my needs in different ways.

[Daniel Fairley, II] Over the past six months I have learned that as a professional I am in charge of my own path. Before I became a professional, my path was largely paved for me. I was told by others what was “best for me,” not the other way around. Now the tables have turned and I choose what conferences I go to, I pick which days I take off, and I am in charge of the time spent in my office to complete my work. I anticipated some of these changes, but I did not anticipate the difficulty I would have sitting back and learning my job without wanting to change everything about my job and the institution. I left UVM with a newfound knowledge about higher education and social justice, which led me to believe I was brought to my new job as a “diversity consultant” of some kind. I expected to come into my office and offer all the ways I felt they could operate in a more sustainable, inclusive, and efficient manner. However, this was not and is not my role. I am a new Area Coordinator tasked with learning my position, the unique university culture, and the professional expectations. As much as I wanted to believe I was going to change the institutional culture overnight, I realized that I need to be patient and learn what is in my locus of control. While I may not be able to change the entire structure of a system, I can control what my meetings with students look like and how I connect with them. I initially felt overwhelmed at the perceivably small amount of control I had over my situation, but once I found my scope I was able to bring my expectations back down to earth. In my first six months, I focused on breaking down and reconstructing the new system I was a part of, but for the next six months I have shifted my focus to re-establish myself, re-establish my community, and reflect on my work daily. These new goals have allowed me to understand my role as a professional and what “being professional” means to me.

As I reflect on my understanding of “professionalism,” I realize how my deep-seeded privilege affects the way I interpret and display professionalism. Growing up in an upper-middle class, military, and southern household, I was taught at an early age how to be “professional.” This included speaking the part by responding to a question with “Yes Ma’am” and “No Sir.” This also included dressing the part, with suits and ties. I became so ingrained in this culture that I looked down on people who did not speak or dress the same way I did. However, as I began to learn more about the oppressive roots of “professionalism” during my time at the University of Richmond and UVM, I started challenging my views of professionalism. I asked myself why was it so important to me that I had name brand clothes, a fresh haircut, and spoke “well” (meaning “white”). I truly enjoyed my time in Vermont

where I was not pressured to “act more professional” or change my clothes so I could fit in. Vermont offered a certain freedom, confidence, and authenticity that I often hid under my suit. I realized my thoughts and ideas did not change because I wearing a suit and I should not make judgments about people’s capabilities based on what they wear. However, it became clear to me on my first day of work as a “new professional” that Vermont was unique in its views of professionalism. I entered my new workspace with a test in mind. I took this test from a story my cohort mate Andrew Mayer (HESA ‘16) told us about his first day at work in Student Life where he wore a full suit. When his supervisor saw him, she lovingly told him he did not need to dress up when he came to work. With this in mind, I took it upon myself to try the same thing and show up in a suit, expecting to be told the same thing. However, I was met with a different reaction. Many people in my office complimented my suit and told me I looked nice. When I asked my supervisor about the dress code he informed me that what I was wearing would be just fine for work. This is not to say my supervisor was wrong or a bad person for telling me to wear a suit, but it became clear to me that I needed to re-evaluate how my recently formed ideas about professionalism would be perceived in this new culture. I initially looked forward to sharing my newfound knowledge of the oppressive heteronormative and white supremacist origins of professionalism. However, I realized my first day on the job might not be the best day to have this conversation. This was the beginning of a long series of instances where I said to myself, “Oh right, I am not at UVM anymore.”

Concluding Thoughts

[Atiya McGhee] In Miracle Husband’s (2016) article, *Racial Battle Fatigue and the Black Student Affairs Professional in the Era of #BlackLivesMatter*, she writes:

Counter spaces, according to Delgado and Stefancic (2001) are affirming locations within an environment that are comfortable niches of verbal and nonverbal interactions, for marginalized people. It is important to create empowering spaces that resist societal oppression for Black student affairs professionals that enable them to process how power, privilege, and oppression impact their lives (p. 97).

A central part of my experience was finding a space that I could be affirmed. This was done by my previous supervisor Adrian, by folks (of color, of the queer spectrum) in other departments, and by connecting with my HESA folks from afar. Find your space where you can be vulnerable and share what your experience is like through the lens of your social identities. As I said before, I was able to eventually get along with folks but that still did not completely address my feelings of erasure. So, when you start a new job, whether it is your first or second, I have learned it is important for me to get on the black, folks of color, and Queer Staff

and Faculty listservs so I can connect with them to create these counter spaces that will allow me to process what I cannot in a predominantly white setting.

Lastly, before I conclude I want to echo the powerful words of Jilliene Johnson (2013) in her Saurman Essay, *Standing at the Intersection: Comfort, Complacency and Curiosity*:

My hope is that we are not bound by complacency and fear, but rather uplifted by hope and faith to listen to what feeds our soul. We can all dream about how we will have heart-soul agreement, but we must start with a vision. Our vision of who we want to be and how we will interact with the world often emerges from the continuum between love and fear (p. 129).

I shall take these words and continue to create and enter counter spaces where I can express my authentic self and ways for people to come to understand me. My vision of who I want to be is one in which I am known for my vulnerability and willingness to delve deep in conjunction with my critical analysis and my social justice and inclusion work. My vision is of a black queer demigirl/woman/genderqueer person moving through space with confidence and a smile in her/their eyes-- a person who embraces the messiness and the successes. The same but different Atiya.

[Daniel Fairley, II] If I had any advice for my past self about how to survive my first six months in my new career, I would say, build a supportive community around you; this will make your transition from graduate student to new professional a lot easier. Take time to build relationships with your new co-workers; trust me it takes time. At the beginning of my job I felt like Cristina Vega when she wrote:

I wanted the kind of relations that I forgot took me two years to build, I forgot it requires mutual trust and vulnerability. I forgot that in order to be whole at this new place I need to have both feet in. This place could be my home. Once I started to believe that, things began to change. (Vega & Walsh, 2016, p. 131).

You cannot expect your new co-workers to be the people you share everything with; it is unfair to them and yourself. Start off with baby steps. Work to build a strong relationship with them because you will see your co-workers more than you see your partner or puppy. So, it pays to invest your time in them. Take the Joey Leon (HESA '16) approach and say "Yes!" to every time someone asks you to hang out, at least for the first month. It will get exhausting at first but this way you can go out and experience the town with your new workplace friends. Like entering a new space with an established identity, you will be entering a new university with an established community. Also, just because someone is your

supervisor does not mean they are going to be your life coach, mentor, and guiding light. Sometimes your supervisor is just that, your supervisor. And that is OK. Like your co-workers, expecting your supervisor to be everything and more only leads to unrealistic expectations of their ability to supervise. The same goes for you and your students. I know you love mentoring and connecting on a personal level that goes beyond work. However, not everyone wants this in their supervisor. Some of your students just want to meet, talk about work or their conduct, and leave to study for their classes. This does not mean you are a flawed supervisor or that you cannot facilitate a student meeting. If this was the case, the majority of your supervision experience and conduct hearings would be failed ventures. Learn to enjoy those special moments where you truly connect with a student or your supervisor. If you have not already, thank them for putting in the time to speak with you and for cultivating a relationship.

To quote President Barack Obama during his last press conference as president, “The only thing that is the end of the world, is the end of the world” (2017). No matter how hard things may feel right now you are an emotionally strong and intelligent person. This year may have been tough, but remember your first year in HESA? Now that was tough! With that year behind your back, you can get through ~~just about~~ anything.

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