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Damned If You Do--Damned If You Don't: A Queer Woman of Color's Journey of Trauma, Agency, and Leadership

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DAMNED IF YOU DO—DAMNED IF YOU DON’T:
A QUEER WOMAN OF COLOR’S JOURNEY OF TRAUMA,
AGENCY, AND LEADERSHIP

A Dissertation Presented

by

Windy Paz-Amor

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ABSTRACT

Navigating systems of leadership in Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) in higher education as a Queer Woman of Color can be a challenging and complex process—one that integrates identity, experience, expertise, knowledge, patience, and most importantly the ability to risk; while remaining authentic and professional. It is a balance, which in my own experience and expertise requires constant reflection, evaluation, and adaptation. A negotiation of owning that one has power and agency, while realizing that the many intersecting identities that one holds influences how dominant culture perceives that power and agency. To reach authentic reflection and evaluation in leadership it is critical to examine and investigate one's own vocation to lead and to ask, what leads us and sustains us in that leadership?

This dissertation will offer a counter-narrative of leadership in prose-poetry through a lens of intersectionality outside of the hegemonic or dominant ways that define the parameters of leadership. Through the use of personal narratives reinforced by scholarship using the methodology of Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN), I explore my own experiences of trauma throughout my life that led to agency and inevitably to leadership. I additionally examine the overarching tenants and themes that continue to inform, sustain and strengthen my leadership.

“Damned If You Do—Damned If You Don’t” represents a phrase often used amongst marginalized communities that signifies the challenges of navigating one’s own power and agency within oppressive dominant systems. This SPN dissertation will be supported by the paradigms of Critical Race Theory (CRT) with a specific focus on Counter-Narrative/Storytelling and Critical Race Gendered Epistemology or Feminist Black/Latino Theory, while also incorporating aspects of positive psychology. It will offer a counter-narrative in leadership that highlights how my multiple intersecting identities, coupled with my life experiences, create meaning and go on to further shape my approach to trauma, agency, and leadership.

As a Queer woman of color in leadership, I find that by honoring and examining my own stories of trauma and agency, and how it led me to leadership. I am better equipped as a professional to honor the narratives, identities, and experiences of those that I serve.
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Lastly, to my foremothers--may we continue to inspire one another to rise.
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It was the third leadership meeting with me that “Tessa” had missed. I waited the usual 15 minutes and then decided to send her an email. The email subject read, “Are you Okay? Third Leadership Meeting Missed”. A day passed before I heard back from Tessa, who showed up at my office door with a somber expression on her face and a friend by her side. Her friend, “Jane”, spoke first:

Jane: Mrs. Paz-Amor…Windy. My name is Jane; can Tessa and I come in?

Me: Please do.

Jane: Tessa asked me to come down to your office with her because she has something she needs to talk to you about.

Me: Hi Tessa and nice to meet you Jane. How can I help?

Tessa directed her glare towards the grey dingy carpet in my office while Jane spoke. Her hands clasped tightly, and her hunched over posture gave me clear signals something was wrong.

Jane: Tessa just shared with me that last month she was raped by a “close friend”.

Tessa: I didn’t want to tell anyone…and I really hope I don’t lose my leadership position. I’m sorry I’ve missed our meetings; I haven’t really been leaving my room. Thanks for asking if I was okay.
As a Student Services professional in the field of Education, stories of trauma like that of Tessa and Jane are not uncommon. In fact, it is because of stories like that of Tessa and Jane that I find it critical to discuss potential impacts of trauma in relation to leadership from my own lens as a Queer, Afro-Latina woman of size in a leadership position in Higher Education. Supported by the paradigms of Critical Race Theory (CRT) with particular focus on Counter-Story telling and Critical Race Gendered Epistemology or Feminist Black/Latino Theory, my analysis will offer a counter-narrative in leadership that encompasses the intersections of identity, elements of trauma, growth, and resilience and engages a pluralistic and authentic approach towards building inclusive community.

Why a counter-narrative in leadership? Dominant, hegemonic structures of leadership replicate the master story of White, male, dominance, conquest, and accomplishments, oftentimes portraying marginalized identities and our stories of leadership and triumphs disproportionately throughout. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) define the counter-story as, “A method of telling stories of those people whose experience is not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society)” (p. 32). Additionally, Delgado (1989) states, “That oppressed groups have known instinctively that stories are an essential tool to their own survival and liberation” (p. 2436).

Honoring our experiences and carving them as leadership is of critical importance to debunking oppressive dominant paradigms of leadership. Within my own leadership, the need for alternative models of leadership inclusive of identity, coupled with the importance of narrative, particularly by other women of color leaders, has significantly influenced my own sense of worth, value, and effectiveness in the Academy. Critical Race Theory (CRT) and feminist Black/Latino theory re-enforce the need for pedagogy
that is inclusive of our experiences, struggles, and triumphs. Gloria Anzaldúa (1990) says:

Necesitamos teorías [we need theories] that will rewrite history using race, class, gender, and ethnicity as categories of analysis, theories that cross borders, that blur boundaries—new kinds of theories with new theorizing methods . . . We are articulating new positions in the “in between,” Borderland worlds of ethnic communities and academies . . . social issues such as race, class, and sexual difference are intertwined with the narrative and poetic elements of a text, elements in which theory is embedded. In our mestizaje theories we create new categories for those of us left out or pushed out of existing ones. (pp. xxv-xxvi)

Come and Gone
“|am moon
Daughter of rain
Sister of dark
I travel like ancestors in the night
hiding beneath skin, searching for inside.
Within shadows of pensive and quiet I lie.
I reveal truth only to those who can hear me.
And disappear among the sun’s light”.
(Paz-Amor, 2014)

The “poetic-text” above is an example as Anzaldúa states of reclaiming space, and speaks to my need as a Queer Woman of Color professional and educator, to create new categories for understanding our experiences in relation to social issues.

“Leadership is a skill shaped by life experience” (Standford-Blair & Dickman, 2005, p. 13) and poetry is a vehicle I use to do this. Leadership was never a choice; it was a rite of
passage. I was born in the Bronx, New York and raised in Brooklyn, New York. Leadership was not represented or given meaning by the people who held office or the newly elected politicians; political figures that felt foreign to my block or my neighborhood. Leadership was raveled and mirrored in my community, in the everyday choices I made for myself with the guidance of family, friends, community, and spirit. Growing up around crack vials, prostitution houses, gangs, shoot-outs, drug dealers on corners and an engrained concept that in order to survive you kept your head up and hustled, no matter what. You carve your place in the world. My journey of Leadership is one rooted in community and spirit, in survival and perseverance. It is one rooted in love. Within my own leadership, being a strong leader means leading with authenticity and accessibility. Based on my own upbringing, these tools helped you to survive and remain connected in and with community. These are two major pillars of my leadership paradigm; however, these are only a few of the beliefs and values that have helped to shape my leadership. “To be strong, a tree sends more than one root deep into the soil. If a tree has only one root, it may be blown over by the wind” (Nhat, 1997, p. 95). As I will discuss throughout this dissertation, there are several positive aspects of my leadership that have stemmed from traumatic experiences, including—resilience, courage, love, forgiveness, compassion, hope, autonomy, authenticity, spirituality, vulnerability and “truth telling”. These beliefs, values, moral codes, and ethics are the roots that make up my foundation of leadership. They prevent me from waverind during difficult moments and allow me to continue to grow and develop as a leader for myself and for others. As a leader, I felt that I had a moral obligation to those I serve, to take the time to delve into how I have constructed my own idea of leadership. What are my guiding principles?
Where did they come from? How have they shaped me? How have my multiple intersecting identities and life experiences formed my lens of leadership?

This is not in any way to negate or minimize the negative long-lasting effects that accompany trauma, nor the reality that trauma disrupts and interrupts one’s life. There are numerous studies and vast research that suggests exactly that. This Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN), however, will look at the rarely discussed positive outcomes and effects of trauma on me as a Queer woman of color and how that further translates in my leadership. “Stressful situations are often transformative (Saakvitne, Tennen, & Affleck, 1998), and, for some people, sometimes, positive change and growth are part of their transformation” (Park, 2004, p. 69).

I have learned in my leadership to remain curious, adaptive, non-judgmental, and authentically interested in the people I work with (students, staff, and faculty) as human beings first; every person has a story that matters. Students in particular, who are trying to figure out how to navigate the world within and around them, are seeking approachable, accessible professionals and educators; they have questions, many of them. I know this by first-hand account, as I too sought this during my time as an undergraduate student, and continue to do so as a graduate student. As a professional who holds multiple intersecting marginalized identities, mentorship can at times be difficult to find or ask for, and it is a risk as a woman of color in leadership to ask for help at times. The feeling of needing to not be just good but great is echoed in Predominantly White Institution’s (PWI’s) and comes in the form of daily micro-aggressions that much like identity, you learn to navigate.
The exhaustion we feel in our bones at the end of the day, the fire we feel in our hearts when we are insulted, the knife we feel in our backs when we are betrayed, and the nausea we feel in our bellies when we are afraid. Our strategy is how we cope—how we measure and weigh what is to be said and when, what is to be done and how, and to whom and to whom and to whom, daily deciding/risking who it is we can call an ally, call a friend (whatever that person’s skin, sex, or sexuality). We are women without a line, women who contradict each other. (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981, pp. xviii-xix)

My own experiences of trauma and resilience, inclusive of wounds and scars throughout my life, coupled with over 15 years of experience working with survivors of sexual and gender based violence as a crisis-counselor and advocate have obviously significantly impacted my lens of leadership. However, what may not be so obvious is how it has impacted my lens and approach to leadership. Inclusive of leadership with my students while working with them on their own journeys of student leadership, and leadership for myself while navigating the pervasive and oppressive dominant hegemonic culture existing in most PWI of Higher Education. As a Queer, Afro-Latina woman of size in a leadership role in Higher Education, hiding is not an option, and so I learned to “dance”. Not the proverbial dance, but rather the ability to adapt quickly and sometimes several times in the same space within my own leadership, while holding on to self.

Hemos tenido que cambiar caras, como el cambio de color en el camaleón—cuando los peligros son muchos y las opciones son pocas.” “To become less
vulnerable to all these oppressors, we have had to “change” faces; some of us are forced to acquire the ability, like a chameleon, to change color when the dangers are many and the options are few. (Anzaldúa, 1990, p. xv)

The “counter-narrative” of leadership is of critical importance to marginalized populations on a college campus. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) tell us that:

Critical race methodology is a theoretically grounded approach to research that (a) foregrounds race and racism in all aspects of the research process. However, it also challenges the separate discourses on race, gender, and class by showing how these three elements intersect to affect the experiences of students of color; (b) challenges the traditional research paradigms, texts, and theories used to explain the experiences of students of color; (c) offers a liberatory or transformative solution to racial, gender, and class subordination; and (d) focuses on the racialized, gendered, and classed experiences of students of color. Furthermore, it views these experiences as sources of strength and (e) uses the interdisciplinary knowledge base of ethnic studies, women’s studies, sociology, history, humanities, and the law to better understand the experiences of students of color. (p. 24)

Every person we come into contact with has a story; a story that impacts how they see the world, a story that seeks to be understood before being asked to understand. After all, “We do not see the world as it is, but rather as we are” (Nin, 1961). CRT,
specifically the counter-story is a tool that exposes, analyzes, and challenges racial, gender, and class privilege (Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993).

A critical race theory challenges the traditional claim that educational institutions make towards objectivity, meritocracy, colorblindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity. These traditional claims act a camouflage for the self-interest, power, and privilege of dominant groups in U.S. society. (p. 32)

I have found CRT, and specifically counter-narrative or storytelling, to be an essential lens and tool within my leadership, as it in many ways empowers and strengthens my approach to being an authentic leader.

My leadership today integrates curiosity or asking questions to better understand compassion through authentic conversation, and connectivity or assuring the space and the person(s) in the conversation feel heard and supported. The lens of intersectionality has been critical in creating inclusive dialogue with students while working towards fostering “safer” spaces to discuss concerns that are often linked in my experience to various intersecting identities. The term intersectionality was originally used by Crenshaw (1989) to recognize the ways in which the experiences of Black women fell between the different discourses of gender and race. More recently Davis, (2008) said intersectionality has been described as, “The interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices and ideologies and the outcomes of those interactions in terms of power” (as cited by Cole, 2009, p. 565).

It is for this reason that I have elected the methodology of Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) to frame this dissertation. SPN allows for the counter-narrative to be not
just explored but fully integrated, as it enables alternative forms of expression, voices gone silent, and fearful scholars to challenge notions of what is knowledge? And who are the gatekeepers? In doing so it challenges traditional research paradigms that at times stifle narrative, while pooling from an interdisciplinary knowledge base. It further goes on to concretize space that validates this new knowledge, emerging marginalized voice and experience in the academy. According to Clough (2002), telling stories is a political act, one through which writers may seek to emancipate.

Although I have learned of many ways to express myself to myself and others, there is no greater, more satisfying way for me to honor my most authentic and autonomous voice than through the use of prose-poetry.

…Women have survived as poets. And there are no new pains. We have felt them all already. We have hidden the fact in the same place where we have hidden our power. They surface in our dreams, and it is our dreams that point the way to freedom. Those dreams are made realizable through our poems that give us the strength and courage to see, to feel, to speak to dare. (Lorde, 1984, p. 39)

My “real” authentic voice is where I store my power. To remember it is to free the scared, doubtful ghosts that linger and make camp when enabled. The “me” that first walked into Higher Education felt tightly clasped to a narrative that said my voice, my experience could not find place or have worth in Higher Education. The “me” that stands here now knows that what I have to offer is a unique voice filled with compassion, love, wisdom, and a deep well of knowledge. I have carved my place in Higher Education, and that means carving or digging into the earth that makes up the fullness and wholeness that
is “me.” The woman, the Brown, the Black, the Latina, the Lesbian, the woman of size, the Poet, the emotionally available, the trauma, the Spiritual self; it is all me and all has a place, particularly in leadership.

In telling our stories we create opportunities for others to share theirs and find connection, understanding and healing. If I cannot bring my authentic self to the table in my personal and professional life, how can I expect my students to do so? It is in sharing the vulnerability of my experience that I can help to create space for others to do the same; this is also how I honor the life guidelines that I created for myself that allow me to live authentically and courageously. My place in Higher Education lies in infusing pockets of reciprocity and authenticity between myself, and those I serve.

If we recognize our triggers, practice critical awareness and reach out to others, we can increase our resilience by building connection networks. These networks are sources for the empathy, connection, and power we need to free ourselves from the shame. (Brown, 2008, p.155)

The implications for Institutions of Higher Education (IHE) are many, as counter-story telling creates opportunity for connectivity, role-modeling, and positive-identify development. It serves as an opportunity to create further understanding among marginalized communities as well as further understanding for dominant culture to work more holistically and pluralistically with marginalized communities.

It is always a risk to show your true self, particularly when you are in a leadership position while carrying various intersecting marginalized identities, but one of my greatest learnings in leadership is knowing that I do not have the commodity or the luxury to not show up as I am, or to say it like it is. The risk of losing my voice and the
courage to use it is just too great. If you risk your authenticity…what do you have left?

A lesson that I have learned in my leadership is that without love and compassion for
myself, my family, my experiences and my community, my voice falls prey to silence
and I show up in-authentically. In my experience, it is in the space of in-authenticity that
masking can begin to take form. Masking as Anzaldúa (1990) describes is:

To put on a face, or to express feelings by distorting the face. To become
less vulnerable to all these oppressors we have had to change faces. The
masks, las mascaras, we are compelled to wear, drive a wedge between
our intersubjective personhood and the persona we present to the world.
These masking rolls exact a toll. After years of wearing masks we may
become a series of roles, the constellated self, limping along with its
broken limbs. (p. xv)

As a Queer Woman of Color, my experiences in leadership, both personally and
professionally, have taught me that in order to survive in a Predominantly White
Institution (PWI); masking is a necessity. However, of equal necessity is being aware and
conscious of what your masks are, when to take them off, and with whom.

For Women who Howl at the Moon
Yams grow underground to the sound of the rain falling down from skies that bleed from
the cries of the dead. And that dead rain feeds the roots that touch the fruit of my own
womb.

The Womb that holds the wolf,
Women carry wolves inside, you know.

We howl because if we don’t, the fowl smelling stories we never speak of begin to rot,
much like the thoughts we never share, the voice that has forgotten to speak and the
breath that sometimes is just too deep.
Yams grow underground to the sound of rain falling down from skies that bleed from the
cries of the dead.
They need darkness and dampness to sprout. Not the kind of darkness and dampness that make you and I want to shout. They need a mound of heavy, moist dirt on top in order to grow.

In order to show themselves later on
Poetry has been how I am most able to say what I feel in words that make sense,
In a culture that often sees me before they hear me.

In a world that teaches me to feed me and fill spaces that have been taken
Prior to me remembering they were mine,
And that they were taken.

(Paz-Amor, 2014)
CHAPTER 2: CRITICAL LITERATURE

“Alienated from her mother culture, “alien” in the dominate culture, The woman of color does not feel safe within the inner life of herself. Petrified, She can’t respond, Her face caught between los intersticios, The spaces between the different worlds she inhabits.”
(Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 42)

Gloria Anzaldúa’s words offer insight into a veiled experience for me as a Queer Afro-Latina woman. The petrified existence she describes offers images of duality that encapsulates so much of the trauma I refer to when speaking of myself as a women of color in leadership; particularly in the White dominant domain that is Higher Education. This duality becomes more of a sacrificial ritual that daily maintains the “otherness” while somehow preserving our “mother culture” because in my experience both often cannot exist within the rules of this space that is Higher Education. Often this propels us into a state of hyper-existence; where we vacillate between hyper-visibility and invisibility in dominant culture, compromising our own sense of worth and value for self and other. That is until we realize “that we cannot use someone else’s fire. We can only use our own and in order to do that, we must first be willing to believe that we have it” (Lorde, 1978, p. 33). It is for this reason that I have selected to use Gloria Anzaldúa’s Borderland theory to help frame this phenomena. Along with Audre Lorde’s essay’s in Sister Outsider (1984) to frame the complexity of fear, anger, and self-acceptance for women of color.

Anzaldúa’s (1987), Borderland Theory speaks to the physical, psychological, sexual, spiritual straddling of two or more worlds. Borderlands, according to Anzaldúa, also describes the process of de-colonizing the “inner-life” of the self (1987). Orozco-
Mendoza (2008) states, “Being a border woman also implies seeing the borders as ever changing spaces that are not restricted to host power relations, but as also incorporating projects of resistance and liberation” (p. 1).

Trauma derails our lives in complex ways. From short term to long term, it is indisputable that trauma leaves visible and invisible ripples throughout one’s life. Women statistically experience sexual and gender based violence at a higher rate than men and yet there is far less research on the implications of trauma and violence on women’s lives and how it translates through leadership. The unconventional ways of healing from trauma for women connect very much to the non-dominant leadership style, (Anzaldúa, 2007), that most women are socialized in— Relational Leadership, (Lipman-Blumen, 2000). I propose that relationships, community and connection are critical markers for healing, growth, meaning-making and achievement amongst women (Bordas, 2007). They allow for a broadening of perspectives through sharing of personal narrative, lessons learned, strategies for success, and developing resources. As Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) presented, I also posit that love, courage, spirituality, optimism, and hope play critical roles in healing, resilience, and achievement for women. The ways that women know and heal are critical to understanding how women go on further to lead ourselves and others (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997).

The importance of this SPN is in the self-examination process that allows for the discovery of the many facets of how I as a Queer woman of color have healed through trauma while offering insight into the positive impacts of that healing on my life and leadership. The SPN will also offer an argument for why Relational leadership holds great importance for women’s mental health and success and should be further integrated
into the more dominant approaches to leadership as we expand and diversify organizations and institutions.

2.1 The Ways Women Heal

Throughout this SPN, I will be using key words or phrases that further examine the potential effects that trauma has had on my leadership and how that has influenced my capacity for agency, resilience, and achievement. The key words or phrases that I will be using in this research will be: Post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), violence, trauma (Ai & Park, 2005); positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000); spirituality, hope, meaning-making, and resilience (Ai, Cascio, Santangelo, & Evans-Campbell, 2005; Hooks, 2003, 2010;); poetic-text (Anzaldúa, 1987); poetry as a means of healing and surviving (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981; Lorde, 1978); stress-related growth (Park, 2004), which refers to experiencing positive outcomes from stressful life experiences; and leadership including Multicultural and Relational leadership (Bordas, 2007; Lipman-Blumen, 2000). These methods all work to fight against the practice of silencing women that white, dominant, male culture perpetuates (Belenky et al., 1997; Brown, 2012).

Research indicates that variables such as spirituality, healthy relationships (Ai & Park, 2004), positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), social support and awareness of resources helps a victim of trauma and violence develop hope, meaning, and growth (Ai et al., 2005) and contribute to the notion of stress related growth (Park) and further achievement in a particular individual’s life. Those experiences and broadening of perspectives for women survivors of trauma have further implications on how women and women of color approach leadership (Anzaldúa, 1987; Bordas, 2007).
Addressing this issue through the lens of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) using Critical Race theory with a particular focus on the counter-narrative (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), Delgado (1989) has allowed me a better understanding of the impact of that trauma on my life and leadership as a queer woman of color. This SPN will offer a self-examination of how that further extends into my perceptions, actions and approaches to leadership. It is suggested that through positive mental health therapies, survivors of violence and trauma, not particular to women, experience less PTSD and go on to further grow and achieve within their lives.

Research by Ai and Park (2004) and Ai, Cascio, Santangelo, and Evans-Campbell (2005) indicate that violence and trauma not only interrupt a person’s life, but that it further “challenges people’s core values and raises questions about meaning and purpose in life” (Ai & Park, 2004, p. 245). It is for this reason that alternate positive mental health therapies are critical in offering a more complex understanding of how individuals, particularly Queer Women of Color, conceptualize and contextualize healing and further how that translates into our own perceptions of leadership; initially beginning with, do we see ourselves as leaders. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) advocate that a focus should be placed on mental health therapies that have emphasis on examining the positive aspects of the human condition, in this case trauma and violence rather than focusing solely on the negative aspects thus providing a better understanding of the impact of trauma on women. Park (2004) further cites positive psychology through the theory of “stress-related growth” which refers to experiencing positive outcomes from stressful life experiences. Park’s research examined how for many victims/survivors of trauma, out of stressful life events, including several forms of trauma and violence, positive change can
emerge. Although, stress-related growth does not speak directly to how those positive changes may impact leadership amongst women who had experienced trauma. It does, however, offer re-occurring themes and similar variables that connect to how Bordas (2007) unpacks multicultural leadership, specifically how Bordas and Anzaldúa (2007) place importance on the intersecting identities that women hold, and how culture, life experience, community, spirituality, and environment can impact women’s approaches to leadership. The intersecting identities we carry, coupled with our life experiences, become the lens through which we see the world. What is normal to one person may seem like chaos to another. The way we define our experiences further shows the complexity of how our identities and experiences create our reality and understanding of those realities. Trauma is a good example of this. What may seem traumatic to one person may be daily life for another. In taking a closer look at the experiences in my own life and sharing those stories with others, I came to the understanding that many of my most defining experiences have elements of trauma. Many of my own values and beliefs are rooted within those experiences and lend towards who I have become as a person, professional, and leader. It has influenced my thoughts on growth, spirituality, friendship, relationships, achievement, love, language and leadership. I have learned some of my greatest lessons through some of my biggest adversities.

This led me to the importance of including Lipman-Blumen’s book, *Connective Leadership* (2000), specifically the research on Relational leadership which offered a framework for looking at a dominant way that women are socialized to lead. Particularly when looking at the significance of building and having strong relationships and trusted community. The framework serves to contextualize the importance of common bonds and
a deep sense of knowing for women. Those strong common bonds lend towards further impacting one’s sense of belonging, meaning, and purpose. The level of hurt, coupled with this unique sense of responsibility, dramatizes the martyr persona that women in leadership who have experienced trauma grapple with. In my own leadership, the need for relationship building within community echoes the importance of reciprocity in leadership, but lacks reflexivity. Within the framework of Relational leadership is Vicarious Relational leadership or leadership through the triumphs of others (Lipman-Blumen, 2000). Is this connected to women’s perceptions of “taking up too much space” and not wanting to burden others with one’s own stories so as to make space for others to share theirs? Is the “back-burner” image for women in leadership who have experienced trauma linked to socialization and internalizations around perceptions of worth and power? These are just a few questions that I have posed to myself and present for analysis throughout this dissertation.

Lastly, Lawrence and Foy (1993) further examined PTSD and both its negative and positive impacts on the lives of women who have experienced trauma. This article studied factors that impacted PTSD and one of the findings from this study supported spirituality as a re-occurring variable throughout this research as having a correlation to resilience. This research also illuminated possible complications or gaps to the research surrounding the importance of including more information on non-traditional therapy styles and their importance on healing for victims/survivors of trauma. These non-traditional therapies can also bring about positive change and outcome for women who have experienced trauma, women raised in violence, women who bear witness to justice and injustice from the mirror, to the streets, to the conference room. Women who have
learned to use their anger as a vehicle for change, women who in the face of adversity know intrinsically how crucial it is to speak, witness, and walk for new ways of being and leading; simply because if we do not, no one will speak for us. As Lorde (1978) stated in the essay, “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism”, (and I would add sexism, homophobia, and socio-economic class):

Every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal an institutional, which brought that that anger into being. Focused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change. And when I speak of change, I do not mean a simple switch of positions of a temporary lessening of tensions, nor the ability to smile or feel good. I am speaking of a basic and radical alteration in those assumptions underlining our lives.

I have seen situations were white women hear a racist remark, resent what has been said, become filled with fury, and remain silent because they are afraid. That unexpressed anger lies within them like an undetonated device, usually to be directed at the first woman of Color who talks about racism.

But anger expressed and translated unto action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification, for it is in the painful process of this translation that we identify who are our allies with whom we have grave differences, and who are our genuine enemies. (p. 127)

This compilation of literature, coupled with my SPN’s throughout, bridges my research between trauma/violence, agency, growth, and achievement and the implications on leadership within my own life. The Concept Map (Appendix A) will offer a
visualization of how trauma, leadership, resilience, and agency impact one another continuously. Throughout each major phase, the impacts of the other phases seem to interweave. Although each phase leads to different understanding surrounding one’s experiences, the overlap suggests that to try and distinctly distinguish them from one another may not be authentic to how women experience trauma and how that goes to further inform our leadership. In my own life this has also proven to be the case.

2.1 Summary

Growth, achievement and positive change are significant factors that may arise out of trauma if further impacted by spirituality, meaning-making, and hope. Perceptions of healing and growing are heavily impacted by the multiple intersecting identities that an individual may have. According to my own experience, although the significance of trauma’s impact on any individual can be primarily and initially negative, the “healing time” or long term impact, if influenced by positive mental health therapies, meaning-making activities, spirituality, community, and connection may lend towards greater positive change that impact both leadership and life.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY AND PROCESS:
SCHOLARLY PERSONAL NARRATIVE (SPN)

SPN is a methodology “that shows how it is possible for writers to connect their own personal narratives to the scholarly writings of others” (Nash & Bradley, 2011, p. 86). Throughout my education I have been trained to write with both a qualitative and quantitative lens. Understanding these traditional methodologies are critical for research, and yet often as an educator, researcher, and writer it left me feeling as though I somehow had lost my most authentic voice. Somehow I had been trained to put aside the fire in my writing, the difference in my voice, my intersecting identities, and of most importance to me, my poetry. I suppose I could be fine with this, except that it took me most of my life to better understand these elements of myself and at this point I simply do not have the luxury to lose them again. This SPN research is a culmination of my experiences in leadership depicted in my strongest form of writing: prose poetry. This SPN research is situated in my own true narrative that is rooted in my “own truth claims and cannot be separated from the particular ways in which I have been socialized to recognize truth” (Nash, 2004, p. 40). As Nash further states:

SPN helps you to explore all the relevant contingencies in your contexts of meanings. There is no SPN truth that goes all the way down to some bottom line, or to some basic foundation, or to some final answer. In matters of narrative truth, there is only interpretation, perspective, point of view, and personal preference. (pp. 40-41)

SPN methodology consists of four [inter-woven] components (Nash & Bradley, pp. 6-7):
1. **Pre-Search:** “How do I get started?” This is an opportunity for the writer to establish self-confidence, commitment and discipline in their writing. This is also a time to establish an overarching theme(s), as well as who your audience is.

2. **Me-Search:** “What is my personal narrative regarding the ideas emphasized in my writing?” In this section the writer will define and establish the “me”, by creating personal questions, finding your writing voice, connecting central points to personal experience, and identifying stories that deepen the theme of your research.

3. **Re-Search:** “What scholars and researchers have informed my writing?” In this section the writer will identify primary and secondary scholarly sources that ground the research, central themes that form the core of the writing, creative ways to re-define and support, conventional understandings of research.

4. **We-Search:** “What are the implications for my profession, or field of study, that can be generalized from my scholarly personal narrative? To what extent are my experiences similar to my readers’ experiences? How can I create a narrative overlap between my life and my profession? How do I universalize my findings to others in such a way that my ‘I’ can co-exist with the ‘we’ who are reading my document. (pp. 6, 7)

This SPN dissertation will be a self-examination of how trauma has impacted my leadership as a Queer Woman of Color. I will be paying close attention to the capacity I have to find agency and continue to grow and achieve and how that guides my leadership.
I will be offering my own experience as a former provider of advocacy services to survivors of sexual and gender based violence for over 15 years, as well as my own personal experiences of trauma, coupled with my multiple intersecting identities as a Queer Woman of Color that continues to impact both my perceptions and styles of both power and leadership.

3.1 Pre-Search

I experienced this process more as a transformation; “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” (Lorde, 1980). During this time in my research my focus began with gathering my inner stories of leadership and making connections of themes and sub-themes that poured out of my stories while identifying the overarching archetypes they were organically falling under. This centered my focus and allowed me to then construct who my targeted formal and informal audiences are.

My Audience

Knowing who you are writing to, and for, will remind you to return to the ‘true north’, your audience compass. For in the end, the audience determines the tone of your writing, the reason for the writing, and the vocabulary or professional language you choose to use. (Nash & Bradley, 2011, p. 53)

This SPN is written primarily for Queer Women of Color in leadership positions in higher education. However, it is also written for students and educators who identify as Queer, woman, and/or of color who are thinking about leadership and how to navigate their own marginalized intersecting identities. Lastly, it is written for allies of Queer
Women of Color, both men and women in higher education who are seeking insight into how Queer Women of Color navigate leadership.

**Identifying Themes**

There are eight over-arching themes that I have identified that make up the foundation of my leadership. These themes will be presented in the chapters of this dissertation. They include (1) Spirituality and Authenticity, (2) Hope, Voice and Agency, (3) Resilience and Courage, and (4) Love and Vulnerability. My chapters describe the foundations of my leadership. These foundations will build upon one another leading up to my final and culminating chapter titled “And So I Lead”. This final chapter will encompass all of the themes presented, while also offering implications for leadership. Through the use of my own prose-poetry and SPN vignette's, I will structure this dissertation by examining themes that reflect my own journey of leadership, survivorhood, and agency supported by academic research. Interwoven throughout this dissertation will be my own poetry and prose-poetry, which will additionally help illuminate my experience in my most authentic and liberating voice.

**Writing Style and Genre**

Why poetry or prose-poetry? Simply, poetry helps me to give voice to the unexplainable in my life and in the world: the racism, sexism, sizeism, homophobia, classism, ableism, the deep dreary dark and the radiant light. I cannot separate it from me or my survival becomes at risk. I have been taught to grow amidst the consistent unraveling. For many Queer Women of Color this is a shared experience, particularly in IHEs. Some of us have broken our codes of silence. Some of us are desperately trying to find self in between the unsaid rules of “keep it together” and “hustle.” At times a
disjointed yet fully lived experience. Lorde (1978) said, “Poetry is not a luxury,” a lesson of critical importance in my own healing and leadership.

3.2 Me-Search

“SPN writing encourages us to see ourselves as the pivotal variables in the research we do, without whom there would be no research at all. Why? Because, more often than we are willing to admit, me-search is prior to research. Our personal lives and experiences are central to our research and scholarship.”

(Nash & Bradley, 2011, p. 58)

I am the central focus of this me-search, my true and lived experiences are a personal testimony “that seeks to offer credible grounds, for the belief in something. The meaning of credible, of course, depends upon the perspective of the researcher” (Nash & Bradley, 2011, p. 83). My perspective is represented in this research and is based on how I have made sense of my own world, my own survival, and my own discourse of leadership.

Identifying: The Purpose, the “Me”, and the Voice

The purpose of this research/me-search is to understand the impact of trauma on my own life as a Queer Woman of Color in leadership; through reflection and analysis. This SPN is significant in that it will allow for a more complex understanding of trauma, agency, and leadership for Queer Women of Color in leadership who have experienced trauma prior to or in leadership, and have found the capacity to continue to achieve and lead.
The aim of SPN writing is not to test, evaluate, or discover whether something is true. The main design objective of SPN research is to investigate, present, and analyze the inner life of the writer in order to draw insights that might be universalizable for readers. (Nash & Bradley, 2011, p. 83)

I look to offer my own breath of experience in the analysis of the potential positive repercussions of trauma and its various impacts on leadership. Through a pluralistic approach that lends towards further understanding how my multiple intersecting identities and realities have shaped and continue to shape my understanding of trauma in relation to leadership. Leadership is often spoken of from a white male heterosexual dominant lens. In providing a feminist lens to leadership through the context of trauma, I hope to examine the visible and invisible ways that I, as a Queer Woman of Color, practice resilience, make meaning, and remain an effective and connective leader. Through reflection, writing, and research I was able to hone in on my experiences and identify the deeper meanings, which further allowed me draw connections.

Voice in SPN takes courage. It takes time to develop and time to have confidence in for reflection and prose. There is something powerful about breathing voice into experiences we have stored away for one reason or another. I personally am a collector of stories; I store them in the corners of the library that is my memory and access them like books. These stories are my truth, my voice, my lens and lend towards a process of sense-making that constructs my understanding of the world. It is vital with SPN research to understand that, “there is no SPN truth that goes all the way down to some bottom line, or to some basic foundation, or to some final answer. In matters of narrative truth, there is
only interpretation, perspective, point of view, and personal preference” (Nash, 2004, p. 41). Writing those truths onto paper (or a computer screen) is a courageous step beyond voicing your truths in SPN. “When I write I feel like I am carving bone. It feels like I am creating my face, my own heart—a Nahuatl concept. It is always a path/state to something else” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 94).

**Personal Questions Posed**

SPN research requires introspective or personal questions: “SPN researchers choose to self-interrogate rather than create interview questions for examining the inner and outer lives of others” (Nash & Bradley, 2011, p. 83). Below are some of the questions I posed to myself when constructing my SPN research, some of the questions are adapted from Nash and Bradley:

1. What is really important to me at this stage of my life? What bridges my head and heart, work and passion?
2. What is the salient knowledge that I have acquired through my own lived experiences that speak to the core of my leadership inclusive of my identities?
3. How can I share the “me” in my stories in an honest way while connecting it to my leadership and honoring my experience of truth?
4. What personal stories do I hold that can also be transferable universal stories in leadership for Queer Woman of Color? How can I tell them in a way that captures the visceral response to oppression and the significance of relational and multicultural leadership?
5. According to my experiences as an active and attached participant in writing, what is the best way to relay my truths while aligning it to larger universalizable truths?

These questions led me to focus on authenticity and identity in leadership. It compelled me to dig and unearth my reasons for why I lead. What I found was that much of my reasoning for why I lead was rooted in experiencing some form of trauma in my life that later led me to growth and a deep well of compassion for self and others. Losing loved ones, experiencing broken hearts, living in violent neighborhoods, surviving violent experiences, deferred dreams, tackling daily micro-aggressions both in the personal and professional realm, and having a constant inner battle as a Queer Woman of Color in leadership to navigate power within systems of oppression while concealing the rage against injustice it ignites in our hearts and bellies, so as not to be labeled “angry”. Ultimately, it led me to ask: How do I navigate leadership without being damned if I do—and damned if I don’t as a Queer Woman of Color in higher education?

SPN scholars place themselves at the center of their research design. Everything else, although of pivotal significance, evolves from and resolves around the self-exploration of the author. Data collection, literature reviews, and analysis and interpretation of data (whether empirical or theoretical) always emanate from the central themes and the self-narration of the writer. (Nash & Bradley, 2011, p. 87)

And so I began building connections through story and scholarship.
3.3 Research

As I began to feel confident in my voice, writing, and stories, it clearly became time to build connection between those stories through the process of interweaving scholarship and further un-packing it in my writing. What I found was that I had a tremendous amount of research that needed to be sifted out by theme in order for me to capture it in a compelling and cohesive way. In doing this, I was then able to categorize my research again by my selected themes and identify any story-overlaps. I decided it would be important for me after identifying the foundational research I would be using to frame this SPN dissertation, to create a section titled “Critical Literature”. Although in true SPN form there is research that is embedded throughout this dissertation, the critical literature section hones in on the foundational research that framed the discourse of this dissertation.

This SPN dissertation will be framed with the lens of intersectionality using Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Critical Race Gendered Epistemology (or Black/Latino feminist theory) specifically through the use of counter-story telling. CRT with a focus on counter-story telling will, as Solorzano and Yosso (2002) described, serve at least four functions:

1. Building community among marginalized people (for but not exclusive to Queer Woman of Color).
2. Challenge perceived wisdom and knowledge by providing a human context to understand and transform belief systems.
3. Offer new or expanded realities to those with various intersecting identities who are at the margins of society, by “showing possibilities beyond the one’s they live and demonstrating that they are not alone in their position” (p. 36).

4. “Teach others that by combining elements of both the story and the current reality a new and fuller reality can be constructed” (p. 36).

Methodologies such as SPN that allow for various valid truth narratives and perspectives to exist simultaneously are of critical importance to those holding marginalized identities. As an SPN student myself and a Queer Woman of Color I will add that SPN methodology feels liberating, authentic, scholarly, and inspiring. Just as the beauty is in the eye of the beholder, in SPN, the truth is in the eye of the writer.

Limitations in SPN

The obvious limitation to SPN methodology is that it is subjective in nature. Due to this limitation my writing will be based solely, “according to my experience”. In this way, as the writer, I “accept full responsibility for the personal disclosures, universal themes, and illustrative stories. In SPN falsifiability has more to do with whether or not the writing is authentic, honest, and, especially universal” (Nash & Bradley, 2011, p. 84).

3.4 We-Search

“There is danger in attempting to deal with oppression purely from a theoretical base. Without an emotional, heartfelt grappling with the source of our own oppression, without naming the enemy within ourselves and outside of us, no authentic, non-hierarchical connection among oppressed groups can take place” (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981, p. 29).
The quote above details exactly why I have selected SPN as the methodology for this dissertation. Stories bring people together and build community, in my experience, in one of the most organic and authentic ways. Storytelling has a rich and continuing tradition in communities of color. Delgado (1989) reminds us that, “oppressed groups have known instinctively that stories are an essential tool to their own survival and liberation” (p. 2436). Stories also have the power and potential to resonate wisdom within and outside of the physical, cognitive, and psychological identities that we hold.

Universalizability, unlike other types of replicability, is not measureable in scientific terms. In contrast, the universalizability of thematic motifs, principles, and beliefs is more felt by the reader than counted, tested, interviewed, or measured by the scientist. Because all SPN’s are different, what remains universalizable are the common existential themes that underlie these differences and touch all human lives, regardless of the unique empirical differences. (Nash & Bradley, 2011, p. 84)

Universalizability in my SPN dissertation will allow me to draw larger implications for Queer Woman of Color in leadership. The overarching question in this section is, “What are the universalizable implications for my profession that can be extracted from my personal narrative and from my research in this SPN dissertation?” (Nash & Bradley, 2011, p. 106). In illustrating my personal narrative of leadership as a Queer Woman of Color in higher education, I hope to offer a different discourse in leadership that is often out of reach in Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) for Queer Identified, Women, and Women of Color.
Pockets of universalizability will exist throughout this SPN dissertation and will explicitly be explored further in the final chapter as it will draw from the previous chapters. As Nash and Bradley (2011) state, “There is no perfect time in SPN to enter into the we-search component of the SPN writing process” (p. 57).
CHAPTER 4: THIS WOMAN WALKS: TRAUMA & WOMEN

“I’m restless. Things are calling me away. My hair is being pulled by the stars again.”
—Anais Nin

**Bullet Lullabies**  
*Part I.*

Resting to the sound of bullets firing at night  
Like a symphony of fireworks to a five year old me.  
Sweet---sweet--- dreams  
Every night  
While sounds of exploding guns carried me away into a peaceful rest  
I remember always being able to sleep when I was a child growing up in Brooklyn.  
Because after a while sounds that mean violence can come to take a rhythm that causes a schism between what we hear and how it makes us feel.  
And when you’re a young baby you make things that make you feel crazy go away by hoping, wishing, praying… humming—
  
Turning the unexplainable—
  
Into lullabies.
(Paz-Amor, 2014)

“We lived in connected houses on East 51st and Kings-Highway in Brooklyn, NY. It was a street lined with trees on both sides. If you stood at the front of the street you could see how the tree tops seemed to be kissing when they reached their peaks. They were untouched by the reality of gunshots and crack dealing in the area. They seemed to dance in the wind regardless of what the night brought ahead. Although I could not name it as a child, resilience is a dominant theme throughout my authentic make-up. Much like the swaying trees, I too had to sway and dance with and against the changing winds along the journeys of my own life.

Pow, Pow, Pow, Pow, “Mi hijas, bájense!” (My daughters, get down!), my mother’s voice echoed in the night in between the bullets that ricocheted amongst the walls. She and my father crept on the floor until they got sight of my sister and I crouched on the floor with our hands over our heads and our faces towards the ground. They quickly covered our bodies with their own until the loud, crashing BANGS dissipated into the darkness.

The house seemed to go from shaking to completely still within minutes. My mother and father as they always did first made certain that my sister Jeannie and I were unharmed and okay, then themselves. Before I knew it sirens filled the air, neighbors filled the streets, and police filled my home. It seems the neighbor next door, the same one my mother was convinced was running some kind of
escort service out of her home, had made some enemies. Enemies who came to our tree lined block with connected houses and unloaded several rounds of bullets aimlessly at her house, rounds of bullets that missed and hit our house instead. With windows inches apart our house became an easy target. Our sense of safety shattered like the windows themselves.

My sister and I were quivering, but not my parents; they were focused and steady. My mother leaped towards a detective and began screaming in his face, “I have been calling and calling about this neighbor and you have done nothing, and now this. If anything happens to my daughters, I will kill her.” She continued by saying, “Write it down. If you won’t protect my family, know that I will. ”The spirit of fire spurs her to fight for her own skin and a piece of ground to stand on, a ground from which to view the world.”

She didn’t blink an eye, my mother; there she stood barely five feet tall, fair skin with an olive undertone, fiery red hair that always matched her chestnut eyes, and she didn’t blink an eye. The next day my parents put up our house for sale and before I knew it we were packing up our lives in boxes and loading them onto a moving truck. I was 14 years old. We moved to Paramus, New Jersey and as my father says, we never looked back.

The courage my mother showed opened my eyes about what it means to be courageous for her and for myself. “Courage is both the innate and the learned ability to bend when all forces of gravity say you should have broken. The moment in between choosing what you think you know and what you hope will all be worth it “in the end.” I do not think of courage as an everlasting resource, nor do I think of courage as having to be a constant variable in one’s life. The voice of courage can be as soft and subtle as a whisper or as textured and deafening as a pounding drum. It can echo and reverberate between your skin and bones enough to make your teeth chatter or it can appear as voiceless and as faint as a muffled memory. It is as powerful as a waterfall washing over you and moves us to act, even if that act is standing still.”

“Simone DeBeauvoir once said: It is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our lives that we must draw our strength to live and our reason for acting.”

My mother taught me to be a warrior. She taught me to be courageous, resilient, to defend and honor those you love and to hold on. The poetry below is a piece I wrote when thinking about my own mother, grandmother, wife, aunt, and sister and all the other “Santa’s, Maria’s, Marcella’s, Miriam’s and Jeannie’s in the world who firmly established in my life what it means to be a warrior woman, a loving soul, and a survivor.
**We Were the Daughters**

My daughter will be a warrior.
She will hunt and fish
learn how to gather and nurture
all with a spoonful of my love.
I will raise her to be strong and proud. I will teach her that self-love is preservation
and that only knowledge and wisdom will give you salvation.
I will regard her as a goddess instead of my princess.
I will teach her the beauty of her spirit will take you farther then a tight ass with loose hips or a fake weave and liquid tips.
I will make sure she understands that love is freedom.
And peace is a revolution of the soul.
I will assure her that tears can be a catharsis and not a weakness according to those who fear your power and want to oppress your spirit
my daughter will be sharpened for battle.
And when the time comes her eyes will be wide and alive and full of the power she holds from the way down-inside,
all within the flowing rivers of herself.
She will take the world by storm,
and like her mother’s possess the power and the form; of the wind.
My daughter will be a warrior
Birthed from my womb
With honor and sword in hand
With wisdom from those before her imprinted deep within her palms
She will walk through a blood tainted earth remembering hymns and psalms sung by women who have broken their hips and backs in the name of being strong.
My daughter will be a warrior.
Stronger and wiser with her-story based in the victory of the silences I have battled
She will speak it, breathe it, and live it knowing the women before her
Took up space allowing for the grace called her to exist
My daughter will be a warrior.

Love and loss are thick areas and major components of how I have set the guiding principles in my life that have allowed me to honor my most authentic self. How has love shaped you? How do you practice loving yourself? How do you show others you love them? I would describe love as what I strive for in every step and loss as what has guided me towards choosing the best possible next step. Love and loss allow me to remember and know where I am, where I have been, and where I want to be. Both demand of me to live my truest self. We all walk with our truths in hand and heart, love and loss are threaded throughout those truths for me. There is not much that has more meaning to me then love. It is the vessel that holds the thought that awakens in the actions of my every day’s.
Loss, reminds me to cherish what I love, to share what I have, and to do it with both my heart and head as guides. Seeing you and seeing others in my own life has really come down to learning how to be ourselves with each other.” (Paz-Amor IN, Nash & Viray, 2013, Chapter 12)

The SPN above is an example of where and how I first learned about major life concepts. The importance of authenticity or “keeping it real,” or love as a necessity for survival, resilience and adaptation as critical to remembering you have worth and value are all morals that I practice and infuse into my leadership today. Although for many, the experience I detail above would be deemed immediately as “trauma” (and it was)—to me at the time, this was life. And life, surprisingly did not feel necessarily traumatic during those moments. When immersed in this type of environment, in your home or school life, you begin to desensitize and normalize the events taking place. Sharing with friends in the neighborhood what had happened the night of the shooting did not result in “Oohs or Aahs”, or any further expression of surprise. It resulted in statements like, “I’m glad you all are okay—let’s play double-dutch now.” Or statements like, “Does this mean your parents won’t let you come outside anymore?” My parents were quite strict with me and my older sister Jeannie. It took them years to even allow us to leave our front porch and play on the sidewalk; to make up for not letting us play outside, they would buy us inside games like video and board games to keep us busy and distracted. Although I was unable at the time to see the trauma in our experience, my parents were acutely aware of the dangers that existed outside of our front door. This is how they coped; this is what they knew. I do not condone their methods; however, I do understand why they did the things they did to “protect” us.
The ripple effects of this experience and many more like them will be the focus of this dissertation. Ai and Park (2005) state:

There is a tremendous human capacity for transformation in even the direst of circumstances. Although trauma can disrupt a person’s relationships and valued life roles as well as their core values and beliefs, the process involved in confronting these disruptions may also promote broadened perspectives, new coping skills, and the development of personal and social resources. (p. 247)

For example, at 35 years old, now living in Burlington, Vermont and not Brooklyn, New York, I still prefer being a “homebody” to being one who is “out on the town”. Fun still revolves around a great board game with friends or a video game with my wife. I still feel and respond as a fierce protector of my family and my community, as my parents once did for us and for their community. My mother was the president of the neighborhood watch on our block. She was not afraid of the drug dealers, thugs, gangs, police, or being told she cannot speak English. She taught me to fear no-one when it came to “standing up for what was right” and because of it, our neighborhood followed her. “A woman’s discovery of personal authority and truth is, of course, a blend of her own unique life circumstances and attributes” (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 76). This is a notion I practice as often as I can within my own leadership role today; fearlessness when using my voice for the rights of others, accessibility, and justice when defending what is right and defending those who are in need. She taught me, that no matter what, I had to be that voice. Even if I am afraid—and often I am. My mother taught me that I must speak, and that even if I did not speak, my silence would still not protect me.
On the cause of silence, each one of us draws her own fear—fear of contempt, of censure, or some judgment, or recognition, of challenge, of annihilation. But most of all, I think, we fear the visibility without which we also cannot truly live. Within this country where racial difference creates a constant, if unspoken, distortion of vision, black women have on one hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism. Even within the women’s movement, we have had to fight and still do, for that very visibility which also renders us most vulnerable, our blackness. For to survive in the mouth of this dragon we call America, we have had to learn this first and most vital lesson— that we were never meant to survive. Not as human beings. And neither were most of you here today, black or not. And that visibility which makes you most vulnerable is also our greatest strength. Because the machine will try to grind us into dust anyway, whether or not we speak. We can sit in our corners mute forever while our sisters and ourselves are wasted, while our children are distorted and destroyed, while our earth is poisoned, we can sit in our safe corners as mute as bottles, and still we will be no less afraid. (Lorde, 1984, p. 42)

4.1 The Cost

As a Lesbian, Afro-Latina woman who works in a leadership role and studies in Higher Education, using my voice authentically 100% of the time—as my mother taught me—although rewarding, can have a cost. In my own leadership I have had to negotiate that cost; measuring between the inner and outer consequences, between losing pieces of
self or losing others. Sharing your authenticity with others is a gift; however, a gift I am quite cautious with.

We are expected to tow the line of appropriateness all the time. Not wanting to cause what others may see as disruptions, we learn to play the game and to choose our battles. Our personalities are dissected by those encased in privilege as they attempt to keep us ‘in our place,’ without the fear of reprisal. This is where they err: wrongly believing that we won’t speak up for ourselves. And when we do, they are astounded and offended when we flip the script and tag that ass as the strong black women we are, with backbone and tenacity handed down to us from our foremothers.

(Williams, 2015, p. 1)

Williams (2015) describes with succinct precision the dichotomy of being a woman of color while also holding a leadership position within systems of oppression. Holding various marginalized intersecting identities in a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) can be at times exhausting. All spaces in a University claim to be inclusive spaces, but what does that actually mean? What does that actually look like? Does it mean that it promotes and invites various forms of leadership to the table? No. According to my experience it does not. Does it mean that conversations will be inclusive to identity or authentic to individual experience? No. According to my experience it does not. However, what I have found it means is that “all” are welcomed to attend, but it will still be run, held, and driven predominantly by individuals holding dominant and at times multiple intersecting dominant identities, leadership styles, and ideologies. And if you want to be invited back to that table, you had better learn to play. So, how do we as Queer
Women of Color in leadership “earn” a seat at the table without wagering our authenticity? It may begin with reconstructing language and theory (Anzaldúa, 1987) so that it is encompassing of our experiences in leadership. It is not enough any longer to carve our place in the Academy; we also have to name and own those experiences out loud.

Recently a colleague, friend, and scholar Stacey Miller (2015), wrote an article titled: Why we Love Scandal: Understanding the Social Construct of Custodial Leadership. In the article Miller (2015) coins a new leadership style imposed upon women of color by dominant culture called “Custodial leadership”, and describes it as:

[A leadership style] that is reflective of the lives of many Black women. It describes the half imposed upon, half embraced leadership style defined by fixing, cleaning, repairing, and re-gentrifying individual lives and organizations. Custodial leadership merges historical images of Black women, first as slaves and mammy’s, then servants, housekeepers, and caregivers, with our own self-embraced perceptions as powerful go getters who refuse under any circumstance to fail. Custodial Leadership ties us into a neat package that often narrowly defines Black women and other strong women of color in the white-collar world for our ability to hold others accountable and reconstruct failing organizations. Custodial Leadership is a social construct that is unconsciously imposed upon Black women by members of the dominant culture as it plays into implicit stereotypes of Black women as powerful, attitudinal, head rolling, finger snapping, no nonsense managers, behaviors that are believed to be innate
characteristics of our race, rather than a circumstance of racial conditioning and survival. (p. 2)

According to my own experiences, Miller’s (2015) description of Custodial leadership felt salient for me. In my role in Higher Education, I am often doing a tremendous amount of “fixing and cleaning-up.” Words such as intense or scary have surfaced regarding my leadership; however, when I ask why, I rarely get an honest response. What I historically know to be true, is that Queer Women of Color in leadership are often met with skepticism and resistance. As Miller says, “We get the job done”, but often get pinned one way or another according to my own experiences as too much—or not enough; leaving us damned if we do—and damned if we don’t.

4.2 Knowing Your Ally’s

My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you. But for every real word spoken, for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made contact with other women while we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed, bridging our differences. And it was the concern and caring of all those women which gave me strength and enabled me to scrutinize the essentials of my living. (Lorde, 1984, p. 41)

Women are often silenced, marginalized, and at times ridiculed for expressing emotion in professional settings, in particular, crying. Yes, I am a crier, an emoter, one who still accepts with fluidity the visceral responses that surge within me when something touches or triggers my heart. I have met some of my dearest allies, colleagues,
and friends in this way. I have also experienced deep judgment and shame because of this as well. According to my own experiences in leadership, as a Queer Woman of Color at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI), knowing your allies is as lifesaving as knowing yourself. As Lorde (1984) tells us, the power of connection that lies by speaking one’s truth holds the opportunity to bridge our differences. Those with whom you may share narrative-overlap, those that find themselves aligned with you for one reason or another, in my experience begin to gravitate towards each other. More importantly, these allies come in every shape, size, age, color, race, class, and gender. We have to remain open to these connections because “if we fail to do so, it will only isolate us in our own oppression—will only insulate, rather than radicalize us” (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981, p. 29).

Oppression can create significant barriers in my experience as a Queer Woman of Color in higher education and this absolutely impacts trust-building in the ally identification process. Racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, infiltrate every being of a society and have produced fears in leadership amongst women and women of color in leadership. A fear that in my own head often says, “Am I being heard, or am I just being seen? Who can I trust”? Particularly, amongst Queer Women of Color, “Even the word oppression has lost its power. We need a new language, better words that can more closely describe woman’s fear of and resistance to one another; words that will not always come out sounding like dogma” (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981, p. 30).

Queer Women of Color must first realize that we have to become our first ally. This was one of the hardest lessons for me in my leadership around understanding allyship. “I had internalized a racism and classism [and homophobia], where the object of
oppression is not only someone outside of skin, but the someone inside of my skin. In fact, to a large degree, the real battle with such oppression, for all of us, begins under the skin” (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981, p. 30). In order for me to create allyship outside of myself I had to start with my-self and most importantly had to be guided by authentic-self-love. As Lorde says, “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare” (1984).

According to my own experience, knowing who your allies are partly rests on who you identify based on lived-experience with that individual. Yes, allyship is not automatic because you share identities or do not! It is an earned title, which in my own life translates as—you have my best interest at heart and I yours. As much as I would like to say as a Queer Woman of Color that other women, women of color, or Queer Women of Color were automatically my allies based on shared identity(s), it just is not the case for me. In fact, at times, those doorways are even chillier.

What lies between the lines are the things women of color do not tell each other. There are reasons for our silences: the change in generation between mother and daughter, the language barriers between us, our sexual identity, the educational opportunities we had or missed, the specific cultural history of our race, the physical conditions of our bodies and our labor. (Lorde, 1978, p. 112)

Cultivating allyship with myself took the road of a practice in mindfulness and meditation, giving myself permission to create space and appreciation for my own breath. Cultivating allyship with others took poetry, using my most authentic form of expression to process out my experiences. Painting a picture of my experiences with my words, one I
could later go back to, breathe into, and change; because much like me, people and poetry have the power to transform and grow.

4.3 This Woman’s Walk

The practice of mindfulness and meditation has heavily impacted my capacity to lead and sustain my leadership. Cultivating compassion for others, as Chodron says “begins with kindness for ourselves” (Chodron, 2001, p. 4). This is a radical act for me as a Queer Woman of Color. Acting as a mirror for myself I ask questions such as, why am I saying what I am saying right now? Is this kind to others and to myself? Or what are my intentions in both my heart and head? These questions are the beginnings of a mirroring process I follow to further build upon my leadership, my relationships, in both my personal and professional life, and my personal sense of self. Mirroring also taught me to self-track; self-tracking for me was the process of tracking my actions and connecting them to my feelings, thus aligning my intentions and actions. Taking ownership of self, body and mind is a radical concept for women of color; as our bodies are practicing deep awareness.

A Rune Secret

I am a womb too full to swallow any sorrow.
Stories are written deep within my cavernous ribs,
Ask me to love, and I will bleed you a story;
A divine testament of truth;
Deep olive and toasted brown in tone,
Lavender and Sandalwood in scent,
Ropes of hair steeped in magic,
Witch magic,
Sister magic,
Love magic,
The secret of my rune lies in knowing, they are one in the same.
(Paz-Amor, 2015)
Through practicing meditation and mindfulness in my leadership I discovered an awareness that once digested, transformed into agency. At the end of the day what I learned mattered the most had little if nothing to do with how others perceived me, and had everything to do with how I perceive, understand, and honor myself. Meditation taught me that everything I had ever been looking for, I have found and will find within myself. Navigating systems of oppression in leadership began with navigating my own internalized sense of oppression. There is power in understanding what we can, and cannot, change. Although women of color are known for cleaning up others’ messes (Miller, 2015), we are rarely known in my experience for taking the time to clean-up our own internal messes. We save ourselves for last; not because we think we are the best, but rather because we feel we may not matter at all. The secret, as I have learned, is that we matter most. The woman, the Brown, the Black, the Latina, the Lesbian, the woman of size, the poet, the emotionally available, the spiritual self; it is all me and all has a place. Owning that means owning and loving me, while also showing those outside of me – just how this woman walks.
CHAPTER 5: WHOSE CUP ARE YOU FILLING? PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL BORDERLANDS

“The Words you speak become the house you live in.”- Hafiz

“You are not a drop in the ocean.
You are the entire ocean in a drop.” -Rumi

To Loving Women Like I Love the Earth

Round, full, and thick,
She sits as if entangled with the moon;
Her flowing tears a testament of life;
The twinkle of light in her eyes
Belongs to no one but her unborn dreams
She walks by the moons shine
The blazing light glistens on her skin like honey glistening from a silver spoon,
Her footsteps walk this earth.
She walks this earth.
With the strong backs of women, continents away aching in her bones
She walks this earth.
(Paz-Amor, 2010, adapted 2015)

Hafiz’s quote, “The words you speak become the house you live in”, resonate deeply for me as a Queer Woman of Color in leadership. We can be after all our harshest critics or our own best friend. It took me some time to figure out that the choice is not as easy as it sounds. In fact, the choice for a Queer Woman of Color is tangled in historical understandings and societal constructs that collide with internalized messages of racism, sexism, classism, ableism, and homophobia; and these messages have the tendency to fossilize themselves within one’s being.

Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society’s definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference; those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are black, who
are older, know that survival is not an academic skill. It is a learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled. (Lorde, 1984, p. 112)

Each of us as women, as women of color, as Queer Women of Color, in some way stand “outside of the circle.” Our circles may look, sound, smell, and feel different, but what ties us together is the irrevocable truth that as women, we stand on the outside. According to my own experience, standing on the outside has afforded great vision and insight, wisdom if you will. “Wisdom is one of the most prized traits in all cultures; according to the Old Testament, its price is above rubies” (Job 28:18). It is that wisdom that has fed me and filled me when I felt I had given all I could give. The wisdom that reminds me that in order to survive, I must learn to fill my own cup first, and it begins with taking my body back.

“It’s 7:40 AM and as I look in the mirror one last time, the question hits me again. Does this make me look too fat? A deep sigh and a quick blinking of the eyes that ends with silence and my hands gently over my heart. I regain my breath and open my eyes to stare at a sticker stuck on my bathroom mirror that reads, “CAUTION, reflections may be distorted by socially constructed images of beauty.” I smile, take a deep breath and remember that I possess every ounce of beauty right now, in this very moment.

“We already have everything we need... All these trips that we lay on ourselves—the heavy-duty fearing that we’re bad and hoping that we’re good, the identities that we so dearly cling to, the rage, the jealousy and the addictions of all kinds—never touch our basic wealth. They are like clouds that temporarily block the sun. But all the time our warmth and brilliance are right here. This is who we really are. We are one blink of an eye away from being fully awake.”

Am I too fat? Is my hair too kinky? Is my skin too light or dark? Is my voice too loud? Do I speak well? Am I beautiful? Am I worthy? Am I courageous? Do I stand for something...anything? Who am I? Who do I want to become? And how do I get there? In my own life, I have learned that the questions never end, and with every question I look forward or backward. In doing so, I miss out on the valuable moments of, “my-me” in the now, or as Pema Chodron says, “being fully awake,” accepting your full truth of who you are in this very present moment. “The truth is inseparable from who you are. Yes, you
are the truth. If you look elsewhere, you will be deceived every time. The very being you are is truth."

All of these questions and many more didn’t really ever help me. They just led me to doubt myself more. In fact, it wasn’t until later in my life when I realized that the questions were not helpful because they were not the right questions. They focused primarily on the judgments and responses of others—and little to nothing to do with my own understandings and thoughts of myself. If you wait for others to tell you who you are, you will never find the right answer. Authenticity is about knowing your truest, realest, juiciest self and honoring it. Knowing what you value, what you believe in and honoring it with courage. For me in particular, this included my body and working to shift my own feelings towards it. For me in particular, this included working to shift my own feelings toward my body. As far back as I can remember, the one thing that has felt most complicated for me, was my body. I had to learn to interrupt the chatter that puts down my body and replace it with gentleness and compassion, which in turn creates healing that resonates and echoes my true genuine self. Early in my life, I learned that through writing poetry I could express the “unexplainables” in a way that I could then digest and further understand. I found healing that I could offer myself and in doing so learned more about who I was at my core.

**Oshune to Moon**

*Woman to Woman  
Sistah’ to Sistah’  
I have something to share with you  
Gather close  
While I whisper to you my truth  
I am beginning to understand that everything I have ever hoped for, longed for—Is  
And always has been  
Within me  
Two shades of brown  
Shimmering from the moon’s light  
To all the women who ever thought beautiful was too strong of a word to use for self  
My love flows out for you, for me, for we.*

We have those moments of awakening and truth throughout our lives, and it’s within those moments, those deep pockets of “shift” and transition within our lives where we begin to see all of the pieces that create our truest selves. It is in those moments where we begin to build compassion and love towards seeking and accepting our authentic selves—and that authentic self is always growing. Did you know there was an inner rhythm that will tell you when those moments are happening? Take a moment and think about a time when you loved deeply, when
you suffered loss, when you found great joy or great pain. In those moments of deep feeling, were your senses heightened? If asked, could you remember a smell, a vivid color, what someone was wearing? Could you remember moments of how it felt? Was your stomach clenching? Were your palms sweating? Was your jaw tight? Was your face hurting from smiling? In those moments and many more we are forced, not asked, to deal with ourselves, to feel fully and authentically in the present moment. Those moments, those pieces of our journeys whether good or bad, whether win or fail, shape us, and the meaning we make from it become the wisdom we take into the next day. Through it we learn to make “rules” or lists for ourselves around how we walk through the world. Living those learned rules or lists help us to reach our truest, realist and most authentic self.

Beauty and Body have been major mountains in my life. “Looking back I can see how I have caused much of my own suffering. For reasons of pride, ego, and insecurity, what is left unsaid. Pain and ache are felt in the unexpressed parts of my life—when I didn’t speak up, spill open, and be truly who I am.” My body often betrays me. It has since I was a child. In addition to falling prey to illness it holds onto weight in a way that is sometimes challenging for me to understand. It has taken a great deal of love and compassion for myself to begin to understand that in many ways I DO love my body, and in many other ways I feel my body had put me through many feelings of loss. I am always healing when it comes to my body both figuratively and literally, it has given my life great meaning. Mostly, it has given me the deep understanding that life is to be cherished and our experiences are our greatest clues to discovering who we really are.

The SPN above is what I think of as a live streaming moment in my life that visits me at times with relentless vigor. It reminds me of the long struggle I have had with my body and my own notions of beauty. As loving oneself unconditionally takes long and hard work, so too does the process of unlearning and learning anew. What self-talk no longer serves you? Through learning to love my own body and seeing my own beauty I am able to feel more natural and grounded in myself. When this fills me, my approach to myself and others is both rooted and genuine. (Paz-Amor IN Nash & Viray, Chapter 12)

5.1 Our Bodies as Spaces of Trauma

The idea of ownership over female bodies and personal labor is as old as history itself. From ancient Sumerian practices of the execution of women who commit adultery to modern day instances of female circumcision in Africa, women’s
bodies have been used as a commodity. Black women in particular, especially during the Transatlantic Slave Trade, have had to relinquish autonomy over their bodies’ time and time again. (Gibson, 2015, p. 1)

How do we as women of color ever begin to take our bodies back? According to my experiences, it is a life-long battle and a constant work in progress. It is more than just taking our bodies back; it is figuring out what to do with them once we feel that we have them back. “The woman of color does not feel safe, when her own culture, and white culture, are critical of her; when the males of all races hunt her as prey” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 42). My identity is rooted in the African and Taino Indian story of resistance. My parents are both from the Dominican Republic; my mother has white-skin privilege, however it did little for her as it was paired with a broken-English and thick accent. My father had light-skin privilege that he saw little benefit from as it too was paired with a heavy accent and a status of immigrant. I have darker skin in my family, and as such am often referred to endearingly as “mi negra”, or, “mi prieta”, which translates to, my black one.

The dark skinned woman has been silenced, gagged, caged, bound into servitude, bludgeoned for 300 years, sterilized and castrated in the twentieth century. For 300 years she has been a slave, a force of cheap labor, colonized by the Spaniards, the Anglo, by her own people. For 300 years she was invisible. (Anzaldúa, 1987, pp. 44-45)

Sit with that. I ask you to sit with this, because as educators, it is our responsibility to have an understanding of the intersecting oppressive dynamic at play for women of color,
if you or we are truly committed to helping in our struggle for liberation. I have been sitting with knowing that I/we are going to have to fight to own our bodies for some time now.

In my own person, I have found it impossible to separate that knowingness from my existence today. Have you turned on a TV lately? Checked into social-media? Women’s bodies are still ‘for sale’, still objectified. The borderlands of my body have been drawn ages before my own existence came to bear. It is a part of the oppressive constructs we navigate. As a Queer Woman of Color in leadership today, owning my body comes with making peace with that same body, my body, which I choose to own and dictate has served to betray me on various occasions. For many Queer Women of Color this is a common tune we sing. “Our minds are like politicians; they make stuff up, they twist the truth. Our minds are masters at blame, but our bodies…our bodies don’t lie. Which is, of course, why so many of us learned to zip out of them at the first sign of trouble” (Roth, 2010, p. 122).

Anzaldúa’s (1987) Borderland theory offers language to better understand the various schisms within identity and how that translates into my everyday life as a Queer Afro-Latina woman. Anzaldúa says:

To live in the Borderlands means you are neither Hispana, India, Negra, Española, ni gabacha, eres mestiza, mulata; half-breed. Caught in the crossfire between camps while carrying all five races on your back. Not knowing who to run to, or run from. People walk through you, the wind steals your voice, and you’re a burra, scapegoat. In the Borderlands you are the battleground, where enemies are kin to one another; you are at
home, a stranger. To survive the borderlands, you must live ‘sin fronteras’, you must be the crossroads. (pp. 216-217).

Navigating these physical and psychological borderlands for me as a Queer Woman of Color in leadership has illuminated a stark contrast between owning all pieces of ourselves without wanting to seek affirmation from dominant culture; and leadership, in which we seek acceptance through affirmation from dominant culture and hegemonic paradigms. It is a paradox. It is for this reason that as Lorde (1984) says:

We must learn to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master’s tools, will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master’s house as their only source of support.

(p. 98)

5.2 The Myths We Hold About Acceptance and Approval

“I urge each one of us here to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there. See whose face it wears” (Lorde, 1982, pp. 31-35). According to my own experience, the queer, the woman, the colored, the fat; acceptance and approval begins within; however, it does not always end there. Particularly, when we see the overlaps between our personal and our professional worlds. I find often that my personal becomes a part of my professional and vice-versa. For example, as a Queer Woman of Color in leadership I know very well how difficult it is to separate identity from leadership. My identity in many ways influences and informs my leadership and my leadership goes on to inform
my identity. It is in part to this ‘catch 22’ that I have found myself at times seeking affirmation, acceptance, and approval outside of myself and especially in the work-place. Who does not want to feel appreciated? Valued? I know I do! However, as a Queer Woman of Color in leadership, seeking this from others does not always result in receiving it. Even when you do receive it, it never quite delivers to expectations.

I learned in those painful moments of witnessing and experiencing otherness that I was better off modeling affirmation and approval to those who hold more of a dominant lens in leadership. Additionally, I learned that I cannot base my worth, value, or sense of importance on any other human being. I have a responsibility to myself to honor my own voice, thoughts, accomplishments, and contributions and that of other women, particularly Queer women, and Queer Women of Color. This is not something you learn to do in leadership when you are a leader with various intersecting marginalized identities. This is something you learn you have to do as a leader when you live on the margins, if you are to survive. You have to take it, steal it, claim it, and fight for it with sweat and blood to preserve your dignity by any means necessary honor your spirit.

For those of us who are successful, it comes as a price. Black women’s professional motives, knowledge, and leadership acumen are more likely to be challenged and questioned, especially by those who have never experienced a Black female leader. This ultimately takes a toll on our emotional, physical, and psychological well-being. (Miller, 2015, p. 4)

It is for this reason that I posit that it is an act of rebellion for the Queer, the woman, and especially the Queer Woman of Color in leadership to honor spirit, vision, our own worth and capacity to love and lead ourselves.
5.3 Inviting Joy In as a Spiritual Discipline and Re-Claiming Ourselves

We leave our bodies and then we return. Leave and return. You forget and then you remember. Forget. Remember. One breath and then another. One step and then another. It’s that simple. And it doesn’t matter how long you’ve been gone; what matters is that you’ve returned. With each return, each sound, each felt sensation, there is relaxation, recognition, and gratitude. Gratitude begets itself, ripens into flowers, snow falls, mountains of more gratitude. Soon you begin wondering where you’ve been all this time. (Roth, 2010, p. 125).

We each hold so many stories within our bodies, stories that help us to remember or forget ourselves. Like mirrors, we hold up these stories of ourselves without at times realizing that those very stories are steeped in, and thus distorted by, a dominant narrative that seemingly looks to crush our own. In my own experience, it has been a daily work-in-progress to establish a sense of self, and affirm my style of leadership outside of the dominant narrative of leadership. It is a challenging but rewarding process that brings me great hope for Queer Women of Color in leadership. As Queer Women of Color, “who are better prepared than the oppressed to understand the terrible significance of an oppressive society?” (Freire, 1970, p. 45). In telling our stories there lies significant importance of speaking your scariest truths; so as to take power away from them. Understanding the emotions behind these stories can alter how we perceive ourselves as women. We can accept that these experiences make us feel anger, or we can internalize that the anger itself makes us angry people.
What you do with that anger is what matters – how you channel that anger into positive change or action. How you transform that anger is critical as to not internalize the messages carried within it, consciously and unconsciously. In my own experience it is through this transformation of anger that I have been able to find kindness for myself, and that has led to compassion for others in my leadership. “Only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong enough to free both the oppressor and the oppressed” (Freire, 1970, p. 44).

Yes, I said it, owning my anger, and digging beneath it, helped me to unearth a deep sense of kindness and compassion for myself, a physical and psychological reclaiming. Anger has a place. I understand as a Queer Woman of Color how anger is used against us. A mentor I had long ago, who identified as a Queer White Woman, offered a pearl of wisdom to me regarding anger. She said: Windy, I am a Queer White Woman in a high administrative leadership position. People often look at me and call me angry. They are going to do it, no matter what. Own your anger, and know that no matter what, you can’t change how others are going to label you. So don’t be mistaken and allow their labels to dictate your process.

I knew that if I as a Queer Woman of Color did not learn how to navigate my anger I would get further and further away from being able to reclaim myself; my body, my hair, my skin, my vision. I would allow the anger to pull me into the darkness where internalized isms and shame dwell. Nothing is more powerful than loving your self. It is a radical notion, especially in a world that tries to convince you otherwise, daily. Stepping back into my body in particular may sound simple, but to me, it is one of the most
courageous things I have done. Allowing joy into my life came from understanding that
anger had a place, I did not have to fear anger or its label.
CHAPTER 6: IN ONE, PEACE: SPIRITUALITY & AUTHENTICITY

“I am large, I contain multitudes”
-Walt Whitman

Awakening

Awoke feeling my ancestors swimming through my blood stream
Felt every cell and pulse taken over by memory.
I heard drums in the distance and felt ceremony approaching.
    There I was naked and awaiting in prayer
The burning scent of myrrh in the air
    Showered by the holy waters of rain
In between silence and stillness
    I was born.
(Paz-Amor, 2010)

Thanksgiving in October

“Five hundred twenty five thousand six hundred minutes; five hundred twenty five thousand six hundred moments; five hundred twenty five thousand six hundred minutes, how do you measure, measure a year? In day lights, in sunsets, in midnights, in cups of coffee, in inches, in miles, in laughter, in stride; five hundred twenty five thousand six hundred minutes; how do you measure a year in the life, how about love?” (Johnathan Larson, Seasons of Love, 1996)

There were mums on every table. Mums and carnations are quite significant for me, mostly because they symbolize death and dying. Every wake or funeral I have ever attended was saturated by these seemingly benign flowers. Vibrant dreary reds, deep oranges, and mustard yellows, they deceivingly seem beautiful, but the loud flashing “flowers of death” sign that looms over their existence is painful to ignore.

We have all thought about finitude, the end of our journey: death. As I arrived at a friend’s gathering to celebrate her life, I began writing a story in my head. I looked around and so many people had smiles with reserved tears being held back by stoically positioned jaws. The many masks we continue to wear, even when death is knocking.
“Five hundred twenty five thousand, six hundred minutes...how do you measure a life?” (Larson, 1996). This has been the question on my mind since leaving what I can only describe as my first living funeral. An intentional time and opportunity for family, friends, colleagues, people who have touched your life, to share stories, memories, tears, laughter, joy, kindness, love—with you—while you are still here. Wanting to smile, cry, laugh and ache within moments of one another is a shocking series of events, a roller coaster of feelings. Packets of tissues were placed on the white table clothes lined with silverware. The meal...A thanksgiving buffet, what could be more comforting?

As people spoke, shared, cried and allowed themselves to be seen, the room seemed to be filling with what I can only describe as a “knowing-ness”. There was a collective, unspoken understanding of the true reason of why we were all there – to say thank you, I love you, I appreciate you, and for now... goodbye. The trickiest thing about a living funeral is you do not actually ever say goodbye. You just feel it, you know it, but you never say it. This was a celebration of life, a life that touched so many so deeply. A life measured by love. See my truth is, I would be lying, if I did not tell you I am afraid of dying. My reality, however, is that as a Queer Woman of Color in an oppressive society, I have been much more afraid to live. However, all things change over time.

The SPN above focused on a woman warrior friend of mine. Someone I admired, and someone who had the power to touch your heart with a flash of a smile. A woman who may not have referred to herself as a leader, but in my experience, those are usually the best and most authentic leaders out there. She was herself, although she did not always feel safe being herself. Liz was a straight White woman with a charisma to her. What I loved about her the most was her ability to make you feel like no matter who you
were, you were a “part of her crew.” As a Queer Woman of Color in a Predominantly White Institution there are times when feeling like a lonely leader is inevitable. But then, there are those moments, when you meet people who actually see you. Well, to me, those moments are priceless; those moments are spirit.

6.1 Hello it is Breath, May I Come In?

“When you go through a heavy difficult time, and you don’t have the resources, you can’t go to anybody in the society or in the community, you finally fall back on yourself. What I did was, that I started breathing” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 240). I am not a religious person, but I am one who appreciates religion and what it offers people. Religion also scares me, as many people across religions can use it to hurt, judge, and kill others. I would say I am a spiritual person; for me that means acknowledging and feeling that I am a part of something bigger than myself. I believe in this entity called God/Goddess/Jehovah/Allah/Buddha, but I dually believe that this entity regardless of what name it is given, is love, and love is everything and everyone.

I struggled with including any beliefs I had around religion or spirit in this SPN dissertation. After all, those of us working in academic settings are trained to rely almost exclusively on rational thought, anti-spiritual forms of logical reasoning, and empirical demonstrations. As Irene Lara notes, “Within a Western framework, writing about spirit and spirituality, as well as writing from a spiritual epistemology that is embodied and ensouled in a woman of color consciousness, is cause for silencing and marginalization” (Keating, 2008, p. 53). Then I remembered my title: Damned if you do—Damned if you Don’t. I realized it was worth the risk to own my spiritual identity, as it was through
understanding religion and spirit for myself that I discovered the power of breath. Leadership for me, above all else, involves a great deal of breath and spirit.

“Politics of spirit demonstrates that holistic, spirit-inflected perspectives—when applied to racism, sexism, homophobia, and other contemporary issues—can sustain and assist us as we work to transform social injustice” (Keating, 2008, p. 56). For me, breath is spirit; when I take a moment to deeply breathe I am also taking a moment to be grateful for the rising and falling of my chest. I am able to listen to my heart beating and my pulse thumping, I am able to feel the undercurrent of peace and wisdom I carry. Furthermore, I am able to access that wisdom and apply it to my leadership, letting it build an ever-evolving perspective of the world I live in.

As a Queer Woman of Color in leadership, inviting breath into my life became a metaphor for inviting healing and a sense of peace. I do not suggest at all that you sit at your desk and meditate; however, I do suggest that you intentionally create ways for yourself to take time to mindfully breathe. One example of how I have done this has been installing a free web-based program on my work computer called, “Meditation Clock”. This program allows me to set a timer and every hour a deep resonating gong goes off and forces me to stop whatever I am doing and take a deep breath. This gong has now become a staple for students and staff that I work with. Many people, now knowing what it is, take a moment to stop and breathe with me. According to my experience, a community that works towards breathing together, also consciously or unconsciously works towards healing together. “For positive social change to occur, we must [with spirit] imagine a reality that differs from what already exists. To wish, to repair, to heal
our wounds…” (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 5). We need to struggle to “talk” from the wound’s gash, make sense of the deaths and destruction, and pull the pieces back together.

### 6.2 Writing to Wisdom

To write, to be a writer, I have to trust and believe in myself as a speaker, as a voice for the images. I have to believe that I can communicate with images and words and that I can do it well. A lack of belief in my creative self is a lack of belief in my total self and vice versa—I cannot separate my writing from any part of my life. It is all one. (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 94)

Anzaldúa’s (1987) quote translates for me as wisdom. There is wisdom that can be found in writing through one’s experiences. Letters, articles, journals, or stories all lead to self-discovery and potentially hold larger meaning for others. “The writing concretizes the spirit” (Anzaldúa, p. 97). As a Queer Woman of Color in leadership, writing has allowed me to make sense of systemic oppressive structures and how they impact my life. I can take peace in knowing that my authentic experiences exist outside of myself and on paper have the power to bring affirmation, insight, and solidarity for those whom it speaks to.

Each time I read my writing, I find I gain new insight and have something to add, take away, or sit with. Writing has given me permission to take those reflective moments of pause that I tell myself I am too busy for, and honor my experience. The writing unpacks the emotion tied to the experience. It allows for a digestive process that, for me, transforms an experience that I may not have felt power in; to one where I am defining situations on my own terms. There is no territory in my life that I am not willing to write about.
Writing is my whole life, it is my obsession. The sacrifice the act of creation requires is a blood sacrifice. For only through the act of creation the pulling of flesh, can the human soul be transformed. And for images, words, stories to have this transformative power, they must arise from the human body—flesh and bone—and from the earth’s body—stone, sky, liquid, soil. (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 97)

Writing our stories has created a way for women, in particular Queer Women of Color, to share our vulnerabilities which is a strength. To see one another and ourselves as potentially, through markers of narrative overlap, having a collective-identity that can cut across barriers of difference. As Hooks (1999) says, “One must put herself on the line, so to speak, and expose one’s vulnerabilities. The dialogue does not cause the differences to disappear, but they may become more porous and fluid” (p. 78). My need to read the stories of others echoed my own desire to write and share my own stories. Writing my stories makes me feel like I matter, like my experiences have more of a purpose then just becoming another chapter of my own internal saga.

Writing, and reading the stories of other women and in particular Queer Women of Color who were also in leadership, gives me a sense of pride and courage. “We are the people who leap in the dark, we are the people on the knees of the gods. In our very flesh, (r)evolution works out the clash of cultures, [the borders]” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 103). My survival relies on speaking, writing, sharing, and finding the wisdom in my own truths. By taking the time to share the expertise and wisdom that we have gained from our own experiences, with our own words, we can enable a transformational process that with nurturing can go on to re-shape leadership for Women of color. “Our leadership intellect
should be recognized, honored and promoted literally and figuratively” (Miller, 2015, p. 6).

6.3 Peace in Chaos

“And suddenly I feel everything rushing to a center, a nucleus. All the lost pieces of myself come flying from the deserts and the mountains and the valleys, magnetized toward my center. Soul…constantly remakes and gives birth to itself through body” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 73). When I am afraid, in panic, caught unaware, I have a mindfulness practice where I place my hands over my heart and breathe deeply for a few minutes. I close my eyes and imagine that my breath is a river, a series of strong and full currents that rush over, along, and through me. I have been meditating for 23 years, and in that time I have discovered various remedies for keeping my peace in the midst of chaos. For example, placing your hands over the areas that feel sore or are in distress while breathing allows for an opening that lends towards feeling peace within.

As a student services professional and educator, I work with students daily who are, for lack of a better word, always seemingly bordering on the fringes of chaos. They are afraid for a multitude of reasons that range from inner fears revolving around issues of worth, validity, and value, to outer fears that range from financial fear to fear involving physical bodily harm. I try to meet my students where they are at; I listen, I do not judge their situations. I offer vulnerability and authenticity when they ask me for advice. In the most peaceful of ways I lay on them the hard truths I feel they are running from. Students have a way of talking around the issues that feel chaotic to them; they are not wanting to sound like they do not know what to do.
I am often told by my colleagues that during chaos, I seem to get calmer. The calm is two-fold; yes, a part of it is breathing, being able to navigate conflict well, and vision. However, there is another part of being calm in chaos for me that is more complex. It involves a learned behavior from my childhood, one I have found in my experience is common for many women of color, and that is the art of stillness. We have had to practice stillness in chaos all of our lives. Stillness to remain safe and survive outside of and at times *within* our homes and ourselves. To clarify, this is not the “fight or flight” type of stillness, but rather the appearance of outward stillness accompanied by a mega-speed inner process that includes assessment, evaluation, solutions, and visioning outcomes.

There was a time in my life where I confused stillness for peace. I found they are not necessarily the same thing, and at times they were on completely different spectrums. I experience stillness as the act of remaining calm for the purpose of measuring a situation for a desired future outcome. A great deal of planning ahead happens when I am still in chaos. Peace however, does not involve any planning. Instead it involves being physically, psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually present and awake in the moment. The sense of groundedness that authentic peace produces in me in moments of chaos or conflict allows me to practice spirit in alignment with my leadership. As a Queer Woman of Color in leadership I have had to compartmentalize myself at the mercy of male dominant culture, too often.

Think of me as Shiva, a many-armed and legged body with one foot on brown soil, one on white, [one on black], one in the straight society, one in the gay world, the man’s world, the women’s, one limb in the literary

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world, another in the working class, [another in the middle class], the socialist, and the occult worlds. A sort of spider woman hanging by one thin strand of web… (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981, p. 205)

How does the Queer Woman of Color in leadership retrieve all of the pieces of herself back in order to lead, as one whole being? Do we as women, Queer women, women of color, ever get all of the pieces back? For me, bringing together all of the salvaged pieces, all of the pieces I could find, was and is a painful, empowering, but necessary endeavor. It takes courage, and the risk to de-compartmentalize; a choice that is so difficult when the act of compartmentalizing itself became a learned and engrained survival strategy for me as a Queer Woman of Color in leadership.

De-compartmentalizing came as a direct result of practicing mindfulness, meditation, and peace authentically. Re-claiming spirit in my leadership works like a salve to smoothen the edges, the rips and tears left from the tight grips of oppressive systems, and it heals me. The most exciting part, based on my own experience, is that it also lends towards fostering a sense of peace for others whom you are helping to support through crisis or chaos. As I have learned from Chodron (2001), an American Buddhist nun and bestselling author, true peace is being able to be in chaos, and still feel peaceful. As a Queer Woman of Color in leadership the commitment to finding and practicing my own peace continues to keep me in one piece and, more importantly; in spirit. “Out spirituality does not come from outside ourselves. It emerges when we listen to the “small still voice” within us, which can empower us to create actual change in the world” (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981, p. 195).
“Don’t you know yet? 
It is your light that lights the worlds”. 
-Rumi

I am poetry

“I understand.
How a voice trembles.
How thoughts can race.
How easily it is to doubt your very own words
For fear that what you have to say or write doesn’t matter to anyone else.
I understand.”
(Paz-Amor, 2013, p. Foreword IN Nash & Viray)

“If I am honest, I will say that I was afraid to hear my words out loud, let alone see them on paper. I knew that if my words existed anywhere else but inside of me I would run the risk of being told that something I enjoyed so much, something I believed in so much, might not have meaning. Or worse, that it just might not be good enough. My identity as an Afro-Latina Lesbian woman was a lens that I didn’t often hear or see represented in Higher Education; my lens, my identity, is a felt experience, one I have learned carries great importance and impact especially in historically predominantly white universities. All voices belong within these walls, including my own. My writing, my poetry, my voice was vulnerability for me and became an extension of my identity; it’s what I knew and know for sure to be mine. Speaking it, writing it, sharing it—is what became the risk. How does one become so afraid of their own voice? And how does one find it again?

I can explain my perception of at the time of Higher Education best by comparing it to a Federal Bank or some kind of corporate conglomerate that had the power to only give power to those deemed worthy. It was like an entity, guarded by sky high iron gates, with gate keepers and all. Even if I got passed the gates, how was I ever going to find a sense of place in it? Was I smart enough? Would I be laughed at for asking stupid questions? I wrote poetry but believed the honorable title of poet was one I did not have “the right” to take on. Outside of “creative writing” or English courses, was the use of poetry appropriate or acceptable in other areas of writing in Higher Education?

I remember the aching I felt and being filled with an anxious anguish the day before I had decided to read one of my poems in my first graduate course, Scholarly Personal Narrative with Dr. Robert J. Nash. Just the thought of it rendered a dry bitter taste in the back of my throat. Although fear clung to my
voice and made my mouth as dry as the Sahara desert, I spoke and read to a room of students, writers, and colleagues...shaky voice and all.

When we are children we are taught to “use our words” to ask for what we need or to describe what we see from the “I” perspective. As you transition into entering school you’re taught to never, under any circumstances, use the “I” in your writing. Your story, your experiences seem to not have a place in your education. Inevitably, somewhere along the line, you forget that you have something inherently wise and “all your own” to contribute. It becomes easier to believe that your story has no bearing or place in the Academy. And like a volume dial on the radio you run the risk of your voice growing quieter and quieter and eventually mute.

Did you know that voice has power? That writing allows you to keep testament and that sharing your story has the ability to help another?

What I discovered is that voice has the power of tidal waves; it can illuminate the night sky like a lightning storm, and it can captivate a room when spoken from a place of personal truth. For the first time in my educational career I concretely believed that what I had to say undoubtedly mattered. More than that, I knew Scholarly Personal Narrative would help me carve my own authentic place in Higher Education. I was beginning to crave the sound of my own voice. The more I spoke and shared, the more I heard and listened the more I felt a force, a surge happening inside... It was courage.

Courage is born and passed along through sharing stories- because within the hymns and psalms of every story told and sung, underlying every voice was the courage to speak. Courage is both the innate and the learned ability to bend when all forces of gravity say you should have broken. The moment in between choosing what you think you know and what you hope will all be worth it “in the end.” The voice of courage can be as soft and subtle as a whisper or as textured and deafening as a pounding drum. It can echo and reverberate between your skin and bones enough to make your teeth chatter or it can appear as ghostly and as faint as a muffled memory. It’s as powerful as a waterfall washing over you that moves you to act, even if that act is standing still.

_Clarly_

_Everywhere I go I look into the eyes of the people around me clearly._

_Moment pass moment_

_Catching deep seeded empty glances;_  
_Tired eyes;_  
_Engraved worry lines._

_all around faces are telling the stories that voices gone silent cannot._

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People walking around  
Forgetting why they are so special  
So critically important  
So bright  
Forgetting we are a piece of each other

I have learned that Life is harder when you believe you have nothing to offer.
Love is hard to feel when you don’t believe you deserve it
Peace is hard to find when you don’t take time to breathe deeply and quiet your mind
And happy is hard to be when you’re taught to find it outside of yourself.
I’ve learned that family is an unwritten testament that we were here
And that sadness when gone ignored leads to hopelessness

The woman in the store today carried eyes sunken low behind carvings of disappointment
And although directly in front of me she seemed so distant.
So distraught
In that one moment when our eyes met,
I wanted to send love
You pretended to stare blankly through me.
I panicked from within and tried to look away.
But my heart felt what your eyes and voice denied me.

I am still crying the tears and stories you store inside.

What stories have you been storing inside?
Has the silence served you?
What is your authentic voice?

These and many more questions like these were what the methodology of Scholarly Personal Narrative forced me to ask myself. Finding scholarship that supported my experience or echoed my lens and voice was where the liberation in the methodology began for me; as Dr. Nash says the “Me-Search”. Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) gave me entrance into Higher Education through a wide door open instead of a latched back window. My thoughts, my narrative, my writing felt welcomed. And in turn I found place where I once only saw gates.

SPN allowed me to use my authentic Pros-Poetry lens and voice and use it in my writing while at the same time researching supporting scholarship that echoed my experiences. This gave me the confidence I needed to become familiar once again with the sound and depth of my voice, my story and my writing. Again and again I experienced affirmation. Courage and a sense of home and voice were the unanticipated brilliance that emerged from diving into the depths of Scholarly
Personal Narrative. With it came the ability to own and speak the experiences that fight against the act to desperately cling to the fringes of silence. The piece of us that holds our stories—all of our stories, is the piece that irrevocably moves us to share what we have witnessed, experienced and resiliently come back from” (Paz-Amor IN Nash & Viray, 2013).

The SPN above speaks to my journey of discovering that the hope I had been searching for all along, that existed in my own voice, and how this surged into agency and further into my knowingness that I must speak, I must lead. Learning how to use my authentic voice in a way that embodies my multiple intersecting identities of being a first generation American, Queer, Afro-Latina, woman of size compounds the complex process of navigating voice in a Predominant White Institution (PWI). Concerns of worth, value, validity, and mattering have a habit of creeping in (or back-in) no matter how careful or “good” you are. It took me experiencing the help, affirmation, and support of my family (especially my wife), close friends, colleagues and my University community to slowly but surely build the confidence of my voice. Ultimately, above all else…it took me, believing in the power and vision of my own voice, to really own my truths. “We fear our power, fear our feminine selves, fear the strong woman within, especially the black aspect, the dark and awesome” (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981, p. 207).

7.1 Speak that Truth! But remember… Not everyone is going to Believe You or Care

Look, my truth is…You can speak from your heart, you can bring the passion of your intellect, offer the curiosity of a visionary, and still…Not everyone is going to understand your truth, and sometimes, that valid truth you so wholeheartedly shared, will go unheard, not believed or dismissed. According to my own experiences, you may even
with all of the best intentions of using your voice, fall flat on your face. It is a risk to speak your truth, a risk to share with others, but as a **Queer Woman of Color** in leadership I have learned that the risk of remaining silent has far greater repercussions. I found a sense of agency when using my voice that allowed me to further grasp the significance of my marginalized voice and approach to leadership, as being one that is not just of importance to my own survival but to those I serve. I work with several students; many of whom identify as young women of color who are just themselves starting to claim the ‘white hat of leadership’. “I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood” (Lorde, 1984, p. 87).

Discovering, owning, and re-claiming my voice regardless of who it fell short for or not is intrinsically correlated to deep self-reflection. A self-analysis or evaluation of when and where I personally began wearing my own ‘white hat of leadership’ was necessary. In order to do this, I needed to reflect on what brought me to leadership, what enriches my leadership, and what sustains my leadership. A model I first learned was through a course in my Doctoral program with a teacher, ally, and mentor of mine, Dr. Judith Aiken. She opened my mind and guided me, offered me mentorship and allyship, and taught me that my authentic lens and approach to leadership was not so unique. In fact, it was rooted in quite a few theories of leadership that incorporate identity. The more I learned about leadership theories the more affirmed I felt in my own approach to leadership. The theories did not make the fear of using my own voice go away altogether or at all, and it certainly did not make me a fearless leader. It did however confirm that I was not alone. My experiences in leadership as a **Queer Woman of Color** contained
overlaps with other Queer Women of Color, I was part of a larger and multi-tiered collective experience. I now had another set of language: the language of the academy. This new academic language set became an additional lens that I couple with my cultural lenses, and my life experiences further expanded and constructed my own development, practice, and journey to leadership.

7.2 A Womanist Multicultural and Relational Lens to Leadership and Agency

In a book titled *Salsa, Soul, And Spirit; Leadership for a Multicultural Age, New Approaches to Leadership from Latino, Black, and American Indian Communities*, (Bordas, 2007), the concept of “Soul” in the Black or African American community is used to describe a pillar of leadership. “Soul reflects a deep well of resilient hope, a spiritual brotherhood (sisterhood) bonded by common hardship, and an emotional connection that forges community consciousness” (p. 13). It goes on to describe American Indian or Native American leadership as being one to “embrace the understanding of the relationships between human beings and the larger world” (p. 16). Lastly, it describes Latino leadership as one that embraces and concretizes the old saying of “Mi casa es su casa; developing the concept of generosity” (p. 18) juxtaposed to leadership.

I use this introduction to my own because as a first generation American, an Afro-Latina lesbian woman, and a Dominican woman whose culture is a melody of African, Latino, Taino-Indian, and Anglo, all of these lenses impact my need of placing inclusivity and authenticity to my understanding of leadership.
For me it began by learning what it meant to lead myself. Having the courage to say no to friends, redefining right and wrong based on what keeps you moving forward. Standing up for myself and others, even if it meant my life, for the purpose of showing loyalty. These were choices within my own leadership that were essential in surviving where my family and I lived. Some of the most significant experiences that led to the development and formation or taking-away of voice in my leadership journey started as a child, on East 51st street in Brooklyn, NY – in the realm of double-dutch. There is no metaphor here, just simply double-dutch. Two telephone wires we used as rope being turned simultaneously while every kid on that block jumps in and “struts their stuff”. If you made it through with just a few lashes from the wire rope you “could jump rope”, and that made you someone who leads. However, if you were more like me and fumbled again and again, barely able to get into the rope, and leaving with quite a number of lashes from the rope, then you were the last to be chosen and most certainly not the one to lead, usually you just turned rope. I was a smart fat girl, who quickly discovered I was much safer within the four walls of my bedroom and a good book.

I did not have many friends and so the relationships with my family became my world. My mother Santa Amor de Paz, my father Rafael Santiago Paz, and my sister Jeannie Paz-Amor, were my tribe. I made it this far because of them. But, especially because of my mother who could not speak English well and was often at first ignored by many people. However, my mother has ways of assuring she is heard. My father was completing his residency and navigating working in challenging, high-paced hospitals rooted in the hearts of Brooklyn and the Bronx while we were growing up. My mother was always home with us and because she could not speak English, neither could we
initially. I was raised with Spanish as my first language and learned English, much like my mother, through TV and books. That is actually how she named me “Windy” from an infomercial playing the song “Everyone knows it’s Windy.” One of my most vibrant memories as a child was carrying tables into New York subway stations and setting up perfumes to sell with my mother. People stared, rolled their eyes and sucked their teeth in disgust. But my mother would just tell jokes. She would keep us laughing for hours while we made the money we could. I always knew I was going to make it and I always knew I was going to do incredible things in my life, because of her and for her.

The rules that kept me “in line” so to speak are still ones I use to guide myself today. 1) I learn to see myself in every single person I meet; 2) I consult my heart first, and then my head. I have learned the answer will be somewhere in my belly; and finally 3) I lead with love, there is nothing more powerful. Guevara said,

I am more convinced that true revolutionaries must perceive the revolution, because of its creative and liberating nature, as an act of love.

…On the contrary; the revolution is made by people to achieve their humanization. What indeed is the deeper motive to which moves individuals to become revolutionaries, but the dehumanization of people?

…Let me say, with the risk of appearing ridiculous, that the true revolutionary is guided by strong feelings of love. (Guevara IN Freire, 1970, 1993, 2000, 2008, p. 89)

Through what seemed like trudging through mud at times, I believed that I could one day bring a better life to my family. Through dreams of one day returning to
forgotten neighborhoods and to people whom have felt that they have been forgotten, my path to leadership was created. Leading became the part that had to happen.

Making sure I was not leaving people behind became the driving tenant in my leadership. By age 14, I joined a summer camp called the Matty Feldman Summer Camp; a multicultural summer camp for emerging leaders specifically, young people of color. Once I returned back to my high school I knew I wanted to get involved with volunteering. I wanted to empower women, young women, particularly young women of color who had experienced some form of trauma, sexual or gender based violence. At 17 years old, I began volunteering at Rape Crisis centers and answering hot lines, editing letters, accompanying victims of violence to hospitals. I graduated from high school with no honors or recognitions (that came later on in Graduate school). However, what I did have was a knowingness— one that said I had true power to bring healing and change into people’s lives. I volunteered straight through college and soon after took a job as an advocate for survivors of sexual and gender based violence at the University of Radford, in Virginia. Although the work fed my soul, I truly felt that as much good as I was doing, I was not affecting the policies that affect how so many of these cases are carried out.

I later moved back to New York City to be near my family and began working for a Civil Rights non-for profit law firm called the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund. There I served as a Paralegal in training and a Legal Intake Coordinator. What that really meant was I had the privilege of working with people every day who were afraid to claim their own rights to live, afraid to use their voices. This echoed my own struggle with voice and infuriated me, as it forced me to I realize that so many people with multiple marginalized intersecting identities, like me, were afraid to
speak…it was not just me, it was an epidemic. “The disease of powerlessness thrives in my body, not just out there in society” (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981, p. 207) and vice-versa.

My role was to make sure that the people I was working with understood their rights, and how to use them. I helped to develop several class action lawsuits alongside my colleagues, which included a fierce team of civil rights lawyers, including my largest project of helping to work with the 9/11 undocumented clean-up workers whom were hired to clean the buildings after 9/11. These workers were placed in toxic environments and hired to clean air ducts without even so much as a piece of cloth to cover their nose and mouth. They were later denied pay, health care and monetary compensation. I met with over hundreds of people and helped to educate and inform these workers on their right to receiving worker’s compensation as well as what is illegal to be asked of them by the justice system. Although small, a bit of justice was served to people who had come to believe that they had been forgotten. People that years later could no longer climb a flight of stairs without having to rest for air because their lungs were literally melting from the toxins they had inhaled from within the air vents of the buildings they were hired to clean. I knew I had to be a leader because I had already understood too well how people and institutions take advantage of others. It was the rage of witnessing injustice that awakened my ability to speak and to see that being a leader was not a choice; it was a necessity. “The pull between what is and what should be. I believe that by changing ourselves we change the world, that traveling ‘El Mundo Zurdo path’; is the path of a two-way-movement—a going deep into the self and reconstruction of society” (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981, p. 208).
My voice serves as a bridge, a connector, a force that has the power to bring about real and positive change to my own life and that of others. This experience in my life taught me that I and others lose out when I do not use my voice to affect positive societal change. This is also value I bring into my current leadership role as the Associate Director of the Living/Learning Center at UVM. My student leaders can smell “bull shit” miles away. There are usually 85+ of them and only one of me. I learned early on that vulnerability begets vulnerability and if I brought a true authentic representation of myself to those I was serving, we would have more of an opportunity to build an intentional and meaningful working experience. If not, I would be eaten alive.

I am not dogmatic in how I lead but rather try to be fluid in my leadership, I do not believe there is just one way to lead. How could there be? When there are so many lenses to see the world through. When I work with my students, or my community members, or even my family, my goal is to bridge individual goals to group goals and common goals. My goal above all is not necessarily to find resolution, but to make certain that all those at the table leave feeling heard, listened to, and respected. Honoring our processes in leadership in my experience starts with honoring all of the voices who have a stake in the process.

I often tell the students I work with that true leadership is empowering and engages others to lead. Every voice has power and the ability to shape something terrible into something wonderful, and maybe even into something incredible. It comes from the inclusion of all of those voices. Building and nurturing relationships over time concretizes those opportunities to offer support, to listen effectively, to connect with what makes meaning for others. My style of leadership is adaptable and formulates based on
the unique goals and ideals of the community I am serving. Knowing the needs of my community make it so that I can tailor my approach to those needs. It makes it so that I can offer my support in an impactful way and not in a harmful way.

I feed my leadership by feeding my soul. I surround myself with people that leave me feeling proud to be myself. I listen to music that speaks what my soul at times cannot speak, until it gives me the power to speak. When I truly need a pick me up I call my parents and simply ask them to tell me a story. When I find myself asking questions like “What am I doing?” or “Am I good enough to be here?” I remember that my education and my leadership in the world is bigger than me; it has the power to serve as a voice for so many –those that are unable to use their own.

I am a luchadora (a fighter) (Anzaldúa, 1987). Many may choose not to see me coming, but once I am there, I own and remember the things that brown and black, lesbian, fat, women, like myself were taught not to do. I will take up space, I will share what I feel and when my lips are quivering and my hands are shaking I will absolutely without a doubt speak. Writers like Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, Joy Harjo, Sonia Sanchez, Adrienne Rich, Barbara Smith, Antonia Pantoja, Paulo Freire and Che Guevara are just a few of the leaders and minds that have helped to sustain my love for change, people, leadership and most importantly, myself. When owning and using voice in leadership, allowing myself and others around me to make mistakes is critical. None of us are perfect, although some of us may feel we border close, it just is not so. Using one’s voice in leadership comes with knowing you are not always going to say the right thing, and when you do not, you will need to develop various mechanisms of awareness that will help you to own your mistakes, apologize to others, and to learn to forgive yourself.
CHAPTER 8: TRUNK AND ROOTS: RESILIENCE & COURAGE

“Throw me to the wolves, And I will return leading the pack”
- Unknown

Guan Yin

I wear her on my back to remind me to keep hope.
She sits peacefully meditating with eyes on her hands and feet; all wide open.
    She is courage.
She is powerful and strong etched in my skin as a forever.
A constant reminder that I am here to fight for things that are bigger than me.
Her mere presence says it all. She folds as I fold. She is full and stretched as I am.
    She rests on my back hiding underneath layer of cloth.
    Amidst layers of ‘please don’t look’.
    I cannot run, she is my reflection.
As foremothers come to pass and loneliness of their departure seeps through skin, flesh and bone
It is the woman that is my mother, my sister, my grandmother, my lover, my friend, that sits;
    Calmly on my back carved within the mountains and canyons of my body.
    It is she that anoints my tongue and sharpens my mind
It is she that pushes that courage to come in the darkest of moments, at all the worst times.
    (Paz-Amor, 2010, Adapted 2015)

When I set a path for myself, make a commitment to something, I work hard to accomplish it. That is one of my staple mottos in life. If I want something, I just need to make it happen. It’s going to take hard work, creative approaches, but I can really do anything. DANGER: APPROACHING A SETUP, LIFE MOTTO’S SHOULD INCLUDE SPACE FOR MISTAKES, DETOURS. YOU ARE ONLY HUMAN. That particular rule in my life hit me like a baseball going 65 mph, it happened after receiving my 30th rejection letter from Law School.
Yes, I said 30th rejection letter from Law School. If you are reading this asking yourself ‘who applies to 30 law schools over 3 years?’ I don’t blame you.

Years of studying, tutors, LSAT courses and nothing seemed to be helping. I have had my heart set on attending Law School for quite some time. I had a plan...quit my job, commit to studying every day, take two practice LSAT exams every week, and then obliterate the actual exam! Land myself into a fantastic Law School. Do “whatever” that entails, graduate, save the world, make a heap load of money and BAM! Success. Right? Well...not exactly, in fact if that plan was a highway, let’s just say I ended up on an island with no roads at all.
I never got into Law School, I held onto this feeling that I had failed for a long time. I felt lost and unclear about my next steps. I had focused on this plan for so long, I forgot to make a “plan b”, a “get out of jail free card”; options for another direction. I had the hardest time with being honest with myself. I kept coming up with high-ego excuses and put downs when the reality was it wasn’t my path. By holding on to what I had deemed a failure in my life, I was preventing myself from dreaming of new roads to travel. If allowing your heart to dream is a risk, then healing is in order. “Whole hearted living is about engaging our lives from a place of worthiness. It means cultivating the courage, compassion and connection to wake up in the morning and think, No matter what gets done, and how much is left undone, I am enough. It’s going to bed at night thinking, YES, I am imperfect and vulnerable and sometimes afraid, but that doesn’t change the truth that I am also brave and worthy of love and belonging.”

When I finally realized that I needed to continue to move forward a new dream arrived. Getting my Master’s degree in Higher Education and then going for my Doctoral degree in Higher Education. It took hard work, community and connection, holding my head up high, and having the honesty to name to others where I did not achieve what I had set out to do. It took great giving and receiving for me to learn how to let go and move forward. “Giving and allow another person to penetrate our barriers.” Receiving helps us to enter the river of spirit that connects us to each other. To give to others is to feel the joy of creation spilling from within us. To receive it, is to be humbled, to shed our ego. Doors began to open for me and before I knew it, I was proudly walking through them. It doesn’t mean I don’t think about Law School now and again, it just means I think about so much more for myself in the now” (Paz-Amor IN Nash & Viray, 2014).

The SPN above is one example of a time in my life that allowed me to discover and practice resilience and courage. Experiences like these offer me teachings that bleed into my leadership. For instance, within my leadership role, I often have the privilege of working with a population of brilliant and “over achieving” student leaders. I encourage them to dream big; in fact, to dream a few big dreams. However, dually, I encourage them to plan for the “what-if” moments of life—in case it does not go as planned, or “next steps”—in case it goes exactly to plan. When they ask me if I have ever had a dream that just did not happen, I am honest with them. I share vulnerability with them, and I watch
their eyes get wide as they are absorbing my stories and taking pieces that apply to their own. New knowledge is forming for them, and new wisdom is rising from the connections that sharing narratives can create.

In my experience, hearing the stories of courage and resilience from my family, friends, colleagues, mentors, professors, and students allows me insight into two things. (1) A better sense of who others are, and what experiences and lenses inform their values and beliefs; thus informing how I can be of better support to them, and, (2) hearing the life lessons of others, including the particular language/words they use to speak about their stories of courage and resilience impacts my own narrative and, further informs my self-learned mechanisms of survival. As a Queer Woman of Color in leadership, passing on my stories of resilience and courage translates as another way I offer love in my leadership. “Because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is commitment to others” (Freire, 2008, p. 89).

Understanding the strength in courage and resilience is important in leadership. Equally as important, as I have learned, is understanding that there is strength in admitting when we are not wanting, willing, or able to be strong or courageous. For me, understanding where I first concretized notions of courage and resilience became critical for negotiating this process. The origins of my understanding around courage and resilience came from my family and my community. Moments where I was most afraid or felt loss were often compounded by continuous messages of being or staying strong. Although confusing, what my brain interpreted and ascribed to was: no matter what you must be strong. Your heart could be shattered, your body could be failing, and your mind could be at its edge, but no matter what, you must stay strong. As I grew more into
myself and also grew in my approach to leadership I realized how dangerous this message was. It propelled me to start the process and reflection of defining courage and resilience outside of my family and, as best I can, outside of the various oppressive social constructs that greatly impact self-perception.

8.1 The Allure and Pressure of the Lioness

As a Queer Woman of Color in leadership I often feel both an inner pressure and an external expectation from others to be the resilient, courageous – the lioness. It is a pressure and stressor that I have witnessed in my own life and in the lives of other women of color in leadership. I could see why we internalize and digest the message that ‘you must always be strong and courageous’, as it is a message many of us learned from our mothers. It is a message that if permitted to be the only message, can lead to dangerous situations. It can become a dense and toxic mask that we wear. One that is near at all times, and one that especially must be tight, fixed, and in place when we ourselves are feeling anything but strong and courageous. In my experience, what we come to believe about ourselves, if not permitted any flexibility, can imprison and isolate us in our egos. In that process it is only ourselves that leave wounded, without limbs, and at its worst, be-headed.

We tend to view mental well-being on an individual level, believing that stress only affects us because of our individual situations and capabilities. Then we acknowledge that these immense pressures come from outside sources and affect us collectively. (McCaffrey, 2012, p. 1)

The archetype of the strong black woman has been rooted and engrained throughout history. It is one that I myself feel both pressure from and pride in. According
to my experiences, courage in leadership is vital but best when seasoned with **humility, generosity, and gratitude**. For me this equates to also knowing when to put the lioness, or the mask of ‘always being strong’ away. After all, even the lioness must rest and at times allow herself to be cared for. I worry for women, Queer women, and Queer Women of Color in leadership who do not know how to put the lioness away, or refuse to, even for each other. I serve as a role model for many of my students, students who do and do not share markers of identity with me. Over and over again I watch how regardless of their multiple intersecting identities, they observe me or ignore me, are learning from what I do and what I do not say. They are active learners and hungry for further understanding on how to navigate the world; this includes leadership. Particularly, my students who are women of color or Queer Women of Color at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) are starving to learn from other Queer Women of Color in leadership. It is because of this need that I have learned to show more than *just* the lioness in my leadership. They will learn that on their own and in other ways. My choice in approaching my leadership as one being beyond the lioness, lies in modeling a leadership approach that feels accessible and offers a multi-textured representation of authentic leadership. Through vulnerability and authenticity in leadership I have witnessed that those very student leaders then begin to show themselves true courage and resilience while infusing compassion so as to heal from the many respective spaces where they have each grown to hide in. I witness them learning to navigate both the pressure and the allure of the lioness.
8.2 The Emperor Penguin

“And they will march just as they have done for centuries, ever since the emperor penguin decided to stay, to live and love in the harshest place on Earth” (March of the Penguins, 2005). According to my experiences and much like the Emperor Penguin, resilience is rooted in a sense of hope and purpose. I searched through various books, journals, and online sites for different perspectives and definitions of resilience. The one I personally found to align most with my own perceptions and experience of resilience came from an online site called “Wisdom Commons” (2015) on the topic of resilience it offered the following:

Resilience is the ability to work with adversity in such a way that one comes through it unharmed or even better for the experience. Resilience means facing life’s difficulties with courage and patience – refusing to give up. It is the quality of character that allows a person or group of people rebound from misfortune, hardships and traumas. Resilience is rooted in a tenacity of spirit—a determination to embrace all that makes life worth living even in the face of overwhelming odds. When we have a clear sense of identity and purpose, we are more resilient, because we can hold fast to our vision of a better future. Much of our resilience comes from community—from the relationships that allow us to lean on each other for support when we need it.

As a Queer Woman of Color in leadership there is no doubt in my mind that the resilience I have gained from overcoming stressful, or traumatic, situations has
significantly impacted my sense of courage, deepened my sense of spirit, and enlightened my sense of purpose. Ai and Park, (2005) state:

Although trauma and stress can disrupt relationships and valued life roles as well as core values and beliefs, the process involved in confronting these disruptions may also promote broadened perspectives, new coping skills, and the development of personal and social resources. (p. 247)

Resilience in my life seemed to come organically. What I mean by that is, that when you are in acute danger, as I often was in the neighborhood in Brooklyn where I grew up, you become clear about what is danger (i.e., gun shots, gangs) and what is not. You adapt quickly between laughter and tears in neighborhoods like Flatbush, Brooklyn, environments that may not offer second chances. However, in the neighborhood called higher education, danger, or as I like to call it “grab hold moments,” is not always as obvious. Resilience to those moments in my experience takes more time to develop; as first one must get over the initial unforeseen betrayal. For example, the daily micro-aggressions experienced by People of Color (POC). The phrase micro-aggression was coined in 1970 by Chester Pierce, MD, and spoke to adverse racism. Derald Wing Sue (2010) Professor of Psychology and Education in the Department of Counseling and Clinical Psychology at Teachers College and the School of Social Work, Columbia University elaborated on micro-aggressions. In an article titled: Racial Micro-aggressions in Everyday Life, he speaks to the phenomena that people of color experience regularly. Wing Sue (2010) states:

Racial micro-aggressions are the brief and everyday slights, insults, indignities and denigrating messages sent to people of color by well-
intentioned White people who are unaware of the hidden messages being communicated. These messages may be sent verbally ("You speak good English."), nonverbally (clutching one's purse more tightly) or environmentally (symbols like the confederate flag or using American Indian mascots). Such communications are usually outside the level of conscious awareness of perpetrators. (p. 2)

Growing up in Brooklyn taught me to have an acute awareness of my surroundings at all times. I clearly understood moments of obvious danger. Navigating resilience in leadership in a PWI as a Queer Woman of Color who is also of size can be challenging and if you are not careful, exhausting. Needing to tap into resilience is not always as transparent in a PWI. Danger is not always as clear. In fact, it is usually as Wing Sue (2010) suggests, quite subtle. The danger of a micro-aggression is that it causes a visceral response in me, and not because the experience of words cutting through me puts my life in danger, but because it puts my spirit in danger.

It is for this reason that community for Queer Women of Color in leadership is of critical importance to building and expanding the knowledge base that can go on to expand individual and collective methods of resilience both in the academy and beyond.

8.3 Redwoods

Redwoods are known as the goddess tree. When I think of Queer Women of Color, I think of the strong Redwood trees. According to the Goddess Tree online site (2015), “Redwoods are resistant to fire because they produce very little resin and pitch. They produce tannic acid, which protects them from rot and insects. When an old
Redwood dies or is cut down, a new one sprouts from its roots. The roots never die. The Giant Redwood is the most magnificent of all evergreens”.

The most important parts of the Redwood…its trunk and roots. *Trunk and Roots* is a metaphor that for me represents coming into, navigating, and understanding one’s sense of courage and resilience. My trunk, or my body, holds my stories, experiences, pains, joys, and love; my roots are my community, mentors, ancestors, professors, and people who have shaped me. Both my trunk and roots influence the sense of courage, resilience, power and connection I feel around and within me. As a Queer Woman of Color in leadership I am constantly amazed by the resilience I witness in the leadership of other women of color.

In this way, the old adage of Black women needing to be “twice as good” is especially true for us in the world of academia. Even though we have earned our degrees and our places in competitive doctoral programs just like everyone else, we still have to prove that we “deserve” to be there.

(Gibson, Feb. 2015, p. 2)

I understand why we work so hard to seemingly and willfully appear to be so strong. I am also aware of the toll that having to practice continual resilience can have. It can make you guarded and distant, afraid that others albeit subtly or without awareness are at some point going to say something that will wound you. The moments in my leadership where I have felt the need to practice continual resilience left me often feeling isolated and trapped in survival mode. I quickly understood that in those moments I needed to find the courage to name what was happening to other trusted allies and colleagues, to listen to their stories of resilience, and gather new information and knowledge. I also understood
the importance of processing and re-naming those experiences in my most salient language, poetry. “Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought” (Lorde, 1984, p. 98).

To imagine the spirit of poetry is much like imagining the shape and size of the knowing. It is a kind of resurrection light; it is the tall ancestor spirit who has been with me since the beginning, or a bear or a hummingbird. It is a hundred horses running the land in a soft mist, or it is a woman undressing for her beloved in firelight. (Harjo, 2012, p. 164)

**Lagrimas**

Mother moon find ground beneath my feet
Create worlds deep within the skies
Where I may speak to the goddesses who ruled before my time
Let them bleed the stories that make us cringe at night
Or proclaim the psalms that gave the spirit flight
We sisters of dark hold tight so as not to break our frame
Entangled in layers of shame, blame, and re-claim.
Lagrimas become our holy water.
(Paz-Amor, 2015)

The poetic-text above is an example of what Anzaldúa (1981) and Lorde (1984) referred to when describing the importance of naming our own experiences through our own lenses of intersectionality using our own language. The freedom to give my own meaning to experiences through poetry and prose poetry empowers me, and moves me into my true power of resilience. True resilience for me came with believing that what I have to say matters, has worth, and the power to offer healing to myself and others. Lorde tells us, “In the transformation of silence into language and action, it is vitally necessary for each one of us to establish or examine her function in that transformation and to recognize her role as vital within that transformation” (p. 43).
What are your stories of transformation or resilience?

What lies beneath them?

When I was in middle-school and my sister was in high-school, she began dating this “low-life” guy, unbeknownst to my mother. When my sister figured out that this guy was involved in drugs and gangs she immediately tried to dump him, saying he did not take it very well is an understatement. He followed my sister and her friend’s home from school. While they rode the city bus, he drove behind them. My sister and her friends ran from the bus stop, a block and half away from where we lived in Brooklyn until they reached the front door. I was sitting in our living room when I heard my sister screaming, “Open the door! Open the door!” I did not know what was exactly happening at the time, so I jumped up, ran to the door and opened it. My sister and her five friends threw me and themselves to the ground, while screaming “stay down!” The “low-life” guy she was dating had decided to come and scare her into staying with him. While in his brand new car, he pulled out a gun and started shooting at the house. My mother was downstairs when she heard all of the screaming. She came running upstairs and without flinching, pulled out a pair of scissors, ran out of the house towards the guy in the car and tried to attack him with a pair of scissors.

My mother first taught me who the lioness is. She is a natural leader, one who people in my neighborhood trusted and followed. Neighbors started looking out of their windows…and began coming outside with pots and pans to attack the car…from a man with a gun. My mother’s courage and resilience forced others to move and to tap into their own. It was they who scared the ex-boyfriend away. The police were called several
times, but as usual, never came. You may be wondering what I did during this time while this ordeal was going on; I was silent, afraid. I wanted to be out there fighting with my mother, but I could not move. I could only watch her from behind barred windows.

In becoming forcibly and essentially aware of my mortality, and of what I wished and wanted for my life, however short it might be, priorities and omissions become strongly etched in a merciless light, and what I most regretted were my silences. Of what had I ever been afraid? To question or to speak could have meant pain, or death. But we all hurt in so many different ways, all the time, and pain will either change or end. Death on the other hand, is a final silence…and that will come without regard for whether I had ever spoken what needed to be said, or had only betrayed myself into small silences, while I planned someday to speak, or waited for someone else’s words. And I began to recognize a source of power within myself that comes from the knowledge that while it is most desirable not to be afraid, learning to put fear into a perspective gave me more strength. (Lorde, 1984, p. 41)

When I lose sight of my true resilience, I remember that I am a Redwood, reared from the roots of strong women before me. When I am afraid, I remember Lorde’s (1984) words and am reminded that my silences have never done anything for me. My mother’s roots are alive in me, as are my grandmother’s, and great-grandmother’s. Their courage and resilience are my foundation, my compass, and my true North. Although I no longer live in neighborhoods where I or my family are physically under attack, I still use these experiences in my life as deep sources of information and knowledge that I know inform
my walk, my talk, and how I lead. In them lie the values, beliefs, and morals that have influenced my notions of courage and resilience in leadership. Knowing this for me is survival. “I affirm my own worth by committing myself to my survival, in my own self and in the self of other Black women” (Lorde, p. 173).
CHAPTER 9: THE SOFTEST SPOTS: LOVE & VULNERABILITY

“Inhale love…
Exhale gratitude”
-Project Happiness

“Maybe the wolf is in love with the moon,
And each month,
It cries for a love it will never touch”
-Unknown

Dirty Boots
Our love had a way of making it snow;
It’s what happens when warm air hits a cold pocket.
As the seeds need the water to grow,
as the wind births the fires flames,
as do we overlap somewhere in between time and space.
It is there I speak your name.
(Paz-Amor, 2015)

“I certainly do not hope to alter the world. Perhaps I can put it best by saying I hope to alter my own vision of the world. I want to be more and more myself. As ridiculous as that may sound. And suddenly it became so light and clear to the inside. The heaviness of all this lifted and I could breathe into me as I am”

“Love and Loss have been staples in my own life. I use them to hold together the chapters of my-self. Love is how I strive to walk in the world. Loss, although painful, has offered me some of my greatest life lessons that lend towards creating my understanding of why I walk the world the way I do.

Below is a small SPN, followed by one of the initial lists or “rules” to help steer my life, which I made after my first heartbreak. The biggest lesson I learned...love is a risk, but what better to risk for.

My thoughts were lavished with rainbows—accented with lavender hues and the thick, layered undertaking of love. Although a long time ago I do remember that being 17 is not as easy as it looks. I would compare myself during that time in my life to a baby giraffe taking its first steps into the wild. I felt shaky, wobbly, constantly on the brink of fumbling, and unapologetically top heavy. What I remember most about being 17: the first time I ever fell in love which also happened to be my first year as a college student and the first time I ever “came out” as a lesbian. I’ll set the stage for you...It all starts with the very conversant “shame of down there” a phrase so many of us have heard growing up.
In my own upbringing, I was never taught to really speak about “down there.” It was an anomaly to me. Growing up in Catholic School run by nuns wasn’t exactly the best place to get answers—not for the “real” questions I needed to ask that is. High School wasn’t that much help either. Aside from health classes that focused more on reproduction or safe sex, nothing was really spoken about in regards to women and loving our…”downstairs.” So, like most women, I walked around at that time not really knowing much about…myself. Until that is, I came to the understanding and acceptance that I was attracted to women - and like most great stories - it starts with falling in love for the very first time.

I grew up hearing stories on TV about how love, “makes colors brighter,” or love, “opens your world.” From cartoons to most movies, love is displayed as adventurous, mysterious, sweet, tender, worth fighting the world for, an epic journey, bells and all. The romanticized love that most people long for involves pieces of that “magic,” and why shouldn’t it? There is no greater truth than love. What they don’t tell you is that love is work. It’s hard, endless, incredibly rewarding - and at times taxing - work. Authentic love or, “real love,” adds a flare of stinky, whole, persevering, compassionate, belly laughter, tree roots, eye stare-down kind of love. It even comes along with a dash of ever-lasting, if you nurture it.

This was not that kind of love. It was more of a, “young, misguided love.” It was a love that brought about tremendous revelation about me - and how I walk the many melodies of love - but had little to do with the other person, and who we were together in love. However, it was the love that freed me from the looming shame of “down there.” It was in that time, that I discovered how misguided I was about the myths! Most women will understand what I mean. “Shame is organized by gender. The expectations that fuel shame for women are based on our culture’s perception of what is acceptable for women.”x The “whys,” the “how comes,” and my personal favorite, the “holy shit, that’s what that does!” With those discoveries came a release of the shame around it. A veil, so to speak, was lifted, and underneath was love and wonder. “Shame is universal—no one is exempt. If we can’t talk about shame and examine the impact it has in our own lives, we certainly can’t be helpful to others.”xi This was the first time in my life that I can remember where I felt like I discovered my own truth, and I vowed to myself to live it. To own and honor my body and my identity and live who I knew I was, out loud and with authenticity and autonomy. Although that love did end in what felt like heartbreak and betrayal by a 17 year-old me, I came out of it that much stronger.

Here is what I learned that later became rules for me to live by:

1. Love is a risk but does a better risk exist?
2. Don’t give your heart to a fool, and don’t be a fool with your heart.
3. Don’t forget to ask yourself, “Is it fit? Or fear?”
4. Let go of the word “downstairs”, downstairs reminds you of basements and basements feel creepy and dreary. How about “over and yonder”? That feels like you’re approaching a meadow and might run into a mystical creature along the way.
5. Be true to your heart and make sure that what you think and what you feel align.
6. When your toes twinkle, you know you’re on to something good!
7. Don’t worry about what others will think of you, focus on loving yourself.
8. Last but not least, there are going to be times when you are afraid to live your truth, when that happens remember rule number 1 and that loving yourself is the greatest love of all.

Learning to “see me” or to see yourself is only the first step in discovering, owning and loving your authentic self and how you walk the world” (Paz-Amor IN Nash & Viray, 2014).

The SPN speaks to the first time I experienced falling, and in the same breath losing, love; and the shame, epiphanies, genuineness and acceptance of myself that came from it. It serves as but one example of how love and vulnerability have been the biggest teachers in my life. They have also served to be the biggest teachers in my leadership. “Eventually if we speak the truth to each other, it will become unavoidable to ourselves” (Lorde, 1984, p. 175). Love is the truth I find the courage to speak, the action of speaking that truth is in itself an act of vulnerability. Love can bring me to my most vulnerable and authentic self and it can also render me defeated as it reveals my softest spots.

In my own experience as a Queer Woman of Color, authentic love and vulnerability go hand in hand. It is in the courage to be vulnerable that I have discovered the most profound relationship with love. And it is in risking to love myself and others that I have experienced the many ways I am able to offer vulnerability. As Brown (2012) states:
As children we found ways to protect ourselves from vulnerability, from being hurt, diminished, and disappointed. We put on armor; we used our thoughts, emotions and behaviors as weapons; and we learned how to make ourselves scarce, even to disappear. Now as adults we realize that to live with courage, purpose, and connection—to be the person whom we long to be—we must again be vulnerable. We must again take off the armor, put down the weapons, show up, and let ourselves be seen. (p. 112)

I was raised to think that vulnerability or sharing what makes you vulnerable was weak. “The rejection of vulnerability often stems from our associating it with dark emotions like fear, shame, grief, sadness, and disappointment” (Lorde, 1984, p. 33). I did not have the ability as a child to understand how deeply authentic love was intrinsically intertwined with vulnerability, or how vulnerability offered an opportunity to sincerely offer space for self-discovery and inner love to flourish.

A self-connection shared is a measure of the joy which I know myself to be capable of feeling. And that deep irreplaceable knowledge of my capacity of joy comes to demand from all of my life that it be lived within the knowledge that such satisfaction is possible. (Lorde, p. 57)

I grew up in areas that taught you to be hard, by mothers and fathers who raised their children to be warriors. “A piece of the price we paid for learning survival was our childhood” (Lorde, p. 171).

It was not until my later adolescent years heading into my adult years that I discovered love outside of the rules of survival, and vulnerability outside of the realm of fear. Brown (2012) states:
Vulnerability is not a weakness, and the uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure we face every day are not optional. Our only choice is a question of engagement. Our willingness to own and engage with our vulnerability determines the depth of our courage and the clarity of our purpose; the level to which we protect ourselves from being vulnerable is a measure of our fear and disconnection. (p. 2)

9.1 Vulnerability in Love

We cultivate love when we allow our most vulnerable and powerful selves to be deeply seen and known, and when we honor the spiritual connection that grows from that offering with trust, respect, kindness, and affection. Love is not something we give or get; it is something that we nurture and grow, a connection that can only be cultivated between two people when it exists within each one of them—we can only love others as much as we love ourselves. Shame, blame, disrespect, betrayal, and the withholding of affection damage the roots from which love grows. Love can only survive these injuries if they are acknowledged, healed and rare. (Brown, 2012, p. 106)

I read a quote a long time ago from an Eco-feminism textbook that said: “Women loving women is a sign of the earth healing herself.” I remember reading it and thinking, I wonder what women loving themselves would do for the earth? I am a self-identified woman who loves women, an Afro-Latina woman of size who knew very early on that I was attracted to other women. More than that I knew that when I thought of love that nourished me, love that seemed holy, I thought of women. However, I was also one who
grew up in schools surrounded by nuns who reminded me daily that women loving women intimately was not just wrong, it went against God. The thought of having to choose between spirit and love seemed like terror to me – and so I hid.

I struggled with being a lesbian for a long time, the internalized homophobia for me as a Queer Woman of Color truncated by internalized racism, and other isms left me feeling silenced and often caught in the clutches of shame. Not knowing at the time what to do with the shame, I tried to pretend it was not there. Digest it. Numb it. At the time, doing so felt like the right thing to do. Had I anticipated the impact it would have on self-love, I would have sought a different way. Brown (2008) writes, “When we are honest about our struggles, we are much less likely to get stuck in shame” (p. 59). Loving myself has been the hardest journey I have ever embarked on, but without a doubt the most vulnerable and spiritual journey that has led to the most complex of relationships—the relationship with myself.

For many Queer Women of Color, “There are myths of self-protection that hold us separate, they breed harshness and cruelty where we most need softness and understanding” (Lorde, 1984, p. 168). A house of shame can seem like protection if you are hiding; you can become comfortable in its encasement, but as I found, when it is time to come out of the many closets we are a part of, shame becomes of no use. In its place must be love and the wanting to learn how to love your whole self. Lorde tells us:

We can practice being gentle with each other by being gentle with that piece of ourselves that is hardest to hold, by giving more to the brave bruised girl-child within each of us, by expecting a little less from her gargantuan efforts to excel. We can love her in the light as well as in the
darkness, quiet her frenzy toward perfection and encourage her attentions toward fulfillment. (p. 175)

The bruised girl-child, the one I had seemingly buried, is very much so alive within me; the difference for me now is, I am no longer ashamed of her, I am listening to her.

9.2 Loving the Vulnerable in a Reach for Compassion

In my own experience, I have discovered that when I allow myself to be vulnerable, to be seen in full light by myself and others, I create the enormous possibility to welcome love. Lorde (1984) writes, “I have to learn to love myself before I can love you or accept your loving. You have to learn to love yourself before you can love me or accept my loving” (p. 175). As a woman of color who is also of size I offer a lot of love to those I serve. In particular students who come to me with very challenging situations in moments where they themselves are “turned-off”, not participating, or in a defensive place. In those moments I try to create space and offer language that allows for vulnerability to be explored by sharing the raw feelings that often encase our ability to be vulnerable. In reminding them that they are not outside of, but a part of, the situations that they are challenged by, active participants in both the process and outcome that they begin to cultivate compassion for themselves and others. Helping them to negotiate and work through their own conflicts, both internal and external, allows both them and me the opportunity to listen, be present and share awareness.

There is power in helping others remain present, in forcing ourselves to see our own faces and in turn those of others, to name that we feel we are alone, and to discover that we are not. It is what my wife often refers to as, “real talk.” “We are stuffed with furies, against ourselves, against each other, terrified to examine them lest we find

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ourselves in bold print fingered and named what we have always felt and even sometimes preferred ourselves to be—alone” (Lorde, 1984, pp. 166-167).

It is through my relationships with others both personal and professional that I am able to cultivate compassion by naming and sharing the love we are able to touch upon when we are honored in our spaces of vulnerability. As Lipman-Blumen (2000) points out, for many women, building relationships and thus relational leadership is an organic approach to leadership. Relational leadership hones in on the dominant ways that some women are socialized to build connection, incorporate care and nurturing, and create space for meaning-making. Through my own experiences of love and vulnerability I have learned that I must gauge, balance, give and take, encourage reciprocity in relationships if both parties are to leave feeling fueled and fed. Otherwise, a ‘drain-game’ can begin to take place. The ‘drain-game’ for me equates to relationships in my life that hardly feed me; the relationships that leave me feeling exhausted, a little more confused, or downright bewildered. Leaving me with an internalized feeling of being too much or not enough, a common theme for me when I particularly reflect on the romantic relationships I have had in my past. However, it is also applicable to my professional relationships as I myself continue to learn to navigate systems of oppression and power that mirror the very same challenges for me as a Queer Woman of color in leadership; that is of being enough or being too much.

A tenant in my life and leadership is authenticity; however, authenticity takes being vulnerable, finding love in your softest spaces, and building compassion for others through cultivating kindness for yourself. It connects for me to finding beauty in the spaces where I am afraid, exposed, and at my most raw. “We must act in the everyday
world. Words are not enough. We must perform visible and public acts that may make us more vulnerable to the very oppression we are fighting against. But our vulnerability can be the source of our power” (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981, p. 195).

Trauma revolving around love and vulnerability in my life has forced me to sit with my experiences that guided me to understanding why I navigate love and vulnerability in the ways that I do. The broken pieces that surface when we are vulnerable offer an opportunity, a small window to reclaim love and in doing so build compassion around our armored losses and jagged edges. “We have to consciously study how to be tender with each other until it becomes a habit because what was native has been stolen from us, the love of Black women for ourselves and each other” (Lorde, 1984, p. 175).

9.3 Loving Myself into Leadership

Loving myself as Queer Woman of Color is a revolutionary act of the self. Women, queer women, Queer Women of Color are bombarded by relentless images of socially acceptable beauty, media riddled with messages of what you need to buy to truly have value, or the messages from our own communities and families linking unconditional love to conditions of achievement. It all has a way of keeping us at the surfaces of ourselves. There are reasons for this; however, when we separate ourselves from the messages of “not enough,” we allow ourselves the space to heal, to love, and to reclaim. “Learning to love ourselves as Black women goes beyond a simplistic insistence that ‘Black is beautiful’. It goes beyond and deeper than a surface of appreciation of Black beauty” (Lorde, 1984, p. 174). It is in my wanting to love myself beyond the surface of beauty that I am moved to lead with love; a mirrored existence that guides me to both love and lead beyond the surfaces. “The love we have for our common maligned
bodies and souls must burgeon out in *lucha*, in struggle*” (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981, p. 195). The act of loving myself in my life has equated to a clearer and sharper approach to my leadership. I lead because I love, and I love in leadership because it is the love for myself (and others) that propels me to continue all of our fights for liberation. I look for the openings presented when a challenge of some kind arises in leadership to infuse reflective vulnerability; “It sounds like you were really hurt”, “How did this make you feel?”, or “Did you share with each other how this has impacted you?” These reflective questions create space for those I work with to cognitively reflect on their own actions, feelings, and inner wisdom. My own reflective questions in challenging situations vary with the context, but if generalized, may look like the following: “Am I feeling connected right now?” “Am I uncomfortable and why? Am I triggered? Am I being honest with myself and others?” These questions keep me grounded and help me to remain open, curious, and of most importance, present in the moments of vulnerability with myself and others. “As we arm ourselves with ourselves and each other, we can stand toe to toe inside that rigorous loving and begin to speak the impossible—or what has seemed impossible—to one another” (Lorde, 1984, p. 175).

The most healing love I have ever felt has been the love I share with my wife. She has taught me to make the most vulnerable pieces of me – my body, my heart, my queer, my Afro-Latina, my woman – the most loved pieces of myself. It has been through offering and allowing myself to receive unconditional love in our shared experiences that I have been able to heal wounds from past relationships and experiences, including wounds inflicted by the schisms of identity, and the injustices in the world. It is an authentic “real-talk,” “ride or die,” kind of love. There is no fluff in our love, cheese—
yes, but no fluff. We are honest, upfront, unapologetic, and unafraid in the quest to know one another and love one another from our softest spaces. Spaces that are often raveled in vulnerability. Twelve years together and neither she nor I can say with certainty that we know every part of the other, or are even close to knowing every part. I do not actually believe anyone can know every part of another person; we are each our own galaxies. Just as I discover new pieces of myself every day, so too does love in my experience beg for daily discovery. The discoveries become windows into how I walk the world, how I do or do not know myself, and ultimately how and why I choose to lead myself and others in love. “Because love is an act of courage not of fear, love is commitment to others” (Freire, 1970, p. 89).

Societal oppression can take its toll on the spirit, particularly for Queer Women of Color. We can become hard, judgmental, and overly critical of ourselves. If we are not careful, we can begin to take that harsh and critical voice from within, the one that was placed on us, and begin to place it on others.

We become hard on others, because we’re hard on ourselves. That’s exactly how judgment works. Finding something to put down, judge, or criticize becomes a way to get out of the web or call attention away from our [selves]. (Brown, 2012, p. 98)

In my experience, learning to love my vulnerabilities and finding strengths in them quiets the critical voice or as many of my students say, “The monkeys and zebras in the attack.” It has been in showing myself kindness and tenderness in my greatest moments of chaos, that I am able to build the capacity to silence those monkeys and zebras. I am able to become my own mother, sister, brother, teacher, and friend.
We can learn to mother ourselves…Mothering means the laying to rest of what is weak, timid, and damaged—without despisal—the protection and support of what is useful for survival and change, and our joint explorations of the difference. (Lorde, 1984, pp. 173-174)

This process guides me in my leadership and becomes what I strive to teach others on their own leadership journeys. For me, leadership is an act of love.
CHAPTER 10: AND SO I LEAD: IMPLICATIONS AND CLOSING

Prologue

“Somewhere in the landscape past noon
I shall leave a dark print
Of the me that I am
And who I am not
Etched in a shadow of angry and remembered loving
And their ghosts will move
 Whispering through them
With me none the wiser
For they will have buried me
Either in shame
Or in peace.
And the grasses will still be singing.”
(Lorde, 1973, p. 46)

My final chapter will be a culmination of all previous chapters and will additionally include implications for leadership. I thought it best to accomplish this by encasing the chapter in a letter to Gloria Anzaldúa and Audre Lorde. These two scholars have illuminated best the struggles of trauma, the triumph of agency, and the power of leadership in my own life.

10.1 An Open Letter to Gloria Anzaldúa and Audre Lorde

Dearest Audre and Gloria,

I call to you so often, I thought it only appropriate to write an open letter to you both – the two women in my life who have helped me to feel safer in my own skin, powerful in my thoughts, and sacred in my shadow. You imparted words and thoughts that allowed me to offer myself understanding, forgiveness, and compassion. It was your call to the academy to be inclusive of the intersectionality of identity that has allowed me to find a sense of place and belonging within walls that do not bleed or reflect my lived
truths. However distant you may be, you continue to guide me to strength and agency, which has allowed me to be an active participant in my own liberation.

It was your demands to create inclusive theory that resounded and reflected the experiences of people of color that influenced theories such as Critical Race Theory (CRT) and specifically, as I focus on in my dissertation, the importance of the counter-narrative. Although it has worked to give us voice in the academy, that voice has not necessarily translated into entrance in the academy. Audre, your essays on the “Transformation of Silence and Anger into Action”, “The Uses of Anger” and “Poetry is Not a Luxury” in your book “Sister Outsider” (1984) continues to provide me with answers regarding how to navigate my multiple intersecting identities within systems of oppression. With raw authentic vulnerability you willfully explore the darkness and provide us with examples of how to reach our own light.

The ways that you have each spoken about the sacredness of women loving women made it so that I too could find the holiness of such a connection. You reminded me that religion and spirit are separate entities that do overlap but do not mean the same thing. You made it okay to question why my religion would say something is wrong with my identity as a lesbian while honoring that spirit told me otherwise.

It is because of you both that I felt it my responsibility to re-claim myself, to love myself, and to speak and write my experience, especially in the academy. In this way, it does not remain with just me. Realizing how important it is to speak my authentic experiences in leadership as a Queer Woman of Color has highlighted concerns of the over-bearing dominant leadership paradigms that stifle and skew our intersectional approaches and styles to leadership. You forced me to realize that as long as I am
defining myself by the same dominant tools used by the oppressor, I am reinforcing the very same oppression for myself and for others. It is still such a work in progress for me. Queer Women of Color in higher education still hide from one another; the survival instincts of numbing, disconnecting, or dismissing that so many of us learned from our mothers are still leaving us, as you have taught me Audre, unarmed.

10.2 Much has Changed—and Much has Stayed the Same

There are times as a Queer Woman of Color in leadership that I do not know what to do or say in the ugly face of oppression. Times I feel silenced and small. Women of color still vacillate between invisibility and hypervisibility, and yes…silence and the fear of speaking still plague us. Things happen within us when we do not speak. Darkness creeps into us, and it can be convincing in making us believe that what we have to say, simply does not matter. Especially in the academy, it is pervasive if not halted. Air can become stale and words go stagnant the longer they go unsaid…and the fear of speaking, the fear of speaking becomes quite thick. However, it is not just those that carry dominant intersecting identities that try to silence us. Sadly, we also do it to one another.

In my experience, consciously or unconsciously, Queer Women of Color can be highly suspicious of one another. As you say Audre, we have forgotten how to commune with one another, how to trust one another. A betrayal that in my experience is linked to not having the ability to trust your-self. I attended a conference last year that centered on Women of Color in leadership. Working at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI), when a conference is being offered that solely focuses on exploring the multiple intersecting identities of Women of Color in relation to leadership, I am there! In a session that focused on hair and dress in the workplace I was dumbfounded when a
Woman of Color in leadership started outright dissing natural hair (i.e., dreads, afros, etc.). Referring to those Women of Color who choose to wear their hair naturally, as opposed to permed straight, as not professional or capable of reaching into high levels of administration. The presenter went on to ask the audience, “How many presidents of universities are Women of Color? And how many of them do you know have natural hair?” This caused tremors through the audience as one by one the women in the room began looking around, catching one another’s wide eyes, or in my case frantically taking notes to quiet the shaking of my voice. Within moments, a Native American woman stood up and said, “Are you telling us we need to look White to succeed?” I was in awe of her bravery, immediately wondered what department she worked in and how this might impact her standing there. Yes, as a Queer Woman of Color in a Predominantly White Institution (PWI), you have to think about these things. It is what makes voice and speaking such a risk.

A moment later, another Woman of Color spoke up and offered a response that linked class, generation, race, sexuality, and gender as markers of difference that impact our professional code of dress and hair in the workplace. She offered reasons for why the answers and questions posed by the presenter were lacking in depth and vision without insulting the presenter’s lens or personal narrative. What I remember most about this woman is that her voice was shaking, trembling almost, and yet, she kept speaking. It was as if she knew she was speaking for all of us in that room. Afterwards, myself and many others approached her, gave a knowing nod, and said a well-deserved thank you.

Foremothers, I did not speak up that day. I felt so angered and saddened by what was happening in the space, a room filled with Women of Color. A space where I
expected to feel acceptance, not shame. I allowed it to silence me. But, much like you both, there is resilience in my blood. “The ability to respond is what is meant by responsibility, yet our cultures take away our ability to act—shackle us in the name of protection. Blocked, immobilized, we can’t move forward, can’t move backwards” (Anzaldúa, 1987, pp. 42-43).

How does a marginalized people even begin to heal within this kind of an oppressive system? How can one redefine and regain power from a system intended to disenfranchise those outside of the hegemony? Can there be any real victory for marginalized cultures within a system of power that does not speak our name? A system that does not have the language that is representative of our multiple intersecting perspectives? Currently, I do not have concrete answers for the questions I have posed. As an individual who identifies as having multiple intersecting marginalized identities, I find myself asking these very questions often…daily. Will I ever develop concepts and understandings about myself, my culture, my gender identity, my history from outside of the dominant narrative? And, if it is all being developed by the “gun holders” or dominant culture, then how can it be authentic to me or my experiences?

Where do we run to hide from the personas that have been imposed upon us? Where is home? I—found—home—in—poetry. Much like you both, poetry for me is a salient identity. I have written my own poetry for many years now and have been a witness to Queer Women of Color, much like myself, much like you both, finding great power through what is referred to as slam poetry or spoken word. During these poetic revelations a re-membering, re-naming, re-claiming, and re-coding takes place. Poetry is used as a vehicle to create political, environmental, historical, and social awareness, just
as you have thought it would be. It is also often used as a form of proclamation; the process of salvaging the self becomes public and in many ways universal. I am naming poetry as a means to “reclaiming the gun.” This expression of re-defining generates a sense of power, community, and connection for those subjugated by a dominant culture and lens. However, it has still not allotted us entrance through a front or back door into the academy. Audre and Gloria, do not worry, we are coming in through the windows and floorboards. “They tried to bury us—they didn’t know we were seeds” (Mexican Proverb).

When I think of the world and the status of women, women of color, Queer Women of Color, here in this country and all over the world, I shudder. I am afraid. I worry for us. I see often how our many separate struggles keep us apart. How our bodies, our spirits, our sense of beauty and belonging, our voices, our self-love, our self-worth, our daily life experiences, our multiple intersecting identities become walls that keep us apart. The year is 2015, and we are living in a world and culture that still controls the images and thus the portrayal of the woman of color. Like you wrote Gloria, “Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts, that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to us through culture” (1990, p. 39). We are still the exotic, the mammy, the whore, the mistress, the bitch, and the servant. Even when Black women are portrayed as successful by mass media, we seem to lack autonomy, vision, and leadership. We are still portrayed as “belonging to” others – our husbands, fathers, careers. We never seem to be shown as belonging to ourselves. “Theorizing about self-worth is ineffective. So is pretending. Women can die in agony who have lived with blank and beautiful faces” (Lorde, 1984, p. 174). You were right to ask Audre, “When can we look at ourselves
directly, and risk the pain of experiencing who we are not so that we can begin to savor who we are?” (p. 174).

The more I take the time to reflect on my own experiences, the more I understand the importance of nourishing peace within myself. I am pulled to meditation and mindful breathing for this reason. Gloria and Audre, you speak of the spirit and the importance of owning it within our work; the love and vulnerability, the courage and resilience, the hope and voice. These have all become pillars of my leadership and I am reclaiming what they mean for myself daily. It is because of your stories, your counter-narratives in life and leadership that I am grounded in knowing that I am not, nor have I ever been, alone. Believe it or not, that gives me hope through which I find agency that empowers me to lead.

There are pockets of revolution taking place all over the world, by women of color, for women of color; pockets of revolution like this very letter I am writing here, and it begins to shake the fear right out of me. This is what reading your words do for me, again and again. Even when I think there is nothing else I can gain from them, I find I am wrong, and another light jumps off of the pages and feeds me. As a Queer Woman of Color in leadership, this is my hope, that my leadership, my work – particularly with students – impacts them into reaching for their own light.

I can only hope my words are working to carve a space where we tell our stories. A space where we connect beyond the many differences we hold, where in healing ourselves we are able to break walls and heal each other, a space where we leave the doubts of ourselves and the compromising of our spirits at the door. The images the world reproduces surrounding Queer Women of Color are painful, and work daily to tear
us down from the inside out. Audre, you taught me long ago that as a fat, black, and lesbian woman, I was never meant to survive. But I have. With bare bones and scathed fingers I have learned to dig my way towards self-preservation and along the way set up placeholders marked with sweat and blood, to claim the few spaces I can as victor for myself and others. We need these times in life to embrace the powerful, brilliant, beautiful, compassionate, fierce, dynamic women leaders of color that we are. They are crucial and necessary moments to preserve if I am to survive while helping to lead others.

How do Queer Women of Color honor our past, our present, and our future—when we are painted as slaves in our past, gangsters and mammy’s in our present and as having seemingly dismal futures? We survive by sharing and honoring our stories honestly with one another. Through narrative we continue to honor our voices in our leadership, and most importantly—we dare to survive. In a meeting with two students, both of whom were Women of Color in leadership roles and excelling in their courses, I asked them what calls them to leadership. They each spoke about the importance of being visible, having voice, and making their families proud. They shared that often when they speak, they felt that people stopped listening. I asked them what they do when they felt people stopped listening. They said, “I used to just stop talking, but I’m trying hard every day to just say what I have to say no matter what, leadership takes courage”. They were right, and seeing and hearing one another affirmed their experiences and nourished the courage. In my own life, when I find myself in challenging moments of leadership, it is my community, the relationships I have invested in, that affirm my experiences and vision in leadership and life.
In my own experience it starts when we begin to see, speak and hear the overlaps in our her-stories. We do not walk through the world without struggle and those struggles will look very differently according to who we are and how we experience the world. But do not be fooled. Beyond those struggles lies our resilience, our perseverance and our courage, and these are the very things that have brought us together in the past and will continue to tie us together now. They are the tenants that will keep us moving forward while holding one hand back to assure we help another.

In my experience we need to take the moments, the deep breaths we think we do not have time for, and the care we are taught that we do not deserve. Our power comes from our ability to see one another’s faces and to look into one another’s eyes. To say, “I see you.” Our power and our revolution lie in seeing one another. “As we fear each other less and value each other more, we will come to value recognition with each other’s eyes as well as within our own” (Lorde, 1984, p. 173).

It is for this reason that when first working to support students that are just beginning their own journeys of leadership I have them do an exercise called, “I am one who” (see Appendix B). It is an exercise adapted from, Soul Collage®: An Intuitive Collage Process for Individuals and Groups by Seena Frost (2006). Students in the training are asked to speak about who they are from the “I” perspective; where they grew up, what do they value and how did they learn about it, what foods/activities/songs/images remind them of home? I am asking them to establish, own, and honor their many intersecting identities. I am also asking them to listen to each other’s statements in a large group, so that we can begin seeing one another beyond what we think we see. Because in my leadership I value love and vulnerability, the training
usually begins with me modeling my own “I am one who” statement. I have learned that vulnerability begets vulnerability. The dominant paradigm of leadership says do not show vulnerability, it is weakness. Through this exercise I assert that vulnerability is courage to honor your softest spots. The statement below is one I adapt every year before this leadership development session begins, as I am one who is always growing and ever-evolving the “I am one who” statements:

“I am one from palms and mangoes, soft sands, and deep hot suns; African and Native from the tribe of the Taino’s; Republica Dominicana. The Dominican Republic. I am also one from a land full of different accents, and languages, a land of “yo”, and double-dutch, a land of welcome to Brooklyn.

I am one who grew up next to women who prostituted themselves on one side and neighbors who used crack on the next; everyone looked like me. I am one who later went on to live in the suburbs where I looked like no-one. I am one from an immigrant father who became one of the first Dominican physicians in this country. I am also one from an immigrant mother who worked in factories for 15 years. I am one from family, one from listen, learn, hustle, survive no matter what, you can be anything you want to be; but it “ain’t” going to come free. I am one who feels trains are the best places to journal, and hot dogs go hand in hand with a good baseball game. I am one raised on the stories of strong women who battled for others, for me, but rarely for themselves. I am one from “do not air your dirty laundry” and NEVER under any circumstances betray your family.

I am one from immigrant parents, three sisters and twin brothers—I am the baby in my family, the last of the tribe, the only one who went to the mountains and stayed. I am one who tries to feel before she thinks, a believer in the power of inner wisdom and a
warrior of love. I am one who fights, protests, speaks up for what she believes in but also one who tries to balance my fire with compassion. I am one who speaks up when other are being taken advantage of. And one who has a hard time speaking up when I am being taken advantage of.

_I am one who learned Spanish and English simultaneously, one who prefers to express her heart and intellect in both Spanish and English. I am one who is married to a beautiful woman who lies in between Belize and Brooklyn and lives with me in these mountains. I am one from rice and beans, avocado salads, maduros, and pollo guisado or sweet plantains and stewed chicken._

_I am one who is always watching like a wolf—a pack animal, always seeking while protecting. I am one who hopes and dreams and although at times afraid, shares what she is thinking. I say what I need to say, even if I look silly, stupid, or am misunderstood. I am one who is fierce and loyal, one nurtured by a village. I am one from old Brooklyn friends who think I have made it because of where I am and what I have…I am one who understands that making it has more to do with what you think and feel about yourself on the inside then anything you could every hold on the outside. I am one who knows there is nothing more powerful than love._ (Paz-Amor, Adapted 2015).

According to my experience as a Queer Woman of Color in leadership, by sharing my counter-narrative of leadership through the lens of intersectionality with love, courage and vulnerability, I am owning for myself and in doing so am giving permission to others to honor their whole selves. When I am able to speak the dark, the light, the shame, and the blame I begin to carve the space to forgive, remember and to re-claim.
Daughters,
Mothers,
Sisters,
Lovers,
Friends,
For all of Us Warrior Women,

Look closely, and you will begin to see a piece of you in every woman, Queer woman, and Queer Woman of Color you meet. I beg you to connect with that piece as I have, because in that lies the power of our many stories. In that lies the collective wisdom that we were not only meant to survive, we were meant to rise. You were wrong about that Audre. Gloria, Audre, we are still in need of your vision. However, you have armed us with knowing that, “owning our stories and loving ourselves through that process is the bravest thing that we’ll ever do” (Brown, 2012, p. 99).

I hear your voices pounding in my heart and resounding against my ribcage. We must love our beautiful selves and love each other well, because the world desperately needs our leadership and we need each other. I send you both my love and my best, and I wish you were both still here. We are still under attack and we need you now more than ever. In Peace, Wind
END NOTES FROM SPN


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Appendix A: Concept Map

- Positive Psychology
- Stress-related growth
- Traditional therapies
- Achievement
- Healing
- Connection and relationships
- Resources
- Relational Leadership
- Multicultural Leadership
- Multiple Intersecting Identities
- Borderland Theory
- Trauma
- Agency
- Resilience
- Leadership
APPENDIX B: “I Am One Who Exercise” (Adapted)

When learning about identity and the various identities we all hold it is important that YOU understand and know your own lens of how you see the world and why you see it in that way, before you can attempt to understand someone else’s. The purpose of this exercise is to learn about yourself, to honor your story. To clearly hear how you got to be whom you are today. Please take some time to write a short narrative about, “Who you are” and “Where you come from”. Below I have included some guiding questions to get you started.

Exercise Breakdown

Writing Portion: 30 Minutes

Sharing Portion: 3-4 minutes per student

Guiding Questions

How do you see the world? What lenses or markers of identity influence how you see the world?

Where did you grow up? Family? Friends? Mentors?

What were the messages you received growing up that have stayed with you today?

What do you want people to know about you so that they can better understand you?

What gets you up in the morning? Or what inspires you?