Honoring Gülden Özcan

The analytic of loss

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ABSTRACT

Panel Honouring the late Dr. Gülden Özcan, University of Lethbridge, Women Scholars' Speaker

Series

THE ANALYTIC OF LOSS

Thank you. My name is Nisha Nath, I work at Athabasca University in the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies and I am here in amiskwaciwâskahikan, colonially known as Edmonton. I have been thinking of and learning from Gülden, how these multiple traffics and travels (of one's own, or one's lineages of migration) that brought my family to the extractive white supremacy of this prairie town in the late 1960s, invoke particular relational accountabilities for variably positioned women of colour, on paths that are filled with, in her words, "rocks and thorns" (Özcan 2022, 14).

Like all of us, my personal, intellectual, and collaborative relationship with Gülden was cruelly truncated – and perhaps unlike many of you, my intersection with Gülden was more recent, but it was an intertwining that felt distinctly serendipitous. I knew Gülden first through her generosity in being an astute, thoughtful, and careful respondent to a talk I gave that was sponsored by SNAC[1]+ in collaboration with the Women Scholars' Speaker Series in 2020. My talk implicated the kind of anti-racist and anti-oppression work we were both engaged in at our institutions, as well as our shared ethos of refusal to the terms laid out by the EDI (Equity, Diversity & Inclusion) academy. One month later, I saw her name as one of the participants in a Knowledge Frontiers Symposium on Security, that was being held by the British Academy and the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research. While first meeting in a context where we were speaking about how we are called into crisis work at our institutions, we shared in common that we were scholars engaged in critical readings of state deployments of in/security.

I was extraordinarily nervous about that symposium, and immediately upon seeing Gülden's name, I reached out to her as an anchor. We travelled our participation in that symposium together, transparently sharing our collective confusion about the process, at ease in our shared posture of humility, but also bonded over our aversion to and analysis of frameworks reifying vulnerability. And so, we began to collaborate most intensely alongside Tarek Younis and Evan Light on a project exploring the intersections of security and racial capitalism. Again, with Tarek, we also dreamed up a project mapping the fundamental insecurity and precarity faced by often racialized scholars who study security. Those collaborations are ongoing but have almost frozen in time without Gülden. But I will say, the warmth of sitting with Gülden's work over the past little while is adding breath and life to them again.

In preparing to make my brief comments today, I was thinking of how our two worlds collided – our two institutional worlds, our personal worlds, and the worlds demanding our epistemic labour on equity and anti-racism, presumably on one side, and on security and insecurity, presumably on the other. It was clear very early on that these worlds are in fact contiguous and co-implicated. To prepare for today, I embarked on a project of 'gathering up' – of gathering up and rereading the exchanges I had with Gülden, of listening to recordings I have of Gülden, of (re)witnessing those exchanges by taking new notes, by rewriting my ongoing work on that basis, and then by presencing her in that work in new ways. I have spoken in other contexts about gathering an epistolarium (Nath 2020), and this felt a bit like that. I found myself in this paradoxical space of witnessing the loss of Gülden through a kind of emptiness or empty space, with questions that I didn't get to ask her, or engage with her on, or even press her on. But also, the gathering up enacted a filling up of space because she *is* present, now as part of our collective lineage of thought, through the interventions that she has gifted all of us, and the provocations she raises that we can be accountable to take up – particularly as we reflect on "The University and Its Worlds"[2]. I want to share a couple of her provocations to carry forward beyond today.

First, in (re)witnessing Gülden's work, I see the themes of loss, accountability, and paradox. I think that in the academe, and especially the EDI academe – where these three letters are deployed institutionally to repackage white supremacy, colonialism, militarism, heteropatriarchy, imperialism and occupation – in *this* academy, we experience a lot of loss – much of it is structural and systemic. We experience the loss of students who are systemically sifted out, the loss of precarious faculty who cannot continue, the loss of those who enact intentional refusals of the terms of the academe, the loss of academics who are politically dislocated through state-sponsored violence and surveillance in the name of security, and of course the loss of luminaries like Gülden. Gülden was a thinker who drew *all* of these epistemic links, including the link between her own labour, *This Bridge Called My Back* (ed. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa) and what these extractive institutions and the racism and misogyny baked into them, do to our bodies and our health (Özcan 2022, 14).

I don't think we sit with that loss enough within the academe; or more specifically, that 'loss' itself is an analytic that we can tether to other analytics, like that of pacification as Gülden does in her work. In not sitting with loss as analytic, we surrender so much, losing not just those relationships, but the presence of that epistemic labour, those embodied experiences, and that embodied knowledge. In fact, in sitting with 'loss' as analytic, we build in its refusal because it invokes presence. Gülden's work does sit with loss, through the lens of pacification, securitization, dissidence, and resistance – because in her work, Gülden notes how the mobilization, regulation and creation of publics through securitization processes represents a kind of foreclosure that cannot and must not be surrendered to (Coşar and Özcan 2021; Özcan 2017). I see in Gülden's work an invocation and invitation to sit with loss as analytic in order to spark urgency.

There is a risk in reading Gülden's work that one might focus solely on the tactics of securitization and pacification, but this to me erases the heart of her work which is animated by a refusal to surrender these losses – something we see so clearly in her work with scholars at risk[3], and her writing on pacification in Turkey (Özcan 2014). So, I am

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[1] SNAC+ stands for the Support Network For Academic of Colour, a support network composed of students, staff and faculty in Lethbridge that are working on issues of equity and anti-racism. Gülden was a core member of this group.

[2] The 2022-2023 Women Scholars' Speaker Series of the University of Lethbridge was held on the thematic of "The University and its Worlds", inviting presenters and guests to reflect on 'What is a university? Whose interests does the institution service, and which communities and lifeways does it exclude of harm?'

[3] The Scholars at Risk Network is an international network of institutions and individuals who focus on protecting scholars whose academic freedom is threatened. This includes supporting the safety of scholars who experience threats within their home countries, monitoring attacks on higher education worldwide, and on campaigning publicly for scholars who are imprisoned or silenced in their home countries.

paradoxically sad and happy today because *this* marking of her work is a refusal to surrender that loss and her epistemic labour, and this is in keeping with her research, her ethical posture and her commitments; this defies so much of what the neoliberal EDI academe works to disappear.

Second, and related is a defiance of and deep skepticism of the logics that structure the neoliberal EDI academy that is clear in Gülden's work. Gülden drew intrinsic connections between the broad themes animating her scholarship – securitization, policing, dissidence and resistance, insecurity, neoliberalism, pacification, publics - to how she conceptualized entering into service work, the theories of change animating that work (Tuck 2018), her conceptualization of what the university was and is, and what institutionalized EDI practices are paradoxically doing. Put differently, through her work she implores us to make connections between the state, capital and the deployment of state power. While much of her scholarship focused on Turkey, I read her work as an invitation that we must be contextually vigilant and skeptical of the rewriting of the academe that we are witnessing in multiple contexts; she writes of market-oriented research, market-friendly curriculums, how universities are funded, the redefinition of universities' primary objectives, the dissolution of forms of social solidarity, the increase in private universities, increasing precaritisation of academic labour and unpaid overtime (Özcan 2020).

I want to pull from a piece of her writing with her good friend Simten Coşar, where they describe security as follows:

Security is an active and unfinished project. A social project refers to rationalized, somewhat consistent, carefully planned tasks with certain targets, agents, means, technologies, and strategies. Thus, the security projects are always incomplete, producing unintended consequences due to the resistance of the governed, which leads to their alteration, abandonment, or significant transformation in their structures depending on the response. In time of crisis, the security projects appeal to the general public through the manufacturing of common sense based on safety concerns (Coşar and Özcan 2021, 38 – citations omitted).

Gülden reminded us that the real meaning of security is to orchestrate a "social order that complies with the accumulation of capital, the security of private property" and exploitation of labour (Özcan 2014, 38). Moreover, under neoliberalism, the discourse of security has been hegemonic in constructing security itself as part of the self-care individuals are responsible for (Özcan 2014, 39). This becomes instituted as common sense, and we, the citizen subjects, become "carriers of the discourse, agents of surveillance and warriors" of insecurity (Özcan 2014, 39). Security does something to us – it turns us, changes us, produces us. For example, she writes this on police power: "…police power turns all kinds of potential dissenting populations, often pro-actively, into the public; that is, an addressable, responsible, accountable, and transparent subject. This in turn makes dissent predictable, reversible, and non-anonymous" (Özcan 2017, ii).

I pull us to Gülden's expansive writing about the work of security because she is whispering questions in our ears, especially during this moment where the academe continues to be under attack, where those of us who teach from insurgent and resurgent lineages of knowledge remain targets.

- How is neoliberal authoritarianism operating in knowledge production processes in neoliberal contexts? (Özcan 2020, 60)

- What and who is the university securing?

- What and who is institutionalized EDI securing?

- What does the pacification of the university look like? What are the technologies or tactics of pacification? (Özcan 2020, 74)

In that moment where Gülden and I transitioned from meeting at an 'EDI talk', and then finding each other at a symposium on security, she made those connections clear in her emerging scholarship with the anti-security research collective – here she described how security is mobilized and penetrates *all* aspects of our lives – policy-making, commodities, rights-based claims, national security, job security, workplace security, supply chain security, environmental security, food security. For her, the anti-security approach brings a radical rejection of the security discourses because those discourses trade on "colonizing and deradicalizing"; as Gülden explained in that symposium, security recodes how we understand hunger, exploitation, imperialism, environmental degradation. And so here, Gülden raised a provocation that I hope we not only take up, but that we contextualize in *her* specific contributions – that we start to *reconceptualize anti-security work as anti-racist work* – these are her words. This was a specific lacuna she identified in the growing literature of anti-security studies.

I think Gülden would ask us to look at the university and at EDI through the lens of not just securitization, but of pacification. What happens when we intentionally start to push back on security within the context of the academe? How might that shift our anti-racist practices, but also dislodge what the institution is trying to secure?

My good friend Dr. Ethel Tungohan writes: "When writing, I've begun to see my citations as love letters to fellow thinkers who came before me and who write alongside me." Gülden graced me with her generosity in offering her reflections about a project I have on *the Letters*, and I offer these reflections as a sort of letter back. The thing that we know about letters is that they are relational, and that they *can* close the gap between time and space – which is something that I imagine many of us are longing for today. I want to close by offering thanks to Gülden for her epistemic labour, which I see as a love letter to us all. But also, to those who invited me here today, Dr. Suzanne Lenon and Dr. Kristine Alexander and the Women Scholars' Speaker Series, but also to my dear friend Dr. Caroline Hodes, a close friend of Gülden's who introduced us in the first place. My thanks to you all.

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