Vidya Shah (00:00:09):

Hello and welcome. My name is Dr. Vidya Shah, and I'm an assistant professor in the Faculty of Education at York University. Welcome to another episode of the UnLeading project. Approaches to leadership that are rooted in dominant discourses and histories do not capture the capacities and competencies necessary to lead in education today. What might it mean to undo and unlearn practices and ideas that promote hierarchy, individualism, compliance, power over, silence and a culture of fear. In this context questions arise related to the type of leadership required to facilitate this work, how leaders are selected and prepared to lead and how we might continue to develop models of leadership that challenge the status quo by looking up and looking out to alternate frameworks of leadership and wisdom. This podcast series will highlight voices of leaders in classrooms, communities, homes, schools, school districts, the academy, and beyond. Our podcast today is on queering leadership and no coincidence that we are recording it on the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia. Queering leadership asks us to question the taken for granted in leadership, to question the very notion of what it means to be a leader and the very construct leadership itself. It invites us to say the unsayable and to consider how desire, affect and imagination figure into leadership and experiences of leaders. As somebody that identifies as cisgender and heterosexual and has been influenced by queer pedagogies, I enter this conversation with tremendous humility and a desire to learn, unlearn, be and become. Our panel today features a wonderful group of leaders in education and community that are challenging notions of what is normal, the dangers of binaries and the possibilities for centering desire, play, affect and our bodies in notions of leadership. For their full bios and contact information please check out the UnLeading webpage at www.yorku.ca/edu/unleading. We explore the tensions that arise in queering leadership and as we begin with all of our podcasts, I'd like to introduce Zena Sharman - writer, speaker, strategist and LGBTQ+ health advocate to help us frame today's discussion to explore those contradictions and to pose some wonderings. We're so happy to have you here today, Zena, welcome.

Zena Sharman (00:02:57):

Thank you so much and I'm really excited be here. To be honest, kind of nervous, cause this is such an amazing group of people and I'm really honoured and excited to be in dialogue. I know that you had asked me just to share some reflections to begin the conversation and what I wanted to do is start by situating myself and by situating myself, I want to just talk about a little bit about who I am and the people and the places I'm in relationship with because it matters for my identity as a queer person and how I show up in my community. I'm a White, cisgender queer femme of Scottish and Irish ancestry. I've spent the past 20 years living as a visitor on the stolen, unseated and traditional shared territories of the Musqueam, Tsleil-Waututh, and Squamish peoples in Vancouver, BC. And I'm raising a child here alongside my three co-parents. When I think about what it means to be in this place, as part of this community, I also think about the joy and intergenerational accountabilities and learnings that come with being in relationship with my kid who is three years old right now, and who teaches me new things all the time about how to be in the world. I grew up in Thunder Bay, a city in northwestern Ontario, that's on the traditional lands of the Fort William First Nation signatory to the Robinson Superior Treaty of 1850, on their traditional territory of the Anishinaabe and the Métis. It was there that I received my earliest teachings about what might be considered leadership, though it wasn't called that. Through the activism and art practice of my mom, Lynn, she was a disabled survivor of violence and trauma who raised me in poverty as a single parent. She did a lot of her work in community activism from our kitchen table and in our community, in art galleries and in the streets. She taught me a lot about how to show up in community, work for social justice and live your values and all of your work and relationships. She died in 2014 and is a really important ancestor for me in all of my work and just being in the world. When I think about who raised me and what this means for how I show up as a leader, I also think about the

queer femmes, survivors, sex workers, activists, Drag Queens, musicians, writers, artists and filmmakers, who were my first teachers when I came out as around 20 years ago. They taught me a do-it-yourself queer punk ethos that continues to inform how I move through the world.

New Speaker (00:05:29):

And it matters too, that I identify as a queer femme. My leadership practice is rooted in a queer femme ethic of care. One that aims to be embodied, trauma-informed, practical, accountable and well boundaried. My perspective on creating leadership is informed by these lineages, embodied identities and experiences. And by my awareness that I claim no specialized expertise or definitive take on what queering leadership might mean. I think of queering leadership as a process and a practice that can take myriad forms, each one as unique as the person who chooses to define and embody what this means for them. It's one of the reasons I'm excited to be part of this conversation. Most of my work now focuses on health and healthcare. It has for a long time, primarily queer and trans health. At least the work I'm most passionate about, which I mostly do as a writer, a speaker and an advocate, but I've always had day jobs to pay the bills and for the past decade or so, those jobs have evolved kind of formal leadership roles in the health research funding sector, where I have jobs where I'm positioned as a leader. So, my perspective on leadership is informed by this work experience I have, but also by my own community activism. Also, when I was preparing for this conversation, I think probably because all of you are rooted in education, I was thinking about how I was first formally introduced to the idea of "leadership" as a thing I could do when I was in high school with my involvement in student council and student leadership programs. It was interesting to think about this formalized learning about leadership in a school setting because it reflects a particular construct of what leadership looks like. It made me wonder and who then, and who now is seen to have leadership, "potential", and who gets chosen to lead in ways that are often circumscribed by institutional power structures. Here, I'm thinking specifically of the ways schools might formally allow some students to lead yet, not actually be designed or governed in ways that are supportive of their autonomy or self-determination. Of course, more broadly than that, how so many schools are violent and carceral environments, particularly for Black and Indigenous students. By contrast, I think of the idea of strategic defiance that is offered by education scholars, Harper Keenan and Lil Miss Hot Mess. In a recent paper, they wrote on Drag pedagogy that explored Drag Queen Story Time as a site where children and adults can come together to do something transformative. And in that paper, they ask, how might teachers encourage children to talk back rather than suppressing dissent?

Zena Sharman (00:08:06):

I was in high school in Ontario in the mid nineties, during the early years of Conservative Premier, Mike Harris's neoliberal "common sense revolution". I remember leading a walkout of my high school classmates in protest against Harris's education policies. That whole series of cuts also affected my family very directly because we were on welfare when the Harris government cut welfare rates by over 20% and I remember how scary that was. I remember engaging with leadership as a student at the time because it felt meaningful to me and like a place where I could have a positive impact. I didn't like sports and I wanted to do the kinds of volunteer work that would help me get a scholarship so I could afford to go to university. All of these experiences are woven together in my perspective on what queering leadership might offer us. Leadership is a construct that holds a lot inside of it, but it has an intangible quality and is rarely defined. Though, I think in many contexts, people sort of assume we kind of know it when we see it, but in practice, this can mask and perpetuate systemic inequities like racism, ableism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia and other forms of oppression. This plays out in all kinds of contexts like schools, workplaces, healthcare, and elsewhere. In a talk, I wrote on queering leadership that I know the podcast team has been engaging with in getting ready for this episode. I quoted a definition of queer

from the brilliant writer, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, who describes herself as a queer, Black troublemaker and Black feminist love Evangelist. It's a quote from the anthology, Revolutionary Mothering, where Gumbs writes, "Our definition of queer is that which fundamentally transforms our state of being and the possibilities for life. That which is queer, that which is not reproduced the status quo." This definition resonates for me because of the transformative potential it holds and because it's grounded in resistance to assimilation. In 2019, I was invited to give a talk on leadership to a group of LGBTQ+ students and healthcare and it prompted me to reflect on how my identity as a queer person has shaped the ways I show up as a leader, which I hadn't really thought about consciously up until that point. At that time, I described this as basically, I lead with my whole body, practice being right-sized and how I take up space. I honour the messy, the uncategorizable and the vulnerable. I feel into accountability and interdependence. I lead in service of surviving, thriving and collective liberation. I'm curious how others might describe the ways they imagine, embody and enact what queering leadership feels like for them. My hope is that queering leadership might offer us ways to resist assimilation in service of building something more nurturing and liberatory. Queering leadership has the potential to be a site of resistance and transformation. Though I caution against the assumption that queerness is inherently radical, especially when located in a White, cisgender, non-disabled, thin body like mine. Part of my specific and ongoing work personally and as it relates to my own ideas about practices of leadership, is understanding and uprooting the ways that I've been taught, including as a leader to embody the characteristics of White supremacy culture like perfectionism, power hoarding, a sense of urgency and individualism, really continuing to work to uproot and shift those patterns of practices. Something I want to close on is reflecting how the pandemic has offered me opportunities to practice leading in ways that reflect my core values of political commitments. Over the past year and a half, I've consciously experimented with this at my day job where I work closely, if virtually, with a team of seven people in a role where I'm formally positioned as the leader of our team. My goal has been to lead in a way that helps co-create the world I want to live in, which can look like together, creating a micro-culture of support, flexibility, and greater psychological safety informed by my own learning about a commitment to disability justice. It can also look like actively resisting or circumventing on just policies and holding each other with greater care and scale than organizations that think of people as human resources, which I am saying in quotation marks, have the capacity to. I'm curious about what kinds of leadership we need now for today and especially for the future. How might we lead in ways that are accountable to our ancestors, our descendants and our communities? I think of this as a practice and a process and as a form of ongoing work, work that won't be completed in my lifetime.

Vidya Shah (00:12:38):

Zena, thank you so much for that, that was so beautiful. Thank you for weaving in your own stories with a much larger analysis of queering and all its intersections and place today in the context of COVID-19, that was so powerful. I'm really taking away and thinking about this idea of who gets to lead and who was seen as a leader, the notion of strategic defiance that you mentioned that we might teach and encourage children to talk back instead of self-silencing or being silenced by others. The fact that there's an intangible quality that often gets caught up in and perpetuates systems of power. That which is queer is that which cannot be reproduced, I love that. Then, this notion of shifting patterns of practices, so much richness there and so much just wonderful sharing. Thank you so much for opening up this discussion and for framing it in such a beautiful way. Building on Zena's amazing opening, we have a wonderful group of panelists that I'd like to take a moment to just introduce. Again, for their full bios you can check out the UnLeading website. First on the podcast, I'd like to welcome Margaret Alexander.

Margaret Alexander (00:13:52):

Hi there, Vidya, thanks very much, and thank you very much Zena as well. I found the things that you said also to be really powerful and really beautiful. And a lot of it touched on some of the things that I've been thinking about leadership. To position myself as well, I identify as a racialized queer person, multi-ethnic, Afro-Canadian, Irish and Anishinaabe descent ancestry. I am a parent and have been involved in the feminist, anti-violence movement for well over 20 years, I'm in my mid fifties. I have also this past year had a little grandbaby to celebrate. I feel like there's lots of familial and relational aspects to leadership and my position and who I am and how I move through the world. It certainly relates a lot to me and resonates when I think about leadership.

Vidya Shah (00:14:53):

Thank you so much, Margaret. I'd like to also welcome Syrus Marcus Ware, welcome Syrus.

Syrus Marcus Ware (00:15:00):

Hello, thanks so much for having me. Thanks, it's been wonderful to get to listen to everyone engage. I'm an artist and activist, I'm also a parent, I'm a scholar, I'm somebody who writes a lot and thinks a lot about disability justice, about queering trans leadership and about abolition, about building a different kind of world. I've been really invested in supporting leaders, supporting leaders in the arts, supporting leaders and through activism to go out there and make the kind of changes that we need to see happen in order to live a freer and more just world. So, that's a little bit about me. I'm based in Tkaronto, in the part of Tkaronto, however, that was underwater at the time of the Toronto purchase, so the unseated territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit.

Vidya Shah (00:15:50):

Thank you so much, Syrus. And welcome Beyhan Farhadi.

Beyhan Farhadi (00:15:55):

Hi, thank you for having me. I'm in Scarborough currently on a land covered by Treaty 13 and the Williams treaties. Apparently, I'm a leader. I say that because I find leadership to be a very challenging concept for me to identify with. I feel like I have been entrusted with responsibility and that takes place in a variety of settings. So, I am a failed performance artist, I am in a liminal space professionally. Right now I'm a post-doc at York, but I have taught secondary school for a decade and I'm boxed into professionally, in terms of my expertise is like online learning and public education and educational inequality. I'm just looking for me, queering leadership is just trying to find my space to feel like I am understood in the entirety of my being without having to chop myself up, to make it work. I'm obviously an advocate for a fully funded public education system with the intention of wanting to dismantle it so we don't actually need it. I really have been invested throughout my life in the contradictions of this place and my body. So yeah, that's where I land. I'm a little obsessed with space and what it means, and maybe that's why I ended up training in geography.

Vidya Shah (00:17:49):

Awesome. Thank you so much, Beyhan. And last, but certainly not least Lance McCready, welcome Lance.

Lance McCready (00:17:55):

Thank you very much for this invitation and to participate in this podcast. I am many things. I identify as African-American, I came to Toronto in 2006 to start a position as assistant professor at Ontario Institute

for Studies in Education, University of Toronto and I've continued to be there now. I'm an associate professor and I'm also Director of the Transitional Year Program, which is one of the oldest post-secondary access programs in the country really, originally designed to serve Black and Indigenous students who had experienced barriers to getting into University of Toronto. So, I'm really humbled, I'm really humbled after doing that for three years about what it means to sort of run and how to run a program that has been quite an experience. I've really done a lot of thinking about doing a formal sort of administrative-like title, with a title sort of leadership within the university versus also all of just the work that I've done as part of collectives doing community health education, and organizing with Black, gay and bisexual men in the United States, in Canada, as well as sort of youth advocacy. I think that's really one of my first most formative experiences on the lower east side of New York City working for a youth advocacy and counseling agency called Project Reach, which was founded by a man named Don Kao, Chinese American man who founded this amazing space funded by the Chinatown Planning Council. That really became a sort of place where a really multi-racial, multi-ethnic group of young people, queer and not queer, did a lot of organizing and activism. I also sort of started working with gay men of African descent and that was sort of in the late eighties and early nineties. I was one of their first youth board members when they first had a board. I've continued to sort of work with these collectives outside of formal educational spaces, like in community spaces. Some of them have been art spades, like Black gay letters and arts movement in the Bay area of California, that in sort of the nineties, to education discussion group in Atlanta called Second Sunday, which is to celebrate it's sort of two decades anniversary. I do a lot of thinking about reconciling the formal and the informal and non-formal or the community base and the formal base. I think that's some of what I'll be reflecting on today in our conversations.

Vidya Shah (00:21:18):

Thank you so much, Lance. What I really appreciate about how you all sort of introduced yourself and Zena, how you sort of started us off is, really questioning, what is leadership like the entire concept, really turning it on its head and asking what is this thing? What constitutes it and what are the boundaries of it and what is our relationship to leadership as a concept and as a language? I'm interested in what your thoughts are around what does it mean to queer leadership? What does that look like in everyday practice? Margaret, maybe we can start with you.

Margaret Alexander (00:21:54):

It's interesting, right, because I think that there's a number of us as we've introduced ourselves, have talked about our relationship to the idea of leadership and how much discomfort, or at least, some tensions or some wrestling with what it actually means. I know that for myself, that's something that I've also wrestled with too because this idea, the way that I understood leadership in this kind of Euro-Western construct about leader was this binary of some people are legitimized as leaders, which then means there are followers. It calls into question the idea of power. For me, I've had some reluctance at the same time, I'm a fairly masculine presenting person so there's an assumption that I have a right to leadership or an assumption that I make sense as a leader. I've always had this sort of discomfort with that. But when I actually think about for real what leadership means to me, or maybe something, some other kind of language, I think about responsibility. I feel like I have a responsibility to my ancestors, to my community, to my family, to my place, to my territory, to all my relations and that leadership or the picking up of that responsibility is something that is shared. It isn't about, I'm going to access this position and be at the front and have followers. It feels very much like a very reciprocal, relational responsibility that I have as a being to all my relations.

Vidya Shah (00:23:35):

Thank you so much, Margaret. And Beyhan, I know that you had some thoughts on this question.

Beyhan Farhadi (00:23:41):

Yeah, to echo Margaret, I mean, I think thinking about responsibility has shaped a lot of my understanding of leadership, but also like the story that I tell about power and pleasure in particular and the role that it has in the relationships. There's something that, for me, queering leadership is thinking about pleasure differently. I feel like that doesn't even land, I feel like there's not even space for that for thinking about pleasure outside of such a narrow, restrictive disciplinary framework.

Vidya Shah (00:24:28):

Thanks so much, Beyhan. Lance, did you have thoughts on this question?

Lance McCready (00:24:33):

In some ways one of the assumptions I had about what it means to step into "leadership" was you're going to be a person who's gonna be accountable, the most accountable, the person who's accountable for this organization or this space. You can't just contribute or critique it, you have to be the person at the pinnacle who's gonna sort of be responsible for making it run or not run or something like that. I mean, it's very traditional notion of what leadership is. So part then of queering leadership is to question that role, question whether or not there needs to be sort of such a hierarchical sense of leadership. In other words, question all the norms and the assumptions with that very traditional notion of leadership. That's what queering it in some ways, one way in which I thought about it. It also means showing up as your self in these leadership sort of roles. It's sort of bringing all of your queerness or your sort of maybe anti-normativity. Your queer sexuality, gender, race et cetera, to these positions that were really designed for people to embody very much the norms of them. I think of things, this is really sort of mundane, but I think sometimes, if you're a Director of a, university program, should I be wearing a collared shirt all the time when I show up to a meeting and that will sort of lend legitimacy to what I'm doing or for because everybody else in the room is wearing that. I mean, that's kind of a silly, it's not a huge deal, but it does mean like part of the queering leadership is you're always questioning these norms. I also think the ultimate for that, for me, some of it is even to question whether or not then really this is leadership, this thing that becoming a program director or stepping into this sort of whatever role, like department chair. I'm part of a group of scholars who received a post-doctoral fellowship called the Mellon Fellowship and we periodically every four years get together. At one time we got together and we were there and they basically said, look, now we have supported you for this thing for you to get tenure at your institutions. Now, most of you are associates, it's time for you to become Department Chairs, it's time for you to assume other forms of leadership in the university. We had big arguments about that because many of us were really reluctant to do that. Then I kind of felt because that's what it meant to be a person of colour in the academy and transform it from within you had to take these leadership positions. I partly said, okay, now it's my turn, I'm supposed to do this and everything. But, the short answer is it doesn't feel very transformative at the time. You're sort of in it, you feel like, yes, you're invited to these meetings because you have this title, you're director, but it doesn't feel very transformative. I just think that even being in touch with how your affective response in some ways and is profoundly part of the sort of queering leadership as well.

Vidya Shah (00:28:23):

Thank you, Lance, thank you. Such great thoughts there. Syrus, you had some thoughts on this question too.

Syrus Marcus Ware (00:28:29):

Yeah, just to take us in a completely different direction. I've been thinking a lot about what it would mean to imagine a different set of ancestors that we are tracing our lineage of resistance to. So, thinking about leadership and thinking about who our mentors are and thinking about who's inspiring us in our leadership journey and maybe queering leadership is tracing through a different set of ancestors. We're looking to Marsha P. Johnson for her leadership, we're looking to Billy Merasty here in Tkaronto for their leadership. We're looking to folks who had played significant moments in our queer and trans histories as examples of who we're modeling after and who we're sort of responding to. I think that this ability to sort of tie leadership to collective action, to tie leadership to activism, to tie offensive leadership to social change, all of that is rooted in a queered perspective. It makes me think of there's this beautiful speech that Raven Wings gave in the summer of 2020 in the heat of the uprisings, just after the arrests of the Black Lives Matter protesters in response to the statue demonstration. Raven gave this speech and she talks about having trans leadership and that it was necessary to have trans leadership in these kind of situations because it makes you question. I meant that it was in that act of questioning that transformation was allowed to happen. Just really thinking about threading in activism as a queer and trans practice, that is embedded and rooted in the work. I teach leadership at the Banff Center and I've taught leadership in the arts for a decade and a half. Those aren't necessarily the dominant model to thread activism in, but I do believe that that's essential to what I have to offer to leadership conversations.

Vidya Shah (00:30:34):

Thank you so much Syrus. This idea that all of you spoken to about that questioning is so central to leadership being in the questions, continuously engaging in the questioning and it. It worries me at times when "leaders" are certain about their "leadership", and what that means and what that forecloses in terms of transformation. So, thank you all so much for naming that. One of the other questions that we're sitting with as a group is how does queering leadership disrupt our ideas of both schooling and leadership? What specifically are we looking to disrupt? We sort of named it in a couple of ways, but I'd love to hear some additional thoughts on this question. So how does queering leadership disrupt our ideas of both schooling and leadership and what challenges do you face in leading from the standpoint? Maybe here, we'll turn to Lance?

Lance McCready (00:31:28):

Well, going back to one of the things I said earlier is that schools are formal educational spaces that tend to be incredibly racist, heteronormative, classist, abelist et cetera, colonial sort of institution. I think we have lots of sort of empirical data to show that we've have decades of the same sorts of outcomes of who's doing well in school and who's not doing well "in school". I profoundly think sometimes just showing up as a queer person of colour in school is disruptive. I think it gets complicated 'cause I just don't think by having those identities, that your actions are necessarily transformative. I mean, you could have a very normative acting or normative leading sort of queer person of colour that I've seen lots of those in schools as well, in terms of people, for instance, who are not openly sort of LGBTQ2S, who perpetuate a lot of lateral violence, uphold sort of codes of masculinity et cetera. I don't think that that necessarily sort of means anything, but I do feel that that the norms of these institutions are so great that if you kind of can show up, if you can just be your queer self in these institutions, that it also ends

up being even today in 2021 that it's incredibly challenging still. We still have, I mean, I don't know if I have to go through like all those sort of examples of curriculum and that does not represent sort of queer, trans, people of colour, women, et cetera. Our lives, the ways that youth are still pushed out of school, where their families are disrespected. I sometimes don't even underestimate just showing up in these spaces and demanding and sort of, as Beyhan was talking about taking up space in those places, how important that sort of queering is.

Vidya Shah (00:34:08):

Thank you so much, Lance. Syrus, thoughts on this question.

Syrus Marcus Ware (00:34:13):

Yeah, I've been thinking a lot about what it would mean to practice a kind of engaged pedagogy, as bell hooks encourages us to do and to sort of imagine the kind of reciprocal relationships, even within our research projects that Viviane Namaste encourages us to think through the ways that we could imagine a more engaged education or more engaged pedagogical practice. To me, I've been thinking a lot about ways of bringing arts, ways of bringing activism into the pedagogical environment and to create almost semi-autonomous zones within my classroom spaces or within wherever I'm working in the university to try to have an alternative set of rules and an alternative set of practices. In the before times, we would have food together and we would take turns bringing food. Like every queer potluck, we would kind of do that, but at the beginning of that, we intake food allergies and take all of those things into account. As we would share food together, the ways that we would sort of build in activist practice into our work, supporting movements in the States and here, supporting political prisoners and making class statements. Really, threading activism through the work and threading this kind of reciprocal engaged pedagogy where the students are bringing, activist content as well and bringing ideas for what they want to focus on. To me, this has been a really beautiful thing to be able to do and I mostly am able to do it because for the most part there's a little bit of a fly under-the-radar myth that can sometimes happen in certain contexts. I ended up proposing a grant for a course that they had an exciting new program to create experiential education, which of course is such a buzz word in academia right now. I applied for an experiential education course that just happened to be on prison abolition. So, not something that the university would have necessarily been first and foremost, pushing forward as a curriculum need, but because I was able to get it in through the back door, through this experience education program again, and then able to create the semi-autonomous onto the classroom. We were able to do quite radical work and support abolition movements through the work of the students I hear on the ground. That felt quite good. I've been thinking a lot about ways that we get to do that and of course, the challenges are that the university is not always the most agile or the most responsive. We have to sort of find these ways in and around to make sure that we can make this kind of magic happen. I think that that is what queer folks have always done in institutions is question, is make space, is prop doors open, is create liminal space, do all of these things that sort of make new things possible.

Vidya Shah (00:37:37):

Love it, thank you, thank you. Beyhan, did you want to add your thoughts to this question?

Beyhan Farhadi (00:37:43):

In my scholarship, I am working really hard to unlearn the associations I make with education and schooling. Trying to think about the ways that schooling, it reproducing inequality, is also a site where we organize all kinds of relations, including the relationship to work. I think the challenge that I encounter, in

a sort of very embodied way when I'm in class, the students that I teach, many of whom are between the ages of 14 and 18, are trying to make meaning of me for all kinds of reasons that are the unspoken pieces of educating right, is the identification that takes place. There's something about me trying to think about how students are making meaning of me and shaping that. Then, I'm thinking about the ways that I'm intentioned with curriculum and the way that knowledge is, and students are entirely coded from the minute they walk through kindergarten in that door, they are coded and coded and shaped. By the time I'm encountering them, trying to sort of build different ways of relating, I get so often, students are surprised. I think if I could characterize the way students feel in my class, it's like this constant state of surprise. They expect me to behave in ways because I am inheriting their history of schooling, they are expecting specific responses. It's an opportunity for me to really get them to think about what their relationship could be to education that doesn't have to do with these sets of histories. And then of course, the challenges, I grew up being really adversarial to leadership. I wear it as a badge of pride that I don't deal with administration. I sort of think about the ways that leadership gets coded as an administration, right, as administrative and what it means to not see myself belonging to that space. Even being invited to a space, in which I'm a queer woman of colour, many people tell me I'm leading, but I don't have a professional title of an administrator that I don't feel like I belong in that space, that I have to really interrogate that as well. Then, of course, I think part of Syrus's provocation to think about activism for me is about, what the purpose of this thing that we're doing is right? That it's not to just reproduce labour, it is to build relations with the people that we are sharing space with in our communities.

Vidya Shah (00:40:46):

Thank you so much Beyhan. This is some fire here, folks. Margaret, did you want to share some thoughts on this question?

Margaret Alexander (00:40:57):

Thank you. Yeah, I was thinking about what folks were saying was sort of resonating with me. The program that I teach in the Assaulted Women's and Children's Counsellor Advocate/Program at George Brown. That is a college program, which is different from university, and college that are completely well, maybe not completely, but they're very different kinds of animals. The focus there in this two year diploma program is to train people to take on job of counsellor. It's interesting because we're a very unique program, a very small program so it allows us to work in a way where the eyes of the system are not always on us. We're able to create different spaces and that's what we do. We spend a bunch of time talking with folks about how to hold this idea of helping and in a workplace or in a sector, if you will, that has an expectation of what helpers look like and behave like and sound like and think like. We very much create a program where the expectation and the mentoring and the modeling of behaviours and support of each other, in support of each other, challenging each other and holding each other accountable, but also holding space for the real ways that people live their lives and go through school. It's just this interesting kind of dance that I feel like I've certainly had to undertake as a person who has gained pay for in a sector, in an environment where people are required to experience harm and then come to me as an expert or whatever, right? How do you at the same time want to abolish the same system that you actually have to work in for pay? I also live that as I go through these educational institutions. I think the queering notion of it that queerness to me is this imagination of possibilities that are much more than what's in front of you and the ability to think about something different or be different or imagine something different. But with this kind of hopefulness and this, I guess this idea that it is truly possible and not just some sort of weird fantasy. We have to embody to sound, I don't know who said it first, but embody the change that we want to see. I feel like queerness queerness sort of opens up a spectrum of

possibility that may not be so obvious all of the time, but it certainly is a challenge. It's certainly a challenge because I think that we also have to hold these tensions of talking about this and engaging with this in these institutions, which are the complete opposite of that.

Vidya Shah (00:44:10):

Thank you for naming those tensions, so important, so important. Zena, I know that you had some thoughts on this question too.

Zena Sharman (00:44:16):

Yeah, I mean, just so much appreciation for this really rich dialogue. It's something I've been thinking about recently and Beyhan, what you were talking about made me think about this. I was thinking about one of the first places that I've really unconsciously learned how to embody a particular kind of performance of respectability was in elementary school as an act of protection because I was being raised by a single parent in poverty. My mom was an amazing parent who also had a really complex trauma history and a lot of complex mental health stuff going on and was an incredible mom. It was not an easy landscape to parent through I'm sure. I have thought a lot now in my forties about what it meant to learn how to perform a certain kind of respectability and to be the smart kid. I was the poor kid, but I was still able to kind of stand out in the classroom as like normal enough to be okay. I understand the way now, much more than I ever did then, of course, how whiteness protected me and protected us from the risk of state intervention and child apprehension and all those kinds of things. But I really feel like part of the work of queerness for me and queering leadership and just showing up in the fullness of myself has been about continuously trying to uproot that performance of respectability. I have really been thinking a lot more about that recently. This is such a funny thing to say, but like writing publicly about aspects of my queer sexuality, like specifically about my queer sexuality and my queer sex life now in my forties that I have never done before and thinking about my coworkers, reading that and just kind of being okay with it. The other thing I wanted to think about and Syrus, this was reflecting on what you were talking about around this engaged pedagogy and this idea of creating these semi-autonomous zones is like just the incredible pedagogical work I see people in my life who are trans and queer and femme educators doing this incredible pedagogy. These are all people I know that are teaching in universities, but one person I know who uses ritual as a way to weave into like creative writing practice and creating these incredible trauma-informed sacred spaces of learning with her students. Someone else I know who's a disabled and trans person, an academic who has really been practicing this abolitionist pedagogy, and again, like, what does it look like to create those spaces of refuge for students in institutions that are institutionally violent, both to the students and to the educators. And, how they do this incredible extra work to create those spaces that are so needed and so transformative, but are often doing it in the weight of the same institutional violence that's harming their students. So, just thinking about like the brilliance and the magic and the world building that I see happen in those spaces, and then also what an uphill battle it can be in the context in which that work is unfolding. So, just wanted to offer those reflections.

Vidya Shah (00:47:20):

Thank you so much, thank you so much. As we're thinking about this, and we're talking about the challenges that we in this and the contradictions in this work, I'm also thinking about the possibilities that emerge and you've all have talked about possibilities in different ways. I'm interested in hearing a little bit more about what possibilities emerge from queering leadership and what do you hope that leaders at, whatever that means and leadership, whatever that means, what do you hope that leaders might take away from, from this conversation? So Margaret, maybe we'll start with you

Margaret Alexander (00:47:56):

Again, I'm sort of ever hopeful. I'm really excited and to be a part of this conversation and to hear the things that people are talking about. I'm looking forward to having a moment to be able to think further about some of the things that people have mentioned. Beyhan, your initial foray into the first question about pleasure and desire. I'm hopeful that maybe at some point I can hear more about that cause I find it really interesting. To go to the last part of that question, what I hope that people sort of take away is this idea of community because I think that what happens in some of these institutions, some of the violence that Zena had mentioned is isolation and how we can become so separated from each other. I feel like I'm really fortunate to have been teaching with the faculty that I do. We're a small group of, there's only four full-time faculty in this entire program and then we have a group of contract teachers and our contract teachers feel very much a part of our faculty. Although, the system engages in a bunch of behaviours that kind of separate us out. I mean, they work at, even as teachers and having us in competition with each other. It becomes a very fearful thing sometimes to be vulnerable, to make connections, to challenge the system from within if that's such a thing. We can feel very, very alone and I'm hopeful that people will know that there are a lot of people who are working in these systems and education, who are working at creating different spaces and have a vision of what these spaces can be. At the same time, I must say that, again, Beyhan comment about eradicating the system. As a parent, if I don't remember being in school lots when I was a kid, I was kicked out often. I was thinking also about leadership, thinking about how at one point I was trouble and problems and thrown out of school continually, and then sort of grew up and accessed socioeconomic power that then started to protect me and make me a leader. I'm still the same mouthy brat that I used to be. I also raised my kids, led them to be mouthy brats as well and they were consistently in conflict in school. I remember my son having this thing about how he's a non-conformist and me going in and saying, and that's a problem? Again, the tension of create this in these spaces because they're here and at the same time, let's throw them out and do something different.

Vidya Shah (00:50:55):

I love that. Thank you, Margaret. Nonconformist, yeah me too. Syrus, you had some thoughts on this question.

Syrus Marcus Ware (00:51:02):

Yeah, I've been thinking a lot about what it might mean to build an abolitionist society and what kind of future are we trying to imagine? In this abolitionist society, the kinds of things that I'm hearing my community talk about and ask for is to create a society that's rooted in trans justice, disability justice, queer justice, migrant justice and economic justice. So it necessarily will be the kind of community that's rooted care at its core, that necessarily rooted its work in collective liberation and collective struggle, and that it would necessarily move away from this idea of the single charismatic leader. I think in this abolitionist future that we're imagining, leadership is going to look so different. It is going to be much more collectively held, hopefully maybe some returns to matrilineal practices and transplant practices. You know, that it will be this way that we will take care of each other in a collective way, in an interdependent way, rather than looking to a leader to provide the solutions to a problem or to the state to provide the solutions to conflict crisis or harms. So, really thinking and dreaming into the future has made me think, okay, well, I know that I may not have known exactly what we're going to look like in 20 years, but I think if we bring about the kinds of revolutionary things that I think we're working on right now, I know for sure it's going to look different than one person at this front of the room talking to a hundred people listening. That's not going to be the definition of what leadership looks like because it's

not going to be valuable to our community, to the kind of community that we will have transformed into. It will look much more like webs, like networks, like collective groupings, like shared knowledge, like reciprocal learning, like shared leadership, like all boats rising. I think that that's sort of what I'm dreaming into is imagining what I hope people take from this is possibility, that queering leadership opens the door to a future where we have so much more possibility. That is very exciting to me and I'm really looking forward to a future that has a different sense. Maybe power will be redistributed in a more equitable way, and there'll be more justice as a result. I'm really looking forward to that.

Vidya Shah (00:53:55):

I am too, thank you so much for sharing that vision, Syrus, so beautiful. Beyhan, I know you had some thoughts on this question about possibilities of queering leadership.

Beyhan Farhadi (00:54:06):

What would I ask future leaders to think about? Once you have power, what are you going to do with it in terms of not assuming center space everywhere? I think as our leader, it's really easy to because the institution, and I'm saying leader as an institution, because that's the only way I sort of understand it. I don't know who's going to be listening, maybe people who are listening, they see themselves as leaders outside the institution, in which case I would say, please continue to set the example and live out the possibility. Possibility is both future oriented, but it's also a becoming. There's not going to be a time in which you take that place, it's making that place. I think that queering leadership is the creation of that space. But for folks who sort of are listening and are struggling to identify, wrap their heads around, what does it mean to step back from leadership? What does it mean to defer leadership and responsibility? I really think this, Syrus mentioning mentorship and who your mentors are, what does it mean to look elsewhere compared to where you've always looked, which is in an institutional space, likely not where you should be looking at all.

Vidya Shah (00:55:41):

Thank you so much, Beyhan. I think that idea of stepping back and deferfing and looking elsewhere, such important pieces there. I'm going to just open it up and ask if there's any final thoughts that folks may have that they want to share.

Zena Sharman (00:55:57):

One thing I will say is where I'm sitting right now, I have an altar actually just above my desk, and there's a picture of my mom on it, but also photos of different queer and trans ancestors who really inspire me and who I look to as again, part of this lineage of practice. I think specifically, kind of inviting in what Syrus was talking about earlier in terms of who are the ancestors or lineages that we're calling into. And Beyhan, I think what you were asking around who are your mentors and what does that look like? I know something, I try to ask myself as a discernment practice in the work that I do, it's not the only question, it's one of many. One of them is does it serve my ego or does it serve the work? The work is like the work of a lifetime, right? The work of transformation, the work of accountability, the work of love, the work of relationships, the work of community. That's a really helpful filter for me sometimes when choosing where to put my energy and where to put my attention. Again, I don't think that's the only question, but it's one that I've tried to kind of practice engaging with. I think also, Beyhan, you introduced the idea of pleasure ever so briefly and I think also think how do we move towards pleasure? How can we find ways to make this make this feel good? And for pleasure to be worthy and an inherent part of this practice because that feels queer to me too. Just wanted to offer those thoughts as well.

Vidya Shah (00:57:29):

Thank you so much. I think that piece around pleasure and leadership. So many times when we speak to people that identify as leaders or that are identified as leaders, pleasure, isn't a word that is usually associated with that. What might it mean to reconceptualize that, to re-imagine it so that it becomes a place of joy, it becomes a site of pleasure. What might that look like? That's great, such great questions. Any other final thoughts before we close?

Lance McCready (00:58:01):

Yeah, I was also just thinking we've been talking a lot about the worlds we want, then the world we live in. I still think that that's a huge contested terrain. I hope in queering leadership, I guess we're allowed to see that we see all the possibilities. I think in this administrative position, I've also been thinking a lot about the places where there isn't a lot of queering going on and how we show up there and whether or not we attempt to show up there or whether we just attempt to build sort of alternative institutions. I mean, we haven't talked a lot about K-12 schools, but one of the things I wrote about is that so many sort of queer people of colour, academics, activists, we all, interestingly, eventually move out of formal educational spaces. It's very hard to stay in the K-12 space as a queer person. We often start out there trying to do sort of the transformative, radical work, but eventually many of the people that I know end up moving to the community spaces, to the alternative space. One of the things that I tried to do is challenge myself to go back into the space that I sort of had stopped sort of being in so much. In that world that we're in and the world that we're imagining, I just wonder about all the people that are in these really challenging, formal educational spaces. Do we feel any responsibilities to or how do we challenge or transform those spaces as well? Do we just sort of try to create the alternative space and sort of abandoned the horrible form of violent ones? There are a lot of things like that and I think sometimes access to education sort of sits in that too, because there's always this huge possibility of what the access to formal education is going to do. And then ultimately, a lot of what you end up learning along the way is it doesn't do all the things that you had hoped that it was going to do, but maybe it does a little something of what you would hope that it would do. One of the things with queering leadership, I guess the thing I'd say is I hope what it does for leaders is it just creates as many questions as it does like certainties about what is it about the future? I think that's part of what the legacy of queering leadership should be, sort of possibilities and questions.

Vidya Shah (01:01:02):

Thank you, Lance. We started this with questions and we're ending with questions, which I think is so appropriate and so wonderful. We're going to have the last word from Margaret.

Margaret Alexander (01:01:17):

I don't know if it's last word worthy, but I guess I was just thinking about young people, as I mentioned in my introduction, I'm in my mid fifties, I'll be 55 this year, excitedly 55. To be quite honest, sometimes annoying, but mostly wonderful I feel engaging with young people is. I am fortunate enough to do that in my job, but I'm also fortunate enough to do that in my community. I'm an auntie and uncle to lots of littles and young people. It gives me this opportunity to see the sort of fruition of a whole bunch of the queering work that has occurred. Like I hear, and I know that I'm also in Tkaronto and downtown-ish and I know that the downtown-ish worlds can be different from other parts of the world. But, I'm just so in love with visions of what the world should be right now. Yes, there's the future, but I do think that what the expectation that young people have right now. I find that sometimes I'm a bit taken aback because I

think, well, don't you understand that that's not possible or I think, don't you understand that we've been working really hard to make this happen? What do you mean you want that happen? Or you have this expectation that that would happen? I think about the queering that happens all the time with lots of young people that I'm fortunate to be in connection with. It makes me really happy because it also makes me really uncomfortable, but it makes me really happy.

Vidya Shah (01:03:08):

I just love that, I love that. They will, the young people will lead us as they continue to think about what this means and as all of these ideas of leadership change over time. I just wanted to thank all of you for this fantastic panel. I wanted to thank Zena Sharman for opening us today with such a beautiful framing, with questions, sharing different perspectives and encouraging us to be in the questions, to our amazing group of panelists for continuing to keep us in the questions, living the questions, looking elsewhere. I'm thinking about contradictions and disruptions and activism. I'm also thinking about centering the body and desire and pleasure. I'm thinking about the unknown, the diffuse, the liminal, the in-between, the ambiguous. I'm thinking about the idea of stepping back and deferring. I'm thinking about, of course, this idea of collective liberation and the possibilities that come with that, and the responsibilities that come with that. Beautiful, beautiful conversation today, and to all of the listeners who are engaging now or will engage in years to come. Thank you for coming on this journey with us. We're not yet quite sure where it's going to lead, but thank you for coming on it with us and for being in the questions and in the tensions of this work. I remind folks that you can find more information about the panelists on our UnLeading website and please check out the website for additional podcasts as well. Again, to all of our speakers, thank you so much for such a wonderful conversation. You've been listening to the UnLeading podcast, my name is Dr. Vidya Shah. Thank you for tuning in.