

“Perception is reality. Perception IS reality.” I told the mayor this many times, yet he refused to believe me. He would argue and say “No! The facts are [that] Frances [referring to the Parks Board member he appointed] is NOT a threat to the Hispanic community. Her membership in the Minuteman [anti-immigrant organization] has nothing to do with her role on the Parks Board.” As hard as I tried to convince him otherwise, he refused to believe that Frances is a perceived threat to the Latino immigrants in Kansas City. Perception IS Reality. (Valenciano 2015)

TRANSFORMATIONAL RESISTANT LEADERSHIP IN KANSAS CITY: A Study of Chicana Activism

Theresa Torres

Abstract: *This case study of leadership draws on the concepts of transformational resistance (Delgado Bernal 1997; Brayboy 2007) and mestiza consciousness (Anzaldúa 1987) to create a model of Transformational Resistant leadership (TR leadership) that helps articulate the leadership of a Chicana activist navigating tensions between an established Latina/o community, new immigrant Latina/os, African American leaders, and anti-immigrant forces. Elements of a TR leadership include a critical awareness, a commitment to social justice, and an ability to maneuver within dominant and marginal spaces, discourses, and ideologies. TR leaders are advocates for social justice; seek solidarity with marginalized peoples; create coalitions; rely on multi-levels of support; maneuver in and around binaries; endure personal sacrifice; and often experience the oppression they struggle to overcome.*

From the summer of 2007 through January 2008, Rita Valenciano, a self-described Chicana¹ activist in Kansas City, Missouri, led the struggle against a newly elected white mayor's appointment to the Kansas City Parks Board (KCPB). Valenciano, a 50-year-old Chicana and immigrant advocate, was chair of the Coalition of Hispanic Organizations (a nonprofit organization), board member of Guadalupe Centers (the largest Latina/o-serving nonprofit organization in Kansas City), and director of a nonprofit organization, AVANCE Kansas City, which served immigrant Latina/o parents.² Valenciano's resistance to Frances Semler's appointment began on June 2007 when a reporter contacted her for a response to Mayor Mark Funkhouser's decision to appoint Semler to the KCPB. Funkhouser's appointment of a 73-year-old gardener to the KCPB seemed befitting of Semler's interests. Semler, however, was also a member of the national anti-immigrant Minuteman Defense Corps, known for its anti-immigrant rhetoric and hostile presence and actions along the southern border with Mexico. Valenciano felt that someone with these views should not serve as a member of the KCPB, which has a long history of racialized segregation.³ Valenciano, in collaboration with the leadership of the Guadalupe Centers, created the Anti-Racism Task Force (AR Task Force), which, in turn, involved other Chicana/o leaders and activists. As the controversy grew, additional white leaders—mainly from religious groups—asked to join the task force. Eventually, the AR Task Force became the Common Table, which eventually replaced Valenciano and other Latina/o leadership with white female progressive leaders.

This case study of Valenciano's leadership draws on the concepts of transformational resistance (Delgado Bernal 1997; Brayboy 2007) and mestiza consciousness (Anzaldúa 1987) to create a model of Transformational

Resistant leadership (TR leadership) to articulate the leadership Valenciano displayed in a Midwestern community fraught with tensions between the established Latina/o community, new immigrant Latina/os, African American leaders, and anti-immigrant forces. Valenciano built a coalition with Latina/o leaders, African Americans, and Jewish leaders to oppose the appointment of an anti-immigrant and anti-Latina/o board member by focusing on the fundamental human right to feel safe in one's community. Recognizing the significance of gender within the power and relational dimensions of leadership—as noted in Mary Pardo's (1990), Carol Hardy-Fanta's (1993), Josephine Mendez-Negrete's (1999), Milagros Peña's (2007), and Michelle Téllez's (2008) research on Latino political activism—this study also highlights the different gendered strategies Latina leaders use to challenge political power to promote social justice.

By conducting a case study of Valenciano's words and actions, while situating them amongst scholarship on Latina leaders, I map out the elements of a TR leadership that best characterizes Valenciano's resistance of Semler's appointment to the KCPB. Valenciano's critical awareness, her commitment to social justice, and her ability to maneuver within dominant and marginal spaces, discourses, and ideologies make Dolores Delgado Bernal's notion of transformational resistance (1997) and Gloria Anzaldúa's *mestiza* consciousness (1987) well-suited concepts to help theorize Valenciano's leadership. Consequently, I offer the conceptualization of TR leadership, which is focused on the leadership style and choices of a Latina/o and/or Chicana/o activist. TR leaders are advocates for social justice; seek solidarity with marginalized peoples; create coalitions; rely on multi-levels of support; maneuver in and around binary thinking and borders; endure personal sacrifice; and experience both the oppression they struggle to overcome and acrimony perpetuated against them for attempting to upend the status quo.

To map out the tenets of TR leadership, I note the various literature used to develop TR leadership and detail the methods I used for my study. I then provide a narrative that chronicles Valenciano's actions in identifying and challenging an anti-immigrant appointee to the KCPB in order to illustrate the elements of her transformational resistance leadership. In the discussion section, I summarize the impact of TR leadership for challenging color-blind racism, white privilege, and sexism. I conclude by offering the implications of a TR leadership model.

Literature Review

The multi-disciplinary literature used to inform this study employs the notion of transformational resistance, utilizes scholarship on Chicana and Latina leaders, and engages Anzaldúa's mestiza consciousness. Dolores Delgado Bernal's (1997) theory of transformational resistance emerged from her research on Chicana activists from the East Los Angeles High School student walkouts of 1968. As a result of training with adult leaders and college student mentors, the Chicana/o high school student protestors developed a critical awareness of the social forces and systemic racism that informed the resistant strategies they employed to challenge racialized structures, groups, and individuals. Bryan Brayboy (2005) later applied the concept of transformational resistance in his research on Native American Ivy League students who pursued higher education in order to be of service to their community. His findings noted that their transformational resistance often resulted in various forms of psychological, cultural, and emotive trauma. While Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) and Brayboy (2005) applied transformational resistance within a school context, transformational resistance can be extended to activists and advocates for other Chicana/o issues such as those regarding equity in education, the justice system, immigration, and human rights—like Valenciano, who engages in resistance efforts outside of educational settings but are similarly motivated to cultivate social change.

Several other studies highlight the significant role that Latina leaders play in grassroots activism and politics. Carol Hardy-Fanta (1993) argues that Latinas often play an important role in local politics, but these roles are largely ignored by scholars and politicians who do not view their participation as integral for changing systems. Mary Pardo's (1998) study of Mexican American women in East Los Angeles noted the significant role these women played in organizing through their gendered networks, "transforming" political organizing and focusing their political issues on the needs of families and community. The women in Hardy-Fanta's and Pardo's research engaged their activist leadership within the Latina/o community as agents of social change. Additionally, Josephine Mendez-Negrete's (1999), Milagros Peña's (2007), and Michelle Téllez's (2008) studies of Latina activism reveal the positive impact gendered activism makes in the lives of the participants, their families, and other vulnerable community members who desire justice and equity. The Latina leaders in these studies create models of political activism for critical community engagement.

Anzaldúa's (1987) notion of "mestiza consciousness"—the ability to live with the ambiguity and duality of life by those living on the border of multiple realities such as cultures, languages, and sexualities—has particular resonance for this study. As described by Anzaldúa, this state of awareness is often fraught with pain and trauma. This energy, however, is often converted into creative and innovative social justice efforts. Expanding on this process, María Elena Torre and Jennifer Ayala (2009) emphasize the impact of a borderlands/ mestiza consciousness for liberatory projects that "interrupt social injustice" and "use our differences...to build intricate multi-layer research designed to disrupt inequalities that otherwise seem inevitable" (391).

The Theory of Transformational Leadership

Since the research of transformational resistance comes from a gendered analysis of Chicanas' experiences, the development of TR leadership is also

grounded in the intersectional lives of Chicanas and Latinas, who face the systemic oppression of race/ethnicity, class, and gender. While transformational resistance focuses on the study of young leaders within education, this article extends TR leadership to community leaders. In essence, transformational resistant leadership refers to the leadership style of Chicanas and Latinas, and other women of color, who are critically engaged in their community in the struggle for equity and social justice and are aware of the various structures of racism, sexism, and classism. Moreover, this approach often necessitates personal sacrifice to achieve long-term goals of transformation (Brayboy 2005).

TR leadership additionally recognizes that leadership on behalf of the Latina/o community means leaders will themselves experience both oppression and confrontation while struggling to transform injustice and unjust systems, and that they will pursue coalitions and draw on existing support systems. Hardy-Fanta's (1993) work on the gendered nature of Chicana leadership supports this additional characteristic, as she found that Chicana leaders relied on long-standing relationships that are rooted in multi-level systems of supports. Pardo's (1998), Mendez-Negrete's (1999), Peña's (2007), and Téllez's (2008) scholarship have parallel findings. Together, this research illustrates that the significant contributions of Latina activists are dependent and built upon networks of gendered relations. Developing these networks, the leaders focus their activities on the collective mission, which is more important than personal recognition. Lastly, a mestiza consciousness is also essential for TR leadership. Anzaldúa's explication of existing in a liminal social, psychic, and ambiguous state reflects the position TR leaders often find themselves in as they struggle for solidarity within a conflicted community.

As such, TR leadership has the following attributes: 1) advocates for equity and social justice; 2) is guided by a critical awareness of institutional

intersectional racism, sexism, and classism; 3) collaborates and builds coalitions with others; 4) relies on multi-level support systems, specifically personal support systems; 5) necessitates personal sacrifice; 6) withstands both oppression and confrontation while struggling to disrupt unjust systems; and 7) requires a mestiza consciousness.

Methods

The following section outlines the data collection process from which the concept of TR leadership emerged. This case study utilized ethnographic qualitative research methods to study Valenciano's leadership role in marshaling the protest against Semler. This action began on June 2007 and ended on February 2008, which resulted in the formation of several coalitional groups, including and within the AR Task Force and later the Common Table. The data collection involved participant observation of AR Task Force meetings from September through December 2007; participant observation of the meetings of the Common Table (a union of the AR Task Force with the addition of white liberal leaders and a few African American and Jewish religious leaders), which met over the months of January and February in 2008; interviews and informal meetings with Valenciano; and informal discussions with the liberal white ally members of these coalitional groups. When I first began attending the meetings of these newly formed advocacy groups, I explained that as a Chicana resident of Kansas City, I supported their efforts to oust Semler, but my primary role was as a researcher who would be writing about the plans and activities of the various groups.⁴

My interviews with Valenciano took place over several years, beginning with informal conversations in 2008 and 2009, and then more formal interviews in 2010, 2015, and 2017. We discussed her leadership role and interactions with the Latina/o community, with the city's other Chicana/o leaders, the mayor,

the media, and with Janet Murguia, CEO of the National Council of La Raza (NCLR)⁵ who participated in the protest against Semler's appointment. We analyzed the rifts in the coalitions Valenciano spearheaded, which primarily included the separation of Chicana/o leadership from white liberal progressive leaders who were mainly women. Lastly, we reviewed the personal costs she endured as a result of her advocacy. I took field notes and recordings of our conversations and used my last two meetings with her to share my analysis and emerging manuscripts as a way to validate my conceptualization of Valenciano as a TR leader.

Benefitting from some time and distance from the events of 2007 through 2008, I wrote this essay with a critical lens regarding the complexities present in coalitional building and struggles for social and racial justice. This distance allowed for insights regarding the challenges and the sacrifice required of such leaders,—which can be devastating—and the significance of personal support systems that can mitigate these effects. The ensuing narrative is derived from these discussions and analysis during and following my ethnographic research of Valenciano. It traces her actions to call for the removal of Semler from KCPB and illustrates how she employed TR leadership.

The Appointment of an Anti-Immigrant Leader to the City Parks Board

In this section, a brief summary of the socio-historical contexts of Latina/os in Kansas City is followed by a narrative that illustrates the seven elements of TR Leadership. The Latina/o established presence in Kansas City began in the late nineteenth century and includes multiple generations—from the first-generation immigrant to fifth generation US citizens (Torres 2013). According to Census Bureau estimates of the Kansas City metropolitan area from 2005 to 2007 (2005 American Survey estimates from the US Census Bureau), Latinas/os were 6.7% of the total population, and of these, 80%

were Mexican, followed by a growing number of Central Americans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and small percentages of South American immigrants. At the time of these events in the history of Kansas City's City Council, no Latina/o had served on the city council since the 1990s. At the time of Semler's appointment, the president of the Kansas City Parks Board (KCPB) was John Fierro, a Latino who did not support the boycott for the removal of Semler. No major Latino leader publicly agreed with his stance.

The socio-political events under study here started in 2006 with a newly elected mayor, who took office in January 2007 and began naming his leadership appointments that spring and summer. In June, he appointed the KCPB members, including Fierro, and a white woman, Semler, who was involved in gardens and park projects in north Kansas City. At first, the Latina/o community did not react negatively to her selection since they were unaware of Semler's connection with the Minuteman Defense Corps (Valenciano 2010).

Valenciano (2010) explained that when Mayor Funkhouser chose Semler, he bypassed the usual nomination process whereby community leaders and citizens, in general, submit their résumés to serve on city boards. Ignoring the 47 applicants for the position, the mayor invited Semler, whom he knew as an election campaign volunteer (Helling 2007). She submitted a résumé. When her name was made public, a news reporter checked Semler's background and called Valenciano to ask her what she thought about the mayor's new nominee to the KCPB since Semler was a member of the anti-immigrant Minuteman Corps. Surprised by Semler's membership, Valenciano was taken aback and stated, "I am sure the Hispanic community would not be happy with her appointment" (Valenciano 2015). Her immediate response exemplifies TR leadership by her critical awareness of social injustice. On June 14, 2007, as chair of the Coalition of Hispanic Organizations (COHO), Valenciano helped to organized the

AR Task Force. Members of the task force included local Chicana/o leaders and activists and other concerned Latinas/os. In her role as chair, Valenciano (2010) explained, “Prior to the first meeting of the AR Task Force, I had already invited leaders from the Jewish Community Relations Bureau/American Jewish Committee, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference of African American, others from these groups, and COHO members to attend the first protest rally on June 12th. It was well attended.” Valenciano (2010) shared her reasons for opposing Semler’s selection with key African American and Jewish religious leaders, who agreed that this cause was important and related to their work for social justice. These actions demonstrate strategic coalition building, an important element of TR leadership.

The next tactic Valenciano and the AR Task Force pursued was to convince the city council to vote against Semler’s appointment. Since Semler already had been appointed by the mayor, Valenciano raised public awareness regarding Semler’s views on immigration and made sure the city council members knew their Latina/o constituents and other community stakeholders were displeased with her appointment. She did this in hopes that the city council would register their opposition to Semler and convince the mayor to remove her from the board. Building this type of solidarity and multi-layered support is another attribute of TR leadership.

These efforts were successful as the city council voted nine to three in opposition to Semler’s appointment and encouraged her to resign or have the mayor replace her. Initially, Semler refused. She later offered to resign after more public calls for her to leave following the city council vote, but the mayor refused her resignation (Campbell 2007) and instead encouraged her to remain (Campbell and Horsley 2007).

Media reports about the opposition to Semler’s appointment drew angry editorial letters against the Latina/o community in the *Kansas City Star*

newspaper. In turn, the AR Task Force countered by writing letters to the editor protesting the appointment. In addition, Valenciano collaborated with key leaders from other community organizations to strategize ways to convince the mayor to drop Semler. Valenciano's purposeful alignment with principal leaders of the Latina/o community was critical since these individuals were among the most respected Latina/o leaders given their support by the established philanthropic foundations and the local media. Strategizing with these leaders meant that Valenciano's TR leadership utilized the collective power of coalition building with diverse groups including their persistent and collective advocacy for the established and immigrant Latina/o population. Together these leaders' long-standing relationships could garner more support from the local Latina/o community, city council members, and the media.

After losing their first significant round with the mayor who continued his public support of Semler, Valenciano and the AR Task Force devised another action plan. In July 2007, Valenciano (2010) met with Janet Murguía, CEO of the National Council of La Raza (NCLR) and former Kansas City, Kansan, hoping to leverage the largest Latina/o lobbying organization for their cause. They discussed and pursued strategies for a more significant resistance against the mayor's appointment. In September, unable to get the mayor to negotiate, Valenciano organized a press conference with the AR Task Force leaders and Murguía announcing that NCLR was considering boycotting Kansas City and finding another host city for their 2009 national conference. Murguía called the mayor and explained that the NCLR convention would move its venue if Semler continued to serve on the KCPB (Alm and Smith 2007). Murguía expressed her concerns in an editorial in the *Kansas City Star* newspaper:

Kansas City is my home. Nothing would make me happier nor more proud than to showcase this great city, its vibrant Hispanic community and the good work of the National Council of La Raza's local affiliates and to the more than 20,000 people who attend our conference every year. But I cannot in good conscience hold our conference in Kansas City when its top official's actions condone hate mongering. (Murguia 2007)

With the boycott, Valenciano raised the stakes, challenging the mayor's upper hand by engaging larger economic (class) forces against him at a crucial time during the recession of 2007. The potential action meant the city would not only lose the NCLR convention, but they might lose other major conventions, including the Southern Conference Leadership Conference and the National Association of Colored People. Valenciano explained how she convinced these groups to support this pivotal strategy:

I already had good relationships with the African American community. I was one of the founders of the Black and Brown Coalition that met monthly. Fuzzy Thompson [a senior and well-respected leader in the African American community] supported our task force by calling upon the leaders of several well-known groups. The South Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Urban League, and several Black Church leaders joined us. (Valenciano 2017)

Additionally, she stated, "We were able to get a local chapter of the SCLC to lobby [their board] that [they move] its 2008 national convention to boycott Kansas City in support of our request to pressure the mayor" (Valenciano 2010). Valenciano's coalitions building, a central feature of TR leadership, is thus revealed in her ability to create strategic solidarity with local and national African American leaders to leverage pressure on the mayor.

City council members feared that more conventions would be canceled after Murguía's statement. As a result, Mayor Funkhouser agreed to meet with Valenciano and other Latina/o leaders to discuss the matter. The meeting on September 26, 2007, however, resulted in a stalemate. The mayor merely repeated his position, offering no concessions (Smith 2007). Valenciano (2015) recalled her frustration over their inability to communicate, "No matter how hard I tried to get him to understand Perception IS Reality. He would say, 'the facts are the facts! Frances Semler is NOT a threat to the Hispanic community'" (Valenciano 2015). Once more relying on her coalitional building skills, Valenciano contacted her networks of religious, civic, and business leaders, who all pressured the mayor to drop Semler from the board, to no avail.

Taking another tactic, Valenciano (2010) sought to appeal to Semler directly to have her consider the fear that Latina/o immigrants would experience considering her simultaneous roles as Minuteman Corps member and as a city leader. Putting pressure on Semler, she hoped, would end the standoff with the mayor. She discussed this strategy during several meetings with other Latina/o leaders. One Latino leader, who was hired by a local coalition of religious leaders and community organizers, sought to take control of the group, claiming that his training as a community organizer should allow him the authority to lead them. He promoted the idea of picketing Semler rather than requesting a formal meeting with her. Valenciano did not support this action, stating, "I was not in favor of giving her any more attention than she needed, so I reiterated that I think we just need to continue to let the mayor know [our concerns]" (Valenciano 2010).

Valenciano convinced the group not to picket Semler's house. Valenciano's reservations showed that a TR leader understands power, which is critical to

being effective. Instead, the group compromised by agreeing to send a small delegation to deliver a letter that outlined their concerns and requested her resignation from the board. Valenciano was aware of the power dimensions and that Semler, an older white woman, would not feel comfortable with seven people of color (four men and three women) showing up at her door. In a later interview Valenciano (2010) recalled that she decided this action was an acceptable compromise in lieu of protesting by her house, but later regretted it. The local television media reports about this visit framed their arrival as menacing people surrounding Semler's home who physically threatened her, which was not the case. After the negative media report, Valenciano used her network of support to plead her side, but in this round, Semler won sympathy. Valenciano (2010) continued,

The media reports said, "how dare they go to her house." I called my friend at the Kansas City Missouri Police Department (Deputy Chief) and told him what happened and how we were there, but it did not happen as she (Semler) said it did. I also called a friend at the Kansas City Star and told him that I was part of a small group who were professionally dressed, and we knocked on the door, waited a while, knocked again and then left the letter and left. In retrospect, I wished we would have Fed-Exed the letter.

Valenciano told me that this experience laid bare the institutional racism, sexism, and classism—the immediate sympathy and support for Semler's position—she faced. She once more pursued trying to alter the public discourse by asking AR Task Force members to write letters in response to the negative anti-immigrant and anti-Latina/o letters in the *Kansas City Star* newspaper. She also asked for volunteers to write editorials, one of which I wrote about the impact of words and their potential to cause more

hateful discourse and potential for violence. Valenciano also arranged for five members of the AR Task Force to meet with the *Kansas City Star* editorial board to stop publishing hate-filled letters and add more letters from a Latina/o point of view. The board's nearly all-white editorial member board denied the potential impact of negative letters. When challenged as to why they published a disproportionate number of negative letters, they claimed their neutrality by stating that they published proportional to the numbers they received, with the numbers of negative letters were much larger than the supportive letters of the Latina/o community concerns. Furthermore, the editorial board refused to consider the disproportionality of Latina/os population (6.7%) as a whole to the rest of the metropolitan population (US Census Bureau 2005-2007). Frustrated by the white privilege in the editorial board's stance in that they could not see the inequality, Valenciano recognized the ways she continued to experience marginalization while fighting it.

Seeking solidarity, Valenciano asked the Hispanic Chamber, downtown business leaders, and convention center leadership to speak privately with the mayor in order to advocate for their cause. When the mayor did not change his position, these individuals publicly raised their concerns about the business impact of the potential loss of conventions, but neither the mayor nor Semler backed down. Refusing to give up, Valenciano (2010) employed additional navigational skills by requesting a mediator from the Justice Department to facilitate a meeting between the Latina/o leaders with which she was working and the mayor. While the mayor heard the concerns of the community directly, he remained unmoved, insisting that the principle of diversity means that a diversity of opinions needed to be represented, maintaining his support of an ardent anti-immigrant Minuteman member. At one point in the deliberations, the mayor agreed to request Semler not attend the Minuteman Defense Corps Convention scheduled for December in Kansas City, later moved to February

2008 (Smith and Horsley 2007). These talks, however, failed to bring a resolution. Directly following the October meeting with the mayor, Murguia, CEO of NCLR, held a press conference announcing the organization's boycott of Kansas City and their decision to move their planned 2009 national convention elsewhere (Gross 2007). Semler's response to the mayor's request to not attend the Minuteman Convention ended with a letter of resignation to the mayor on January 22, 2008 that attacked him for lack of support and included a racist diatribe against Valenciano and other Latina/o leaders. In the end, Semler showed her true allegiance and validated Valenciano's and the protestors' reasons for her removal.

After removing Semler from the KCPB, the coalition Valenciano formed—the AR Task Force—convened with another objective: to protest the Minuteman Convention in Kansas City scheduled for February 2008. They renamed the AR Task Force as the Common Table Coalition. Other things changed regarding this coalition as well. For instance, they no longer met at the Guadalupe Centers, whose members were part of the original participants of the group. The Guadalupe Centers hosted meetings from June through November 2007, but Valenciano and the AR Task Force Latina/o leaders then discussed moving the meeting space for two reasons. First, they needed a larger space since they had requests from non-Latinas/os who wanted to join. Second, the nonprofit was worried that their city and local foundation funding and other donations might be jeopardized because the organization played a key role in criticizing the mayor's appointment of Semler. In December 2007, under Valenciano's TR leadership and support system with college leaders, the Latina/o AR Task Force moved the meetings to Penn Valley Community College, which was close to the Latina/o Westside neighborhood. The coalition strategically included a few white liberals. By January 2008, without Valenciano's knowledge or consent, these white

members moved the meetings to a church in a wealthy neighborhood several miles away. This move meant fewer Latinas/os went to the meetings and, upon Semler's resignation from KCPB, many Latinas/os felt the struggle was over and were less active. Therefore, the newly reconstituted coalition, now named the Common Table, was composed of mostly politically progressive whites and white religious groups. Other than Valenciano, less than a handful of the original Latina/o leaders (mostly male) and only a few African American leaders remained active.

Soon, white liberals worked to replace Valenciano as leader of the coalition. Valenciano resisted, deriding the white liberal leaders for their discriminatory actions and their hypocritical "inclusionary" practices that were in actuality exclusionary and silenced Latina/o voices. In response, the white leaders angrily complained about a lack of cooperation from Valenciano and other Latina/o leaders whom, they argued, did little to support and fight for the rights of immigrants. They labeled Valenciano's anger and response to their actions as crazy. "Why should she be the designated leader in the new group? Of course," one woman argued, "we have a right to determine its leadership and direction."⁶ This turn of events exemplifies the complex challenges that result when pushing back against systems of power.

In essence, Valenciano's voice was minimized and her role in the protest to remove Semler was dismissed. The other Latina/o leaders on the AR Task Force who work as advocates and directors of nonprofits that serve the Latina/o community, especially immigrants, were also disregarded, and an African American female leader was relieved from her subcommittee chair position. The new white leadership, however, did not malign other leaders who were not Latina/o or African American.

Although Valenciano (2017) fought diligently to retain her leadership role, the new white members successfully removed her from leadership in the new coalitional group. The struggle took its toll on Valenciano (2017) and she indicated “always feeling exhausted” during the months of resistant leadership. In January 2008, she stepped away from grassroots activism and later accepted a job at the Justice Department as a community mediator, refocusing her TR leadership skills into a different mode. Although Valenciano successfully achieved her goal to remove Semler from office, she did so at a personal cost and sacrifice.

Discussion and Conclusion

Valenciano’s motivations, actions, and decisions detailed in the narrative above illustrate a number of the attributes I categorize as Transformational Resistant leadership. Her insight into the harmful ideologies of power held by elected officials motivated her protest and her strategy to leverage a boycott of the city. Using a mestiza consciousness—an ability to bridge different worlds and perspectives—and a commitment to social justice, Valenciano cultivated solidarity across networks of support to act collectively to remove Semler from the KCPB. This alliance of Latina/o and community supporters, African American and Jewish leaders, and other religious leaders pushed the media to promote public awareness of Semler’s anti-immigrant stance as a means for her removal. Valenciano also built a coalition with business leaders (the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and the Kansas City Chamber of Commerce) who advocated her cause to the mayor. She relied on relationships she developed over thirty years of community advocacy and activism for both collective action and moral support. She invested immeasurable time and energy towards ensuring a xenophobic appointee did not sit on a municipal decision-making body. Furthermore, Valenciano situated her advocacy in communion with many others, repeating that these efforts were not hers alone.

Additionally, Valenciano rendered herself subject to the similar attacks that marginalized people sustain and bore the brunt of attacks for challenging existing power structures. Valenciano placed herself in the line of attack in support of immigrants and others with limited means and next to no privilege. These challenges resulted in the chaos of limited success and personal attacks, and ended in the removal of her leadership position.

Being the leader of a protest put Valenciano in the precarious social location of mestiza consciousness that forced her to juggle the chaos of conflicting agendas—Latina/o leaders supporting immigrant rights, a mayor supporting his color-blind position as a supporter of a diversity of opinions, and purported allies. These allies' agenda was recognition of their leadership as immigrant rights advocates instead of a focus on immigrant rights. Through her mestiza consciousness, she had the ability to see to the heart of these various perspectives. The white liberals were threatened by Valenciano's leadership, claimed a need to restore some semblance of order, and justified why they should be in control by calling Valenciano crazy. Anzaldúa (1987) notes that the challenges of being mestiza sometimes means being labeled crazy for crossing societal borders of culture, expectations, and boundaries. In essence, Valenciano's multiple methods of negotiation, coalition building, and social networks employed to address discrimination, as well as her self-sacrifice and willingness to endure the taunts and conflicts to focus on the larger goal to promote respect and dignity of people—particularly immigrants—reveal key elements of TR leadership.

This case study offers critical lessons and strategies for women who wish to act as transformational resistant leaders. For one, TR leaders must be prepared to face strong resistance. They need creative strategies by developing social justice training and analysis for strategic change as well as knowledge and

historical analysis of the strengths and pitfalls of social movements. They must be strategic in their work with allies, both from within political groups and with external groups. TR leaders need to scrutinize their allies and if necessary, challenge them to engage their racism—whether internalized as Latinas and other women of color—or white women’s blinders grounded in white privilege and living in a racialized society. TR leaders must recognize that the impact of racism, sexism, and inequality at all levels can create enemies not only externally but also from within their groups. TR leaders should remain vigilant when engaging white allies who may carry their racist assumptions, whether in leadership, strategies, or vision. Education and critical analyses are necessary for being leaders, as noted by Delgado Bernal in her study of young Chicana leaders. These TR leaders and allies can collaborate in developing methods for resistance to systemic forces by constructing new visions for advocacy and social justice and by creating powerful coalitions and personal supports systems for building long-term leadership resilience.

While Valenciano built a coalition of community and political support, Valenciano did not appear to have a personal support system nor mentioned one in the interviews. Facing external attacks like the ones Valenciano experiences without personal support systems can be devastating, as witnessed in this case study. As TR leaders utilize their gifts of advocacy and coalition building, these strong leaders will be tested by the chaos of systemic oppression. Their trusted family, friends, and colleagues can offer these leaders personal support by standing in solidarity in meetings, calling out and resisting oppressive forces, and giving a listening ear and constructive feedback. These forms of support are crucial for maintaining healthy leaders and an important strategy for building and maintaining resilient TR leadership. These multiple levels of support can assist TR leaders to regain their foothold and clarity of

purpose to reframe the personal attacks resulting from intersectional systemic racism, sexism, and classism. Indeed, ongoing reflection and analysis with trusted support systems can help TR leaders maintain their leadership in the face of systemic oppression. Social justice leadership is most often a lonely position. In the long-term, this role requires the nourishment of relationships and the creation of other support systems.

In the era of Trumpism, the importance of TR leadership is needed now more than ever. As the multitude of racists proudly publicly advocate and fulfill their anti-immigrant beliefs with little impunity, they promote the narrative that Latina/o immigrants are criminals and by association, all Latina/os are criminals. Such ignorance among not only political leaders but also a sizeable portion of the U.S. population, calls for TR leaders, Chicana/Latina scholars, and other social justice leaders and scholars to engage and resist the challenges of hate-mongering authorities and followers. Chicana/Latina scholars have an opportunity to cultivate additional models of TR leaders by excavating and documenting the leadership of past and present leaders who have spearheaded successful movements for social justice. These accounts could be made accessible both in and outside of the academy, perhaps as research, curriculum, or pedagogical approaches that can inspire or train TR leaders.

While some critics might question the selection of Valenciano as a TR leader since she lost her leadership at the end of her battle, this case study offers an example for understanding the messiness and complexity of leadership. As such, this study reveals Valenciano's strengths and long-standing advocacy for social justice; her internal and external struggles including the depth and type of challenges that such leaders regularly face; and the need for a personal support system of trusted family, friends, and colleagues. Valenciano's leadership was effective as Semler did resign, and in so doing revealed Semler's

racism in her verbal attack of Valenciano and Chicana/o leaders who sought her dismissal from the KCPB.

Not all TR leaders are always successful—which is an important lesson for leaders, particularly new leaders. La lucha for justice and equity is not merely measured by its effectiveness, but rather by its faithfulness. The work for justice remains a life-time struggle and no one can do it alone, as Valenciano (2017) noted repeatedly. TR leadership does not come in an instance or a particular battle; such leadership comes through consistency in leaders like Valenciano.

Notes

¹ Activist Rita Valenciano is a second-generation Mexican American born in the US who self-identifies as a Chicana.

² Latinas/os refers to Latinas and Latinos who are either from Latin America or whose ancestors originally came from Latin America.

³ In the late 1800s, with the creation of the Kansas City Parks Board, the city hired noted architect George Kessler, to design “one of the most ambitious system of parks and boulevards in the country,” which he finished in 1893 (Schirmer 2002, 16). The plan was used to develop stable residential areas surrounding parks and along boulevards that were to prevent the blight of poor homes and business near “quality homes” (Schirmer 2002, 16). This system of parks and boulevards was used to move out the poor, particularly African Americans. “The city’s park and boulevard project led to the demolition of houses in an integrated neighborhood... Thus, black residents and newcomers [immigrants] alike found their housing choices narrowed somewhat by these early examples [in the early 1900s] of urban renewal” (Schirmer 2002, 40–41).

⁴ I remained on the sidelines as a scholar and did not play a role except at the beginning when I wrote an op-ed (editorial) in the *Kansas City Star* and by participating in the Latina/o leaders’ meeting with the newspaper.

⁵ In 2017, NCLR was renamed UnidosUS. (UnidosUS. “2017 Annual Report.” July 7, 2018. UnidosUS.org.)

⁶ In 2015, in an informal discussion with one of the key white female liberal members of the group several years after the events, I asked her, “What were the reasons the group gave for replacing Valenciano’s as the leader?” She maintained that the group was reconstituted and so they had the right to a democratic election of officers. I might add that they implemented this change right after

moving the location away from a Latina/o neighborhood and did not fully notify the original AR Task Force members of the change, thus excluding many Latina/o members.

References

- Alm, Rick and Deann Smith. 2015. "Tourism Officials Worried About Impact of Losing Conventions." *Kansas City Star*, September 7, 2015.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. 1987. *Borderlands/La frontera*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. 2002. "Now Let Us Shift: The Path of Conocimiento." In *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*, edited by Gloria Anzaldúa and Analouse Keating, 540-78. New York: Routledge.
- Barvosa, Edwina. 2011. "Mestiza Consciousness in Relation to Sustained Political Solidarity: A Chicana Feminist Interpretation of the Farm Worker Movement." *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 36(2): 121-54.
- Brayboy, Bryan McKinley Jones. 2005. "Transformational Resistance and Social Justice: American Indians and Ivy League Universities." *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 36(3): 193-211.
- Campbell, Matt. 2007. "Funkhouser Rejects Semler's Resignation Offer: Councilman to Call for Her Removal." *Kansas City Star*, June 14, 2017.
- Campbell, Matt and Lynn Horsey. 2007. "Mayor, Council at Odds on Board Appointee: Nine Members Deliver a Rare Rebuke to Semler, But Funkhouser Tells Her 'Hang in There.'" *Kansas City Star*, June 15, 2007.
- Case, Kim A. 2012. "Discovering the Privilege of Whiteness: White Women's Reflections on Anti-Racist Identity and Ally Behavior." *Journal of Social Issues* 68: 78-96.
- Delgado Bernal, Dolores. 1997. *Chicana Resistance and Grassroots Leadership: Providing Alternative History to 1968 East Los Angeles Blowouts*. PhD, diss., University of California Los Angeles.
- Gross, Sylvia Maria. 2007. "NCLR Moves 2009 Convention Away from Kansas City." *KCUR News*, October 21, 2007.
- Hardy-Fanta, Carol. 1993. *Latina Politics, Latino Politics*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Helling, Dave. 2007. "Two of Mayor Mark Funkhouser's Appointments to the Park Board Did Not Originally Apply." *Kansas City Star*, June 30, 2007.
- hooks, bell. 1989. *Talking Back, Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. Cambridge: South End Press.
- Jacobs, Michelle R. and Tiffany Taylor. 2011. "Challenges of Multicultural Antiracist Activism: Racial Consciousness and Chief Wahoo." *Critical Sociology* 38(5): 687-706.
- Kansas City Star. 2013. "La Raza Conference Coming to Kansas City in mid-July 2015." *Kansas City Star*, March 18, 2013.

- Kendall, Frances. 2006. *Understanding White Privilege: Creating Pathways to Authentic Relationships Across Race*. New York: Routledge.
- McIntosh, Peggy. 1988. *Working Paper 189*. "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women's Studies." Wellesley, MA: Wellesley College Center for Research on Women.
- Méndez-Negrete, Josephine. 1999. "Awareness, Consciousness, and Resistance: Raced, Classed, and Gendered Leadership Interactions in Milagro County, California." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 20(1): 25-44.
- Murguia, Janet. 2007. "Please, Mr. Mayor, Repudiate Intolerance." *Kansas City Star*, September 16, 2007.
- Nadler, Arie and Samer Halabi. 2006. "Intergroup Helping as Status Relations: Effects of Status Stability Identifications, and Type of Help on Receptivity of High Status Group's Help." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 91: 97-110.
- Ostrove, Joan M. and Kendrick T. Brown. 2018. "Are Allies Who We Think They Are? A Comparative Analysis." *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 48: 195-204.
- Pardo, Mary. 1998. *Mexican American Women Activists: Identity and Resistance in Two Los Angeles Communities*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Peña, Milagros. 2007. *Latina Activists Across Borders: Women's Grassroots Organizing in Mexico and Texas*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Schirmer, Sherry Lamb. 2002. *A City Divided: The Racial Landscape of Kansas City, 1900-1960*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press.
- "Second Group Pulls Convention from KC over Minuteman Issue." 2008. *Southeast Missourian*, January 15, 2008.
- Smith, Deann. 2007. "Funkhouser, Hispanic Leaders Try Mediation." *Kansas City Star*, October 20, 2007.
- . 2007. "La Raza Threatens to Cancel Convention in KC, Cites Controversial Park Board Appointee." *Kansas City Star*, August 21, 2007.
- . 2007. "Mayor Meets with Hispanic Leaders." *Kansas City Star*, September 27, 2007.
- Smith, Deann and Matt Campbell. 2008. "Semler Resigns, Citing Lack of Support from Funkhouser." *Kansas City Star*, January 22, 2008.
- Smith, Deann and Lynn Horsley. 2007. "Parks Board Commissioner." *Kansas City Star*, June 14, 2007.
- . 2007. "Documents Reveal Funkhouser's Efforts to Appear La Raza." *Kansas City Star*, October 27, 2007.

- Solorzano, Daniel G. and Dolores Delgado Bernal. 2001. "Examining Transformational Resistance Through a Critical Race and LatCrit Theory Framework: Chicana and Chicano Students in an Urban Context." *Urban Education* 36: 308-342.
- Téllez, Michelle. 2008. "Community of Struggle: Gender, Violence, and Resistance on the U.S./Mexico Border" *Gender and Society* 22(5): 545-67.
- Torre, María Elena and Jennifer Ayala. 2009. "Envisioning Participatory Action Research Entremundos." *Feminism and Psychology* 19(3): 387-93.
- Torres, Theresa. 2013. *The Paradox of Latina Religious Leadership in the Catholic Church: La Guadalupanas of Kansas City*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- United States Census American Survey 3-year Estimates 2005-2007, Kansas City, MO. Accessed May 31, 2019. https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_07_3YR_B03001&prodType=table
- UnidosUS. 2018. "2017 Annual Report." UnidosUS.org. July 27, 2018. Accessed May 31, 2019. <https://www.unidosus.org/about-us/annual-report-2017/>
- Valenciano, Rita. 2010, 2015, and 2017. Interviews by Theresa Torres.

