You Are Your Ancestor’s Wildest Dreams!

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Monday, May 20, 2019, Zellerbach Auditorium

Website Edition

All praises due to you graduates and those assembled to witness this magnificent rite of passage.   I wish to thank Dr. William Banks for hiring me in 1973 to teach in what was then the Afro-American Studies Department. I also wish to extend my appreciation to Dr. Ula Taylor and Dr. Brandi Wilkins Castanese and the class of 2019 for trusting me with this responsibility.  Graduates, I ask that you call up the name of an ancestor who holds a sacred place in your hearts and invite them to be with you as your degrees are conferred upon you.

As abolitionists Harriet Tubman and her second husband Nelson Davis, to whom she was married in her heart because during slavery Black people were not allowed to marry legally, sat under the North Star sharing tender moments and reflecting upon the enslaved men, women and children they guided through the Underground Railroad, one can well imagine they shared their dreams and visions of a future filled with the kind of remarkable accomplishments we are gathered here today to celebrate.  Harriet and Nelson’s North Star also guided thousands of Africans to make their way to a formidable enclave of intellect and scholarship on the Continent before Africans captured from the Kingdom of Dahomey, Oyo Empire and the Empire of Mali were routed into the slave trade.

While some of you are classified as the first generation in the US, your ancestors came from academic traditions that date back eight centuries where scholars taught and studied mathematics, medicine, surgery, physics, philosophy, linguistics and art.  During the 14th century, the University of Timbuktu in Mali had close to 25, 000 students. They were taught from manuscripts written in Arabic, Bambara, and Songhai by scholars including Ahmad Baba al Massufi.  As you carry that tradition of scholarship, education and innovation forward into the third decade of the 21st century here at UC Berkeley you are have done so along paths forged by activist Louise Alone Thompson Patterson, who graduated with a degree in economics in 1923.  Patterson must indeed have felt “alone” for at that time there were no *known* Black faculty or administrators and a mere handful of students including Ida Louise Jackson, an educator after whom the graduate house is named.

Patterson was inspired to answer her calling after listening to a speech by scholar, author, and Pan Africanist Dr. WEB DuBois, one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).  For the first time in her life, she was proud to be Black and she poured that pride into the Harlem Renaissance, working early in the Post Reconstruction emerging mass incarceration movement. She played critical roles in the eventual release of the Scottsboro Boys; nine African American teenagers accused in 1931 of raping two white women on a train in Alabama.  Patterson also mentored activist and UC professor Angela Davis who continues to dedicate her life to dismantling mass incarceration after being acquitted on charges of conspiracy, murder and kidnapping on June 4, 1972.

The path widened and grew longer with David Blackwell joining the faculty in 1954.  He went on to become the first tenured Black professor in the UC system and chair of the Statistics Department. After the formal founding of Ethnic Studies in 1969,  Afro American Studies became its own department in 1970.  A more solid Black presence was established at Berkeley through faculty who secured tenure overriding battles rooted in the trenches of racism and sexism.  In 1978, Dr. Barbara Christian, whose work focused on Black women in literature, was awarded tenure and appointed the chair of the department.  That was followed by a slowly growing number of administrative positions held by pioneering scholars, researchers, and authors in Sociology, Black Women’s Studies, Chemistry and Architecture, and students from throughout the diaspora attending in numbers that have yet to reach above seven percent. You are part of the two percent currently enrolled at Berkeley.

From the esteemed ranks of that department emerged another daring Black woman scholar with unparalleled vision and wit.  Her work ensured that the paths you’ve taken are permanently enshrined at this world-renowned institution.  Dr. VeVe Amassa Clark coined the term Diaspora Studies and created the discipline out of the breadth of her scholarly research and experiences across the Diaspora from the Caribbean island of Haiti over the Atlantic to the splendor of Leopold Senghor’s Negritude Movement in Senegal followed by studies in Paris and into the intellectual and cultural terrain of America’s deep South.

In the 1980s, VeVe, who also was a personal friend and colleague brought a dynamic intellect and energy to the department and established the course “Introduction to the University” to pave a road to success for students who might otherwise flounder while trying to navigate over walls reinforced with the steel of bigotry.  She could ignite the intellect and spark the spirit in seemingly the most disinterested student and raise them from despair to distinguished.  VeVe spoke Wolof, fluent French and Creole.  She also orchestrated some of the most memorable exhibits and platforms for speakers that included world-renowned choreographer and dancer Katherine Dunham and legendary Stanford Sociologist and author Dr. St. Clair Drake.  I got to be her partner in deep intellectual “mischief” mounting exhibits on art and the breadth of literature from the African Diaspora.  Those exhibits also included the work of Black publisher and early 20th Century back to Africa proponent Marcus Garvey, whose vision informed  “Wakanda.” The exhibits often drew thousands from across the campus and wider community.

VeVe mastered critical pedagogy and the vast landscape of her vision and intellect would be tickled Black as students deconstruct the deep dialects and discourse and write dissertations focusing on the intersectionality of Snoop Dogg, Martha Stewart, and 21st century uptown and hoodtown culinary paradigms or Sir David Adjaye’s work some of which also is grounded in the vision of the architect and UC Berkeley Professor Emeritus Ken Simmons. Simmons lead the movement for Berkeley to divest from the apartheid regime of South Africa. Included in her syllabus were the novels ***Kindred*** and ***Parable of the Sower*** works by Black science fiction novelist Octavia Butler.  She brought Butler to speak at Berkeley in 2004 and would be over the Moon with the fascinating explorations in the field of Afro Astrophysics for she had a dynamic and compelling relationship with the Universe and worshipped at the altar of Earthseed.

With footsteps now forged on paths by esteemed alumnae, faculty, and administrators, your dreams became boulevards where you learned to navigate the intellectual and empirical rigors of the academy.  You came from throughout the Diaspora as transfer students, immigrants, first generation and children of alumnae. Some of you managed to secure your degrees while living in your cars, couch surfing and sheltered from the brutalities of the streets in facilities rife with unfathomable challenges.  There were those of you who had to plead for adaptive tools and ADA access to get into classes or battle life-threatening health challenges. Others secured degrees while working jobs, raising families and maintaining committed relationships.  And, there were those who did this with the unwavering support of family and solid fiscal resources.  Each faced a unique range of academic and social challenges while studying to secure degrees in African American Studies and multiple disciplines, in centuries-old fields as well as those new to the Academy.  But your commitment to endowing your intellect and securing skills to position yourself on a steady course in life’s whirlwinds prevailed. Also, your ancestors, generations of activists and some professors, friends and family members worked tirelessly to prevent the legislative, social and economic nightmares fueled by those currently squatting at the mighty whitey alty righty house from aborting your hard-earned dreams. Your research and scholarship may inform the work being done by the Movement for Black Lives Matter, the NAACP and policymakers to keep you emerging into the brightest futures possible.

While some are mixing beats and dropping albums, you are booking your intellectual and techno-driven skills and experiences out into the stratosphere to unscrew the bolts to doors thought permanently sealed against your entry.  As you walk the world in your blue and gold converse, screamin’ red Stilettos, or balancing on the rims of your wheelchair make your lives **jamazin'** on the personal, professional, intellectual and spiritual level.  Those paths expanded by you and previous alumnae will make it possible for so many generations coming up the ranks to travel with you at their backs.   I’ve had the privilege of witnessing your “strides toward freedom,” through students I taught here including Clinical Social Worker and therapist Donnie Gayfield-Maddox and Wellness Warrior Dr. Shanesha Brooks Tatum.

Some of you are freshly minted adults still giggling about meeting Drake, hacking a system and totally acing an exam in pedagogical theory, while others are seasoned professionals who decided to return to complete or secure advanced degrees.   Many of you also know how to hold your own at the intersections of linguistic bridges that connect the Diaspora speaking standard American Academic English and fluent French and mastering Wolof and Xhosa, with some Creole and patois in the mix. With those BA’s MA’s and Ph.D.’s degrees in tow and your names embolden across them, you will enter through portals where you name will be called out of recognition.  No, you may not call me Kwi Kwi.  My name is Laquita Shanti Jefferson. Nkrumah Toure Emphalilie honors the legacies left by men my adoptive parents held in the highest regards.  And no, my name is Zora, not Zorro or Zero.  If they can pronounce the names of characters from Game of Thrones, presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg, and journalist Mika Brzezinski, they can learn to speak your name with the respect due. Say your name, say your name, so we can hear your name as **you** say your name. And at this juncture in the so-called evolution of our species, no one should be legislating your gender, race, class, anatomy, sexual preferences nor the depth or degree to which you love.  Nor should your naturals, cornrows, and locks be under legislative jurisdiction or corporate review.

Those about to be awarded these prestigious degrees will go on to defend dissertations, pass the bar, secure teaching credentials and licenses that allow you to practice in various fields.  You also will become preeminent scholars in Diaspora Studies, presidents of companies and countries and other’s presidents and chancellors of UC Berkeley.  You will fill the literary canon with new philosophies, develop policies that reframe equity and Democracy, and continue bringing those divine dishes from across the diaspora. Already you are writing the 21st century lexicon of liberation and painting the pulse and heartbeats of our people. I have no doubt that you will be future recipients of MacArthur Genius Awards, Nobel Prizes and the Ibrahim, the highest prize awarded in Africa.

The tectonic plates under your path can reposition your thinking on almost everything you thought you knew.  And just when you think you’re about to step in the world as an engineer, the power of your being shifts and you become a principal ballet dancer with the Dance Theater of Harlem, medical illustrator instead of a coder or a first grade teacher who realized he was called into the classroom instead of the courtroom. Some of you will join teams to create viable strategies for reclaiming the Earth while creating sustainable new materials and systems, restoring essential species from extinction. 

Know you never do things alone.  Someone always has your back whether it’s the janitor who let you in the classroom to get the Chromebook you left; the roommate who realizes you have not eaten in three days; the friend who gets you up where you’ve been embedded in your blues for a week and convinces you to join her on the swing set and slides; or the professor who spent three sessions insisting you rewrite the paper because the thesis and core of the ideas were powerful but the poorly constructed narrative minimized the depth of your brilliance.

From the joyous Nawlawin’s notes of Tank and the Bangers to the old school grooves of Nina and Aretha to the stirring compositions of Berkeley’s former professor of Music Olly Wilson to Nipsey Hussle’s Hussla Hoodsta, imploring us to get off up our knees and stand up, keep the soundtracks of our lives on your playlist.  The intersection of your inner world with the demands of the outer one requires an extraordinary set of practices, especially in these daunting times where the very essence of our humanity is being challenged by virulent digitized systemic racism, unbridled homophobia, and misogyny.  That inner world must remain grounded in a power that sustains you, along with solid mental health and self-care practices.  I would not be standing before you if I had not worked on the healing of deep fissures in my dome and seismic shifts in my spirit beginning with my first therapist in 1969 a black woman psychiatrist named Dr. Frances Cress Welsing.  When you trip and fall, turn them steps over or build new ones and climb back up the staircase of your goals. And then sometimes you’ll dive off a cliff into shark-infested waters and learn to outswim them.

Marry your integrity and dance with your imagination.  This big round sphere on which we live is filled with amazing people, some educated by life experiences and cultural traditions, others by formal preparation at prestigious universities like Berkeley.  From neighborhoods right around the corner from you to world heritage sites in South Africa, Suriname and Malta, see the world and do so through the indigenous histories and cultures that shaped them.

Not only did Nelson whisper sweet somethings into Harriet’s ear, but they also built a brick making business to lay foundations for your futures including the right to vote.  Let nothing and I mean absolutely nothing deter you from exercising that right.  Civil Rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer stood up to men, who threw back triple shots of sexism and racism before breakfast and tried to prevent her from testifying before the Credentials Committee at the Democratic National Committee in 1964, so you could exercise that right. Grass roots philosopher Junebug Jabbo Jones and the organizers of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) did not “stride towards freedom” for you to absolve yourselves of that right.  Some of your great grandparents stood right alongside them.  Stand firmly in every right you have and exercise them to the fullest. Voting has everything to do with the daily quality of your lives as well as the long-term future of our country. And how you vote can determine whether you will be buried in the detritus of your student loans or unburdened by them through legislation that includes free tuition, slashing the interest rates, or loan forgiveness for teaching or engaging in community service.  I also encourage each of you to recruit at least ten students to Berkeley, for as 20th century Pulitzer Prize-winning Chicago author and poet Gwendolyn Brooks stated, “We are each other’s harvest; we are each other’s business; we are each other’s magnitude and bond.”

There are now standing testimonies across campus cast in the dreams of our ancestors:  The Martin Luther King, Jr. Student Union, Dr. Barbara Christian Hall, and Ida Louise Jackson Graduate House.  Their dreams continue to come into formation as you rise to become public school teachers, climate change cartographers, intergalactic architects, suborbital specialists, historians, philosophers, and visionary writers and filmmakers casting us into futures that affirm the complexities of the human experience.   Fear and courage share the same heart; trauma and triumph the same mind.  But you are standing on pillars of Black people who allow you to look out onto vast oceans of victories.  You are bound to leave the most remarkable legacies imaginable, especially the restoration of our planet and the power of Black people to rise as blazing stars lighting up galaxies with fires that simply will not be extinguished.  You are indeed your ancestors cherished chocolate hearts and wildest dreams.

Daphne Muse

The Seasoned Elder

Writer, Poet, and Cultural Broker