2022 DIVERSITY & FIRST GENERATION CELEBRATION FOR FAMILIES
Tuesday, May 24, 2022 | 5:00 p.m.

Lift Every Voice and Sing
Corey Leak, M.A. ’22, Music & Music Education
Thomas A. Wright, Jr., M.A. ’22, Music & Music Education
Lyrics by James Weldon Johnson
Music by J. Rosamond Johnson

WELCOME
Thomas Bailey, President of the College

REMARKS
Stephanie J. Rowley, Provost, Dean and Vice President for Academic Affairs

REMARKS/STUDENT LETTERS
Carmen Martinez-Roldán, Associate Professor of Bilingual/Bicultural Education

REMARKS/STUDENT LETTERS
Sandra Schmidt, Associate Professor of Social Studies Education

Make Them Hear You
Corey Leak, M.A. ’22, Music & Music Education
Thomas A. Wright, Jr., M.A. ’22, Music & Music Education
Lyrics by Lynn Ahrens
Music by Stephen Flaherty

MASTERS STUDENT SPEAKER
Irene Dimatulac, M.S. ’22, Communication Sciences & Disorders

REMARKS/STUDENT LETTERS
Prerna Arora, Assistant Professor of School Psychology

REMARKS/STUDENT LETTERS
Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz, Associate Professor of English Education

DOCTORAL STUDENT SPEAKER
Juontel White, Ph.D. ’22, Sociology & Education

REMARKS/STUDENT LETTERS
Matt Henley, Associate Professor of Dance Education

FAMILY ROLL CALL
Stephanie J. Rowley, Provost, Dean and Vice President for Academic Affairs

CONCLUDING REMARKS
Stephanie J. Rowley, Provost, Dean and Vice President for Academic Affairs

GRADUATES RECESSIONAL
We ask that guests remain seated until graduates have exited the auditorium.
At the heart of today's celebration are letters written by graduates of the class of 2022 to their families and loved ones.

Faculty speakers will read selected letters during the program. All of the letters are included here.
When I dropped out of school during my undergrad, I received the same lecture from my father for years about the importance of a college degree. My mother continually said that if I took too much time off, I would never finish. My parents were afraid that I would not get a degree. I assured them that I had every intention of returning and finishing college. In the only instance of my life, my mother said, “If you go back, you can tell me you told me so.” A B.F.A. and two master’s degrees later, here I am. No need to tell you “I told you so.” I do need to say “thank you” to both my parents who are the smartest and most hardworking people I have ever known. I would not be here today without their support and no words that I can write or say could ever express my gratefulness, gratitude, and love for these two.

My mother and father raised two children, pushed us both through college, and live in a part of the country that still has issues with biracial marriages. Yet, 47 years, two children, two birds, six dogs, two cats, and a Franklin later, they still are going strong. I am here because of them, I thrive because of them, I succeed because of them, and I honor them. I love you. My sister, who is the second person in the family to graduate from college, I love you too. My nephew Frankie, the greatest gift ever, will outdo us all.

Jocardo Ralston

I want to thank my mother and father for giving me the chance to reach this level of education. My mother is from Panama and my father is from Trinidad. I identify as an Afro-Latina Caribbean.

The importance of education has always been prevalent in my family, and I appreciate the opportunity that they have given me to be here today. Both my mother and father were the first family members to achieve higher education. My mother has a master’s in teaching while my father has a double master’s in philosophy.

My goal is to make them proud by graduating with a doctorate in clinical psychology. But as a first step, I will be achieving my master’s this semester. I appreciate and love my family for supporting me and pushing me to achieve higher education.

Ajani Bethea-Nurse
Querida familia:

Quiero darles gracias por el apoyo y el amor que me han dado a lo largo de toda mi vida. En particular quiero agradecerles que, a partir de mi adolescencia, me han permitido tomar decisiones con las que quizás no estaban de acuerdo. Pero siempre confiaron en mi capacidad de enfrentar las situaciones en las que me metía. Cuando decidí estudiar carreras cada vez más extrañas (primero sociología, después política educativa internacional, y muuuuuuuucho después, educación comparativa internacional). Cuando renuncié a mi trabajo (cinco veces). Cuando me mudé a un país extraño (tres veces). Cuando decidí compartir mi vida con Michael, mi pareja desde hace quince años.

La paradoja es que quizás no me hubiera metido en algunas de esas situaciones potencialmente desafiantes si no hubiera sabido que siempre tengo un lugar seguro a donde volver si algo sale mal. Y la paradoja es que, si no hubiera tenido esa certeza, quizá no habría tenido la seguridad y la confianza para poder desenvolverme en esas situaciones. Por último, quiero agradecerles por enseñarme el valor de los afectos; de nuestra cultura latinoamericana y uruguaya; de la educación; y del trabajo. ¡Gracias por acompañarme en este viaje!

Besos y abrazos para toda la familia,
Manuel Cardoso

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Quiero darles gracias por el apoyo y el amor que me han dado a lo largo de toda mi vida. En particular quiero agradecerles que, a partir de mi adolescencia, me han permitido tomar decisiones con las que quizás no estaban de acuerdo. Pero siempre confiaron en mi capacidad de enfrentar las situaciones en las que me metía. Cuando decidí estudiar carreras cada vez más extrañas (primero sociología, después política educativa internacional, y muuuuuuuucho después, educación comparativa internacional). Cuando renuncié a mi trabajo (cinco veces). Cuando me mudé a un país extraño (tres veces). Cuando decidí compartir mi vida con Michael, mi pareja desde hace quince años.

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Besos y abrazos para toda la familia,
Manuel Cardoso

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I wanted to take the time to thank my family for being a constant support system for me. I thank them for praying for and with me, for giving me words of encouragement, and for lifting me when needed. I would like to thank Paul for being a proofreader when I needed it and for standing by me as I pursued this endeavor, always being there to see what he could do to help make things easier for me. I would like to thank my mom and dad for always giving me inspiring words and motivation. I would like to thank my siblings for all of their support and my aunts and uncle for their constant support over the course of these past two years.

I truly would not have accomplished all that I have without the input of each of the people I just named. I want to thank my church family and colleagues for all of their support, for asking me how things were going and if there was anything I needed. I am here today because of what each of these people has contributed to my life, and I am eternally grateful. This is dedicated to you.

Corey Leak
Dear Family,

Michael, Ella, Noah, and I suppose Luna, although she’s a dog and kinda just lays around. Family for us extends to chosen family, work family, neighborhood family, but let’s focus on you three for a moment.

This academic journey has been a bit wild, hasn’t it? I appreciate all the patience you have had, all the ways you tip-toed through the house while it seemed I was on endless zooms for a year. The backup vocals you (Ella and Noah) recorded. Michael, thank you for what seemed like endless trips to buy musical instruments. I promise by fall, most of them will be hanging in my office. Who knew when I got that confetti-filled letter in February of 2020, that our whole world would change, and the in-person grad school experience would be washed away with all the Clorox and hand sanitizer we could purchase.

You three lifted me up and gave me constant love and snacks, and I appreciate you from the bottom of my heart.

WE DID IT!

Love, Mom, Carmen, that really loud lady singing in the bathroom recording studio. :)

Carmen Keels

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Dear family,

To say that this degree would be possible without you is not only a complete lie, but it would also deny me the opportunity to give you all the credit you deserve for carrying me through some of the roughest and most formidable years of my life.

I stand here today because you believed in me when I couldn't believe in myself.

I can celebrate with you today because you never rested until I realized my worth.

Rightfully so, our family extends past those sitting here today.
As a Black woman with roots across multiple lands, I also want to give my ancestors thanks for their persistence and undying belief that skin color and preferred culture do not define a person.

Without the steadfast commitment to equality that so many before me upheld, I would surely not be able to receive educational and professional accolades.

I am blessed, grateful, and now a graduate of the illustrious Teachers College, thanks to the love you gave me!

Forever yours,

Valpal

Valerie Mitchell
Dear family,

Thank you so much for teaching me discipline and the value of education. I feel so honored and privileged to provide you with something tangible like a master’s degree that will be a constant reminder of the hard work it took to make sure that I got this far.

Thank you for being there when I was breaking down, overwhelmed, and exhausted. You were there rooting for me until I got to the finish line. Thank you for all the prayers, hugs, and warmth you provided during these past two years. I could not have made it without your support and love. It literally took a village to raise me and keep my head above shallow waters.

I hope to continue making you proud and be the person that can inspire you and others to achieve their goals and aspirations.

Joanan Sanchez

I am a culmination of so many people who have supported me throughout my college and career journey. I am my grandmother, who taught me that being sensitive and caring doesn’t equate to being weak but actually that being vulnerable is a form of strength. I am my aunts and uncle, who remind me of the power of my femininity and to always remain true to myself. I am my mother, who prepared me for the confidence I need to navigate through this world that wasn’t created for a woman like me. I am also my grandfather, whose hot sun blood constantly runs through my veins.


I am also the child of you. You make me whole.

Our roots are free; our foundation strong.

Thank you for all of your love and support.

Jasmine Toledo
When individuals speak of the term first-generation, thoughts of joy, delight, and accomplishment come to mind. All desire the accolade of being first, but I also want people to think of the difficulty, adversity, and work that comes from a scholar having to steer these foreign waters. Many of us had to navigate rooms and spaces where nobody looked like us or shared similar views. Even if we were shy or introverts, this did not matter because advice and guidance almost always came from a source outside of our family/comfort zone. We are here today because we prevailed against these odds. We should celebrate this triumph. Congratulations to my fellow graduates on this win. You should bask in the glory of success. You have proven to the preceding and next generation what your lineage is capable of. In other words, you put your family on the map! Furthermore, you should be proud of this profound achievement, and do not forget to take a second to thank yourself.

To my family, thank you for agreeing to partake in this unprecedented journey for someone related to us. We had no idea what these last few years would look like. You stood by me and supported my Starbucks habit for the last 12 years. Thank you for your encouraging words, love, and peculiar yet oddly motivating pep talks. I’m sure some of my support system googled what to say during this dissertation process. Your effort to make this process as smooth as possible helped to keep me motivated.

Thank you Teachers College, it’s been real.

Kiiera Robinson

When I think about how I got to this point in my educational journey, I tend to reflect on the hardships more than the positive outcomes. About how I had to battle severe imposter syndrome—thinking I wasn’t good enough to attend an Ivy League institution for my master’s. About how much I would have to leave behind—will my family be okay if I move across the country to pursue my dreams to become an educator? About how I would be able to sustain myself in a city like New York.

But today, I am filled with gratitude, with honor, and with love. Because I am a first-generation Filipino American whose father came from the scrappy Barrio O’Brero and whose mother came from the farmlands of Nueva Ecija in the Philippines not knowing that someday in the future, they would give birth to three unique and talented children. One of which would be standing here today with a degree from one of the most prestigious institutions with dreams of sharing our ancestors’ stories through academia.

I am filled with hope, care, and light because the support of my mentors, Dr. Allyson Tintiangco-Cubales, Dr. Arlene Daus-Magbual, Mayor Roderick Daus-Magbual of Daly City, California—my hometown, and Dr. Kevin Nadal, the first Filipino American Distinguished Professor of the City University of New York, carried me through my program. My Queer communities, my Asian American communities, and my Black/Latinx communities have supported me when I felt alone at a Predominantly White Institution.

There are three more individuals who I think deserve a special shout-out—all of whom have inspired me in ways I could not put into enough words—my partner for reminding me that love exists, and my brothers, who show me that strength can be manifested with your mind, body, and soul.

Maraming salamat—I did this para sa aming lahat (for all of us).

Kai Santiago
I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my parents and loved ones for the unconditional love and support that was given to me throughout this journey. It was also a pleasure to call Harlem my place of refuge while navigating these academic institutions. First-generation, nothing to lose and everything to gain. We did it!

Me gustaría expresar mi más profundo agradecimiento a mis padres y seres queridos por el amor incondicional y el apoyo que se me dio a lo largo de este viaje. También fue un placer llamar a Harlem mi lugar de refugio mientras navegaba por estas instituciones académicas. Primera generación, nada que perder y todo que ganar. ¡Lo logramos!

Raul Armenta

Growing up in a small, tight knit Texas community, I knew a good rivalry when I saw one. I recall once asking my parents if we rooted for UT or A&M because their answer would decide which university I would one day attend, as members of all good rivalries know. To my dismay, they said they were not partial to either. At that moment, I realized my college journey would be all my own. Without a rivalry to lead the way, I began forging a path for myself using a tool my family supplied in abundance: strength.

I come from generations of individuals forging their own paths. For one family member, that meant hiding the truth of her citizenship for decades as she watched her children each work for the very government she was hiding from. Another's path led her to tell her husband she was going to find a job, an act of defiance that feminism was only beginning to touch on at the time. My path led me to be the first in my family to receive my master’s degree. In the midst of a pandemic, when individuals were fleeing New York City, I gathered generations worth of strength and became a first. With this degree in hand, I can only hope that the Ortega-Fords after me are able to use the strength coursing through our veins to find themselves doing something I can only imagine. (239)

Nadia Ford
To my late husband: For never doubting that I could accomplish this and for your endless words of encouragement and support. Until we meet again.

To my children: Lauren, Sean, my nieces and nephews Avery Brooke, Addyson, Raine and Ryan—and also to Cole and Jodi—never believe you are too old or that it is too late to pursue your dreams. Thank you for your constant support and encouragement. I love you all more than you will ever know.

To my mother: For always being there and for motivating me with your beautiful paintings and letting me witness you graduate Magna Cum Laude with your Bachelor in Fine Arts-BFA in your 50s. Here’s to your gallery opening and to watching you fulfill all of your dreams in the future.

To my Cruz Family: My earliest memories are of you encouraging me to always pursue my dreams, making me feel able, stable and confident since I was a little girl, and for instilling in me the love of reading and lifelong learning.

To my father, who as a little child was told that he was “only Hispanic” and, despite having high grades, that he should drop out of school and get a job. This work is in honor of his success in becoming an NYC Detective while going to law school full-time at night and becoming a lawyer and an NYC Judge.

A special thank you to college professors who became lifelong friends—my dissertation advisor Dr. Barbara Wallace, this would never have been accomplished without your endless hours of guidance and support. My sincerest respect and gratitude to you for all that you do for your students.

Pamela Cruz Ford

Oma and Eyang,

For two opinionated women, it was strange how you both agreed on my fate. The story was that you saw me as a child, and you said (or decreed) that I was going to explore the world. How did you know?

Or was it a self-fulfilling prophecy? Because you started speaking to me in English before I even began elementary school. So I got a few years of head start. For the next 30 years, people ask me, how come your English is so good? It opened doors for me that weren’t available to a lot of Indonesians. That was all because of you.

You carried yourself so unapologetically that even now, years after you have both passed, I still feel your presence. When I’m unsure, I wonder what you would have done. If someone treated me badly, what would you have said? You exhibited what it meant for Asian women to follow social rules while maintaining individuality.

I know you had wished to see all your grandchildren on our wedding days, but I think you would have liked to see our graduation days. When you were in school, Indonesia was still colonized. Now we’ve been independent for 70+ years. If you were here, I would have flown you across the world to see your granddaughter finish an advanced degree from an Ivy League university. I know you would have been proud, but I also know you would have commented about my hair or how tired I look on this special day. That is your love, and I accept it. Thank you.

Kartika Putri
Dear Ma,

You probably weren’t expecting to see this, but I wanted to thank you for the overflow of support you’ve always given me. Between me going to school in Susquehanna, moving to Prague twice, and now Columbia—I couldn’t have done it without you. The choices you made for me as a child really paid off, and they made me who I am today. Yes, you were a little bit strict (even if you say you weren’t), but you never pressured me when it came to school. You always told me to do the best I could, and I did. You let me be my own person and always found a way to make things happen, and gave me the opportunity to experience new things. All of that adds up, and it led me to a master’s degree! Thanks for everything thus far.

Love, Jelani

Jelani Spencer

For my family who came from the islands and nourished a seed unsure of the plant that would bloom… you nurtured me with what you had, and ended up providing the richest soil. “A tree does not fear the wind when its roots run deep.”

This unit has emphasized family but made sure I know how important it is to be able to stand on my own. In my graduate years, there were times I physically entered a new space and seemed alone, but I never felt this way. I stand on your shoulders and constantly walk with my ancestors behind me. When I stepped foot on this Ivy League campus as a graduate student, it felt like reaching the millionth mile... I continued to take steps even when I was terrified. This path has not been easy but it was paved with the love and support of my family, friends and mentors. Your faith in me was always stronger than my doubt, and for that, I thank you. When I count my blessings, I count you all twice. I love you all so much and am grateful to you for carrying me to this very moment.

-With love & gratitude,

Kimone Williams
The person I want to thank for my educational journey and achievement is not with us anymore. Although he is not here in the physical form, his spirit and everything he taught me are the foundations I stand on. My dad, who was a revolutionary mind, not only educated and made me fall in love with the never-ending journey of learning. Early on, he gave me the critical lens I would use to examine society and the world around me. Being who you are, unapologetically, which he preached day in and day out, helped me stay my authentic self in a world that tries to place me in a box because I am a woman, I am black, or I am Muslim.

Thank you, Dad, for being my greatest advocate, encouraging my curiosity, and letting me question everyone and everything around me. But out of all the amazing things you taught me, one thing I will always carry with me is how much you preached about using my privilege and knowledge to do something that helps others or changes the living situation of those around me. This lesson is why I decided to join the field of early education and why I am at TC. Thank you, Dad, for being my most extraordinary educator, a fierce advocate, and a great role model for what it means to be a lifetime learner.

Anita Emama

Dear Mom and Dad,

I want to take this moment to tell you how grateful I am and thank you for everything. Because without you, I wouldn’t be where I am today. I have two amazing parents who taught me to always try my best in life. Leaving your life in Ecuador to come to the United States was not easy, but this decision determined how bright my future would be. You showed me what hard work, humility, and determination are, and I dedicate this diploma to you.

Sincerely,
Sandra Gaona

Dear loved ones,

Thank you for all your support over the years. I could not have done this without you. Whenever I needed you, I could always count on you. Your backing was crucial in seeing me through to this stage in my career. I hope to be able to repay in kind all the incredible gifts, both material and intangible, that you have bestowed upon me. I intend to make you all proud.

As I venture into the unknown, I have the assurance that I will always have a lighthouse in the harbor guiding me safely to the shore. No matter the heights I attain, I know I will stay grounded because of you.

I will never forget where I came from because this will help me focus on my eventual destination. I look forward to the future with sunny optimism, equipped with the knowledge and skills I need to succeed. I am incredibly blessed to be here with you all today, and I hope to be a part of the glorious history of this hallowed institution.

Yours truly,
Ademola Edun
Dear Mamí y Papí,

From a very young age I was presented with the idea of the American Dream. Every immigrant's dream is for success and prosperity in another country through the provision of opportunity. I understood that this wasn't the reality. To achieve success, we must be presented with opportunities, opportunities that you both did not have. Despite this, you both worked every day to care for all your children.

To my mother, I am grateful for never clipping my wings before I could fly. For how passionately you encouraged me to take every opportunity life provided me, even though you did not have the same experience growing up.

To my father, words cannot describe how appreciative I am for your consistent sacrifice of working up to 12-hour days, within 2-3 jobs, just to pay the bills. While you may have not been around physically, emotionally you always encouraged me to give 110% of myself when striving towards my goals. I learned the value of hard work, community, and family through the both of you.

You both understood that you lacked opportunity. Knowingly or not, you used the skills you both had to expand your children’s horizons. While I try to say I did this all independently, truth be told, without your sacrifice and support I would not be here today, as the first in our family to receive a degree of this magnitude. I've come to know that I am your American Dream, and I will be eternally grateful to you both.

Los quiero,
Su hija, Annali

Annali Ramirez

Dear Mom & Dad,

I just wanted to say thank you for everything that you have done for me. You have both been there every step of the way, from enduring my wailing on the first day of kindergarten when I did not want to say goodbye, to watching me obtain my high school diploma, bachelor’s degree in Psychology with a minor in Counseling, and master’s degrees in Mental Health Counseling.

We have celebrated many achievements and overcome so many obstacles as a family, and I cannot wait to see what lies ahead of us in this next chapter. I know that leaving your home countries of Guyana and Trinidad & Tobago was the hardest thing you both had to do in order to achieve the “American Dream” in pursuit of a better life. Hopefully, you still believe that it was the best decision that you made, for I am living proof that all of your sacrifices were not in vain and dreams do come true. I love you both forever, and I am so honored to be your daughter.

Love,
Nia

Nia Kerr
I have so much gratitude for the communities who have raised me, held me, and loved me. My academic journey was a collective effort and would not have been possible without so many people believing in me and believing in us.

Thank you to my family—blood, chosen, and movement.

James and Luna, you have kept me going, and you have healed me.

To my stepmom and my sisters, you show me every day how strong women are and how we continually hold things down.

To my dearest friends, our messages and video calls remind me why it is that we do what we do.

To my friends at Teachers College, learning from you and laughing with you was a source of light through difficult moments.

To the communities in which I found my political home and to my educator friends on both coasts, you taught me that I can find alignment between my values, commitments, passions, and responsibilities. You also remind me of what can be possible when a group of dope, like-minded, and committed people get together.

And, of course, I have to thank my amazing students, from NYC and Providence, all the way back to the Bay. You have brought me so much joy and I have deeply appreciated the opportunity to learn with and from you.

Lastly, thank you, Bô. None of this would have been possible without you. Thank you for your stories; thank you for everything.

Van Anh Tran

Thank you to my entire village including my mom, my dad, my grandparents, and my best friends, and the rest of my family for being my biggest cheerleaders. Thanks for always being proud and excited for me even when and especially during the moments when I am not excited for myself. Mom, thank you for all of your physical, financial, and emotional support especially during the first year of grad school. It’s a privilege to have made it this far and I couldn’t have done it without you. I love you all very deeply. Thank you so much.

Thomonique Moore
Teachers have always opened their doors to me. Crossing these thresholds, I seek, pursue and practice wisdom.

For 20 years as Mannings sensei, my students in Japan nurtured me: Motherly housewives from Funabashi and a fatherly CEO in Takadanobaba; youths and elders in Fukushima, committed to empowering people in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and the Middle East; clever children who said I wasn’t really Santa Claus yet made me intricately beautiful origami; diligent engineers at the #1 e-commerce; compassionate Majors and Lieutenants who served on United Nations Peacekeeping missions in Sudan; cool kids at the posh private school in Kyoto. And, numerous more who happily taught me their principles of life and customs such as tea ceremony, judo, calligraphy...

I acknowledge and honor my Jamaican ancestors. Despite being enslaved on this beautiful island, as their progeny, my intention as an educator is to transform pain into power so as to uplift others.

Kindness is my love language, and I love those who are kind to me, who stayed up late nights on the phone with me, who unpacked troubles with me, who revel in my triumphs with me.

Respect to my graduating cohort and sincere appreciation to Dr. Felisa Tibbitts: Your empathy and encouragement compel me to pay it forward.

In all things, I am thankful. To the Divine within, I am grateful.

Teachers College, Columbia University, many thanks for welcoming me back to New York City.

Damion Mannings

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Dear Mom, Dad, Nanny, and Big Mom,

I remember Dad giving me homework. To make it worse—it was summer homework. Book reports were required during every vacation and later, even on top of my schoolwork. My dream of attending Columbia University began at our dining room table, covered in math problems, textbooks, and the belief that 99% was not good enough. Little did I know how much this discipline and dedication would light the way through my educational career. I hope that I have made you all more than proud by graduating as a first-generation college student at an Ivy League University.

As I got older, the tables turned. No longer did you need to yell at me to do my schoolwork. Now I was the one demanding quiet so I could focus. Even through the noise, you supported me. You brought me fried sweet plantains just to make sure I ate, rubbed my ankle as it healed, and encouraged me every day. It was your acts of love that have brought me here.

Because of you, I am the strong, resilient, and hardworking woman I am today. Thank you for the discipline you instilled in me through our Hindu prayers, bhajans, kathak dancing, and our Indo-Caribbean culture.

I know that as I continue with my career goals of one day leading a school and with my personal life goals (yes Nanny, I’ll get married soon), you will be my rock. I love you with all my heart.

Your one and only daughter, Shristi Devi Singh
To the unconditional love de mi bisabuela Maria, abuela Ana y mama, estoy muy agradecido por los sacrificios que hicieron para las oportunidades de mis hermanxs y yo. To my siblings who have seen it all and have helped guide me through times of despair—I thank you all for being my light. I carry the resilience within me of the communities to which I come from—to the city of Compton, California, which has taught me to not let societal perceptions deter one from their pathways to success, and allowing my lived experiences to inform my passions for addressing educational inequities that continue to inflict harm.

I want to thank the extended family of friends, mentors/femtors, and teachers I have made as a result of traversing my personal educational journey, for I am eternally grateful our paths intersected when they did. The friendships fostered and memories made have truly fulfilled my own life’s purpose. Finding my community has ensured my survival and for that I am indebted to the co-creation of knowledge for the betterment of those existing in the margins. Finally, I would like to admire the skies above which I believe inhabit those I have lost throughout my life, for they keep me grounded during times of doubt. This is for you; this is for us.

Jeffrey Acevedo

To My Beloved Boyce and Charles family,

We do ancestral work. This degree turned into something I had no idea was possible, and I finally feel grateful for every single word and interaction that has enriched me. I finally feel grateful for the hard parts, too.

I cherish the Boyce-Charles fervor for getting me through the difficult moments, and I can never thank this family enough for the emotional support, the financial support, and the inspiration you all have given me as I took every step.

Michelle, your vision has inspired me and everyone else to be bigger and better, to reach the heights of service and to do so with grace and humor.

Dad, your eloquence and quick wit has allowed me to understand the depths of fine art and literature. Your fatherhood represents years of love and dedication to Guyana, and the bravery in starting a new life elsewhere. I hope these years of seeing your children grow and the transition to Grandfather-hood has been validating.

Mom, I am speechless. It’s all in Mom & Me & Mom. But I hope this has soothed you and let you know I am okay.

I’m learning that my “difference” is not a difference at all. With culture and literature, we have learned to cope and heal on our own. As a family, with the love and support of one another, I have been liberated into an empathetic and empowered Black woman.

Joelle Charles
I'm really grateful to have been born into such a loving and supporting family. I am appreciative to study overseas, come here, and be enthusiastic about pursuing my passion. I don't have to apply those social norms to myself as a girl with ambition because of my family's openness. My parents have encouraged and supported me in my pursuit of a career as an educator and artist. My grandparents have nurtured me with their kindness. My sister is always there for me, and my husband reminds me that I can become the best person I believe in. With my family's love and encouragement, I am able to move forward and provide more opportunities to the communities I've visited.

Thank you very much!

I very much appreciate my family's support and help. I also thank everyone for their unwavering support and encouragement. I am grateful for the opportunities and challenges I have faced so far. I am confident that I can continue to pursue my passion and contribute to society. I am committed to becoming the best person I can be.

Sincerely,
Kelly Huang
(黄煜榕)
A child's first and most important educators are their parents. My mother is the fiercest advocate I have ever encountered. Her commitment to ensuring I took up space in places other people, including educators, felt I should not have access to, provided the blueprint for the educator and activist-scholar I am today. I pray she finds solace witnessing her son thrive as a free Black same-gender loving man without apology. I am equally thankful for my father's quiet and steady presence in my life. I have inherited my love of art and penchant for writing and creative expression from my father. He continues to teach me that softness is not something exclusive or restricted to femininity—the opposite is true. My father and all of the men in my family that I have had the opportunity to encounter are strong because of their softness. Their strength manifests in different ways. I pray the men in my family, including my ancestors, experience my liberation and self-actualization as a beautiful reflection of themselves. To my parents, my sister Melinda Nicole Johns, my niece Jordyn, nephews Jett and Jaxx, my aunt Candy (Auntie), and cousin Blayne, my Godmother Lavail Stanford, and my family, thank you for supporting me and allowing me to be selfish in the pursuit of our collective liberation. André, thank you for being my partner and supporting me along this journey. Thank you for the grace, love, and support.

Dr. David Jermaine Johns, Ph.D.
Pa’ mi familia bella,

Cuando empecé esta jornada hace casi 8 años, no sabía lo que me esperaba. Momentos difíciles pero también de crecimiento. En estos años, he logrado crecer en maneras que no sabía que eran posibles. Pero este crecimiento sólo fue posible gracias al respaldo tan fuerte de ustedes. En cada alta y en cada baja, ahí estaban. Listos para felicitarme, llorar o reír conmigo, o simplemente escucharme. Gracias no es suficiente para describir lo que siento, pero deben de saber que estoy eternamente agradecida con ustedes. Gracias por compartir la felicidad de otro logro conmigo. Mi mamita bella, mi hermana hermosa, mi sobrinitos chulos, mi hermana elegida, papá y hermano—LOS AMO!

To all the special lights I’ve encountered along the way to make this accomplishment possible, Thank you. I’m forever a product of those who went before me and those who went with me.

Siempre pa’lante.

Julianna Merino

An ode to the ones I love
By: Denise J. Herrera

Graduates, today we sit in our respected gowns colored in Pantone 290 Blue. Together we’ve lived through a pandemic, midterms, finals, and bonding events on Zoom. Our families have been the pillars that kept us from falling apart when things got difficult. We put our lives on hold, pushed past the tears and finished strong, never gave up or fumbled. So today, I take this time to thank my family, who sacrificed so much to ensure generational change, despite cultural barriers, life, and other struggles.

I recall my parents stating how painful it was to arrive in this country as teens and say goodbye to the only life they’ve known. They left their warm climates, were forced to learn a new language and make this foreign place their new home. As time progressed, and my parents assimilated, they soon remarkably would make little old me. They taught me the value of holding onto my heritage, working hard for things in life, and knowing that nothing is impossible or out of my reach. So today, I thank you mom and dad for emphasizing the importance of a solid education, family values, altruism, and creating a seat at the table with class and dignity.

Guilt for leaving the family and feelings of not contributing financially at home are prevalent for first-generation students past and present. These were the sentiments of my Tia Marcia who graduated from Teachers College years ago and would unknowingly be the generational propellant. As the oldest daughter, Tia mothered my mom and her other three younger sisters, too. Without knowing, Tia inspired the generations after her by modeling that statistics and stereotypes don’t define you. So, today I thank you Tia, for paving the way for our family and loving and accepting me the way you do.

To the rest of my family and friends, please know your patience and love throughout this quiet time of growth goes further than you’ll ever know. My heart has been full throughout this program with all your cute puppy videos, surprise home-cooked meals, and thoughtful check-in hellos. So today, Teacher’s College, Columbia University honors and celebrates first generational students and diversity.

For us, when one wins, we all win, so together, we celebrate in Pantone Blue, because, as of this week, we’re officially Ivy league—this degree isn’t for us, this is for YOU!
To my dearest father and mother, CheeWai Tang and Kathy Ong, thank you both for bringing me into this world, for nurturing my mind, and for all your support towards the pursuit of my Ph.D. in Cognitive Science. Although no one in our family history has pursued this life path, much less travel halfway across the planet from Malaysia to the USA to do so, I am so thankful that you both believed in my potential to transform into the person I am today. You are both truly inspirational individuals to me, and I'm forever grateful for your love! To Jan (my bro), Jo (my sis), Amanda (my sis-in-law), Zen (my nephew), Jun (my niece) and to all my family members in Malaysia, thank you for all your continuous encouragement throughout the years! You all are inspirational sources in pushing me forward.

To my American in-laws, Nancy and Tony Lonardo, as well as Kristi, Liam and Nick Clemens, thank you for including me into your family and your homes all these years, especially when I first arrived as an international student at Stony Brook Uni. You have my eternal appreciation for all your warmth, understanding and loving support!

Finally, to Chris Lonardo, the love of my life since 2008, thank you for being a great US ambassador to me when we first met in college. Throughout the years that we've spent growing up together, your endless support and unconditional love has deeply moved and inspired me.

I love you from the bottom of my heart, and thank you for being the amazing husband that you are.

Jean Tang

Completing a doctoral degree is hard. But we can do hard things.

I did this hard thing with my two daughters and husband at my side. We did this hard thing together. Teagan and Reese, thank you. God gave me you, Teagan, the year after I started my degree. Then almost two years later, God gave me your sister, Reese. But five years after I started this journey to earn a doctoral degree, I went back to school to finish what I started. You gave me grace when my studies took hours of time away from you. I pray that you Black girls know that you, too, can do hard things. You are enough.

Randall, thank you for your unwavering love and support. You were patient and selfless. You were steadfast in the sacrifices you made so that I could complete this degree.

To my parents in heaven, thank you for all that you poured into me. If heaven was not so far away, I know that you would be here today.

To my friends and family who were cheerleaders along the way, I appreciate you. Thank you, team.

XOXO,

Anisha