2023 DIVERSITY & FIRST GENERATION CELEBRATION FOR FAMILIES
Monday, May 15, 2023 | 5:00 p.m.

Lift Every Voice and Sing
Lyrics by James Weldon Johnson
Music by J. Rosamond Johnson
Terion Cooper, M.A. '23, Music & Music Education
Ruthanna Graves-Mcqueen, M.A. '23, Music & Music Education

INTRODUCTION
Kai Santiago, M.A. ’22, Assistant Director,
Graduate Student Life & Development

WELCOME
Thomas Bailey, President of the College

REMARKS
Haeny Yoon, Associate Professor of Early Childhood Education

MASTERS STUDENT SPEAKER
Lauryn Duncan, M.E. ’23, Mental Health Counseling

MUSICAL INTERLUDE
Wayfaring Stranger
Lyrics by Lynn Ahrens
Music by Stephen Flaherty
Terion Cooper, M.A. '23, Music & Music Education
Ruthanna Graves-Mcqueen, M.A. '23, Music & Music Education
Kailey Simmons, M.A. ’23, Music & Music Education
Thomas Wright, M.A. ’22, Music & Music Education

REMARKS/STUDENT LETTERS
Leslie Williams, Ed.D. ’19, Lecturer
Higher & Post-Secondary Education

REMARKS/STUDENT LETTERS
Maria Hartman, Ph.D. ’15, Lecturer & Director
Deaf & Hard of Hearing Program

DOCTORAL STUDENT SPEAKER
Apeksha Mewani, Ed.D. ’23, Community Health Education

REMARKS/STUDENT LETTERS
Limarys Caraballo, Ed.D. ’12, Associate Professor of
English Education

FAMILY ROLL CALL
Davinia Gregory-Kameka, Ph.D. ’20, Assistant Professor
Arts Administration Program

CONCLUDING REMARKS
Davinia Gregory-Kameka, Ph.D. ’20, Assistant Professor
Arts Administration Program

GRADUATES RECESSIONAL
We ask that guests remain seated until graduates have exited
the auditorium.
Behind these achievements are my parents, who made the choice when they were young to give a brighter future to their children. My parents who encouraged me to learn new things, who pushed me to keep on going even when things were tough. My mom, who taught me how to be a tough woman, not afraid of taking the lead and speaking out. My dad, who would say yes and never discourage my crazy ideas to do more. My parents, who are the clearest example of hard workers and loving parents. Gracias mamá y papá. El yo estar aquí, es fruto del trabajo duro y el amor tan grande por sus hijos. La mujer que soy el día de hoy es gracias al apoyo incondicional que me han dado. Los quiero mucho.

Valeria Benitez-Lopez

I want to give thanks to my mom. She is a guiding star in my life.
感谢我的老妈，陈秀琪，谢谢你包容并支持我的一切。陈若浩

Ruohao Chen

To my mom and dad,

Who immigrated from across the world with nothing but love and being able to take control of their own reality. I can’t even imagine all the late nights, long hours, and tears you shed in order to help me get where I am today. For that, I will forever be grateful for the power of love that you provided for me to accomplish our dreams of getting an education. Thank you!

Wendy Chen
Dear family,

Although it is true that as a first-generation, low-income student, my family was unable to provide me with the financial or social capital that is highly valued in this educational system, they have given me an abundance of our own cultural capital. Their unwavering and unconditional support, which has brought me here today. I owe my achievements to my family and want to express my heartfelt gratitude for their constant support.

To my older sister Bere, my second mother. Thank you for being our family’s cultural broker and helping me navigate the higher education system, though also foreign to you. You guided me as best as you could. To my brother Mario, growing up, we only had one computer, and you would often let me finish my homework even before doing yours; because that’s the kind of selfless sibling you are; thank you. To my sister Verito, thank you for being the fuel that drives me forward, even in the darkest of moments.

Lastly, to my parents, there are no words in English or Spanish to describe how grateful I am for all your support. Both of you have taught me to be strong and resilient. Mom, you have taught me to always hold my head high and never lower my gaze. You have taught me to take pride in where I come from so that I can always be my authentic self. I regret that it took me a few years to learn this lesson, and I am sorry. I’m sorry for the times I was ashamed of where I come from, but now I understand the beauty of our struggles, culture, and family.

Today, I can say I couldn’t be prouder of where I come from and my family. I am proud of my Mexican roots. I am proud that my parents are from México, Michoacán, La Ex-Hacienda de Dolores, a small and humble town that dedicates itself to farming and raises the bravest and hardest working people I’ve ever met. I am proud of the wealth of knowledge and wisdom that my parents have and most importantly, I am proud of the sacrifices that my parents have made for their children. When I feel the imposter syndrome creeping up, which it often did here at TC; I think of your strength, Mom, and the sacrifices that you and my dad have made for me to sit in these classrooms and walk these hallways that historically were not intended for people like me. I think about the fact that, in some way, both of you had to clip your own wings to lend them to me, and that’s why I am eternally grateful, but sometimes, I feel guilty for your sacrifice. So today, I hope to return those wings to you in the form of this diploma, which is not only mine, but also yours. Although this title will never measure up to your sacrifices, it is my poor attempt to return the favor.

Lastly, I just want you to know that the admiration with which you look at me is the same admiration I have for you both and that your efforts were worth it (valió la pena sus esfuerzos).

Con mucho cariño,
Marylu Bautista
My dream to attend Columbia started as a little girl. And now I’m here finishing my Masters. What can I say, my dreams were never too big. I’ve been able to accomplish everything and anything I’ve wanted to. I’d love to say I did it solely by myself, but the reality is I’ve had so much support. It takes a village. My friends and family have been with me every step of the way.

Todos ustedes me levantaron cuando sentí el peso del mundo. En lo bueno y en lo malo. ¡Los quiero a todos!

Alejandra Figueroa

As a first-generation student, my parents raised me with the understanding that education is the key to success and the “American Dream.” My parents migrated to America to find that “American Dream.” They insisted that their children did better than them. When my father got sick with cancer, I tried my hardest to delve into myself and made him even prouder. When he passed, I had to reflect on, did I make him proud? My father was always proud of his children. His hard work and determination has seeped his way into my life. I try my hardest to do the best in everything I do.

Sheldon Sucre

I want to express my sincere thanks to my parents, who supported me unconditionally to pursue my Master’s study in the United States. We have experienced ups and downs together during the past two years. I am grateful for the life journey so far and look forward to exploring a wonderful future with them.

Ye Huang
Dear Family,

As I prepare to graduate from my program, I wanted to take a moment to reflect on my graduate school journey and express my gratitude for your unwavering support and encouragement.

Graduate school has been a challenging and transformative experience, one that has pushed me to grow and develop in ways that I never thought possible. But I know that I couldn’t have done it without your love and support.

Throughout this journey, I have often felt overwhelmed and uncertain. But you were always there to remind me of my strengths, to offer words of wisdom and advice, and to help me navigate the challenges that came my way. Your belief in me gave me the confidence to pursue my dreams, even when the path ahead seemed uncertain.

As I reflect on this journey, I am grateful for the sacrifices that you have made to help me achieve my goals. Your support has been the foundation on which I have built my success, and I will always be grateful for your love, guidance, and encouragement.

As I look towards the future, I am excited about the possibilities that lie ahead. And I am comforted by the knowledge that I will always have your love and support as I continue to pursue my dreams and aspirations.

Thank you for being there for me throughout this journey. I am grateful for all that you have done, and I look forward to sharing my future successes with you.

With love and gratitude,
Your Daughter and Sister,

Isabella Christal Manoharlall

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Dear friends and family, I am so grateful to you for holding me down throughout this experience. I will continue to make you proud.

Senami Morris
Dear Family,

I am so lucky to have you all in my corner. I don’t know how I would have completed this degree without your support.

Nick, you are an amazing husband. There were so many sleepless nights that I stayed up writing and numerous days that I sat in the library or my office typing, and you never complained. Your contributions to raising our four children while I focused on completing this degree will never go unnoticed. I know you are probably tired of hearing me say “I’m going back to school” well now, I’m FinishEdD!

To my four beautiful children, I am so lucky to be your mom. There isn’t a day that goes by that I don’t think about how blessed I am to be your mother. Even as a doctor, my most treasured title is mother. I hope that I continue to set good examples for you all. Please always know that you are loved, you are capable, you are brilliant.

To my mom, my earliest memories are of you attending my pre-school events. You prioritized our education and always found a way to be present. I remember telling you at age three that I would be a doctor and a clown, now all that’s left is clown school (sorry Nick, I still have clown school).

To my big sister, you are my best friend. It is because of you that I am confident, have a voice, and live life on my own terms. You have been there for me during some of my darkest times and I am forever grateful for your support.

To my younger siblings, the Sha’s, we are great, and I am lucky to be part of such an amazing group of people.

Shameika Williams

To my dear friends, I am so thankful for you all and your support over the years! I’m so grateful to have y’all in my corner today and tomorrow. I pray that the love y’all have given me is returned to you tenfold in this lifetime and the next ♥️ Kella

Kella Merlain-Moffatt
Thank you for all your support and all the encouragement you gave me so far in life!

Susana Li

Dear Mommy,

Thank you for leaving me with love when you needed to make ends meet. Thank you for never turning your back on your only daughter, and thank you for always picking up when I needed you. Even though you were miles away, I recognize now as an adult the importance of your sacrifice for me and my 2 brothers. I love you and I am proud to be your wildest dream!

Dear Daddy,

I wish you had loved me more than your addictions, but I understand. I understand that you were simply a man with a weakness. I understand that we all have weaknesses that are presented in different ways. I wish you were alive to see your only child accomplish her life goals, but I understand that life is beyond our control. I understand and value the fact that I am a product of you.

I AM MY MOTHER’S BLESSING AND MY FATHER’S HOPE! I AM A BROWN-SKINNED, UNABASHED, COLUMBIA TRAINED, BLACK GIRL THAT MASTERED A LIFE GOAL. MOST IMPORTANTLY, I AM A CHILD OF GOD!

— She is clothed with strength and dignity, and she laughs without fear of the future.  
  Proverbs 31:25

Phoebe Robinson
To my dear families, friends, classmates and professors,

I am excited to share some special news with you: I have officially completed my master’s degree at Teachers College, Columbia University! I am proud of myself for achieving another milestone in my life—it has been an incredible journey filled with challenges and growth. I am deeply grateful for your unwavering support, encouragement, and motivation throughout this journey. Thank you for always being there for me.

As I reflect back on my time at TC, I am amazed by how much I have learned and grown over the past two years. I began my journey in the Intellectual & Developmental/Autism Disabilities program during an extraordinary and uncertain time, as we were all adjusting to a new normal after a long period of quarantine due to COVID-19. This experience, which included attending “masked” classes, was new and unique for me. I started with many questions and uncertainties, but now I feel more confident, capable, and prepared for the next chapter in my life.

Of course, I could not have accomplished this without your love and encouragement. Whether you were cheering me on during this journey, taking care of me or supporting me in difficult moments, you have been an unwavering source of motivation and strength. Your belief in me has meant so much, and I am incredibly grateful for having you in my life.

As I move forward from graduation, I know that I will face new challenges and opportunities. But I am excited to tackle them with the knowledge and skills I have gained, and with your love and guidance. I am honored to have you in my life, and I look forward to sharing all my future adventures with you.

Thank you for everything.

With love,
Jieping Li

Thank you to all my friends who made my graduate experience at TC a memorable one! I will forever cherish our friendship. And most of all, thank you to my family for your endless support, and most especially for flying all the way to New York to celebrate my graduation. I could have not done it without you all. My success is also your success. I love you!

Leanne Aira Villanueva
Mom and Dad,

Thank you for helping me get through the last two years (and all the ones before that). Graduate school alone was challenging, but beginning my teaching career simultaneously made it feel impossible at times. Your confidence in my abilities never faltered, even when I’ve doubted myself.

Thank you for reading to me before bed and bringing me to the library every weekend. I’m grateful that you pushed me to read, even when I tried giving up. It inspired me to pursue this degree in Literacy so that I can hopefully do the same for my students.

Without you, I wouldn’t be here today. Thank you and I love you.

Emma Lupoli

You guys are real ones ❤️

Leticia Vasquez

To my family and loved ones,

Thank you for your support and encouragement on my way to obtaining my master’s degree at Teachers College, Columbia University. Sometimes when I felt lonely, uncertain, and unmotivated, you were the ones that I could always turn to. I am so lucky to have you all. Finally, Simon says, give yourselves a big hand!

Sincerely,
Simon Chen
I think it was a very bold decision from the beginning since we knew nothing about America and if they will work or not. I am thankful that in every step of my journey, I have friends and family supporting me physically and mentally. I am very slow and hesitant to make any important decisions, yet you guys were always there cheering me up. Thank you!

Danni Hang

“Tinsagu nu hana ya
Chimisachi ni sumiti
Uya nu yushigutu ya
Chimu ni sumiri”
- excerpt from the Okinawan folk song Tinsagu nu Hana

This traditional song written in Uchinaaguchi, my Okinawan ancestors’ language, poetically expresses my feeling of gratitude to my family: Just as my fingernails are stained with the pigment from balsam flowers, my heart is painted with the teachings of my parents. I feel that earning this master’s degree in one of the most prestigious universities in the world is not only the result of my own efforts, but the sum of sacrifices of generations that came before me. As I wore my ceremonial clothing for a photo session, I remembered the stories my mother recounted to me about my great grandparents leaving Okinawa during a massive diaspora, my grandparents working tirelessly as contract laborers in Brazilian plantations, and my elder aunts having to relinquish their education to relocate to Sao Paulo, Brazil’s largest metropolis, to learn a profession while supporting the entire family.

During my childhood, my father’s absence was prevalent as he had to leave for Japan during a period of economic crisis in Brazil, working long hours in blue-collar jobs to provide for my mother and me. Thanks to the strenuous efforts of my mother, father, and entire family, I had the opportunity to receive an excellent education and pursue my dream of studying at Teachers College, Columbia University. Despite struggling with linguistic and cultural barriers during these two demanding years of studies, my wife was an unwavering source of encouragement, inspiring me to persevere and believe that my aspirations were achievable.

Therefore, I have no words to thank my wife, family, friends, and the whole Teachers College community for their invaluable contributions. This master’s degree is a celebration of a collective achievement.

Walter Akio Goya
Growing up, the literary arts had a way of teaching me about myself, my people and a country left behind in a search for a new beginning. It wasn't until I discovered the performing arts that those lessons could be given arms, legs, a tongue, and teeth. I discovered my own voice and power through the language of the theatre. And my life story has been proof that the effects of the arts can be transformative. This transformative gift has led to what has been an exciting chapter at TC.

Columbia University has always seemed to be an improbability for someone from my background. However, my faith and family have encouraged me to reach for what would make me better rather than succumb to fear. Teachers College is where I was meant to complete my master's degree and I'm confident in my abilities to contribute to the world of Arts Administration. My hope is to bring this gift of the arts to as many people as possible and help to change the trajectory of their lives as it did for me.

I’m so grateful for those in my life who continue to love and support me. Without the guidance of my mother and sister during my informative years I would have been lost. Without the support of my friends Teanna, Walter, Tiffani, Mathew, and Keshia who spoke light into my darkest moments I wouldn’t be the person I am today. Lastly, without Kent, my amazing husband, and in-laws I wouldn’t understand the true depth of unconditional support. Thank you to everyone who helped me arrive at this moment. It is because of all those mentioned and the shoulders, counsel, and love of so many others along my life’s journey that bring me to this milestone and I will forever be grateful.

Bianca Horn

Snoop Dogg said it best: “I want to thank me. I want to thank me for believing in me, I want to thank me for doing all this hard work. I wanna thank me for having no days off. I wanna thank me for never quitting. I wanna thank me for always being a giver and trying to give more than I receive. I wanna thank me for trying to do more right than wrong. I wanna thank me for being me at all times...”

Also, shoutout to my partner Kai. I am forever grateful for your unconditional love and support.

Jaclyn Hawkins
I wish I could name everyone who has inspired me, nurtured my intellectual curiosity, and taught me to take challenges as an opportunity. Thank you to all my professors, mentors, friends, and teachers, from past and present, for helping me learn how to think and express my ideas while staying true to who I am. Thank you, David, AJ, Victor and Jaime for being here with me. Most importantly, a big appreciation to my family. Without my family’s support, encouragement, and understanding, it would not have been possible for me to achieve this dream of getting my doctorate at Columbia. And this doctorate degree is dedicated to all those who felt out of place by a system that was not designed with you in mind. This is for you. I see you. You are loved ❤️

Carlos Osuna

My dearest daughter: Thank you for coming to attend my commencement, one of the most important days in our lives! Even today I still remember clearly the day we arrived at Columbia University from Beijing, China, and started our life and studies in New York City in January, 2013, when you were 12. Thank you so much for your love and support all these years and your willingness to study with me at Columbia University for my second doctorate (I won the first doctorate in China) at 42 and helped me realize my dream to pursue my doctoral study at Columbia University since my undergraduate days 30 years ago! I couldn’t have come so far but for the love from you and your dad who stayed in China to offer us support all these years! I know how many difficulties we have endured in the process and I am so proud that you have become an EECS major at UC Berkeley and are striving to overcome the difficulties in your studies and determined to make the world better!

I also want to extend my deepest gratitude to my supervisor Ruth Vinz, Sheridan Blau and other professors, faculty members (Janet Miller, Bob Fecho, Mr. Russell etc.) at TC who have offered me equal love, support and encouragement for our studies!

Jinjin Wu
Dear TC Graduate! Today I would like to congratulate you and your family on First Generation Celebration! I can imagine how much it means to you and your family! Take a moment to celebrate it with your loved ones and thank them for their support and love through your study years at TC! My very best wishes to you!

Bakyt Amirova

Thank you to my family for all their love and support during my doctoral journey at Teachers College. I owe my entire success to my family. They were there for me through thick and thin. I could not have done this without them. I love them so much. I am also very proud to be a first generation graduate in my family and the first ever to earn a doctorate degree.

Vanna Som

Dear Tabitha,

Thank you for all the love, care, patience, and support you gave me through my grad-school journey. You are a ray of light in my life. I appreciate and I love you so much. Also, happy two-year anniversary ❤️

Dear TC friends,

Thank you for holding my hand and walking down the rocky road of grad. school together. Your support was truly valuable and greatly appreciated. Congrats & best wishes to you all!!

Bonelyn De Los Santos
Dear Family,

The following sentence might be a cliché, but I can't think of anything else that best explains this moment. “A dream you dream alone is only a dream. A dream you dream together is reality.” You have all dreamt this dream with me and did everything you possibly could to make sure it came true. As I look back on the journey that brought me here, I am filled with so much gratitude and love for every one of you.

Mom and Dad, you are my ultimate inspiration for everything. You are kind, unfailingly generous, and my twin pillars without whom I could not stand. You two never gave me any idea that I couldn’t do whatever I wanted to do or be whomever I wanted to be. You filled our house with fun, books, music, and so much love and support that I always felt like there was nothing I couldn’t accomplish, especially with you two by my side. You have always been unflagging in your efforts to guide me through life and be the best version of myself. I don’t know if you ever realized that my best version has only been possible because you gave me the best version of yourselves, being the best role models one could ask for and hope to have every single day. You both have been my biggest cheerleaders since day one, been there to listen, to offer advice, and to remind me of my own strength when I needed it most. Thank you for your unwavering support, your boundless love, for teaching me the value of hard work, and for always believing in me. I wouldn’t be here without you. You are my guidepost for everything.

Rafa, I might not say it enough, but you are the biggest gift I have ever received and I couldn’t have done this without you! Your friendship, support, belief in me, and just knowing I have you by my side have kept me going through the toughest of times. But it’s not only your support that has meant so much to me. It’s the little things you’ve done along the way - from the funny videos you’ve sent to make me laugh without even knowing that was exactly what I needed at the time to the texts in which you shared about your day knowing how sad I was to be missing so much of your life by not being there. You always seem to know just what to say or do to make me feel better. I want you to know how much I appreciate you and how much I love you. I am so lucky to have you, and you are the best brother and friend someone could ask for. Thank you for being you!

Italo, you have been my rock through it all. You supported me as I pursued my dreams, and your love and encouragement never wavered. I could not have done this without you, and I am so grateful to have you by my side as I take the next steps in my journey. Knowing you would be there with me every step of the way, after hard days of often feeling that I was not doing enough was like a breath of fresh air and a boost in my confidence. I have been so blessed to have you in my life. You have an amazing heart, and are kind, generous, compassionate, and confident in yourself (and in me). In such a different way from how people are these days, you amazingly stand out: Instead of resenting me for pursuing my dreams and for watching me shine, you mend my wings to make sure I fly further and further. I love you and am thankful for you every single day.
To the four of you: Thank you again for everything. I am honored to have you in my life, and I am so grateful for the love and support you’ve shown me my whole life. I love you all more than words can say.

Mariana Rodrigues

Dear Mami & Papi,

Thank you for always encouraging me to work hard and follow my dreams. Thank you for your continuous support and providing me with a beautiful life that has allowed me to get to this point today. Coming from the Dominican Republic at a young age, you both worked hard to create a life for yourselves in America and I hope this accomplishment shows the fruits of your labor. You have provided a better life for me and my three brothers, and for that I am always grateful. You have taught us to always be humble and give back, so as I embark on my professional career I will always hold this virtue close to my heart. I could not have done this without your love, encouragement, and support. This is not only my accomplishment, but an accomplishment for our entire family. It’s an honor to share it with you all. Te amo siempre.

Amanda Espinal

Thank you to my family, my biggest supporters.

Saudia Baksh

Yasmin and Elizabeth, I could not have done this without you! Thank you for giving me a shoulder to lean on, for your encouragement and guidance. Your love and friendship carried me through, and will continue to carry me through beyond grad school. Love you both so much!!

Carol Castaneda
I was raised in a small town in Chile called Requinoa, where I could see the Andes mountains every morning. I still miss the mountains, but I have learned to enjoy the beauties of New York. As the distance between Requinoa and Harlem, my journey has been lengthy, eventful, and exhausting but rewarding overall. I could not make any of this journey without my family. I am eternally grateful to them for supporting me and allowing me to dream big.

Quiero agradecer a mi mamá y a mi papá por dar el espacio, amor y la fe de que el esfuerzo si entrega recompensas. A veces son pequeñas o casi invisibles pero están y son siempre motivo de orgullo. Por siempre dejarme soñar en grande les debo más de lo que pueda poner en palabras. Also, to my brothers, my sisters-in-law, my nieces and nephews, for sending me love, laughs and always hoping the best. And my husband, Jaime, who was lovingly and patiently being an amazing partner in this adventure. Without him and our cats, Donna, Chimuelo y Leia, I am not sure I would have the energy, inspiration and strength to finish this part of the journey.

Yes, this is just a part, the first step of many other things I want to do. TC opened a world to me that I was unaware of and that I want to continue exploring and uplifting education. Last but not least, I want to share a quote from one of my favorite authors, Gabriel García Marquéz:

“No es verdad que las personas dejen de perseguir sueños porque se hacen viejas, sino que se hacen viejas porque dejan de perseguir sus sueños” (It is not true that people stop following dreams because they get old, instead, they get old because they stop following dreams).

Muchas gracias,
Maria Belén Berrios Droguett

I am dedicating my master’s degree to immigrants, who like my parents, sacrifice so much for a better life in this country. Mamá y Papá, this accomplishment is a testament to your bottomless love and support that have carried me through. I am now the first in our family to graduate from college, let alone an Ivy League institution, because of the opportunities your sacrifices have afforded me. Today, I celebrate you and all immigrants who inspire me with their stories of grit and perseverance. You planted the seeds of hope. Now, here are YOUR flowers!

With gratitude,
Laurette Espinoza
To my family,
I will never be able to fully express how much it means to represent my family as a graduate from Teachers College, Columbia University. You are the backbone of my academic and personal achievements, and this is as much a celebration of my success as it is yours.

Papi, you told me to “never stop learning” the summer before I started my freshman year of college. I’ve carried that with me throughout my academic career and even used it in my application for graduate school. I only found out recently that you learned to speak English and acted as a translator in Peru which gave you the opportunity to move your family to America. Thank you for reminding me how important knowledge is and for loving me unconditionally. I know you’d be here, front and center if you could be. I love you and I miss you. You have and always will be my guardian angel.

Nana, you have always presented yourself as a strong and powerful force. I can’t begin to imagine the sacrifices and hardships you endured by moving from Peru with Papi and my aunts to a new country. Your story is one that I hold close to my heart when I accomplish anything. I promise to carry your experience as a reminder of the impossible being possible.

Grandpa, you’ve lived so many lives and you’ve created a beautiful family that I am so proud to be a part of. From picking watermelon to being in the Navy to working on the Railroad—you have shown me what hard work is. The last time I saw you, you were wearing the Columbia sweatshirt I bought you, and you told me you were proud of me. I was a sobbing mess in the car on the way to the airport because not only is leaving you incredibly hard but knowing that you’re proud of me is beyond words. You will never be able to know how much I love you and how much I look up to you.

Grandma, because of you, I go through life knowing that there is someone who is always in my corner with a warmth and love that words cannot describe. You are the most loyal person I have ever known. You shared with me the story of how you raised your younger siblings and I could only relate to a fraction of the responsibility you had as the oldest daughter. To know that you still found the strength and energy to create your own family and raise two of your own children while working is a perfect representation of how expansive your ability to love is.

Aunt Irma, other than my parents, you were the first person I told that I got into graduate school. I sometimes felt that when people in my life were offering advice about school, they were judging my decisions or trying to mold me into their version of a “successful” person. I never felt that with you. You never questioned my choices and you trusted that I knew what was best for me. For that, I am forever grateful. I love you. Thank you for believing in me.

Dad, you have supported me in my academic success in more ways than you know. I remember the night you wrote me a letter telling me how proud you were of me after I cried the whole way home, empty handed, from the 8th grade award night. You’ve always been better at expressing yourself in written words—I must get that from you. Then, in my freshman year of college, I wrote an essay about your childhood. You shared what it was like growing up as a child
to immigrant parents and it made me even prouder to be your daughter. And when I opened my Teachers College acceptance email in front of you and mom, and I whispered “I got in,” completely dumbfounded, you started to cry which made me cry too. I know you didn’t come from the perfect situation, but I need you to know that you made mine perfect. You’re the best dad I could ever ask for, and you being proud of me is the best award I could ever receive. I love you papa.

Mom, for 24 years, I’ve watched you work, clean, cook, and care for our family even when you were facing your own challenges. You are my superhero, and to say I am here now because of you is a complete understatement. I wouldn’t have been able to finish this last semester without your love and support. Thank you for helping me stay positive and holding me tight when the uncertainty knocks me down. To this day, I still think about that morning in fourth grade when I told you I felt sick, and you let me stay home even though you were pretty sure I was lying. You told me that I needed to be honest, and I burst into tears as I told you the whole story. I got my multiplication tables wrong in front of the whole class, and it felt like the end of the world. I was so embarrassed. Instead of getting mad at me for lying, you sat down with me and went over my multiplication cards until I knew them by heart. You have always known what I needed, and when you didn’t, you have always given me the strength and push to ask for what I need. I love you mama.

To my siblings, I love being your older sister. In different ways, you have all inspired me to be better. Sierra, you taught me how to see the world in color. Your creativity spills out from your art and into the real world, showcasing the beautiful parts of life. It’s the most magical thing I’ve ever experienced. Phoenix, you taught me how to ask questions. You came into this world curious, and although your questions can be tedious at times, I love that you aren’t afraid to ask. You search for answers where others might just accept what they’re told. Dakota, you taught me to never accept others’ expectations of me. Every time you were faced with adversity, you proved yourself to be someone to bet on. I admire your ability to persevere and commit to being your best self in everything you do. Sierra, Phoenix, and Dakota, being your sister is the most important role I’ve ever fulfilled. I’m so excited to see you all change the world in your own ways. I love you.

Family, I am so proud to be a Mexican-Peruvian first-generation college student and I am proud to be part of this family. This is for all of you.
Cheyenne Madrid
My dad was far from a perfect dad, but he loved me deeply and always cheered me on. I credit my work ethic to him. He spent his life working in construction and landscaping to care for me and my mother who deals with significant mental disability. When I was in middle school, he told me that he hoped I would go to college but that financially, I would be on my own because he simply wouldn’t be able to help. So being awarded a full tuition Posse Scholarship to attend Bucknell University was a dream come true, and dad sobbed when I got that phone call. I’ll never forget how excited he was each time he was on campus for a family weekend, or my mom and my friends told me that at my graduation, despite having two surgically repaired ankles, he literally jumped up and down when I walked across the stage. Ever since a session about graduate school hosted by the Posse Foundation, I knew Teachers College was my dream school for my master’s. I wanted to be here. But in part due to a desire to teach in Prince George’s County Public Schools where I grew up, and in part to support my parents financially and physically after my dad had a battle with cancer and lost his job, I moved back to the Washington D.C. area and thought the Teachers College ship had sailed.

That was when I found the INSTEP summer program in Social Studies Education which could not have been more of a perfect fit for me! 3 summers on campus in NYC taking classes with other social studies teachers from across the country seemed perfect! And then during the school year, I could be back in PGCPS doing action research in my classroom and supporting my family. When I got my acceptance to Teachers College, my parents were excited for me but I don’t think fully grasped how excellent a school Teachers College is and how it connected to Columbia University and were confused by the timeline of the program, but they were excited for me and always believed I made good decisions. Little did I know, just a couple weeks after I got my acceptance, COVID hit and everything changed. That first full week of the world shutting down saw my mom with agoraphobia who rarely left the house for over two decades, alone in a hospital fighting for her life. Thankfully, she survived, and this was a gift in disguise because it set mom up for medical care moving forward that she and my dad struggled to obtain prior. That first summer wasn’t what I expected, taking classes on zoom during the day and reading, writing, and moving my parents out of their home of 30+ years in with my grandma because they were facing eviction for over a year. That summer was rough. But the fall offered hope—in spite of the pandemic, mom was actually more active than in my entire life taking walks with dad around the neighborhood, and the weight of the eviction that hovered over us finally lifted. Then dad died unexpectedly of a stroke on November 16th, 2020. The stroke happened around 2:30 pm, and I sat alone in the hospital room holding my dad’s hand as he passed away at 11:19 pm.

A lot of people encouraged me to take a break from grad school, to take more time than the 3 summers planned. But I stuck with it, engaging with TC peers, even being on zoom was energizing. The professors I had as well as my program director, Sandra, and thesis advisor, Brad, were as patient and supportive as could be over those next 21 months. The work I was doing for my thesis focusing on identity development and positive psychology with my students was rewarding and motivated me to keep battling my depression. But the weight of a demanding teaching job and taking care of mom and grandma in dad’s absence was tremendous, and I am not going to lie, teaching about and completing a positive psychology and identity related thesis while in the darkest mental years of my life so far at only 24–26 years old left me more defeated
than not most days. But I knew financially, I needed the raise from the master’s salary increase, and I was determined to get the degree and finish what I started.

Summer 2021 and Summer 2022 on campus and in NYC were exhilarating and presented a brief chance where I got to feel like I was living my own life and doing what I wanted. Thank you Teachers College for that gift — beyond a transformative education, my time on campus at TC and in NYC helped me work on loving myself. Even though mom and grandma are back in Maryland and dad is no longer here, I knew I had to be here this week to engage fully in the convocation celebrations. Being the first in my family to finish college let alone get my master’s degree from the top education graduate school in the country is deeply humbling and emotional. I wish dad was here for just one more day to see this and jump up and down even on his 2 bad ankles.

This week means the world to me. And it means a great deal that my closest friends, the ones who help me move mom and dad out of their house that first TC summer during Covid, the ones waiting in the hospital parking lot for me after dad died, the ones I zoomed with weekly for laughs and sentimental check-ins, the ones who remind me on the hard days how capable and amazing I am as a teacher and as a person—and those who cheered me on as I finished my thesis last summer and walk across the stage this week—I would not be here without you. Thank you and I love you.

John Quinn

Dear my parents,

Thank you for providing me with this opportunity to study at Teachers College. As you have always taught me, education is the key to a better life, and I am grateful for your unwavering support and encouragement throughout my entire learning journey. I still vividly remember how excited we were when I received the offer from Teachers College and how excited and nervous I was for the first day to arrive in a new country to study. I really appreciate the year at Columbia as an international student. I experienced a totally different life here, new culture, new friends, and new living styles. This invaluable experience will stay in my memory forever.

Love,

Yihui Xie
Dear Mami and papi,

I want to express my heartfelt gratitude for all you have done for me throughout my life. As a first-generation college graduate, I recognize that my accomplishments would not have been possible without your unwavering love and support.

When you decided to immigrate to the United States from the Dominican Republic, you did so, hoping to provide a better life for your family. And you did just that. You instilled in me the importance of education and always emphasized its value. You never hesitated to put my education first, even when it meant making sacrifices in other areas of our lives.

Throughout my academic journey, you have been my biggest cheerleaders, encouraging me to strive for excellence and never give up. You have celebrated my successes and helped me navigate the challenges of pursuing higher education.

As I reflect on my recent graduation, I am grateful for all you have done to help me get to this point. Your love and support have been unwavering, and I am fortunate to have you as my parents. I hope to make you proud with the opportunities that this education will bring and someday repay you for all you have done for me. Thank you for everything.

With love and appreciation,

Jovana Alejandro

Hi Friends! So they told me to write a letter to family and friends, but I really don’t know what exactly to say to you guys because it’s only been a year since I met you guys. But within this one year, we have made fun memories, lasting ones that I will remember in my higher education career moving forward. You guys have been my rock ever since starting this journey; I will say that I never felt alone throughout this academic year. Even through the tough times when it came to finishing assignments, stressing about finals, ranting about professors and walking back home every chance that we get. You guys have been the group of people that I trusted, had the closest connection with, and of course, the most fun with wherever we go. Yes, it has only been a year but I would not take this year back for anything; this has been the best graduate school experience because of you guys. You guys are awesome. I’m a bit sad that I’m the only one officially graduating in the group, but I am also happy that I get to leave with memories and lessons that I can cherish for a lifetime. I wish you guys the best in wherever you may go, and although I won’t be at TC next year, I’m still a text or email or google calendar invite away. (But send out that google calendar invite so that we can hangout). I love you guys! My homies and my close friends! <3 All the best, Miggy.

Miguel Jose Gabriel Losa
Dear Familia y Amigxs,

As I find myself on the cusp of graduation, I realize I am reaching a goal that seemed like a far-fetched dream just a few years ago. Not just any dream too, but one of my boldest and valorous ones. I recognize I am the product of so many others, a beautiful amalgam of love and support that has sustained me through it all.

Mama, you always tell me that I am your dream come alive. That seeing me live out my aspirations is everything you always envisioned for your daughters after leaving all you knew behind in Chile. From helping me with my homework in elementary school, even though the material was foreign to you and we were both learning together, to listening to me vent about tough assignments and offering words of wisdom that helped clarify my vision and purpose, I hope you know that this is just as much of a joyous accomplishment for you as it is for me. ¡Lo hicimos mamita linda!

Damir, the minute you entered my life you changed it completely --- all in the most beautiful ways. Thank you for being such a source of light throughout this journey. Your kindness, understanding, and love were essential in keeping me balanced and focused. From the affirmations we’d do in the morning, to celebrating every milestone as if they were your own and making sure I made time for rest and fun, I’m so grateful.

To my dear friends that have been by my side through thick and thin, especially Isabella, Jezza, Marissa, and Nicole. Thank you for checking in on me, enduring all-day study sessions together, sharing funny TikToks you knew I’d ugly laugh to, thinking of me when opportunities arise and so much more. The universe truly blessed me with your friendship.

There are so many other people to thank like my supervisor Ryan, who understands the importance of education and who’s flexibility allowed me to attend class while also holding a full-time office role. However lastly, I would like to extend thanks to the younger past versions of Yasmin. I am forever indebted to you for getting me to where I am today. You have everything within you, be kind to yourself. I’m so proud of you.

To all my fellow first-generation graduate students, I am so honored to be considered one of you. The way we pave paths with no blueprint never ceases to amaze me; you all give me the strength and courage to persevere. May the seeds we plant turn into flowers that will help others that come after us find their way. I have no doubt our efforts will flourish into a beautiful garden one day. May we build a beautiful life for ourselves and uplift others with us along the way.

Con cariño y gratitud,

Yasmin Butt
From a very young age, my mom always told my brothers and me that everything happens for a reason. For a time, I did not have enough perspective or was too naive to fully understand or believe what that meant. I constantly asked myself the cyclical questions: of Am I making the right decision?, Did I do well enough?, and the biggest question of them all, What if I fail? As a first-generation college and graduate student, I am often my biggest critic; however, it is my family who has always taught me to believe in myself and to dream big—no matter what anyone else says. It is a support system that I cling to as I navigate the world of uncertainty—but I know I am never alone.

I was 12 years old when I decided I wanted to get my master’s degree in New York City. Now most people when they heard that while I was growing up often chuckled at me. But my family and friends have always been the ones to build me back up and encourage me to keep going. I consider myself extremely lucky to have a village of my best friends (in NYC and at WVU), my partner, my work family at GSLD, my mentors and my advisors, my professors, and my family who I admire so much.

When I was growing up with two older brothers, Ethan and Adam, I knew I was going to have to be tough. Thank you for teaching me to always get up, brush myself off, and to be tough in the face of any adversity. I’m lucky to look up to you—you are my heroes. To Jen (JJ) and my niece Emma, thank you for always being there for me when I needed a laugh and being there when I needed someone to just listen.

Thank you to my Dad and Mama J. Without you, I would have never had the confidence to chase my biggest dream. You both sacrificed so much to make sure that Ethan, Adam, and I never had to worry about getting what we needed and that you always had our backs no matter what. Thank you for always answering my late-night phone calls when I felt like giving up, challenging me to dream bigger, and for taking care of my cat Salem while I am away. Dad, you’ve taught me the value of hard work and not giving up when I am stuck. Mama J, you are my rock, my best friend, and my inspiration. You are one of a kind and fostered a sense of resiliency and strength that you have modeled for me every day. You are a guiding light and have trusted in my journey even when I did not.

To my Nana who left us too soon this year—I hope to make you proud every day. Thank you for teaching me the value of being kind to everyone, always having fun no matter how serious life gets, and the importance of being there for your family. I miss you immensely —- this is for you.

Because of all of you, I am proud to be First-Gen. Because of all of you, I am invincible.

Amelia Jones
A mi familia,

¡Si se pudo! Yo no pude haber terminado este programa sin su apoyo y amor incondicional. Estoy eternamente agradecida por su apoyo durante toda mi carrera. Yo estoy tan orgullosa de ustedes, las lecciones más importantes de mi vida no las he aprendido en ninguna escuela, sino en casa. Nuestra familia muestra una fortaleza y sentido de comunidad que me inspira todos los días. Los quiero muchísimo. Besos, Angie (Tita)

Angie Gonsalez

To my dearest father and mother, Chee Wai 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 PhD in Cognitive Science. Though no one in our family has pursued this life path, much less travel halfway across the planet from Malaysia to the USA to do so, I am thankful that you both believed in my potential to transform into the person I am today.

Dad, your brilliant and honourable qualities have made you a successful engineer. Along with your international successes, I’m so proud that you helped build the Petronas Skyscrapers, the tallest twin towers in the world. Mum, your strong perseverance and creative mind have made you into a successful floral designer and businesswoman that is internationally known. Your life successes have made you both truly inspirational individuals to me. I hope that I will keep making you both proud, and I’m forever grateful for your love.

To Jo Zee (my sister), Jan Haw (my brother), Amanda (my sister-in-law), Zen (my nephew), Jun (my niece) and to my extended family members in Malaysia, thank you for your continuous love and laughter throughout the years! Special thanks to my aunt, Wan Chee Tang, for helping my parents financially and for your support. You all are the reason why the Tang family now has their first doctorate holder, and you have my deepest gratitude.

To my American in-laws, Nancy and Tony Lonardo, as well as Kristi, Liam and Nick Clemens, thank you for being my American family throughout these years, especially when I first arrived as an international student at Stony Brook University. When I was homesick or down, thank you for lifting me up and for believing in me. I am eternally grateful for you all.

Jean Ee Tang
Dear Family, Friends, Co-Conspirators, and Neighbors,

I hope this reaches you in good health and with hope. Thank you for showing me so many dimensions and levels of love. We dreamed of this day together. I dedicate my academic pursuit to the efforts and commitments we make today that will produce a sustainable world seven generations into the future. I dedicate this to the great cloud of witnesses I know by name, and those I know by spirit. I dedicate this to GriefLove, Ella’s Candlelight, and the House of Love (all of the residents and guests). I dedicate this to home as where my people are, and the full-body yes we all deserve that says, “If it’s not a Heaven Yes, it’s a Hell No!”

Valley School
Wilbur Elementary School
Cleary Middle School
Buena Regional High School

Educators from California to New Jersey and Massachusetts before New York have poured into me. A great deal of investment was made to seed and bring this vision for healthful narratives before we found funding through opportunities like the Gates Millennium Scholars Program and the RWJF Health Policy Research Scholars Program. No one but God could have scripted our journey from Emerson, Harvard, and Columbia.

Thank you to my parents, siblings, aunties, uncles, niblings, and many many sibling-cousins especially! Thank you for your love.

We did it!

With sincerest gratitude,

Dr. Shanaé Burch

Being the “first” in the family comes with a lot of pressure but, it is by far, one of the most rewarding experiences I have ever had. I have gained confidence to take on challenges, overcome barriers, and believe in myself in systems that were not built for individuals that look like me. I have learned independence, to rely on myself when making decisions and getting things done—it will always be okay in the end. But, I could not have done this without the endless and unique support of my family. My family has taught me the importance of being united and taking care of one another; in the end, all we truly have is each other. Now that I am older, I understand the hard work my parents did to make ends meet. They have always encouraged me to take this opportunity to create a better future for myself, and to set an example for my siblings. They have instilled in me the importance of an education, and I am eternally grateful for the chance to pursue my dreams. Despite the financial constraints, I am proud to have made it this far because I know it is just the beginning to a future with endless opportunities.

Daysy Ruiz
Praise God and Thank my Ancestors. Your Girl is done for now! In the *Bible*, James 1: 2-4 states, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”

When I reflect on the past two years I find myself consumed with gratitude. In the midst of trauma and grief was the certainty of getting through with faith, support and gratitude. I am so thankful for the pillars of support you have been in this milestone I get to add to the blessing of my life. While many may give accolades to my accomplishments and how I have overcome obstacles, I am consistently reminded that they would be nonexistent if it had not been for you all supporting me. As a single Black mother, I recognize and appreciate the fact my small but mighty community of mothers has taken my daughter, Sage Ali into their care and helped shape and mold her as I prepared our future. So now I am here. With the grace of God and the manifestations of my Ancestors, specifically my great and late Grandma Babe’s prayers, I am graduating with another master’s in a program and discipline I was once told I would never get into. Thank you for showing me faith in action and letting my mind be at ease so I can enact my due diligence here at Teachers College.

I started the Philosophy and Education program in September 2021, and lost my Grandma Babe within the same month. She was my greatest motivator and supporter. Having to navigate the world without her physically was hard but I believed I would be able to because of the faith she instilled in me and the belief she had in me. Still, today I carry her voice with me and confidently move in the direction of my dreams. Healthy relationships, justice, community, authenticity, and liberation are extremely important to me. I was able to go forward these last two years incorporating these themes as my moral compass through my educational experience and life experience. So it is my duty to publicly acknowledge you, Ramona, Sharmaine, Linda, Kenya, Michelle, Selena, and Kim for practicing community in real life. I love you all and I pray God continues to bless you and keep you in favor. Stay blessed.

With love and light, peace and blessings,

Shapel Monique LaBorde
Although I officially began my master’s program in 2019, my journey with this institution began a lot earlier than this. I would like to dedicate this letter to my grandfather Bernard Fils-Aimé.

His mother, Uranie Gabriel Fils-Aimé was the director of a primary school in Petionville, Haiti and was arrested for criticizing the policies of François Duvalier. As a result, she and my grandfather and his siblings left Haiti for New York City in 1966 where he graduated from John Jay High School in 1971 and then started at Columbia College in 1973. While he was here he became involved in student activism, and ultimately ended up leaving Columbia after two years to then co-found the Haitian Refugee Center, which organized protests and litigated cases on behalf of detained Haitian refugees.

My grandfather was so influential in my life and my educational journey, he supported me in attending Spelman College and always pushed me to excel as a scholar. I remember visiting Columbia’s campus as a high school student, not even knowing my grandfather went here or that I would too one day. It was a dream that I forgot I even had.

Timing is very important my journey and defined everything for me—from the time I said I wanted to attend an Ivy League institution during my first year at Spelman (which I forgot I even said) to the timing of even applying to this program. I found out about it maybe two weeks before the application was due and it was the only program I applied to. The timing was perfect either way and I was able to run into beloved professors who were able to write my letters of recommendation.

The timing was so perfect; I remember walking into church on Easter Sunday in 2019 and getting the notification that I had an interview. And so I was accepted, and moved to New York and had a wonderful experience being able to explore my interests with my cohort. I attended a diversity mixer at the beginning of the school year and made life long friends at Teachers College that are very dear to me. We were having the times of our lives when unfortunately the pandemic cut things short and everyone had to move away. I had 6 credits left to finish and felt like I needed to stay in New York because I felt like I wasn’t done with the city yet.

Naija Brown
Dear family/Querida familia,

I cannot express enough the amount of gratitude I feel for every one of your contributions in helping me get to where I am today. From financial advice to simply being available at 2am to talk me out of quitting the program, I will never forget your unwavering and unconditional support. Despite my being the first one of us to have a graduate degree, this degree is all of ours because it represents our perseverance / nuestra perseverancia. I am incredibly lucky to have you all as my support system, and even luckier to call you family.

To my dad, for your invaluable words of wisdom and guidance, gracias. To my mom, for modeling what true resilience looks like (and for being my source for family gossip), gracias. To my brothers and sister, for your constant encouragement (and distraction), gracias.

¡Los quiero mucho!

Con infinito amor,

Hugo Bautista-Lopez

Being the “first” in the family comes with a lot of pressure but, it is by far, one of the most rewarding experiences I have ever had. I have gained confidence to take on challenges, overcome barriers, and believe in myself in systems that were not built for individuals that look like me. I have learned independence, to rely on myself when making decisions and getting things done -- it will always be okay in the end. But, I could not have done this without the endless and unique support of my family. My family has taught me the importance of being united and taking care of one another; in the end, all we truly have is each other. Now that I am older, I understand the hard work my parents did to make ends meet. They have always encouraged me to take this opportunity to create a better future for myself, and to set an example for my siblings. They have instilled in me the importance of an education, and I am eternally grateful for the chance to pursue my dreams. Despite the financial constraints, I am proud to have made it this far because I know it is just the beginning to a future with endless opportunities.

Daysy Ruiz
For my Lola (Grandma),

Thank you. Thank you for teaching me about the importance of family, about friends, about community. My journey to grad school really did take a village, and I couldn’t have done it without my community. In true Bayanihan spirit.

Bayanihan is something you instilled into me without having to explain it. The Filipino spirit of community, unity. It’s so core to who I am thanks to you. And it’s now core to the work I’ve done as a scholar.

You inspired me with stories of building community in the face of oppressive government regimes. And you inspired me to find community on an everyday basis with the people I love and even complete strangers.

This is the value that carried me through to this day here, to celebrate not only two hard years at Teachers College, but over twenty hard years in school altogether. And this is no small feat for a child of immigrants, a first-generation student, and someone who’s queer. The odds are stacked against people like me, but you helped me find the value in not doing it all alone.

I’ve found community in my peers graduating here with me today and in the faculty and staff who supported us along the way. They’ve offered me wisdom in ways I’ve found no where else, they’ve offered me compassion in some of the hardest years of my life, and they’ve helped me see the potential I have to offer these very same lessons about community that you gifted to me.

In the face of a world that is increasingly hostile to people like us, I remember these lessons, this gift, and find a spark of hope for our futures. You, like many of our ancestors, have left me with the lessons we need to build a future built on love, built on compassion, and built on unity. Bayanihan. This spirit of community lives on in me as I transition out of these final days of my education and I hope this spirit lives on in those around me here.

Maraming salamat po, Lola.

Thank you, Lola. Rest easy.

Niko Crawford