

Mixing It All Up

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Farajaje', Starr King School's Vice President of Academic Affairs, Dean of the Faculty and Professor of Cultural Studies and Islamic Studies, delivered this address at the May 13, 2004 Graduate Theological Union commencement ceremonies.

Good afternoon! I invite all of our ancestors to be present with us in this gathering, especially the ancestors of the Class of 2004, those who helped pave the way for them to be here, those on whose shoulders they stand; those who had been locked out of the academy because of race or class or language or gender or gender expression or sexualities or disabilities or religion or where they came from in the world; those for whom further education was only a distant dream, but who gave of themselves so that it could happen for you, whether you knew them or not. Whether ancestors of choice, or ancestors by birth, we acknowledge their presence and we ask them to continue to give us strength and courage for the journey. The blood of the ancients runs through our veins, forms pass by, but the circle of life remains. As we give thanks to the Source of all-Being for sustaining us and bringing us to this joyous occasion, I ask permission of the Yokut, the Pomo, the Miwok and the Muwekma Ohlone, the peoples indigenous to this area, to grant us their permission and their blessing to be here on their soil, in their air, near their sacred waters.

On behalf of the Faculty of the Graduate Theological Union, I greet you with words of peace and profound gratitude and congratulations for you, the graduating Class of 2004!

If you read the New York Times this past Sunday, you might have seen the article about what perks schools are now offering to attract commencement speakers. One of the things mentioned was that some schools offer to fly their speakers in private jets to their campus. The article did not seem to take into consideration the fact that in the San Francisco Bay Area, parking is not easy to come by. So, it was with a particular sense of thrill and honor that I received yesterday from Dr. Maureen Maloney that most important of perks at the GTU: a Special Guest Parking pass for today's commencement. I think that will merit at least a letter to the editor of the Times!

These are particularly crucial times to be moving in the world as scholars trained in the study of religions and theologies. These are times that beg for this class of scholars/artists/activists, with its particular mix of skills and gifts, for we live in a world that is obsessed with fictions of purity and struggles over authenticity. Fictions that say: “Pure scholarship will only deal with certain matters and only in a certain way.” Struggles over authenticity that say: “Real people of real faith and integrity are all of one type and will respond in a way that supports those in power in the world.” Purity of religion becomes an obsession; some seek monolithic definitions of religions, while others allow for fluidities and diversities. These fictions of purity and struggles over authenticity would say that people in the interstitial places, in the intersections, are not REAL and therefore do not and should not exist. Those engaged in these struggles attempt to make categories more rigid, to establish more rigidly defined identities, and as part of that, they challenge the right of many of us to be in the academy, indeed, even to be in the world.

We witness ever more horrific vanguards of violence rooted in these fictions of purity, enacting their deeds in the name of the Divine or of some notion of a sacred mission to purify the world, leading to degradation of humankind, especially of those who are considered to be disposable people, and furthering the abuse and destruction of our Mother the earth, of the environment. Literal walls of separation are built; globalitarism runs rampant, with no input from the peoples of the world.

Whether it is the wanton murder of transgender people here in the United States or the massacre of women’s bodies in Rwanda or Bosnia or Iraq, it is done in the name of re-establishing clear lines of purity, of separating a fictive “us” from an equally fictive “them,” for they are we and we are, indeed, they. We live in a time of contraction and expansion of notions of religion, genders, race, embodiments, with Nation-States blurring into all-consuming and self-absorbed Empire. Our world is transfixed by religion and religious questions, while at the same time it tries to minimize its primacy.

That is why I have chosen to speak very briefly today about what I consider to be a source of hope for all of us, the transmodern, transdisciplinary art of mixing it all up, the revolutionary act of the 21st century. For I believe that this is something in which you graduates have long been involved and in which you will provide leadership for your communities and for the world. The transmodern paradigm takes positive elements from modernity, such as the struggle for human rights, democratic control, self-determination, scientific research, technologies and grounds them in commitments to holistic and spiritual values, connecting them to commitments to affirming communities and cultures and strengthening commitments to more responsible world citizenship and to the health of the earth, living in a not only post-colonial, but anti-colonial élan, with awareness of the existences of others. This interculturality is expressed not in universality, but in pluriversality, which values the complementarity of differences, dialogue and negotiation, and which is inspired by the

communitarian model of various traditional societies and cultures. This pluriversality cannot help but be plurivocal. This is a mix, a mixing-it-all-up. These multiple voices and multiple perspectives are reflected in what I call the hip hop aesthetics and epistemologies of transmodern theologies.

Hip hop is far more than the violent urban product that it is usually portrayed. A highly-developed form of cultural resistance, it is based on an aesthetics of mixing and remixing, of metaphorplay. Being itself a product of mixing, hip hop began as a combination of four art forms: deejaying, rapping, breakdancing and graffiti-tagging. The DJ has the particularly vital task of quite literally mixing different types of music and spoken word.

Spoken rhymes placed over the beats of United States music from the 1970s and 1980s, might mix with rhymes, poetry, metaphorplay and traditional music from all over the world. Hence, the importance in hip hop linguistics of being “all in the mix,” of being fully present. In fact, the person considered to be one of the greatest contemporary DJs, one of the greatest mixers in the world, is a South Asian woman living and mixing in New York City.

Hip hop aesthetics can be seen as having created their own counter-hegemonic cultures that reflected their intercultural roots.

Soon, there were counter-hegemonies within counter-hegemonies, producing women’s hip hop; lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender/intersex/queer/questioning hip hop; eco-centred hip hop; Christian hip hop; Muslim hip hop; Jewish hip hop; and hip hop using Hindu and Buddhist sacred music. This phenomenon of global youth culture has created forms and mixes of forms that are constantly in conversation with each other, no matter where they are located in the world.

As graduates of the GTU, as scholars/artists/activists, you bring to the world this dynamism of a transmodern hip hop transdisciplinarity, mixing it all up. The years in which you were here are years in which we have witnessed radical and profound changes in the world.

Some of you have lost parents and partners and children during this time of study, while some of you have also had new life and love come into your lives. Some of you will return to countries and communities that have changed while you were away studying. You have changed this place by being here. You have changed our ways of thinking and being. You have helped us to grow into becoming what we say we are and want to be as the Graduate Theological Union.

I believe that you came here as scholars and have honed your and our skills throughout your time here. You have engaged in the work of subverting categories and interrupting conversations in order to bring life to the world, while at the same time receiving life from the world. You have helped decolonize the academy through your highly innovative work here, through who you are and through

the universes of meaning that you brought with you. This very place has changed because you have been here. Through your work in liberatory knowledges, you might well find yourselves being engaged in ways of thinking and teaching and writing and agitating that are totally different from ways in which you moved here. In Antonio Gramsci's model of the organic intellectual, the intellectual profoundly connected to the life of their communities. You are already making profound changes in the world and taking a public voice, moving your scholarship into conversation with the public sphere, challenging the public/private split. Thank you for all that you have taught us and will continue to teach us.

Thank you for your patience and understanding in letting us engage with you in the midwifing of your work, in the tug and pull of theses and dissertations. Now, you will be midwives for others. While you initiate them to the sacred mysteries of writing a concise thesis statement, make sure that you give them passion for learning, guiding them to the GTU or to create other GTUs in other parts of the world. Help to reshape the discourse; continue raising new questions. There are more of you out there in the world!

I would say a very special word of thanks and congratulations to your families and partners and friends and communities of accountability, for they helped bring you to this place and gave you affirmation and encouragement and support during these long years of study, especially when they were wondering, for example, why their beloveds were so nervous about going before this dread group known as the Doc Council!

This is the place where we are invited to live on the borders, the "dihliz," as the 12th-century Muslim scholar, al-Ghazali, would say, the area marking the space between the house and the outside. And that borderline place is powerful and empowering, for it sustains us as we move in the in-between spaces. And it is problematic, because those who see themselves as "inside," will question the authenticity of border/threshold-dwellers, yet we will move with holy boldness as insider/outside, as we continue to mix it all up!

Audre Lorde, Afro-Caribbean scholar, critical theorist and Poet Laureate of New York City, said in her essay, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House": "Within the interdependence of mutual, non-dominant difference lies that security which enables us to descend into the chaos of knowledge, and return with true visions of our future... Difference is the raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged."

Continue to Mix it all up! Continue to represent, as we would say in hip hop-ese, or to dare to show up in the world. Continue to be in your bodies, that sacred space where you also encounter the Divine.

Continue to bring religions and theologies of liberation out of the closet and into public conversation, as you help shape public policies and understandings, for you are technicians of the soul.

Continue to be tender revolutionaries of the spirit, setting fires in the heart of humankind.

Continue to be bold DJs of the whole human being and of the environment, mixing and remixing, placing the spoken rhymes of the desires of the heart over the music of liberation and transformation.

Continue to invite others to show up in the world in the fullness of who they are, to live in the differences and to mix it all up! But most importantly, thank you for existing!