

A Letter to My Peoples (a small part of my chapter 5...in revision for journal publication)

Dear African American, Black, and Indigenous Graduate Students,

I write this letter to you in particular from one self-identified African American graduate student to another of the African diaspora. I choose you because I sometimes wish that someone would have informed me of the totality of who and what the akkkademic institution is and of their main objective and purposes. Yet, I am grateful to God as I now know that this is what the vision on the plantation (in chapter one) was all about. I say sometimes because after experiencing the institution, the structural racism, the disrespect and disregard of Black bodies and its bifurcated processes, and yes the trauma, I am not sure if I would have been truly able to comprehend and decompartmentalize it all. I believe this due to my lack of understanding my initial plantation experience in Cuba and because I am not certain that I would have appreciated the process(ing) the way that I do now. I am not sure if me writing this letter and sharing will help you but I feel such a responsibility to do so. Although I love all people, I have a strong love for African American/Black people (to which I am unapologetic) because we still live in a world that often refuses to see us. Being African American in America is Trauma for so many of us and every day we awaken is a political day for us with questions! How many microaggressions? Macroaggressions? Will we or our families return home safely? And now this space that you have entered is not one of true or full freedom, not one of complete safety, and may leave you asking more questions daily. I write as a means of awakening for some or a re-awakening so to eliminate some of the shock and trauma of now being in this space that is often referred to as a badge of honor and privilege (and in ways it is even for us) but you best believe it is still the good ole white boys who want to be oppressors club.

I first want to begin by saying and/or reminding you that not only are YOU greatness but also that YOU come from greatness. YOU of all people more than deserve to be here in this space, this place! YOU like that of your ancestors who built these institutions for free are Life, Love, Worthy, Fierce, Value and of Value. YOU are the essence and personification of ALL things created, beauty, innovative, intelligent, performative, musical, wisdom, knowledge, Brilliance. YOU. Are. FIT! In fact, never forget that all life stemmed from the womb (WO-Man-man with a womb) of a Black woman. Research this if you do not know and see how they, white oppressors changed her name and never put this in history books in order to keep us from knowing our history and the truth of history. Why do you think white oppressors, whiteness, structural racist institutions, racist systems, and yes even those who suffer from the poison of white injected oppression seek to keep us silent, invisible, inferior, disregarded, and disrespected? Why do they ask and want us to assimilate, acculturate, and give up our identities in these predominantly white institutions? Why does whiteness and white oppressors call the cops on us for driving while Black, sleeping while Black, birdwatching while Black, selling lemonade while Black, barbequing while Black? And for me sitting in a Black Overseer's office regarding my writing of research while Black. Our list goes on. It's daily! Why do they steal our voting rights, just plain out lie about the truth, and do not want critical race theory taught? Why did they kill heroes such as Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Medgar Evers? Fred Hampton? Why did they seek to "kill" the strength of our women in many ways, Nina Simone, Ella Baker, Ella Fitzgerald, Ida B. Wells? Why do they kill our bodies via policing, healthcare, and various other polic(e)ies, enslave us via the carceral system and the 13th amendment, and again the list goes on. It is daily! Why? Because they know that I/YOU/We are Greatness, because they fear us in many ways as this country moves towards the browning of Amerikkka, and because they

seek to keep us in *our places* (inferior according to them) in order to keep their power and hierarchy. And most of all please remember this, it is ALL about economics, economics, status, and more economics and this my brothers and sisters includes YOU-the modern-day labored economics. Plainly stated, where you now reside (PWI's) is whiteness as property in all forms. A space that is intentional, predatory, political, and most often is employed by those who know this information and either do not want you to speak about it, will flat out tell you to assimilate to graduate, play the *game*, or that you are permitted to speak about the plantation when you finish the process. AND even in knowing all of what this plantation consists of, most importantly, YOU can get through it! You can get through it without selling your soul to the highest bidder and/or to the devil(s) personified. Note, many will not take this road (and benefit from your pain) and will cross onto the highway of the road least resisted. Know that these same folk will praise you and be in your corner one day and crucify you the next. Just as many got through the indoctrination given to us in K-12 and may not have been aware, beware that on this plantation, you are now being asked to drink the indoctrination socialization Kool-Aid and make a decision to assimilate, acculturate, and become congruent with a structure, an organization that was built by us and once owned us. You are being asked to socially condition yourself and become one of them while existing as an "other." Yes, you are being asked to freely become enslaved and give your permission to do so-oh yeah, all while you take out loans, work one, two, and sometimes three jobs to pay for these conditions. The script has flipped as we are now asked to pay the oppressors to oppress us.

Now, am I saying that there are not some good and great people in these spaces?

Absolutely not! Am I saying that there are not some that may need an awakening in ways and may truly work to help you? Absolutely not! Am I saying that there are not any really doing the

work of liberation? NO, No, and no! There are many fighting and seeking to not only teach liberation but also aid in true freedom across the board. They don't say one thing and do another or say one thing to obtain a grant yet sacrifice the lives and bodies of those who understand the game, want to talk/write to others about it, desire to walk the walk and talk the talk, and who may challenge you and your thought process. I want to inform you that there are some AND there are some who look like You. I write because what happened to me just did not happen to me. I am not alone as I have heard from many others across the US and abroad of the trauma they received. And we can both read the research that exists here and abroad. I share this letter with hopes that you will find the literature that you need at the right time.

I must share with you that you will need to have a conversation with all of those that you love and that love you because your time will definitely be redirected. It will be pulled upon in a way that I doubt you are aware of. There are many times that you will have to say no as the work and the assignments will not only engulf a great portion of your time but also engulf you. And through all of this please, please, make conscientious decisions to make time for self and others! You will need time with a friend(s), with your spouse, children, mom, dad, self...you will need a night out, a dinner, a massage. Do not neglect others and yourself of the love, the affirmation, the hugs and kisses of others, they are critically important! Do not get so entangled in the process of making this "living" that you forget to make and keep a life. There are days coming that you may question whether this is really what you want to do and this process can cause a private conflict, a dichotomy. Your answer will come, either way. You will need your outside village as you assert your agency in these spaces. My outside village was another way that I maintained my forced resilience. I want to tell you that this "new normal" is not a new feeling or experience! Many of us have endured conflicted feelings so you are in great company! Do not let the

isolation that these programs can bring about even when you are not physically there be a signal that you do not belong. Allow your inside and outside village to be your insulation as you build community and exercise the resilience that you need. I cannot express how much you will need a village as you exercise your agency and decide what you need and how those needs will look.

In fact, you will often hear and learn about imposter syndrome (Noonan, 2015). Now in my opinion there is nothing wrong with learning about this phenomenon. I want to scream to you that YOU are NOT an impostor. How can you be when these spaces are the legacy which really belongs to us; it is a part of the generational wealth gap owed to us. Yet when many introduce imposter syndrome to you, ask yourself are they grounding you in a way that no matter any of the symptoms that you may (or may not) experience, are you being told that YOU, my sistah's and brotha's are nowhere near an impostor?! If you are asking yourself can you make it, do you belong even when it is intentional that you are being made to feel like an outcast, an outsider, isolated, KNOW that You can make it. Keep pressing onward whether YOU decide to stay at one institution as a form of resistance or go to another as a form of resistance. Again, YOU are FIT! I have heard some say that they suffered from imposter syndrome as they were the first in their family to go to college and they don't feel worthy. I say CONGRATULATIONS!!! You were presented with opportunities and/or took advantage of them. Carry a torch knowing that not only are YOU worthy but YOU were chosen for such a time as this. A time to break the chains and shackles of generations! A time to glean knowledge of your worth, your value, and your greatness! A time to birth legacies in order to build dynasties! Dynasties, a place known to our ancestors! If you are in one of those programs that professes such things as access, success, equity, inclusion, justice yet denied any of these- Speak up, speak out and make a true change! Speak up and speak out and make transformation rather than transfer the reformation and

transactional normality of whiteness. It's past time. It's our time! Where are all those who possess the full true fighting spirit of our fearless ancestors? Where are all of those fighters from the true civil rights movement? From the Black Panthers? Know that this is not going to be easy but it is time for real freedom...our free indeed moment! Will it be fearful for some? Yes! But your light and your voice will draw others that will play many positions in the allyship. True faith conquers fear! Faith flourishes in the face of fear! It stands up even through the tears, the conflict, and the fight. I watched it. I became it!

If I had to give you any advice (some of which I did not do or know) I would say the following:

- Know that You have a right to be there and they are more fortunate to have you and your experiences than you are to be in their presence!
- Know that many of these spaces are not ones of shared power. They are hierarchical and political.
- Learn the full and in-depth history of the institution to where you plan to reside and know Your history.
- Do NOT assume because one looks like you that they are for you! (glad I heeded Dr. Eddie Glaude's skin folk/kinfolk advice)
- Make sure you have a village both inside and especially outside of the institution. This outside village can contain strong supportive family members/members we call family, social justice activists/organizers, mentors, attorneys, policymakers, journalists/writers, policymakers or those who work in the policy arena, mental health providers/therapists, etc. While inside and seeking to build a village, know that this takes a little more time as you watch actions, listen to what is being said and by whom, AND pay attention to

whether or not actions and speech are aligning. This goes for professors and your colleagues. RELATIONSHIP, Relationship, relationship.

- Know and expect some form of trauma.
- See what organizations may be on campus that may be of interest and/or truly support your identity.
- Pay attention to your gut or that small voice.
- If you are not receiving a curriculum that includes melanated authors, find and feel out the right time to ask if you will be receiving any or who may be some authors to read. Watch the response and tone of those that you asked.
- If you know that you may need more help, do NOT be afraid to ask a professor that you deem safe or seek help outside of your department.
- Make friends with the library, its workers, and the librarian. Find out if there is someone assigned to work in your particular college and with your program.
- Make time for self-care!
- Go to as many conferences as you can. Present and meet other like-minded individuals that you can write, present, and share with. Build your network and again your village as building relationships can serve to keep you from sinking into imposter syndrome.
- How to outsmart imposter syndrome: https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/files/hks-communications-program/files/pp_robbin_chapman_041119_impostor_syndrome.pdf
- If you find yourself disconnecting from your space of safety, you are utilizing a coping mechanism because you feel that your space, mind, body is being threatened. Know that this is trauma and seek help from a culturally competent therapist. Do not be afraid of speaking with someone.

Some tips/questions and thoughts from other graduate students:

- As much as possible, decide how much time you want to invest in activities outside of school requirements (i.e., serving on committees, running for student government, or other extracurricular activities).
- Be clear about how the university can serve you (i.e., alumni association or perks, partnerships, or programs that can advance your personal agenda).
- Who are you and what is your self-perception?
- What is your “Why” for being at this particular institution? For the work?
- In what ways has this/is this institution positively changing the trajectory for other students from minoritized groups?
- Are or how many African-American or Black professors are in your program? Have they been institutionalized?
- Make time to obtain an understanding of the culture and politics of the university, your department, and student government (i.e., ask as a potential student to attend a university board meeting, a department meeting, and a student government meeting if this is allowed and if they have a graduate student government organization for doctoral students)?

It is my hope, prayer, and my heart that both this letter along with this overall dissertation has encouraged you in some way, has or will boost your sense of self all the more, and has or will fortify your tenacity to go all the way knowing that YOU got this and YOU are NOT alone! As I prepare to close I think, wow-wouldn't it be great if this letter could be shared with every African American student and melanated students at orientation or especially when they have

you read imposter syndrome or stereotype threat? This letter could serve as a reminder that you are not and never have been a deficit! I leave you with the words of Marianne Williamson as a reminder of who you are. Make it personal and use it as a daily affirmation if necessary. SOAR My Peoples! Disrupt the Systems! Break the Chains! And remember, all of this happens to us via our 'skin folk' as well!

Forward Motion,

Your Sistah In the Struggle, In Solidarity,

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, "Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?" Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we're liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others. (Marianne Williamson, 1992)