GEORGIAN COURT UNIVERSITY

THE MERCY UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

GCU Convocation Address

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Welcome student government leaders, award recipients, and new students. Welcome faculty, administration, and trustees. And thank you for this honor to join you today as the recipient of the 2020 Virginia Graham Award Winner for Excellence in Teaching. I am humbled and grateful to my colleagues for choosing me for this award.

Today, as this is a celebration of scholarship, I would like to share a few excerpts from an article I wrote a few years ago. It is quite pertinent, and I hope that you will be inspired by its theme of social justice. On that note, I would like to dedicate this presentation to all of Georgian Court's students and faculty of color, as well as our staff and administrators of color.

Throughout history, our universities have existed to create and defend exclusive social locations. While present-day universities allow for the education of women of all colors (although not in every society), racialized and gendered hierarchies have been normalized for centuries; white equates to purity, color to unclean, male to strong, and female to weak. This binary thinking extends to the social and geographical landscapes with the city being equal to civilization, nature to wilderness, male to rational, and female to emotional. Always, there is a hierarchy involved in the binary; one is superior to the other. That which is "othered" is considered and normalized to be inferior. In the words of the feminist Luce Irigaray, "that which is labeled as "'she' is indefinitely other" (262). In discussing knowledge creation, the superior voice has historically been masculine, white, and upper class. We continue to live the ramifications of such stratifications across society as a consequence of binary thought patterns continuing to be cultivated in our universities where ideas, not dollars, are the valuable currency.

New ideas threaten established knowledge. They raise questions about central, social values because thoughts have the power to destabilize and overturn social hierarchies. New knowledges are considered dangerous as they challenge the white, heterosexual, male domination of the Western knowledge industry (Sibley, 116). It is feared by the establishment that knowledge will lose its sanctity and become tainted as the dominant groups in the academy lose their unilateral authority. The control of knowledge upholds the 19th-century concept of ideal citizenship, underscoring the existence of a moral dimension that must be upheld to maintain stability and homogeneity, which are two pillars of strength for a nation. Indeed, accepting what is considered knowledge and allowing it to be taught in schools and universities has created great debate in the last few decades in the United

States. Specifically, one can point to the reactionary stance certain states took in response to the inclusion of works written by authors of color into the curriculum. It is not surprising to note that the voting members of a school board are more apt to ban a book "of color" when they themselves are on the whiter end of the spectrum—both color-wise and culturally.

Bias toward particular material as well as toward a certain type of student is ubiquitous in our schools and universities, especially for certain programs or majors. Need we be reminded of past Harvard University's President Larry Summers' comment about women and mathematics? Despondently, we can conclude that since an Ivy League president feels so comfortable speaking such nonsense in a public forum, we can be certain that there are many others that hold the same appalling opinion. Prejudice against women and women of color permeates the university as they are subjected to gender, social class, and ethnic discrimination. In addition, these students suffer due to their professors' sexist and racist ideologies about their origins and also about who should be allowed to enter the space of the academy. Undoubtedly, reasons abound as to why assumptions like Summers' exist. For example, one reason being that by "restricting entry by employing ostensibly academic criteria is a way in which elites retain their power" (Sibley, 116). Moreover, space in the real world has boundaries as do academic disciplines. These boundaries exist because the powerful have "a distaste for mixing expressed in the virtues of pure spaces and pure knowledge" (Sibley, 116). Those with power view their social location as an exclusive club; therefore, as the gatekeepers of knowledge, historically they see themselves much in the same way they see race, gender, or social class—as an identity marker that distinguishes and isolates one group from another.

Purity of knowledge combined with the preconceived notion of social Darwinism ("the whiter, the better") permits those in power to assume a level of superiority and with "science" in their corner, to mistreat women of color since they deem women inept from the first day they enter the university. The text that I analyzed, *Telling to Live*, published in 2001, was one of the first cultural studies texts to underscore the lived experiences of Latina feminists who share their stories to highlight the abuse that was commonplace during their graduate school years. Each author mentions that she was subjected to co-optation, humiliation, and outright physical abuse. They suffered not only physically, but emotionally, psychologically, and intellectually, simply because they were considered "unworthy" for being Latinas. Celia Álvarez points out that graduate school proved to be a battle for selfhood: "I constantly had to fight off their stereotypical conceptions of my cultural and academic identity" (181). Comparably, for an anonymous Latina, "it became clear that the troublemakers were students of color and/or feminists and that we were sanctioned for speaking our minds" (219). Clearly, for being in the minority, and daring to enter graduate school, these Latinas were treated horribly. Aurora Levins Morales realized quickly that in graduate school, language served a unique function—it was a tool of exclusion and humiliation:

> A frequent response to those who resist exclusive language is that they are intellectually lazy. Like other forms of gate keeping, the whole point is that we, and not the gatekeepers, are responsible for getting ourselves in. We must stop what we are doing, forget what we came for, and devote our energies to techniques of breaking and entering. We are required to do this just to win the right to join the argument. If we are uninterested, we are assumed to be incompetent. (LFG 31)

The metaphor of a robber breaking and entering to steal something of value—that is, knowledge—which according to the gatekeepers, does not pertain to Latinas, comes to mind after reading the above citation. Levins Morales suggests that achieving academic success for Latinas corresponds to

the activities of a burglar. From the perspective of those in power, this representation, many times, is accurate.

A few examples that stress the common mistreatment of African American women that attempt to enter fields that are dominated by men are represented and analyzed by Dr. Glenn in "Stepping In and Stepping Out" from the text *Presumed Incompetent*. Dr. Glenn introduces a graduate student named Natasha who mentions, in regard to her studies, that she constantly feels disparaged because she is told that "black women are less intelligent, that we don't have any place, particularly in my field [political science]" (137). Moreover, another student, Denise, decided to change her career goals after several negative experiences, she explains: "All of my professors were men, white men . . . I often felt dismissed . . . and because of that I had to work harder to make myself be seen because I didn't want to be ignored" (137). And finally, Dr. Glenn discusses Angel, who changed her major from biology to psychology as a consequence of feeling invisible. Her experience screams prejudice. Angel expounds:

> I even had a professor—I walked into an organic chemistry class—he was just lookin' at me like you must be in the wrong place kind of thing. I was like, no, I'm not in the wrong place. Or I'd gone into a classroom, particularly my science classes, where I really had very weird experiences. And I knew that it was attributed to my race, in particular. It was, you know—professors have come in and have asked if I was there to change the light bulb on the projector, and I'm just like, why would you think that? I'm a student in the class. (137)

These examples emphasize how out of place it seems to the white, male professor that an African American woman would actually be in the room to study a "hard" science. I find this anecdote when the professor assumes that Angel has entered the classroom to change a light bulb particularly revealing of the extreme privilege held by the professor's social location. Furthermore, the fact that he seems oblivious to the possibility that she is a student further reiterates the

embedded prejudice that his life experiences—and hers—corroborate. The fact that all three students were so poorly treated that they each changed their career paths illustrates how rampant "geographies of exclusion" are across our universities and our society.

In being excluded from participation based on gender and race, one can draw a parallel between the historical role of knowledge that has been maintained in our universities, and the commonality of the not-so-successful attempts to broaden who is allowed into the university. The latter, ultimately, will determine our future knowledge creators. Indeed, racial, gender, and social class divisions must be dismantled for inclusivity to occur.

As resistance literature, *Presumed Incompetent* highlights the power dynamics within the academy, specifically the marginalization that academics of color encounter throughout their careers—from graduate school through tenure and promotion. The authors contest their "asymmetrical relationship to power" by exposing unjust treatment and as well as theorizing the socially constructed binaries—specifically, those within gender, class, and ethnicity—within existing prevalent ideologies (Pérez-Torres, 162). Brenda J. Allen writes that the individual authors featured in *Presumed Incompetent* write in order "to reveal the ubiquitous power of numerous dominant ideologies in US society, including white supremacy, patriarchy, heteronormativity, classism, ethnocentrism, and rationality" (18). In point of illustration, I would like to underscore how these ideologies affect one Latina academic through analyzing Dr. Lugo-Lugo's chapter "A Prostitute, A Servant, and a Customer-Service Representative: A Latina in Academia."

Professor Lugo-Lugo's essay revolves around an exchange she has with a white, male student in her ethnic studies course one day. In sum, he asks her to cancel class because he does not feel like being there, and since his father pays her salary, it is only fair that she does what he says. In this oral exchange of about one minute prior to class, the professor points out the power dynamics that reflect much broader social realities and injustices. Such an exchange would never happen if the professor was male and/or white; however, due to his social location, the student felt that he had the right to make this demand. The binary markers of male/female and white/Latina underscore the privilege that the superior markers purport to their owner. Another student, during the discussion that took place that day in class—Dr. Lugo-Lugo did change the topic to focus on white privilege —"challenged her classmates to 'just think of the kind of nerve that it takes' for any student not only to think that he owns his teacher but to feel free and secure enough to tell her in front of forty-nine classmates that he, in fact, does" (41). At least, there is one other student in the course that understands the inherent superiority of the white, male student as misplaced arrogance, self-importance, and condescension.

However, the exchange lends itself to a critique of our society, and our universities—especially some of the larger ones—as they exist today. Dr. Lugo-Lugo blames the media and popular culture for a unilateral representation of Latinas as sexy and nothing more. To illustrate this point, she refers to how a Google search for the term "Latina" will return pornographic sites in the top 10 results.

Furthermore, when one compares the two Academy Award-winning actresses Angelina Jolie and Penelope Cruz, although both are considered quite "sexy," only Ms. Jolie receives attention beyond

her physique. Ms. Cruz exists merely as an "exotic beauty" (48). Therefore, as a Latina professor, Dr. Lugo-Lugo understands that her students do not expect her to be intelligent, and as such, her course and the learning of the material are considered by some to be unnecessary (44).

The idea that an ethnic studies course is deemed unnecessary by many of her students (and, indeed, their parents), in addition to the fact that the professor is devalued based on her gender and ethnicity, demonstrates that our societal mores must be re-evaluated, along with our definition of knowledge, as well as whom we consider appropriate gatekeepers of said knowledge. A student displaying his masculinity and whiteness as markers of privilege speaks to his professor, Dr. Lugo-Lugo, as if he were the colonizer and she the colonized. Obviously, understanding the historical relationship underscored here by her student, the professor does understand why he is conditioned to speak to her in such a disparaging way. Society—that is—history, has demonstrated to him that his professor—for her ethnicity and gender—inhabits the "wrong" side of more than one binary category, placing him on the "right" side.

Furthermore, as Dr. Lugo-Lugo affirms, many students feel that since we have elected an African American president in 2008 and 2012, we are living in a post-racial society. Moreover, they also share the view that their courses at the university should conform to and reflect their fleeting desires, as if they were consuming food or shopping at the mall. The consumerist mindset underscores what students expect from their classes: entertainment. This performance aspect to teaching also concerns Dr. Lugo-Lugo as she compares what the students see as sharing the same building/space: Starbucks, right next to the classroom.

The fight for mental space brings about another issue for today's knowledge producers.

How do we encourage deep introspection and critical thinking about important subjects that impact all people on the planet when a student is focused on the next sale at Forever 21 or GameStop? In her essay, the author discusses such difficulties facing the corporatization of our universities. She writes "students begin to treat their professors and other university workers as clerks or cashiers at a department store, who are there to serve and satisfy their every need" (46).

As knowledge becomes envisioned as a commodity by new generations of students, the relationship between who holds the power in the classroom has shifted enormously. The professor, not necessarily viewed as the figure he once was, has lost his place on the pedestal within society. However, it must be stated, for male professors, it is much less likely that they will suffer such open abuse as women of color. When color becomes part of the equation, as well as gender, women academics must negotiate carefully, as they do not hold the exact position that their male counterparts do, and they certainly are not considered members of the dominant culture in society or in the university.

However, this last point—entering the dominant culture—has become the goal, not to acquiesce to the status quo, but rather to transform it to be more inclusive. In summation, Dr. Glenn's essay describes the issue at hand. The author asserts:

> I am a Latina telling my mostly white students that racism, discrimination, and inequality still exist and affect all our lives (theirs included), both in ways that can be measured and ones that cannot. I also tell them that they are implicated in those things; that they must do something about them,

> and their comforts come at the expense of others. And of course, they do not want to hear that. Especially not from me. (45)

Reaching the students, having them understand that their consumerism impacts others' lives, and potentially negatively, does allow for the beginning of a process that can be labeled subversive. Having succeeded thus far—gaining entry into graduate school, achieving a position and tenure—permits academics of color the opportunity to reach the future citizens of our nation and potentially shape their thoughts toward a more inclusive mindset.

Academics of color, like Glenn and Lugo-Lugo, are engaging in and critiquing the knowledge taught in our universities with benefits that are far reaching. With the breakdown of traditional disciplines and the creation of new ones, there is a knowledge revolution in the making. As forces for humanization and for change, not only are Lugo-Lugo, Glenn, the Latina Feminist Group, and other academics of color challenging the status quo, they are inscribing themselves into history. By allowing new knowledges to permeate our universities, that is, by supporting and celebrating men and women of color in graduate schools and on the tenure track, we can aid in their success toward ultimately redefining our universities and eventually, our nation. Consequently, all ethnic groups will gain a much larger role in contributing to the knowledge we teach, which in turn will serve every citizen who is a part of the 21st century in the U.S.

Teaching in today's universities becomes a subversive act for many academics of color, in that they consciously choose to reject the status quo by including counterhegemonic points of view, thereby redefining knowledge and inviting encounters between every member of society in the interest of changing not only our education system but also the ideologies that inform policy and the

curriculum. In letting go of the old, discipline-specific silos of knowledge, and allowing for constant updating in our classrooms and across our universities, there exists an opportunity to become an inclusive nation that privileges all sources of knowledge equally. "In the end, we have nothing to lose but the constraints of our history" (Soja, 75). I would add that we have a great deal to gain by being more inclusive of "knowledges of color" in our universities and our society.

As you continue on in your studies this semester, think of how you can embody social justice by calling out abuses in our society and asking difficult questions of yourself and those around you. It is only through learning—and sometimes unlearning—that we will gain a truly just society that embodies our values.

Thank you.