

Convocation Speech

ASPC President Rachel Jackson '15

September 2, 2014

Thank you, Dean Feldbulm, for that warm welcome. Good morning and welcome staff, faculty, deans, administration, trustees, and returning students. Welcome especially to the incoming class of 2018 and also to the outgoing seniors of 2015. I also want to thank the students and community of Pomona College who voted in the spring elections of the Associated Students of Pomona College, I am here in front of you today as an elected representative of student voices and am honored to be here.

I also want to thank the presidents of ASPC that have preceded me, especially Darrell Jones III and my very good friend and mentor Sarah Appelbaum. I have learned so much from them and am in this position in great part because of their courageous work. As a student who was certain in my first year that I would most likely transfer to my home institution in El Paso, I am here today because of the truly life changing support I received from my community on campus. Thank you community, you are my other me.

I specifically want to remember a theme evoked by Sarah in their convocation speech and the college itself. Sarah reminded the college community that “daring minds” are minds that work to bridge theory and praxis. This call to action reminded me of a phrase by the theorist, writer, scholar, philosopher, and liberator Jose Marti who reminds his reader that “conocer es resolver, pensar es servir.” In English, that phrase might translate “to know is to resolve, to think is to serve.” In this phrase, Marti dissolves the dichotomy between theory and practice, arguing that the thinking and knowing he is interested in is one that moves, one that is always already invested in a living, changing, community.

An Argentine philosopher, Arturo Jauretche, echos Marti half a century later, writing that “la responsibilidad de la Universidad es pensar en las necesidades del pueblo,” which translates to “the responsibility of the university is to think of the necessities of the pueblo.” Like Marti, Jauretche bridges the intellectual community of a college and its community, the students and the places the students come from, the elite and common ways of knowing.

What Jauretche and Marti remind us is that intellect, artistic creativity, and rule-bending innovation live within the gates of liberal arts colleges just as much as around the kitchen tables, street corners, and bus routes of the pueblo.

What I appreciate about these thinkers is their emphasis on a living learning that overflows, extends beyond, and disrupts traditional ideas of where, how, and in what types of languages learning can take place. They remind us that intellect is something truly *sin fronteras*.

Growing up on the El Paso-Ciudad Juarez Border, being a kid of a mixed-race family, and knowing intimately the struggle to find work, get visas, and maintain family ties over the barriers of borders, language, and income, my distaste for walls and gates is something that grew very early in my life. Communities from El Paso and Juarez know personally the violence that often accompanies walls, fences, and

boots that come in the name of security at the cost of autonomy. This summer, we have seen the consequences of walls, physical and otherwise, on communities on the Mexico-US border, the St. Louis-Ferguson border, and the Israel-Palestine border.

The work I hope to do today is to raise the question, in what ways do we as a community of scholars put up borders? In what ways do we confine academic achievement in the name of security for our intellectual tradition? What does a liberal arts degree really mean if graduates read Marx but never Manuela Saenz, Hobbes but never Tupac Amaru, Foucault but never Friere, Proust but never Morrison? What does a liberal arts degree really mean if it can potentially be walled off from indigenous studies, critical race theory, or gender theory; these legacies of scholarship that have historically pushed us to consider our places in power and systems of domination?

Writer, scholar, Chicana activist, queer theorist, feminist, and poet Gloria Anzaldua writes in her work “Borderlands: La Frontera” that “to survive the borderlands, you must live sin fronteras, be a crossroads.” I am so grateful and lucky to have in the audience today my mom, Martha Jackson, and my dad, Ron Jackson, both of whom were my first teachers and my greatest examples for surviving in the borderlands. They have taught me to respect perfectly enunciated English just as much as an English that weaves in between Spanish, Korean, or Arabic.

El Paso, my second greatest teacher, taught me that what some people consider “rough language” or “uncouth” is without a doubt beautiful and creative. My professors at the Universidad de Buenos Aires taught me that an English, or a Spanish, or a Portuguese that doesn’t understand its community is not a language that is sufficiently intellectual. I taught myself that I belong to English, and Spanish, and Spanglish, and West-Texas Drawl, and my half-gringa, half-Caribbean Spanish accent. I taught myself that I belong both to dangling modifiers and polished sentences. The professors who have most impacted me here at Pomona, most of whom teach critical race theory, Africana studies, gender theory, Latin American studies, and Latin@ studies, have taught me that all these languages, all these accents, and all these crossroads can and should live in the classroom.

Liberal arts is home to me because it feels like my first home, the borderland. This year, I hope that we as a community can relearn how to let praxis inform theory. I hope we can relearn, remember, and revalue the art and intellect that lives in the streets of the pueblo. I hope we can relearn how to ask academic English to make way and be changed by Spanglish and other forms of English. As we begin classes, I hope we will think about how we can recreate and reimagine a spirit of frontera flexibility and openness in classrooms, on syllabi, in offices, and through our relationship with all people in the Pomona College community. I am so so grateful for your attention this morning. Thank you.