

Remarks by Graduate Commencement Speaker Courtney Brown

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You know what I love about music? It suspends time. [It] Elongates snapshots of our lives in bass and treble. It resonates. And for a few minutes we nestle ourselves between note and lyric—reconnecting with the harmonies that punctuate our individual and collective compositions. Life. Then we move on with our days because we are conditioned to believe that time is impatient and won't wait while we're hooked on a feeling. Graduation day embodies this notion—in natural decrescendo—a sudden boom of commotion that fades to hush even before day transitions to night. So let's suspend ourselves in time and really bask in this moment.

Re-collect how you got here. Graduates, you WORKED for this; the years It took; the books you read; the papers you wrote; the sleepless nights; the deadline is approaching freak out; the deadline is HERE freak out; the ask for an extension freak out; now what is the professor going to think of me now that I have asked for an extension—freak out. [point to the audience] And YOU all had to listen to this craziness. [point to the audience again] YOU WORKED for this.

Graduates, if possible, lock eyes with your loved ones. If it isn't possible, rest your mind on the memories of those that made this moment possible and give them their flowers. It is never too late and it is never too early. Mom, Dad, Chris, and Alia: I am looking at you. Thank you. I couldn't be here and I wouldn't be here if it weren't for you. To quote my favorite movie, "You are the perfect verse over a tight beat"—my heart to you. And on behalf of my fellow graduates, my heart to all family, friends—past, present, and in spirit.

I give this speech today in memoriam. To my great grandfather: who recently passed on. Paw Paw would've been 96 today. I am honored to sing praises of his legacy at this podium—as a man with an 8th grade education who was wise beyond every degree—who always reminded me that either I was going to work with my hands or with my head. As a black man who grew up in Mississippi and as a veteran, I like to think that it is the legacy of his hands that has made way for me to work with my head.

I often reflect on his legacy in moments of social dissonance: thus, providing a dueling piano accompaniment to my education in the keys of black lives: Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Freddie Gray—lives dually lost in a narrative of breaking news have been resurrected in discussion as history lessons—American Studies at Cal State, Fullerton has given us a space and THE space to consider. These spaces of consideration looked like University Hall classrooms, the benches of Aloha Java, the quiet nooks and crannies of the library, post-seminar beers at BIGS, trivia

at Stadium Tavern—places where we dialogued: peers attempting to reconcile academic theory in verse with the vibrant rhythms of life—a signature of time always simultaneously in and out of tempo.

Graduates, we have had the privilege of spending the last several years learning, growing, becoming in spaces of consideration. THIS is the moment where privilege becomes responsibility. THIS is our signature in time. As you step onward and upward, take ownership of what you possess—what you have cultivated on this campus: we are the minds that consider silenced histories; we are the minds that re-verb the past into present, and we have a responsibility to retell the stories, histories—to read and resonate between the lines of tv screen, cinema screen, and popular consciousness. Remember that the next generation isn't listening and you have the mic: a voice that is rich, unique, and critical. Graduates, THIS moment is your signature in time. Don't. Drop. The Pen.

[Close with air “mic drop” hand motion and walk away]