

UCLA Ph.D. Hooding, June 15, 2023
Dr. Emma Pérez, University of Arizona

I'm honored and privileged to be here today to celebrate you, particularly because UCLA is my alma mater. I want to note that:

As a land grant institution, UCLA acknowledges the Gabrielino/Tongva peoples as the traditional land caretakers of Tovaangar (Los Angeles basin, So. Channel Islands). We pay our respects to the Ancestor, elders, relatives and relations past, present and emerging.

Let me begin by extending my gratitude to Dean Susan Ettner for the invitation, to Dr. Kristen McKinney for transportation to the event, to Paris McDonald for organizing logistics, and to all who elected to bring a brown, gender-non-binary, queer historian, fiction writer to speak to you today and offer what I hope are snippets of inspiration.

Returning to campus today to honor you and your accomplishments reminds me of years I attended classes. I remember I was strengthened in ways I hadn't been before. UCLA was my haven in the mid-1970s and into the 80s. I met some of the most talented people I'd ever know—whether professors or fellow students or staff who helped facilitate my journey through all three of my degrees and I have to say, the PhD was the most arduous of those. You know well that a PhD is not an easy task. The journey itself demands rigor, discipline, and a lot of positive affirmation and self-talk.

Although I graduated with my PhD thirty-five years ago, I don't believe the rigors have changed much. One of the questions that I'm asked consistently, and be prepared because you'll be asked, if you haven't already, and that is,— “Why did you select your field of study?” As an undergrad, I learned that there were only 3 Chicanas with PhD's in history in the world. At the time, I wasn't interested in studying history at all but when I read the only essay assigned in a women's history class about my community, I began to think differently. In the article titled, the “Mexican Peon Women of Texas,” published in the 1920s, the sociologist claimed that Mexican women were passive and followed men wherever they were commanded, mostly to labor in cotton fields and other agricultural work. Well, I come from a family of strong, courageous women who are my grandmother, mother, sisters, aunts, cousins. As a kid of 8 and 9 years old, I'd been in those cotton fields with the women of my family—all of whom did what they had to do and they did so with confidence. The little essay made me angry. It gave me no choice. I had to make a commitment to research the lives of women who had been neglected historically. I was fortunate to find a few other Chicana/Latina students who felt the same way and subsequently, we helped each other complete our dissertations in the 1980s to become the first of a handful of Chicana historians. We're pleased that now there are over 100 Chicanas/Chicana in the profession. I tell you this not because I'm unique and not

because I pulled myself up from bootstraps, a ludicrous, if not impossible, burden for anyone. What I know is that none of us would be here without our communities, without our families and without friends who become our family, without our partners, spouses, children—all of whom assisted us in some way. And this observation does not negate your accomplishments because your will, your willingness, and your convictions have brought you here. And I'm sure someone or many someones stood beside you. And I suspect you're grateful to your steadfast family and friends. I want to acknowledge those who are here today as well as those who are with you in spirit. All of you deserve recognition. I'm sure you're as proud as I am, and not in that patronizing way, but rather in that grateful way--that another generation has elected to become scholars committed to communities, committed to social change, committed to a new way of being in the world. And for that I commend you. For that, we respect and admire you.

We're living many adversities in the early 21st century. You've inherited too many challenges. When young people say to me, 'the world is going to end. Why bother with social change, why bother with protests or activism?' My response is, yes, the world is going to end. But not today. And not tomorrow. And here's the thing: the world has experienced trials and survived. Sixty million Indigenous people were massacred from 1500-1600. And yet, Indigenous folks of numerous nations thrive today. From the 15th to the 19th centuries, the transatlantic slave trade killed over sixty million black people. In the 19th century, Chinese immigrants suffered at the hands of racists who only wanted their labor and not their personhood. In the 1830s and 40s, the US invaded Mexico and Mexicans became second class citizens while borders between families were enforced. Lynchings of brown and black men and women were more common than we'd like to think. During WWII, Japanese Americans were imprisoned in detention camps. For over a century, Appalachia and the US South continue to have many of the poorest white and black people in the US. The unhoused in LA alone is a mockery when we consider that we live in one of the most advanced countries in the world. And there are many more inequities. These are the facts that the far-right refuses to acknowledge as facts and instead they've been removing history texts from classrooms and libraries. Fearful people are on a mission to censor our history, our literature, our many voices and perspectives. Why the rampant censorship? Because learning the complexities of our past means we develop understanding and compassion for each other. I'm fortunate that I'm at a juncture in my career when I can teach my favorite classes and in one of those I teach how to write memoir. Students share their personal stories and find their voices to impart often difficult moments they've survived. When they share their voices, they become vulnerable, they become compassionate. They become kind. They become progenitors of a future that holds hope, hope for a better, healthier world for everyone. They begin to believe in a future not driven by greed, not driven by fear, and not driven by hate for queers and trans folks or anyone who is different.

You who are here today are the forerunners of a future not only for you alone but for your children, (if you have them), for your nieces and nephews, for your friends' kids—the next generations that deserve our respect and attention. Indigenous prophets speak

to the seven generations that will carry on after us and that it's up to us to care for this earth and for all sentient beings. How do we do that? I believe we sustain a sense of hope, whether cautionary hope, or tricky hope, or enduring hope. We simply choose it. Abolition feminists have asked us to consider hope and to bear in mind that hope is a discipline. And you all know about discipline having come this far.

Today's ceremony represents the culmination of a long, arduous quest, a quest that demonstrates resilience and hope. I truly believe you are warriors prepared to fight for the generations to come. After today's rather long afternoon of anointments and appreciation, I'm ordering you to go get crazy! To have fun, responsible, safe fun, but fun, nonetheless. Go shout and sing and dance and feel passion and zest and be wild enough to recognize that life is a wondrous adventure and you're on your adventure, living out loud a life of integrity. Living a life that doesn't fear and ventures boldly into the future, because "the times they are a changin'—to quote one of my favorite Nobel prize recipients, Bob Dylan. This is your day. Go on your journey with promise in your back pocket and hope in your heart even on days when you just can't get out of bed because another virus has struck, or fires and hurricanes are whipping the environment, or the threat of WWIII lingers above us. Whatever the challenges, remember your ancestors and their spirit. Remember to choose the discipline of hope. And always, always, be kind, be generous to yourself and to others and most of all be your true, authentic self.

I want to end with a quote from my favorite Nobel prize writer, Toni Morrison. She said,

"There is no time for despair, no place for self-pity, no need for silence, no room for fear. We speak, we write, we do language. That is how civilizations heal. I know the world is bruised and bleeding, and though it is important not to ignore its pain, it is also critical to refuse to succumb to its malevolence. Like failure, chaos contains information that can lead to knowledge—even wisdom. Like art." (—Toni Morrison, "No Place for Self-Pity, No Room for Fear," *The Nation*, 23 Mar. 2015).

And so, I will end by saying to you, you are the piece of art that you have constructed during your time at UCLA and I hope you will continue to create with your beauty, your wit and your resilience.

Thank you.