

Rutgers-Newark 2019 Commencement Speech  
Dorothy Roberts  
Imagine New Suns

Thank you, Marcia. Thank you Chancellor Cantor. Graduates—you look amazing! I can't tell you how honored I am to address all of you on this special day.

Being here is especially meaningful to me because I started my academic career at Rutgers Law School-Newark in 1988, thirty-one years ago. It was known then as the People's Electric Law School. Where else would it have been okay for a brand new law professor to write her first scholarly article defending the dignity of black women who were charged with crimes for using drugs while pregnant? To be honest, even some of my senior colleagues at Rutgers warned me that black women's reproductive freedom wasn't an appropriate topic for my first research project.

But I persevered. To me, if I couldn't argue that the Constitution protected the rights of the most vulnerable people, then there was no use in being a constitutional law scholar. It turns out I made the right decision. My article, "Punishing Drug Addicts Who Have Babies: Women of Color, Equality, and the Right to Privacy," was published in 1991 in the *Harvard Law Review*. Do you know who the editor in chief was at the time? None other than the future President of the United States, Barack Obama. So you could say I owe that start of my career to Rutgers-Newark and President Obama.

That article led to my first book, which was published in 1997, in my last year at Rutgers—*Killing the Black Body*, about the long history of devaluation and regulation of Black women's childbearing. Twenty years later, in 2017, I had to reflect on what I wrote, because

Vintage Press asked me write a new preface for a 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition. That was a pretty depressing project. All the terrible policies I had written about had intensified over the last two decades. And with the all-out assault on reproductive autonomy we're witnessing now, it keeps getting worse. But I was also uplifted, because my book had helped to form the foundation of a movement led by women of color that provides a powerful new vision for reproductive justice.

The other day, a young woman told me she was trying to finish my book, but she kept throwing it across the room—the history she was reading about made her that angry. One of the most common questions I'm asked about my work is, How do you keep going? When you see so many problems and so little progress, don't you want to give up? My answer is always, No: it makes me want to work harder. Here's what I've learned over three decades of teaching, writing, and activism for social change: The key is you have to be willing to *imagine* a different world.

At times like these, it helps to turn to science fiction. The great science fiction author Octavia Butler put it like this: "There's nothing new under the sun, but there are new suns." There's nothing new under the sun: The ideologies and systems of oppression—racism, sexism, ableism, class inequality, homophobia, religious intolerance—are frustratingly resilient and embedded in every institution in America. But look up! There are new suns! We can imagine a different kind of society—a humane, equal, and just society, where human needs are met with compassion rather than punishment. Harriet Tubman envisioned a life of freedom where the chains of slavery were broken. Dr. Martin Luther King had a dream of a beloved community where all human beings were valued equally. And this is essential: They didn't just dream it; they lived their lives as if it were possible to achieve it – even in the face of greater obstacles

than we're facing today. In the words of another great visionary, Angela Davis, "You have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world. And you have to do it all the time."

Why is imagination so important? Without imagination, you might go nowhere. And even if you start, you might go wrong. And in the end, you might give up. Let me explain. First, without imagination you might go nowhere. I've found as I've spoken to countless audiences about dismantling oppressive structures, what blocks many people the most is lack of imagination. I'll give you an example I encounter a lot lately. I've been calling on doctors across the country to stop the routine practice of treating patients by race, based on false assumptions of innate biological differences. This practice is rooted in the belief that race is a natural division of human beings—a concept invented to justify enslaving Africans. Many medical students are beginning to resist race-based medicine but some doctors tell me they couldn't possibly stop practicing it. They refuse to even *imagine* treating patients without relying on biological assumptions about race. This lack of imagination is even built into medical technologies. There are many tests that correct for race, so they automatically produce different results depending on the race of the patient.

High-tech barriers to imagination extend beyond medicine. I've become more and more concerned about the way both corporations and government agents increasingly use predictive analytics to automatically make decisions that profoundly affect people's lives. Because the data and algorithms are typically based on prior events that were shaped by structural inequalities, their predictions of the future are actually reiterations of past injustices. When police, prosecutors, and judges predict who will commit *future* crimes based on *past* racial profiling, they guarantee the replication of institutional racism. Big data's built-in biases thereby

foreclose imagination of a future where these injustices no longer occur. We should be asking, How can we design artificial intelligence that helps us imagine a different future so we don't replicate the wrongs of the past?

Second, without imagination you might go wrong. You can't know what changes to work toward today if you can't imagine where you want them to take you tomorrow. Without imagination, what will guide our aims and strategies? If we don't have a vision of a radically different society, we'll be tempted to settle for inadequate reforms—reforms that might fool us into thinking we've made progress, when in reality we've left in place the very structures that keep producing unequal and inhumane results.

For example, the United States has the largest prison population and the highest incarceration rate of any nation on Earth. Many jails and prisons are woefully overcrowded and the inmates live in conditions unfit for any human being – rampant violence, disease, malnutrition, and solitary confinement. One response has been to build *more* prisons to ease overcrowding. But for prison abolitionists who imagine a society that doesn't rely on caging people to meet human needs and solve social problems, building *fewer*—not more—prisons is the only answer.

Finally, without imagination you might give up. There's so much injustice to criticize, dismantle, and abolish, that the task can seem overwhelming. But what if we envision the new world we're creating? That goal gives us direction for what next steps to take, motivation to keep moving toward it, and hope that eventually we—or the next generation—will achieve it.

There's nothing new under the sun. But there are new suns. Are you willing to imagine a radically different world? Not pie in the sky, but a concrete path toward building a society that

is humane, equitable, and just. Here's the secret: You must imagine that world and then act as if it were possible to create it. And you can't do it alone. You have to work with others who share the same vision and commitment as you. Looking out at this group of graduates from this great university dedicated to social change, *you* inspire me to act as if the world I imagine can actually become a reality. Congratulations, Rutgers-Newark class of 2019!