Hello, and thank you for inviting me to this beautiful gathering of community and family. I am truly honored to be here and want to thank my dear friend, fierce femme warrior, and colleague Dr. Adriana. I appreciate that I am in a new space and this space feels sacred. So, first let me honor all of those who have gathered here to be in community and honor our ancestors whose land is under us and whose blood is in our veins.

My name is Dr. Van Bailey and I’m a transfeminist brown boi, Caribbean born and nomadically raised. I grew up in a semi-stable two parent household and at the age of 14 I was kicked out of my home because of my gender and sexual identity. Homeless for two years, I discovered queerness. I discovered that most revolutions were started by people who didn’t fit quite nicely into boxes or binaries.

This year, marks the 45th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots and for you that don’t know next month, if you go to a Pride celebration, the celebration of Pride is about survival. It is about honoring those who came before us, who dared to say, “I want to be on freedom’s side.”

You see, queerness isn’t just about identities we put on ourselves, it’s about a deeper connection to the pulse of revolutions. I’m talking Stonewall, I’m talking
Act Up, and I’m talking about UndocuQueers. I’m talking about raised fists and limp wrists.

When I was a homeless youth, I never in a million years thought that I would have the privilege and opportunity to speak at events, like this one, or graduate with a doctorate, or work at Harvard. In fact, discovering my queerness allowed me to be open to loving me. Just the way I am. So, why the tangent? Why tell you a little about myself?

Because, now that I have the privilege to have access to spaces, like these, I want to leverage that privilege by illuminating the voices in the intersections. The voices that don’t always get heard because fighting for survival often means silence.

So, I’m asking you all to join me in breaking some of that silence. No social movement was ever done quietly. When I think about Stonewall, I think chants from the street. Chants from immigrants, chants from people of color, and trans folks, and gay, bi, and lesbian folks daring to be bold and hold their lovers hand...not in the dark but for everyone to see. These acts, are acts of love. These acts, break the silence

Black queer feminist scholar, Audre Lorde states, “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.” I love
that quote. Now, I see some of you are staring at me perplexed. So, in the spirit of Stonewall, let’s get a little call and response. When I say, are you with me? You say, I’m there. So, are you with me? (pause), Are you with me? 7Cs, are you with me?

You know, many people ask me about what inspires me. What keeps me going? What motivates me?

Empathy, love, community, connections. These words move me. Why? Because at the center of community is my self-preservation. All that I do for community, I do for me first. Self-love is a radical act. Are you with me?

To all the graduates, I’m proud of you. I’m proud of your survival. I’m proud that you will leave the Claremont Colleges with more knowledge about the world around you and hopefully yourself. I hope that when you leave here, that the passion and fire that kept you going won’t be lost. That you will realize the immense power of your voices. Are you with me?

You all have the opportunity to change the world. At the end of the day, privilege is about power. And yes, having an education from these amazing Colleges is a privilege. And many of you will go off to be our next National leaders. Many of you will lead initiatives that will shape and shift the conversations we have in our
communities. And while, I’m so excited to see all of this magnificent work happen, I hope you don’t forget to love yourselves. I hope you don’t forget about your character. You know, we often quote folks like Audre Lorde, Harvey Milk, Sylvia Rivera...but what do we truly know about these people? Were they kind? Did they love themselves fiercely? Did they take the time to tell others...I see you and I love you? We may never know…

And I ask, why aren’t these conversations a part of the revolution? Are you with me?

So, I challenge you to always start with love. To always start with loving yourself.

Have you ever wrote yourself a love letter? Or a letter to the aspects about yourself that perpetuate systemic barriers? I have. In fact, I love writing myself love letters, buying myself flowers—lilies and lilacs--- treating myself to a movie every once in a while. Because I can’t expect others to do for me, what I won’t do for myself. Are you with me?

What makes you smile? What makes you uncomfortable? When exploring my own masculinity, I had to first admit to myself that masculinity can hurt the one’s I love, but when explored and checked, healthy masculinity can put the most vulnerable at the center of the work, including women of color, girls, transwomen,
in fact…all women. You can’t be afraid of that what brings you power. Write a letter to it. I wrote a letter to my masculinity and for the first time, I held myself accountable and agreed that my first act would always be self-love and my second would be holding myself accountable for my privileges. I can’t expect others to love me and care for me, if I won’t do it myself. Are you with me?

That selfie type love. The type of love that says, look at me, I’m worth it. I’m worth the recognition. I’m worth it because I’m here. My existence is resistance. When I move I make statements. I create memories when I speak. You are an imprint. You make memories with smiles. You want inspiration? Smile. Now that is a radical act. Smiling. Smile because you are worth it. No one ever talks about activists smiling. We never talk about smiling in higher education? Smile because you are transformative. Are you with me?

There are times that just being...or surviving is hard. It feels like you can’t smile. Perhaps, it’s due to tension in the community, or body dysmorphic or just not having enough hours in the day to get things done. Sometimes, we hear that voice in the back of our heads that says, “life sucks!”

Yea, who’s been there? Life sucks. Why me? This can’t be happening. I know I’ve been there. When we perform the act of self-hate; we build up walls around
ourselves. It’s so funny that as a community we are often talking about tearing down the walls of racism, sexism, transphobia, homophobia, ableism…but we build up walls of…I’m not worth it. I’m too tired to love myself. Well, love is a struggle ya’ll. It keeps us feeling. It keeps us as revolutionary beings. Self-love is revolutionary. So, smile. Dismantle walls of oppression through self-healing. Smile, ya’ll. Smile because you can. Smile because there’s only one you. Smile because you are here. We are powerful because we have survived. Audre Lorde knew what she was talking about…Are you with me?

Sometimes, we say…I just gotta make it. Making it is revolutionary. Exist. Struggle. But smile through the struggle. When we can’t love ourselves, there’s no movement. We are stagnant. We wonder why we can’t see change, because we are unwilling to transform ourselves. We are unwilling to love ourselves so fiercely that we can become a force. Fear? Guilt? We’ve all been there. Feel it. Know it. Know these emotions are self-serving…check it. Hold yourself accountable because you are worth it. Are you with me?

Put yourself at the center. The personal is always the political. The Political is always personal. In fact, the revolution is personal. When we feel, that act is revolutionary. When we connect as empaths, we begin to feel the pulse of community. And I don’t want to paint this picture that community is always the
place of healing…it’s a place of revolutionary chaos. Full of information…because community is always is in formation. We are constantly learning, growing, hurting, healing, loving…and we feel it. Don’t deny your feelings. It’s your database. Feelings are facts. They are your facts. So, if you feel rage…feel it. Know it. Learn to love it. Because it’s coming from you. It’s genuine. It’s necessary. You are necessary. You are the revolution. Self-love ain’t easy. But it’s worth the struggle. Are you with me?

We talk about the work like it’s not a part of us. We have to handle the work. We have to change the institution. What about your institution? What about knowing the makings of you? The work is you. You are the work. Healing is the work. Love is the work. Empathy is the work. We are so consumed with meetings and teaching them but what about learning you? I urge you to learn you.

Love is struggle. It ain’t easy. We deny ourselves of it all the time. We sweat for community. We sweat for our ancestors but won’t take the time to look ourselves in the mirror and say, I love you. Are you with me?

Forgive. Uplift. Be gentle. Be Kind. Feel it. Feel it all. Because when you’re feeling, you’re knowing. Our body’s knowledge production is in our emotions. When you’re feeling, you’re learning. When you’re learning, you’re growing. And
growing is transformation. Transformative revolutionary acts of self-love…I said, self…love. Put yourself at the center. Are you with me?

Who are you? Who is your authentic self? The soul dwelling inside our temples. Our bodies, constantly moving, feeling, interpreting. I’m talking about love.

If you are searching for it, it’s not in others. Although, I know we are in a room where we are surrounded by family…blood, chosen. But, the love I’m talking about is unconditional. It doesn’t need reciprocity. Or a certain amount of time, or re-tweets, or likes, or followers….all it needs is you. Beautiful, you. So, get a little familiar. Stare a little bit harder. Smile a little bit wider. Because you are beautiful. You are life. Your presence inspires me. You make the work, worth it. Because after realizing my self-worth, I’m left raw, vulnerable, open, and loving…

I’m loving all of you. Your presence keeps me going. We all have a heart, and we pour love into our hearts but we all have a pulse as well. And for me, the community…all of you, are my pulse.

I want to thank everyone here, the moms, the dads, the queens, the kings, the grandmoms/dads, the guardians, the chosen family. I celebrate you. Because today
is all about the graduates. Congratulations! Your journeys inspire me. Your stories inspire me.

You see, college can be one of the most awkward uncomfortable experiences of your lives. We grow here. We laugh here. We cry here. We lose a lot of sleep or sometimes sleep too much. We live life and life can drain us, sometimes to the point of depletion. But you know what, you are here. So, I celebrate you. You have all learned to say yes to the discomfort. Growing up, learning, feeling the pain of life lessons…it’s all about saying yes to the unknown. And saying yes to the unknown is uncomfortable. We all come from rich histories of perseverance. And I hope that experiencing your own sense of perseverance gives you hope. That’s called resilience! Are you with me?

You all can change the world by acknowledging your potential. As I’ve said before you are necessary. And as this chapter in your life is about to close, don’t run to the finish line. Take a stroll. Bask in memories, even the one’s that aren’t so pleasant. And smile at your resilience. Are you with me?

Consider yourselves fabulous. Consider yourselves unique. Some of you may think, this is a scary time. I don’t know what’s next for me. And perhaps fear may keep you stagnant. But what are your strengths? Act from the source of strength,
even if it leaves you vulnerable. Audre Lorde states, “When I use my strength in the service of my vision it makes no difference whether or not I am afraid.” What do you envision? Again I ask, what are your strengths? One of the biggest strengths we all have in common is love. Love ya’ll. It’s a radical act. Because society doesn’t want us to all love each other. That’s the heart of the revolution. Loving ourselves so much that we expect better. We want better. We need better. But, we gotta be better ourselves. Love makes us better. Loving ourselves fiercely gives us strength. Love moves beyond fear and highlights our worth. We are all worth it.

Queerness is about creation and authenticity. Create the structures that will celebrate you. Create the structures that will circulate your culture. Because you are worth it. Recreate the beat of life and know life is worth living because you make it so.

When I look around I realize we are not all the same. We are diverse and dynamic. And we should know that trying to only recognize that in which we are the same will destroy our sense of community. We are all different. We take different paths. But that in which we are the same is why we are all sitting here now.
We love ourselves so much that we are sitting here to say, this is our moment. The moment is love. The moment in this movement is a celebration. We all have feelings about being here right now. I encourage you to always listen to those feelings. Your feelings are primary source material. Those are facts. They are your facts. They are sacred. So no, you can’t find them on google, safari, firefox, or bing… you can’t ask Siri and you can’t reblogg it. But know, as Audre Lorde states, “our feelings are our most genuine paths to knowledge.” Are you with me?

You are your greatest work. You are the work. So, as we move forward and we all ask ourselves what’s next? Put yourself on top of that to-do list. Self-love is the first act. Dance and celebrate you. Use this time to know, you are worth it all. You are complicated melodies tuned for success. Are you with me?

I want to thank you for inviting me once again. I am thankful to be in community here at the Claremont Colleges. Congratulations again. And remember, the revolution starts with love.