Today, on the last day of graduate school, I find myself thinking back to the first day. In my very first course of the Educational Studies program, Professor Sabina Vaught included a quote from Dr. Cornel West on the front of her syllabus. As I sat, with my new classmates around a table, already fearing I did not have the chops to make it to graduation, we read Dr. West's words. “I’m a blues man,” he wrote. “A blues man is a prisoner of hope, and hope is a qualitatively different category than optimism. Optimism is a secular construct, a calculation of probability...Hope wrestles with despair, but it doesn’t generate optimism. It just generates this energy to be courageous, to bear witness, to see what the end is going to be. No guarantee, unfinished, open-ended.”

Graduation is a celebration, in part, of hope, as we share our visions for the future along with our reflections on the past years of scholarship. But even on this hopeful day, there is still much despair with which to wrestle. In Educational Studies, we examine the relationship between education and society. To interrogate the production and reproduction of power and excavate the deep roots of structural inequality in United States school system, we have been taught to ask questions that do not have easy answers.

The conferral of our diplomas will not answer our questions or produce solutions to educational inequality. But, we will walk out of this tent today as graduates. I put forward a call to all of us, to, in the words of Dr. West, “be courageous,” and “bear witness” to an unknown future in a world that is filled with both pain and possibility.

I would like to acknowledge the scholarship my cohort has pursued. Talia Puterman produced her master’s paper on the implications of recent Supreme Court affirmative action opinions. Kristen Snyder wrote her paper on accessibility services in higher education. And I completed my master’s thesis on the pedagogical possibilities and potential of archives as sites of knowledge production and exchange.

On behalf of Talia and Kristen, I would like to extend our gratitude to those who are here to celebrate with us today. We are grateful to all of the faculty and staff who have taught and supported us. We learned alongside many students from other cohorts and departments, and are especially appreciative of the generosity of our writing group this past year, as well as our individual writing consultants. We would like to extend our thanks to Dr. Shameka Powell and Dr. Nino Testa for their integral roles for our final papers and thesis. Finally, to our advisor and teacher, Professor Sabina Vaught. Thank you for providing us the space to learn, to develop and follow lines of inquiry, to engage tensions and questions without answers. You continually held us to high standards, while providing the support to exceed our own expectations. Thanks to you, we leave this program as scholars and educators,
ready to take on the challenges, and, in the words of Dr. West, “see what the end is going to be.”

So, how do we remain hopeful as we bear witness to inequality? Dr. Maisha T. Winn argues that “The ethical core of teaching is about creating hope in students.” Winn goes on to write, “Because the future is unknown, optimism is simply dreaming, pessimism merely a dreary turn of mind. Hopefulness, on the other hand, is a political and moral choice based on the fact that history is still in-the-making, each of us necessarily a work-in-progress, and the future entirely unknown and unknowable.” Because of the scholarship of my teachers and peers, I enter into the next stage of my professional life making the “political and moral choice” to be hopeful and to create environments to foster that hope in others.