

Good afternoon friends, colleagues, professors,

My name is Idalia Robles De León. I have been an employee in this institution and an AFSCME 3800 Union member since April of 2007; I am also an undergraduate student in the Department of Chicano and Latino Studies.

I am really thankful to be here today. I am thankful to the ancestors who have defended the land we stand on right now, this Dakota land, this Indigenous land. I thank the land that this University was built on, as it is one that holds memories of genocide, of struggle, and of survival. This land, which has witnessed the multiple waves of resistance that have come before us, the moments in history where people have been pushed to the limits, driving them to action, this land, that remembers the takeover of that building on more than one occasion.

I started organizing with my colleagues in Whose Diversity? in the Fall semester of 2013, but I also participated in the work of the Whose University? Campaign in 2010-11, when my dear friends Hana Worku and Sofi Shank spearheaded an effort to question the administration's push to become a Top Three research institution. These were the questions and these were the efforts that welcomed President Kaler as he began his term as president on this campus.

Today, however, I would like to speak as a working-class woman of color who has navigated this institution as staff every day since April 2, 2007, and as a student since the Fall semester of 2010. Today, I speak as the survivor of countless incidents of violence on this campus. I speak as someone who has witnessed the insidiousness of racism, transphobia, classism, recognizing tokenism at the blink of an eye. I speak as someone who has held many students who have confided to me in tears, just how difficult it is to try and survive their programs. I speak as someone who has listened to the faculty and graduate instructors who navigate this place in their institutionally marginalized bodies, I speak as someone who has sat in the classrooms in rage while witnessing the disrespect demonstrated by students who cannot fathom the idea that people of color are intellectuals too.

I speak as an employee who has requested the assistance of Human Resources during a time that I was dealing with a racist, classist, and abusive supervisor in my office, only to be told there was nothing Human Resources could do for me. I stand here today as someone who has sat through meetings where old racist tropes resurface in code when people of color are at the center of the conversation. I have heard people talk about the "angry" African Americans, the "incompetent" Chicanas/os, discussing the way their writings could be polished, and how they should be going to the Writing Center for help, while these students and professors are working twice as hard as their white peers because Butler will always be privileged in the classroom over the Gloria Anzaldúas and the bell hooks of the world.

I stand here today as someone who is stared at on a daily basis as I ride the elevator to work, a gaze that is all too familiar to many of us, one that, in the words of Chester Pierce, “is designed to reduce, dilute, atomize, and encase the hapless into his or her ‘place.’ The incessant lesson being that he or she is insignificant and irrelevant.”

Today, I speak as someone who has had to bear witness to the macro and microaggressions that people who are systemically pushed to the margins are forced to endure. Today, I speak with and for those who haven’t made it, professors, students, and staff alike. Today, I remember Dan Markinson. Today, I stand by our collective commitment to make change happen.

I stand here today, as do my colleagues, with hovering threats made by the administration because we dared ask uncomfortable questions. With this in mind, I want to honor the courageous students who took over Morrill Hall in 1969, who were surrounded by an angry mob of students who yelled racial slurs at them, and whose courageous actions led to the imminent threat of serving prison time. Most importantly, I stand in gratitude and inspired by their efforts, which led to the institution of the African American and African Studies Department, and to the institution of the Chicano and Latino Studies Department, the Department I will be graduating from this semester.

I want to honor the activists who took over Morrill Hall in 2005, and who were arrested, and/or pepper sprayed as they participated in a peaceful protest to defending the permanence of the General College; I want to honor my Whose Diversity? colleagues who are facing sanctions that range from “a warning to expulsion,” and thank the students and professors who have also demanded to receive similar sanctions in support.

These threats have no chance against our visions and dreams of reaching equity and social justice. These are the master’s tools, but we are confident that our love for our communities, and our insistence on enacting change will lead to powerful results. The initial responses of our administration are disappointing, to say the least, though not unexpected. We will continue to organize and will not be discouraged by their lack of response. This is just the beginning, and if anything, our list of demands has the potential to grow.

I have two messages today.

My first message is to the administration of the University of Minnesota: Let it be known that this is just the beginning; our movement will continue to grow, and we will continue to organize until change happens. We will not let these efforts die off in closed-door meetings and circus-like public forums, spaces where we are pitted against our privileged peers, a tactic that is masked as a democratic process. It is predicted that the University will rely on those at the center, and/or those living in fear to silence us – we will not let that happen anymore. Racial slurs or not, we will make change happen.

My second message is for you, my colleagues and friends: Do not underestimate the power you have to make change. Community efforts have led to many changes. Imagine what we can do if we collaborate as students, faculty, alum, staff, and in conversation with each other and with our respective communities. Know that no contribution is too small.

Last, but not least, I would like to leave you with the question that has guided much of our efforts:

In an ideal world, what could this University be like?