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**CHARLOTTE: THE FUTURE GLOBAL CITY:
BLACK DIMENSIONS**

by

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Revised Text of the Lecture Presented on the Occasion of the
First Dr. Bertha Maxwell-Roddey Distinguished Africana Lecture

UNC Charlotte

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Thank you for that warm and generous introduction. It is indeed a special honor for me to be with you today. It is a signal honor to be asked to give this first Bertha Maxwell-Roddey Distinguished Lecture. The title itself is a bit daunting but the honor of being here helps to calm the trepidation engendered by the importance of the occasion. Our topic, Charlotte: The Future Global City: Black Dimensions, brings to mind a few thoughts about our history and experience in Charlotte, the connection and role of the African Diaspora and the importance of moving racial, ethnic and cultural diversity to the top of our community agenda. I will come to that presently, but I want to first give my thanks, adoration and appreciation to my mentor, hero, and, most importantly, my friend, Dr. Bertha Maxwell-Roddey. It was her vision, her determination and her leadership that gave birth to the Black Studies Program at UNCC forty years ago. Little did she, or we, know then that we would gather here forty years later to celebrate not just the birth of that program, but the success and growth of that program into the Africana Studies Department. I remember the excitement at that time that rippled not only through the University, but through the entire community of Charlotte, that finally the myth of Black inferiority, perpetuated for centuries through our public-segregated educational systems and other public institutions, would finally be done away with.

We have now seen the realization of Dr. Maxwell-Roddey's vision that one day the color line would be broken to the point where an African American has become President of the United States and the leader of the free world. Even so, we must still explore the meaning of the journey that brought us here and we must shape the path that we must follow from here. For indeed, notwithstanding the election of an African American as president of the United States and even in the face of the great success that this Africana Studies Department has had at this University and in our community, we have not yet reached that post-racial society dreamed of not only by Bertha Maxwell-Roddey, but dreamed of by Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey Gabriel Prosser, John Brown, Harriett Tubman, Frank Lloyd Garrison, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks and countless others who gave so much of their lives to building the dream that we steadily move towards with every mile-stone, including the election of a President whose very presence represents the continuation of that dream, though not yet the reality of it.

Forty years ago, the Black Studies Program, launched under the vision of Dr. Maxwell-Roddey, was just a dim flicker of light to be seen only by those who knew where to look and what to look for. Today, the Africana Studies Department is a bright and shining light in our community that can help illuminate our path to become a global city. It is altogether appropriate for us to take this celebration as a

time to stop, reflect, take a brief look back to see how far we have come and then to look forward with a new vision to see how we build for the future a global city that will be built upon the principle of inclusion, in contrast to the long history of exclusion that has characterized our journey thus far. What then has been that journey and where does the path to a global city lead us from here?

We need not do a detailed analysis of our history to know that much of that history has been the story of exclusion; those who were left out. From the beginning, we started with a Constitution that left out almost everyone except white, male land owners. Not only were African Americans left out; women were left out; Native Americans were left out; Africans were left out; Asians were left out; Latinos and Hispanics were not only left out, but not even thought about; children were left out; the disabled were left out; the aged and the infirm were left out; gays and lesbians were left out; the poor were left out. It has been only through suffering, sacrifice and struggle that these left out groups have been let in, and, even then, only with great resistance and reluctance. But, still, they rise.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the great thinker, writer, and activist, W.E.B. Dubois, made the prophetic observation that the central issue in American life in the twentieth century would be the color-line. So prophetic was he that those words ring true today, nine years into the twenty-first century.

Dubois spoke to a racially divided America along the lines of black and white, still

plagued by the ugly and shameful legacy of slavery and white superiority. That was then and this is now, but that line still persists, although the color of the color-line has seen tremendous change. That line is no longer just black and white; it is brown, red and yellow. That line is also not always straight. It bends sometimes like turns in the road, and, although the line remains predominantly white and black, at various turns it may be a dividing line between white and brown, or black and brown, or white and yellow, or red and white, or even black and black. And, often, superimposed upon that color-line is the line between the rich and the poor. Our vision of the future global city must recognize, reconcile and remove all of these lines insofar as they are lines limiting opportunity and equality, not just for African Americans, but for other groups as well.

It was only 42 years ago when I arrived in the small, southern, segregated town of Charlotte, North Carolina. Charlotte was in the midst of the upheaval of a way of life that was being turned upside down, inside out and every other way but loose. Notwithstanding the ever-present genteel veneer that hangs ubiquitously over our town, there was strong resistance to changing a way of life that had conferred power and privilege to a few based on skin color and limited the opportunity, participation and advancement of many, likewise based upon skin color. But as the irresistible tide of change engulfed the city, it became clear to those in power that Sam Cooke's song, "A Change is Gonna Come" was more than

just a melody; it was the irrepressible cry of freedom heard across the ages. It was the melodic and inevitable refrain to the plea of Frederick Douglass in 1854 when he spoke at an all-white Fourth of July celebration in Rochester, New York, “Above your shouts of jubilee, I hear the mournful wails of millions.”

And so it was in Charlotte and throughout the south that the walls of racial segregation, like the walls of Jericho, cracked and eventually crumbled. Many here today will still remember, while others today will never even know, the strong resistance to the movement for racial equality right here in Charlotte. Dorothy Counts was spat upon, ridiculed and jeered by white adults as she tried to do something as simple as go to school. Bombings took place not just in Alabama and Mississippi but right here in Charlotte. The homes of civil rights leaders Dr. Reginald Hawkins, Kelly Alexander and my own law partner, Julius Chambers, as they fought for something as simple as seeking an equal education for Black children. Their own children could have been killed just like those four little Black girls in that Birmingham church. Charles Jones and his fellow students at Johnson C. Smith University laid their lives on the line on a daily basis just to have the right to eat at a lunch counter. We take these things for granted today, but we must never forget the tremendous sacrifices that these and countless others made just to be able to participate in the simple everyday life of Charlotte.

Many had hoped that the crumbling of the walls of segregation would usher in a new era of quick change which would provide for those who had been excluded meaningful inclusion. It was not long before reality set in and made clear that though change was coming, real and meaningful change would not be quick and would not be easy. It would still be a long time coming. The quest for civil rights, equality and justice continues, although the official barriers have been largely outlawed. It goes without saying that much progress has been made in opening new avenues of opportunity for African Americans. It is equally true that for many who have been historically excluded, the dream remains, at best, elusive, as the effects of the legacy of slavery and white supremacy continue to pose persistent barriers. One only need look at the persistent racial disparities in our education system. Although the court declared ten years ago that we have a unitary system no longer in need of court supervision, we see a disturbing and growing pattern of racially identifiable schools still separate and unequal in the education being delivered to our children. The racial identifiability of schools in Charlotte-Mecklenburg goes hand-in-hand with inevitable disparities in the quality of education. It is no mere accident that the overwhelming majority of schools that are considered failing or at risk for failing are overwhelmingly black, Hispanic and poor in contrast to those that are affluent and are heavily white. A cursory look at our criminal justice system reveals a similar and related pattern. There is an

undeniable pipeline from school to the criminal justice system for those children who are the unfortunate dropouts, disciplinary problems and low achievers. It is not a mere coincidence that our prisons and jails are filled with African American youth and, increasingly, Latino youth who are often poor and uneducated or unemployed. This disturbing pattern is more often met with a call for more prisons and jails than for more schools.

In every index of the quality of life, we see racial, ethnic and economic disparities that tell us that we have not yet overcome. In every significant measure of the quality of life, we find that African Americans and Latino Americans are still at the bottom in healthcare, in schools, in employment, in the criminal justice system, in income and wealth distribution and virtually all economic measures, in political power and representation. Notwithstanding the election of an African American President, African Americans and increasingly Latino Americans, lag behind. These disparities on the human landscape serve to tell us that we are not there yet. They also remind us that we as African Americans are closely linked with our Latino brothers and sisters in more ways than one. We are brothers and sisters in the African Diaspora. In fact, the African influence in South America and the Caribbean is even stronger than here in the United States. More Africans were transported to South America and the Caribbean in the Atlantic Slave Trade than to the United States. We must see them as our brothers and sisters in the

Diaspora and not as foreign immigrants coming to take our jobs and strain our taxes. We must not view them as enemies who threaten our position in the social and political structure. We must resist the temptation to use against them the same fallacious arguments that poor whites used against African Americans to fight against racial desegregation.

Many developments and events tell us that we stand on the threshold of a new day and that there are still new worlds to conquer in the quest for equality and opportunity. But, this new opportunity has not come labeled, “new opportunity.” Quite the contrary, it often comes wrapped in the clothing of challenge, and fear and adversity.

The fact that the lines of division are no longer just between African Americans and whites, but between whites and Latinos or African Americans and Latinos or African Americans and Africans may well mean something much more than greater division. It may mean that there is now an opportunity to bring even more people together with the benefit of much greater diversity and enrichment. In fact, one of the new worlds we must conquer is the world of diversity. It is important to continue the never-ending quest for civil rights, but it is not sufficient to simply enact and enforce laws that outlaw discrimination. The new challenge is not only to reconcile differences in a global city, but to bring people together in a way that produces more than mere tolerance of those who may be different from

ourselves. We must learn to bring people together in a way that we allow ourselves and teach others to not only tolerate those who appear to be different, but to recognize the great value of their contribution; to welcome and embrace them; to enjoy and appreciate what they bring with their rich history, their culture, their traditions, their values. In short, we must learn to grow in the understanding and appreciation that comes from association with fresh and new ideas, new traditions, new cultures, new history, new art, new perspectives with which to view the world. In practical terms, Charlotte, as a global city, will have to be deliberate and intentional in creating, promoting and sustaining diversity in every walk of life.

I read in the paper just the other day that there is a group in Charlotte that is talking now about what the Center City of Charlotte should like in the year 2020. That group has already developed and is promoting a master plan. They are deciding what neighborhoods ought to look like; what commerce ought to feel like; where parks and entertainment centers ought to be placed; what residential development and business development ought to be done. On the other hand, I have not heard nor read about a group of leaders in our city who are devoting time, resources, energy and commitment to developing a master plan on how we promote diversity, how we embrace cultures, and people heretofore unfamiliar to us.

Just the other day I was speaking with a friend of mine, a gentlemen by the name of Mike Whitehead, who is the principal in Whitehead Associates. Mike was leading the training of a group of about 45 students who are going to experience the Underground Railroad through a funded project. As I looked upon this group of seventh through eleventh graders, I commented to Mike on just how diverse this group was. It was richly mixed between African American, White, Hispanic, East Indian and others. I said Mike, “it is really uplifting to look out upon this diverse group of young leaders coming together with excitement and exploring a new path.” Mike, in his off-hand way said, “Yes, they are diverse, aren’t they? “It was the result of intentionality. It doesn’t just happen.” I reflected upon virtually every diverse gathering I have witnessed in Charlotte and they all resulted from intentionality. It didn’t just happen. Given the structure of our society today, that is no surprise. As we build towards becoming a truly global city, we must be intentional when it comes to diversity, just as we are intentional in promoting global markets, commerce and trade. We identify cities and economies with which we wish to interact for profit and trade . Just think about the possibilities for creative, innovative, energetic and uplifting diversity if there were a collaboration between the University, the City and County, business and civic leadership to promote racial and cultural diversity as a value for the global city of Charlotte. And what if, as a part of that, there was a general recognition that the history and

culture of certain people have been ignored, distorted or suppressed not only in our school curricula, but in our community institutions as well. What if the private sector recognized that our historical Eurocentric approach to history and culture has created a gross imbalance in the perception of Africa and her history, her culture, her tradition and her institutions. What if the private sector decided that this gross imbalance should be corrected. Just suppose a group of interested citizens committed themselves to correcting that imbalance so that not only African descendants, but everyone would know that there has been a rich and strong contribution from Africa to the culture of America; to the culture of South America, to culture of Europe, and indeed, to the culture of the world itself. If these what-ifs became reality, we would know we were moving in an important direction towards the global city we talk so much about. Of course, there will be those who wish to usher in a post-racial society by simply removing race from the discourse, the discussion, and the debate. They would write race out of the public view and pretend that we have had no racial history, no racial hostility, no racial holocaust. They will argue that under recent decisions of the courts, race has no place in the conduct of public business. But I would say quickly to them that the courts have never said that race can play no role in public policy making. The courts have simply moved in the direction that prohibits racial preferences in certain aspects of government decision-making.

It is with these thoughts in mind that I leave you with a few proposals that might aid Charlotte's quest to become a global city: 1) that our civic, business and governmental institutions adopt and promote racial and cultural diversity as a prime value for our community; 2) that a collaboration be established between our great universities in the area and business and civic institutions to study and promote diversity as a prime value; 3) that a leadership team be developed to develop a master plan for creating a racially and culturally diverse global city; 4) that the curricula and texts in our educational institutions be revised to reflect more completely and more accurately the contributions to the development and progress of Western culture made by Africans and their descendants in the African diaspora. This revision would include also the contributions of other historically excluded groups. Finally, I propose that all of the Diaspora communities represented in the Charlotte area come together to establish a Council of the African Diaspora to promote greater understanding of, and appreciation for, African history and culture and the influence and impact of the African Diaspora.

I make these proposals in the spirit of addressing our racial history forthrightly, in a manner that deals with race in a positive, healthy and helpful way and not by attempts to ignore history, erase history or rewrite history. I make these proposals out of the simple recognition that unless we know something of the history of those who make up our community, we can never have a full

understanding and appreciation for those who have been historically excluded. It is only through looking at each other with facts, understanding and new appreciation engendered by a new knowledge that we lay the foundation for the Global City.