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## Remarks at Memorial Service for Professor Kellis E. Parker

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## REMARKS AT MEMORIAL SERVICE FOR PROFESSOR KELLIS E. PARKER

*Kendall Thomas\**

Paul and Silas were locked in jail  
Had nobody to go their bail  
Keep your eyes on the prize  
Hold on  
Ain't but one thing we did wrong  
Took injustice a little too long  
Keep your eyes on the prize  
Hold on  
But the one thing we did right  
Was the day we started to fight  
Keep your eyes on the prize  
Hold on  
Hold on, Hold on  
Keep your eyes on the prize  
Hold on

Seventeen years ago, I came to New York and Columbia University to begin a career in the legal academy. Seventeen years ago, I met Kellis Parker. The two moments run together in my mind, quite simply because my life in New York and at Columbia are inseparable from my relationship with Kellis Parker. If I had the time, I'd stand here and testify. I'd testify about the man who was my colleague, my mentor, my model, and my big-brother-in-the-law. I'd testify about the Kellis Parker who was my careful and generous critic. If I had time, I'd testify about Kellis, my neighbor around the corner, at home and at the office. I'd tell you about the Kellis who was my jam session partner, my most entertaining dinner guest (he could always be counted on to come with his slide trombone), my one-man pep rally, my always sympathetic after-hours confidant. I'd tell you about the Kellis Parker who was my teacher and about the Kellis who was, quite simply, my friend.

I can't do all that, though, so I want to share a few thoughts with you today about my journey with Kellis Parker, the intellectual. More than anyone else I know, Kellis Parker taught me about the unique challenge of being a black intellectual in white America.

The great Italian political philosopher, activist, and political prisoner Antonio Gramsci once wrote that the intellectual vocation can be divided into two types: One can be a traditional or an organic intellectual. Kellis Parker was an organic intellectual: In Kenston, North Carolina, Kellis was born into the large family and the small community that nurtured him and shaped his early experience of life and life's horizons. Kenston was

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in his very bones, and he never forgot from whence (or whom) he came. When he left Kenston, Kellis took with him the quiet dignity, firm resolve and generous spirit of the black South. Perhaps that's why Kellis's office at the law school always reminded me of my grandmother's kitchen—there was always a place for me at Kellis's table, a respite from the rigors of the day, a snippet of good music, a broad smile, and a word of encouragement. A conversation with Kellis about competing theories of injunctive relief could shift in a split second to a heated dispute about whether boiled or roasted sweet potatoes made the better pie. (Sometimes he'd clinch his case by offering a slice of the pie he'd baked the night before.) Kellis had a wide-ranging, cosmopolitan sensibility. However, his wordiness had an easy country touch, seasoned with the sounds and scents of a world far removed from the halls of Columbia Law School. For Kellis Parker, the organic intellectual, his work on and in law was of a piece with the rest of his life; his life as a lawyer was deeply touched by and connected to the *whole* experience that made him who and what he was, an experience for which he had no need to apologize.

But Kellis Parker was also an oppositional intellectual. Our Columbia colleague Edward Said has written that the intellectual vocation has an edge to it, because it "cannot be played without a sense of being someone whose place it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than to produce them), to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations [or universities], and whose *raison-d'être* is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug."<sup>1</sup> Kellis Parker's work as an intellectual was informed by a vision of how the law looks from the standpoint of those who are on bottom of the social order. During his long tenure in the legal academy, Kellis remained faithful to those who have to fight for the right to have rights. Because of his deep love and passion for the oppressed, Kellis Parker never hesitated to speak truth to power. For Kellis, the life of the intellectual was a life of struggle and resistance alongside those who seek freedom, equality and justice.

These, then, are the lessons I learned from Kellis Parker, the organic, oppositional intellectual.

The dominant understanding holds that law is a career; Kellis taught me that my work as a lawyer is a calling. The dominant perspective sees the legal educator as a problem-solver, whose role is to justify the law; Kellis challenged me to see myself as a problem-poser, whose task is to criticize the law and law's complicity in justifying illegitimate privilege and power. The common wisdom holds that in order to protect her standing among the general public, the intellectual must cultivate the passive virtues of neutrality and impartiality; Kellis Parker taught me that standing with the wretched of the earth, knowing whose side you are on, brings its own rewards. The standard view binds the intellectual to a pro-

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1. Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* 11 (1994).

fessional community of the similarly credentialed; Kellis reminded me that the community which sustains our work must be sought elsewhere, on the margins of the society, outside the institution of the university, among people who may not even be able to read and write their own names, among those whose sweat and blood equity paid for our credentials. The common understanding of our enterprise views our work as the achievement of the individual; Kellis taught me (in the words of the sociologist Alvin Gouldner) that the work we do is not merely influenced, but produced by a group. The standard self-image of the intellectual is informed by an ethic of self-sufficient singularity; Kellis Parker instructed me in the larger ethical and intellectual value of solidarity.

John Dewey once wrote that “[i]f the ruling and oppressed elements of a society, those committed to maintain the status quo and those concerned to change it, had, when they became articulate, the same philosophy, one might well be skeptical of its intellectual integrity.”<sup>2</sup> Kellis Parker understood that, and worked hard and long to forge a grammar that would enable him and those of us who were his intellectual comrades to give voice to the vision of people who have been left off the scales of justice.

Kellis taught me that you may get weary, that you may get discouraged, that you may sometimes even get disgusted. Through it all, though, you have to hold on and you have to keep your eyes on the prize. Kellis Parker has fought a good fight, he has finished his course. He has left us to take up the blood-stained banner of the cause for which he poured out his life. In mourning his loss, I find strength in the words of another warrior, the late poet Essex Hemphill. I speak them here today as a challenge and a pledge:

When my brother fell  
I picked up his weapons  
and never once questioned  
whether I could carry the  
weight and grief  
the responsibility he shouldered  
I never questioned  
Whether I could aim  
or be as precise as he  
He had fallen  
and the passing ceremonies  
did not stop the war<sup>3</sup>

Farewell, old soldier. Thank you for keeping the faith. Thank you for holding on. Thank you for keeping your eyes on the prize.

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2. John Dewey, *Philosophy and Civilization* 9 (2d ed. 1968).

3. Essex Hemphill, *When My Brother Fell*, in *Ceremonies: Prose and Poetry* 31 (1992).