Brionna Jimerson

Black Graduation Student Keynote: Theme: reaching forward and reaching back (SANKOFA)

Good evening, everyone and invited guests, family from out of town and out of the country, welcome to the 2013 Africana Center Stole Ceremony and Black Graduation. I’m Brionna Jimerson, a graduating senior here at tufts, and I want to start by thanking the Stole Ceremony planning committee for all the hard work the seniors and underclassmen put in during the weeks leading up to and during finals period to make sure that we had something of our own, made carefully and lovingly with us in mind during this celebratory time.

We need to understand why we are thanking them. Why a black graduation? This ceremony may not jive with you politically, but it was made with you in mind and carefully done. That is more than we can say about many things at tufts, so at the end of the complex stage that is undergrad at Tufts, Why do we want or need this ceremony, why do people bother to put it together when there is a list of other ceremonies and honors on the weekend’s horizon.

It is important because reflection and positivity matter. When you are constantly and consistently read in ways that do not reflect what you view about yourself, you begin to reflect, in turn, that projection. You perform as compartmentalized versions of yourself, and any negation from that performance is the anomaly, not the performance itself. This ceremony is necessary because it is about a personal triumph and resilience that we have all built, sometimes at high costs. It’s important because we have a different experience from dealing with microagressions stereotype threat, a layer of personal work we must push through, and the truth is, our celebration and elation isn’t captured with everyone else’s’ s we turn inwardly to congratulate each other where we may not otherwise be congratulated, and to celebrate ourselves. In this way, we embody our own sankofa.

When Jared Snead texted me that I had been selected as student keynote speaker, I texted ‘wow, thank you! ’Before I realized that I had to, indeed confirm. The selection couldn’t have come at a better time—I was in the midst of a moment of depression, feeling like I’d at once given too much and not enough of myself to my tufts community. All I could think in that moment was, why me? I cannot imagine why my name came up at the table; yes, I write a lot, and. I had 17 words in Kristen Johnson’s 2012 original play “High Yellow Blue Black Bird”, but other than that, I manage to slip behind the scenes easily. But at that moment the self-deprecation had to stop, because someone has just sankofa’d me.
Someone had looked back, saw me, and reached for me while still moving forward. I was someone worth including in the future.

This semester has been about telling the truth in private and in public. It is something we think about towards the end of a phase, when we have a second to breathe and look behind us. I believe the sankofa bird is a self-reflective creature, and the spirit of self-reflection and introspection is too often coupled with self-judgment.

So when it comes to looking back and moving forward, how do we do so without being trapped in the past? When we look back, it is not always with loving nostalgia or hope…sometimes looking back is incredibly painful and traumatic. We forget that we left for a reason. Sankofa teaches us that we must go back to our roots to move forward. We do not have to live by them or cozy up under them, but we must acknowledge that they happened and continue to reverberate in our present.

The sankofa is about developing a common understanding of what unites us. Tonight I want that understanding to be celebration, elation, and a remembering. Senior week is tricky that’s why they give you yummy mimosas, free hot dogs, and a few T-shirts to keep the good vibes coming. Let us unite under a telling the truth in private and in public. Let us unite under honesty in all its forms.

My grandmother, the toughest cookie I have ever known, and her sister--my great aunt--a retired elementary school principal raised me. At just over 4’11, my grandmother literally held our family together financially, socially, and spiritually in a way that we only realized after she had passed on. In my household, there was love, but little patience for ignorance or lofty expectations. As she said, “I have champagne taste on a 40 oz. budget”. Resources were always tight, and tanks rested near empty. Still, she held us with a mystical fortitude I still cannot fathom, but when she reached back, it was with a sense of duty, and sometimes with a twinge of resentment. You see, the sankofa bird is mythical in part because not all types of reaching back to uplift and remember the past are safe, desirable, or anything worth remembering. My grandmother and my aunt volunteered often in their adult life, supporting their respective communities as well as their households, but the obligatory and difficult reaching back took a toll on them both, and on me.
At Tufts, I discovered for the first time in the black Tufts community that reaching back and creating a shared past can be transformative and even therapeutic. That is what I want us to focus on this evening. The people in this room reminded me that giving back was the same as giving to you, only through a different level of self-awareness. Today, some of us are transcending from first-generation college students to first-generation graduates, but we are all legacy students, because our presences, smiles, patience, friendships, academic pursuits, energies, creative outlets we’ve made for ourselves and others, never-ending quest for equity and justice of all kinds have left legacies at Tufts that will be remembered far after the names of donors fade from the buildings, and generations of Jumbos stampede through the quad. We are legacy students.

I always say Hindsight is 20/20, and I think that is the idea behind the sankofa bird, that when you see that hindsight is seems like perfect vision you do not lament your poor vision and keep going on as if nothing happened. When you realize that reflection is just that—a reflection of the beginning and result, not the journey between, pursue to correct your own vision and that of the person coming up behind you. In your hindsight, consider readiness and preparedness for the gifts of life (they keep telling me there are gifts!). It is about knowing what you are able to take in when and where, and being patient with your own development. I was at a party with a friend just last night, and we were discussing someone’s ability to take information in, especially when the information can rock individuals to their foundation. Not every moment is the be-all-end-all moment, and not every “missed opportunity” is missed—they are sometimes simply rerouted, so that when they come around again as themselves or another form, you will be ready to grab it wholly and confidently.

A great friend Barbara Florvil told me to speak truth life and light, and I hope I accomplished that today, because you have all given the same to me for the past four years. I will end with my favorite quote of all time: The best time to plant, a tree was 30 years ago. The second best time is today. The best time to start probably was not 4 years ago, perhaps the ground had not been laid, or you were not ready. But be gentle with yourself, and start today. Reach back without spite, hate or obligation, but with respect. Reach forward not out of envy or vanity, but with compassion.