



High School Graduation

August 2, 2020

Speech by Giselle Silla, Class of 2020

Hello, everyone. It is an honor and a privilege to speak to you all today on this belated graduation in the most extraordinary of times. I'd like to extend a special thanks to Katie, Anna, Lisa and all the other adults who have made our senior spring (and summer) as celebratory as possible under such unique and unprecedented circumstances.

One day back in February, before the pandemic, I was in the library, scrolling through my phone, probably procrastinating, when I came across an article that caught my eye. The headline read: "How To Write Fiction When The Planet Is Falling Apart." It was about writing novels in the era of the climate crisis, and it began with a word, one that has stuck with me over the past six months and that keeps on coming back to me time and time again. That word is solastalgia. It's a combination of solace, desolation and nostalgia and describes the particular emotional distress and disorientation that arises when familiar surroundings become unrecognizable. The word is generally used in the context of the climate crisis and the distress caused by wildfires, floods, or even an absence of snow in the winter. You wake up one day, and your forests, your rivers, your winters are not what they once were. Solastalgia is a pining for the time before the change. It is a homesickness one can feel without ever leaving home.

Solastalgia is everywhere, and not simply because climate change is everywhere, but because change is everywhere. Since the pandemic began in March, almost all the markers against which we measure our lives have changed. We've changed our routines, our traditions, our syllabi, our expectations for the future. And since then, I have found myself yearning for a time when I could go to restaurants and use public bathrooms, pining for a time before the change. My life is at once familiar and unrecognizable. I am homesick, and yet I rarely leave home.

At the heart of the word solastalgia is a contradiction, between the words "solace" and "desolation," between comfort and profound sadness. Embedded in the word are seemingly unanswerable questions. How can a place be both familiar and unrecognizable? How can you be homesick without leaving home? And because solastalgia is everywhere, it stands to reason that contradictions and tensions are everywhere, in ourselves, in our communities, in our society

at large.

A contradiction lies at the heart of this profoundly unique and pivotal frame of American history we find ourselves in right now. We are physically distant, and yet we are coming together in the streets and on social media in unprecedented numbers, and with striking camaraderie and passion, to focus on the communal work of grappling with America's long and violent legacy of anti-Black racism.

On a more local level, a contradiction lies at the heart of GDS as an institution. We are an institution that claims to uphold equity and social inclusion, yet we are a private school, an inherently exclusive and therefore inequitable place. In other words GDS seeks, almost impossibly, to reconcile at once its commitment to dismantling white supremacy with its heavy reliance on the intergenerational wealth white supremacy helps to build.

This institutional tension helps to explain the interpersonal tensions many of us are familiar with and that my Black peers experience regularly. It explains how GDS can be both the site of tremendous personal growth for white students and that of tremendous trauma for Black students, how our school can both advertise a commitment to social justice and protect racist habits among students, faculty and administration.

So, what do we do to resolve this tension between what GDS promises to do in theory and what it does in practice to stay afloat as school? How can we build a community that is safer and more equitable and that more closely aligns with the mission of our school?

The answer lies in another contradiction.

It may appear as if to resolve this tension so we must hide racism within our community, that we must sweep it under the rug saying "this is not who we are." That is a flimsy facade, and most see right through it. Instead, GDS must do exactly the opposite. We must confront racism and white supremacy boldly, understanding these to be forces that no one, regardless of their position in this school, is immune to. To put into practice GDS's mission to "honor the integrity and worth of each individual" is to shed an indiscriminate light on the ways in which our community fails to honor the integrity and worth of each individual. I love this place. I love the people who inhabit this place, and it is for this reason that I invite you to reckon fully and

truthfully with the white supremacy present at our school so that we might heal and grow and that we might build a safer and more nurturing community for the future.

This means that the white faculty, staff and administration at GDS, particularly the white deans, white department heads and white veteran teachers must be active participants in unlearning habits of racism and white supremacy in our community. Examine the way you treat Black students in your classrooms, on your stages, on your fields. Examine your white fragility and your white tears and the way these behaviors harm your Black students and colleagues. Examine racist biases in hiring, grading and disciplinary practices and how you might be complicit in them and benefit from them. Remember that addressing racism in our community in any way that does not also address our white community members' institutional complacency and benefit from racist structures does little more for healing and growth than a Band Aid does for a broken arm.

To my Black classmates in the Class of 2020. I hope you take my speech today not as an effort to absolve myself of any responsibility to dismantle white supremacy in myself and my communities, but as just the opposite, as a promise to carry the work of anti-racism with me wherever I go. Know that I am speaking today not out of a desire to center myself or to undermine the voices of my Black peers, but out of a deep sense of responsibility to my school, as both a leader and a white person. My whiteness affords me the opportunity to openly critique powerful people and systems without fear of consequence, a privilege my Black peers cannot always assume they have.

To my white and non-Black classmates in the Class of 2020. The unfortunate truth is that our expensive educations are woefully inadequate when it comes to American history and the issues facing Black communities today. So, while at college and for the rest of our lives we must take it upon ourselves to fill in the gaps. We must read Black authors, watch TV shows and documentaries by Black filmmakers, listen to podcasts and music by Black creators, take classes in Africana studies. We must also take it upon ourselves to be active participants in grappling with the racist and exploitative histories of the colleges and universities we will soon call home. Many of these schools were not racially integrated upon their founding. Many boast libraries and dorms built by people who were enslaved, and many began their endowments with money extracted from slave labor. These institutions would not be standing today if it were not for their violent exploitation of Black bodies, yet they freely use buzzwords like "diversity" and

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“allyship” in classrooms and admissions materials. My white and non-Black peers and I must make it our priority to dismantle racist structures both past and present at our colleges, and we must do so by confronting our role in maintaining and benefiting from them.

I’d like to leave everyone here today with a quote from the one and only Toni Morrison. She says: “If there’s a book that you want to read, but it hasn’t been written yet, then you must write it.” This quote resonates with me because it frames the acts of living and of writing as one and the same, suggesting that our futures will be determined just as much by what we do as what we say and what we write. Glenn Albrecht is the Australian environmental philosopher who created the term “solastalgia.” As the story goes, he and his wife sat at their dining room table, brainstorming ways to capture this intimate yet global phenomenon in a single word. In a very literal way, he wrote the book he wanted to read and did not hesitate to create the language he needed to write it. I hope in the upcoming chapters of our lives, we can all take a page from Morrison and Albrecht and not only write the books we want to read, but also create the languages necessary to write them. Thank you.