Senior Speech: Daniel Brown, Class of 2019

From “Song Unsung” by Rabindranath Tagore

The song that I came to sing remains unsung to this day,
I have spent my days in stringing and unstringing my instrument.
The time has not come true, the words have not been rightly set;
Only there is agony of wishing in my heart.
The blossom has not opened and the wind is sighing by.

And From “A Litany for Survival” by Audre Lorde

And when the sun rises we are afraid it might not remain
when the sun sets we are afraid it might not rise in the morning
when our stomachs are full we are afraid of indigestion
when our stomachs are empty we are afraid we may never eat again
when we are loved we are afraid love will vanish
when we are alone we are afraid love will never return
and when we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent we are still afraid
So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive
What do you think this speech is about? I have sat in the same seats as you and wondered the same exact thing 25 times by now. I know me asking it may seem a little trite and over-metacognitive (that is a big word to prove I am smart), but, still, what do you guys think? Do you think I am talking about lacrosse and sports culture? About socioeconomic status? Maybe I am speaking about my neighborhood—the Upper West Side. Or maybe I am talking about growing up the son of an immigrant. Or maybe—just maybe—you think I am going to talk about race. I do not know what you think this speech is about. But if I were a betting man, I know where I would put my money, and I bet that is where you all are putting your money too: that this speech is about race. And you would be right. And wrong. This speech is about race. But it is also about more than that. It is about my family, my neighborhood, my friends, my experiences, my pains, my joys. I do not speak for all black people, nor all minorities, but I do have a story to tell. For you to understand this story and for it to help this community to grow, I need you all to do something for me. I want you all to stop thinking. For the next fifteen minutes or so, I ask you to not judge or analyze what I am saying. For the next twenty minutes, I want you to try to understand and empathize first instead of simply hearing the words that I say. Can you do that? Good. Then let us begin.

I have grown up here on the Upper West Side. While I did not go to Trinity for lower or middle school, I did go to somewhere that was very similar: Anderson. Both are filled with smart kids, both have dedicated teachers. They have great resources, affluent families. Both are on the Upper West Side. Both are white spaces, or places in which predominantly white people are in positions of leadership, respect, and power. Between growing up and living on the Upper West Side, going to Anderson and Trinity, and spending the majority of my free time playing lacrosse, I have spent almost all of my young life in these white spaces.

In elementary school, I was ignorant, as all children are, of the fact that I was different. In school, it was the usual: kids asking to touch my hair, being looked at whenever we talked about slavery, having other kids of color compared to me. But I never thought anything of it. In my building on 63rd Street between Broadway and Central Park West, I was adored by elderly white ladies who acted as if I was their grandchild. They would always tell me how cute I was, how smart I was, how “special” I was, how I was “one of the good ones,” and how they wished that there were “more like me around.” I never really understood that one, but I took it. Kids love compliments, and they are not great with nuance. When I was nine, I remember these same ladies saying, “you are a young Obama.” Years later I realized their comments were not fully based on my character but also based on my skin. They saw me as a sort of mascot, the image of what they thought black people should be: cute, non-threatening, a “good boy.” I
always thought it was funny that they called me the same things that they called their dogs, but I never paid it mind.

My fondest memories from when I was a kid come from my time spent with my Habesha family. This is the Ethiopian-immigrant family that I am related to through my mother, and an immigrant herself. Our family is awesome. As immigrants, all of our parents are really into the idea of education being the path to success, and they are all super over-affectionate. But something unique about them is how they see race—or rather the ways in which they do not. You see the history of Ethiopia is quite different than that of the United States. Ethiopia was never colonized by whites. In 1895, Ethiopia embarrassed Italy when they tried to colonize us, battling them back and defeating them. In 1935, Mussolini decided to try again, and succeeded in occupying Ethiopia for a while, but never in fully colonizing us. This means that Ethiopia is a nation where black people have always been at the top of the power structure. Growing up in a place like this has made my family proud, evidenced by my mother, who has more Ethiopian pride than she knows what to do with. The thing that I love most about my family is that everyone is accepted. We have people who are rich and who are poor, people who attend private schools and Ivy League institutions and those who never attended college. People of all skin tones, sexualities, and ideologies exist in my family, yet everyone is loved, respected, and valued as an individual. It is the most beautiful thing that I have ever had the privilege to experience.

I grew older, and I entered middle school, a place filled with kids who have no idea who they are and I was the same. I was a nerdy kid with a big afro, a lot of energy, and a wardrobe filled with brown corduroy pants, purple overalls, and cashmere scarfs. My mom’s choice, not mine. I remember kids would make fun of me for how I dressed, but it did not bother me, or at least, I never showed that it did. That all changed when I was 11. I was in sixth grade, and I was on the JV basketball team. We did not have a locker room, so, just like at Trinity, we would change in the bathrooms. I am a slow changer, and I was talking to my friend about Katy Perry. As he left to go to practice, an eighth-grader on the varsity team, Damien, walked in. Damien was a black kid who had gone to Anderson since kindergarten as well. I looked up to him and felt a sense of connection with him, even though we were not really friends. He overheard the last bit of my conversation, and he snickered. When I inquired the reason for his audible outburst, he casually replied, “You are such an oreo.” I did not know what that meant, so he explained it to me: “Oreo. It means you are black on the outside but white on the inside.” I was confused, and I commented, “Well, then so are you. You are just as white as me.” He snickered again, this time removing his orange crew neck shirt to reveal his skin. He was darker than me, darker than even my father. He was bigger than I was, with lightly-defined, eighth-grade muscle that seemed to exude raw masculine power. In that moment, he seemed to be defying me with
his body, showing me who he really was. He looked into the whites of my eyes and bared his teeth savagely in an impish smirk. He said, “Nah, little man. I’m a real nigga. I ain’t never been no oreo. I’m black.”

I was confused, but I slowly began to understand. This was the first time that I fully began to recognize that I was seen differently than my classmates. I was seen as black, and the way that I was black did not seem to be correct. My friends soon got the memo, and they started to tell me that they were blacker than I was. They cited the evidence of their superiority at basketball, their baggy sweatpants and Jordans, and their affinity for Hip-Hop. What drove the nail in the coffin, however, was their use of the n-word. A note on this word. It is horrific, and I was horrified when I first heard them say it. It is amazing to me how kids in this school, educated people who understand the history of the epithet still say it. Worse than that, it is shocking that after all of the people who have come forward and said how much this word personally hurts and offends them that people still refuse to stop using it. It is a relic of the past that is better left there in my opinion. But I will defend my right to say it with every ounce of intellect, articulation, and charisma that I can muster, because, simply put, it is one of the only ways that I can have any power over my own identity.

Right around this time, I began to study what it means to be black, at least it in the public perception, and I developed a hypothesis: that there are approximately five acceptable ways for a man to be black in America. The first is to be the athlete. If you can run fast, jump high, and have good hand-eye coordination, then you can be accepted into this category. Members include: Lebron James, Odell Beckham Jr., Saquon Barkley, you get the picture. The second way is to be the jokester. If you are loud, self-deprecating, and have a knack for making people laugh, then this is the category for you. Members include: Chris Tucker, Eddie Murphy, Kevin Hart, et cetera. The next one is the artist. If you can rap, act, sing, dance, write, or do anything creatively, then you can be accepted into this prestigious community. Members include: Michael B. Jordan, Kendrick Lamar, J. Cole, and countless others. Another one is the radical. If you choose to fight against the oppression of black people and push for change, then this is where you belong. Members include: Malcolm X, Jesse Jackson, Louis Farrakhan, and so many more.

The last one is the most frightening, and sadly, the one that is overarching. It touches every one of the other groups slightly, and a hint of it must be present in any real black man. I call this category the monster. You see, black men are supposed to be hood. They are supposed to be strong and prone to violence, which is evidenced in the athlete category. They are supposed to be loud and dumb, but also quick-witted enough to “clap back” at someone, evidenced in the jokester category. They are supposed to be cool and have an almost inherent knack for dancing and singing, evidenced by the artist category. They are supposed to be abrasive and passionate,
traits found in the radical category. But most of all, they are supposed to be poor, threatening, dangerous, and, for lack of a better word, ghetto. These definitions of blackness constrict people all over the country, all over the world.

Need examples? Look at your TV screens. Shows like Empire, Ballers, and Wild ‘n Out, teach people across our nation these definitions of blackness. The monster category is present in almost all rap music. When rappers talk about killing people, selling drugs, and being with women, they are lauded with money and success that further incentivize this kind of behavior. It is a vicious cycle that leaves black men trapped in these constricting narratives of what we can be. The J. Cole lyric, “They telling n****s, ‘sell dope, rap or go to NBA,’ in that order, it’s that sort of thinking that been keeping n****s chained at the bottom and hanged, the strangest fruit that you ever seen, ripe with pain,” articulates this sentiment that black men are told that these are what our accepted roles are. Each one of these categories is limiting, and dwelling within them is nearly impossible. But when someone defies these preordained standards, they are labeled as an oreo. In other words, they are no longer black.

For me, I could not accept being an oreo. I needed to be black. My family was black, and proud of it. I had always been black, and my skin dictated that I could never be anything else. I became rife with the fear that I needed to be more black. I purchased Jordans, started to use more slang, and tried to act a bit more “hood.” In the classroom, I let my enthusiasm become more disrespectful. This granted me some reprieve from the label of oreo, but not from the use of the n-word. However, I soon discovered something: When I said the n-word, kids saw me as black. The more I used the word, the more I was seen as black. So I did use it. I used it a lot, and I used it as a crutch to support my newfound identity as a black man. I remember the change that other people saw in me. The old ladies in my building would not speak to me anymore unless I initiated the conversation. I guess I did not seem like “one of the good ones” anymore. My cousins noticed my change in style, and they questioned it, but not too much. I think they knew the kind of things that I was going through, knew the path I was going on.

The most tangible way that I knew that I was truly black happened when I first became the monster. I was exiting the Century 21 only three blocks from my house, when the security guard decided to search me. I was dressed in my “Concord” 11 lows and my camo pants, and I looked every bit the part of the young black man. He stopped me, and patted me down. I obeyed. I knew what to do. My mind went into overdrive. Had I done something wrong? My white friend, who had just purchased something, asked that question, to which the guard did not reply. He asked me if I had taken something. I said, “No sir.” He asked me again, and I again said, “No sir.” He finished his examination and he said that I was free to go. I told my friend that I was fine, and we never talked about it again. I was 13. Wanna hear the worst part? I was glad that it happened. I thought that that was what it meant to be black. It was proof of my race to
the world. It also was the most terrifying moment of my young life. I was hurting so much from all of this pretending. I hated it, but I felt powerless. I told myself that things would be different in high school. I told myself that I would stop the minstrel show that I was performing.

When I got to Trinity, I was excited for a fresh start. I was eager to meet new people, have new experiences, but mainly, I was desperate for the opportunity to reinvent myself. I did not want to be the black kid anymore. I simply wanted what all high school kids desire: to be accepted for who I was. But as soon as I got here, I remember kids telling me that “I was the whitest black kid that they knew.” The label of oreo had returned. I was scared that middle school would simply repeat itself. However, I soon discovered a brand new role to play: the black friend. This role involved me being the approachable black kid, the guy who white kids could talk to about race and their opinions on it, regardless of how ignorant they may be. While this role was not perfect, the possibility of changing people—helping them to see how much they had to learn—appealed to me. My family had always taught me that people can learn if they are offered the right lessons, and that sentiment fueled this new role.

And yet, despite these hopes, I somehow became a token. I began to give out the “n-word pass,” a fabricated concept in which I could grant white kids the permission to say the n-word. I would play up my blackness to fit in, all the while feeling horrible about doing so. I did everything I could to avoid being seen as radical. I tried not to let people know that I was attending BAC meetings, and even denied attending when asked about it. I never talked about how frustrated I was in history class, my favorite subject, to be spending a whole year almost exclusively learning about white European history, something which I am now relieved to hear has changed. Instead, I kept my mouth shut. I knew that in humanities classes, where I was usually the only black kid in the classroom, I was automatically seen as “the black voice,” and I did not want to emphasize this any more than I needed to. I was accepted as the black friend by my peers, and even though I felt like it was a completely disingenuous and limiting label, at least it meant I was not fully an oreo.

As I got to sophomore year, I slowly decided to change. Firstly, I removed myself from the swamp, because I felt that if I was there, I would only be the subject of racial jokes and questions. Instead of being in the swamp, I joined an extremely tight-knit group of six nerdy boys. We were inseparable, and, I will admit, it was nice to feel that sense of closeness with them. That was until I learned that behind my back, several members of the group were saying the N-Word. I was shocked. I held all of my friends in the highest esteem, and that includes in regards to their moral character, yet, on a consistent basis, some of the people who I was spending inordinate amounts of time with were secretly saying a word that fundamentally hurt me. I do not know how to describe the sense of betrayal and hurt I felt. But I chose not to confront them. I felt that if I wanted to not be seen as radical, I needed to ignore the things
they were doing, even if it so deeply offended me. I hated myself for my inaction, but I feared that any action I took would leave me outcasted and branded as the “radical black boy.” I did not want to be alienating friends, especially at a time where I, myself, felt so alone.

Over the summer, I began to reflect on who I wanted to be, and I decided that I was going to make a more conscious effort to stand up for myself. This started with my friends. I told them about how their use of the n-word affected me, and some of my friends immediately changed their behavior. However, others in my friend group did not respond well, claiming that it was their right to say that word, and that while they knew it was wrong, they were still going to do it anyway. It was nearly impossible for me to come to terms with the idea that people—kids who I considered friends—could hear my pain and still not care enough to change their actions. However, I would not let that deter me. I re-entered the swamp, and, while I encountered both subtle and overt racism there, I also found kindness, empathy, and friendships from various people who began to see me not simply as the black kid, but as Daniel Brown.

As things improved with some of my friends, in the classroom, I still felt like my only voice was as a black person. I remember that during the first weeks of American History, my favorite subject, I was waiting outside our classroom, when I heard a comment from one of my fellow students, saying, “my role is to be the financial voice, his role is to be the conservative voice, her role is to be the feminist voice, and, Danny, your role is to be the black voice.” I remember hearing that comment from someone who I thought was my friend and feeling so reduced, so one dimensional. In English class, I somehow felt that my voice was valued more when we spoke about Beloved rather than during conversations of books that I had a firmer grasp on like Hamlet.

In Spanish class, there was a presentation on unemployment in Spain that contained a slide with an image of a black family. The teacher stopped the class to investigate why that was the image chosen, and he, in Spanish of course, asked me what I thought about this. This cold call shocked me. Here was another moment in which I felt like my only role in this community is to represent the black voice, and it hurt. It hurt to feel like I did not have any individuality. However, later in the year in that class, we had to do a project regarding the image above me, “Los Dos Fridas.” In the painting, Frida Kahlo shows how her public perception did not match the true individual who she felt she was, which is represented by the heart over the Frida in the traditional Mexican garb, and the hole where the heart should be in the Frida in more Spanish attire. I related to this sentiment immensely. For my presentation, I talked about how I always felt like I was only seen as a black person, and not as a full individual. I talked about my discomfort and pain at what had happened earlier in the year. My teacher was amazing and responded with a sincere apology, and his genuine care for my words was inspiring. Never
before had a teacher so fully seen me and accepted me in the classroom. His empathy and compassion made me feel like this school saw me as more than just another black kid.

As I entered senior year, I was excited to embrace my last year of Trinity. Over the summer and during the fall, my friends who had remained insensitive towards me learned that their actions were wrong. They apologized, and their sincerity and care meant a lot to me. I continued to receive kindness and care from people in our community as well as from my family, and that helped to make me feel valued not simply as another black kid, but as an individual. However, I was never fully able to rid myself of my labels.

At Trinity, I have always felt labeled and boxed in because of my race, and I know that I am not alone. I have talked to so many minorities in this community who feel the same way. Whether it is due to race, class, sexuality, or gender, when we are reduced, we lose a bit of our humanity. Others begin to see us as caricatures, as one-dimensional representations of who we truly are. This goes on everywhere. At Trinity, at Anderson, on the lacrosse field, in my neighborhood. Every white space I have occupied has done the same thing. I know that I will struggle with my labels in college, in the workplace, and for the rest of my life. But guess what? You will too, no matter who you are. Everyone is labeled in some way, shape, or form, based on the way they dress, the way they walk, the way they speak, or the way they look. But for those who are not minorities, try to understand that when you are labeled for something that you have no choice in, you feel unbelievably trapped, isolated, and helpless.

But there is a path out of this cycle of suffering—this box of labels. As I mentioned before, I found it in my Habesha family. Nobody in my family ever labeled me. They always listened to what I was saying and empathized with the pain that I felt. The care, respect, and empathy that they have provided me helped me to feel safe and valued. Likewise, the compassion that I have received from my friends has also been invaluable, along with the care of various faculty members and teachers. When they listened to my pain and offered their support, when they saw me as more than just my labels, they helped me to accomplish what we all set out to do in high school: be accepted for who we are. Yet the pain and suffering that I have had to endure to feel this level of acceptance is unreasonable, and what truly keeps me up at night is that so many others among us feel the same sort of pain. This needs to stop. We need to start to care more about the emotions of other people in our community. We need to fight against the urge to label and criticize them. The rest of the world will do this to all of us, for things as small as hairstyle and as large as race. But in this school, if we want to create a community that is healthier and happier for all, then we must empathize and care for each other so the labels can disappear. It may sound simple, but this is no easy task to repair the fractures in our community this way. But this is the only way to create a school where everyone feels more accepted, more included, and more seen for who they truly are.
I asked you twenty minutes ago, “What do you think this speech is about?” The truth is that this speech is not about race, or class, or lacrosse, or anything like that. This speech is really about compassion, kindness, and empathy. It is about caring for one another. If we choose to do this—to care—than we have the chance to create a place that can inspire more joy and fulfillment than we can ever imagine. If it can work in my family, it can work here, so Trinity, the choice is ours. We can either choose to make our school this incredible community of empathy, respect, and contentment, or we can simply maintain the status quo and allow our fellow community members—and yourselves—to suffer through the pain of the labels that are forced upon us. The choice rests entirely in our hands, Trinity.

Choose wisely.