

TiA 2014 Closing Remarks
Peggy Chang

I would like to begin with some thank yous. I must start with the Theories in Action conference coordinators: To Brian Kunding '14, for your ability to bridge communities, especially bringing communities of color to the CRC and TiA, and for your deep reading of the TiA applications. To Darcy Pinkerton '14, also for your deep reading of the applications, and for your rigorous and tireless attention to detail. To Jessica Brodsky '14, for your unwavering professionalism and for bringing TiA into the 2.0 digital world. To all of the CRC staffers for chipping in at some point over the course of this weekend; to my professional colleagues across campus for facilitating one of the 14 group presentations. And when planning a conference of this size, you know that it takes a village to do it, that so many people work on our behalf to ensure the seamless functioning and beauty of this campus: Thank you to the Catering staff, Facilities Management & the Green team, Media Services & Production, and Metcalf Copy Center.

And it wouldn't be a conference at all without you, the student presenters! Thank you for your participation. I know how incredibly busy you are as seniors during this time of year. I want to congratulate you on this huge accomplishment. Let's take a moment to take stock of what you've done here at TiA. Think back to when you first arrived here as a freshman. Did you ever think you'd get to this point? I recently heard President Paxson describe your collegiate developmental process as the difference between being student and becoming a scholar. You've certainly demonstrated that this weekend--an ownership of what you know and an ability to speak publicly about it.

In fact, you've taken things one step further by wanting to translate what you know, to communicate ideas to a broader audience across boundaries. As high school is a collection of cliques, when you got to college you realized that in the university setting, we organize ourselves into departments and concentrations, institutes and centers, clubs and dormitory program houses. Indeed, as we delve deeper into our personal identities and academic specialization, we start adopting a tribal language. I remember doing that: In American studies, I started using seductive and heady words like, "transnationalism," "post-colonialism," and "hegemony." As a graduate student in Public Humanities, concepts such as publics, actors and audience held my attention. Yet these academic frameworks and the terms we use to explain them not only illuminate what we mean to others, but also may alienate the very people with whom we want to be.

At TiA you engaged in the difficult work of translating what you have done and why it's significant to more than just you and your tribe--why it matters for the greater good, why we should care about "the other," and how you envision it is that we commit ourselves to new ways of thinking, to social change.

As you move on beyond college--from the realm of your "youth" and transition into "adulthood," as you move into your professional lives--I choose the word devotion to highlight the challenge that now lays before you. "Passion" as a concept is overused here at Brown, and for me it implies perhaps something hedonistic or unsavory or selfish. Devotion, on the other hand, has a reverent ring to it. Indeed, its roots are in "the devotions," or the religious activity of prayer or worship. It commonly means, "a feeling of strong love or loyalty; the use of time,

money, energy, etc., for a particular purpose.” Will your devotion to your particular research/activity/creative project stand the test of time?

All along the way, your choices over which classes to take and then which concentration to select and then what projects to embark on have prepared you with the ever-important life skill of understanding why you are choosing what you are choosing. You have had to intentionally consider what you are devoted to.

While you and I have much in common, as I also went to Brown as an undergrad, one thing you have probably not yet experienced is being a parent. One of the great things about being with young kids, and you may know this from having younger siblings or cousins or perhaps from working with young children, is that they have the capacity for feeling the wonder and excitement of the ordinary--seeing the look on their faces at their first taste of ice cream, or when they discover a butterfly or rabbit during on a walk in May. Let me tell you about the pure devotion and joy that I'm currently experiencing vicariously through my older son; lately, its purely about penguins. Did you know, there are 17 species? There are Gentoo penguins, Adelie and Chinstraps... My personal favorite is the Macaroni penguin. There was a prehistoric species over six feet tall! The smallest of the species is the Little Blue or Fairy penguin at less than two feet tall. If you've seen the movie, March of the Penguins, you know a lot about one of the most fascinating of them all, the Emperor. They live on the Antarctic continent year round; they travel 70 miles inland, far enough away from any predators, to mate. The fathers stay nearly four months with the egg while the mother searches for food, huddling together as a group of dads in 80 degrees below Fahrenheit. This mysterious devotion to that egg, in the context of the grueling and life-risking commitment it requires of the parents to raise their offspring, is for many human beings hard to fathom.

While your commitments are still in formation, development, or incubation, I imagine that you've already had to decode a devotion or two of yours hatched at Brown to friends or family back home. In fact, moving forward you may find your devotions require ongoing interpretation. It is this devotion to the unfamiliar, to the mysterious, and in the face of the urgent question, "Are you crazy?!?" that I believe is necessary for bettering the world we inhabit. For the better world that we want, you will need to do what you know you need to do despite the risk of ridicule, and put your creative and persuasive powers to use.

While this place called Brown is indeed a bubble not to be found elsewhere, you need to take a piece of TiA and of Brown with you: To the classrooms in which you teach; the page or computer screen at which you write; to the nonprofit organizations and companies at which you work or lead; to the floors of the town halls or state houses or the Hill at which you persuade as a fellow lawmaker or as a member of a protest; in front of the canvas, or lab, or Boardroom.

Yes, the uncertainty you are feeling is palpable. In fact, we all feel it. Open up to the news in your browser, and you'll find the relentless stories of threats to our humanity and biodiversity. Our learning, our work, is ongoing.

Finally, I want you to know that you are entering into a new community, of Brown alumni. You'll find, if you haven't yet discovered, we are all Sherpas of a kind. You will be called on to do the same, to shepherd someone over the mountain, someday.

So please remember not only what you learned here, and what you didn't learn here, but what it feels like to have had the privilege of and precious opportunity to reclaim that childlike joy, and to finally, finally, find your voice.

Thank you, and congratulations again to the Class of 2014!