

# Convocation Keynote: Sankofa: A Historical View of the Future

Sidney J. Lemelle,

Edwin F. and Martha Hahn Professor of History, Africana Studies  
September 2, 2014

Thank you, Dean Feldbulm, for that warm welcome. Good morning and welcome staff, Thank you so very much, Dean Hudgings and President Oxtoby. I would first like to extend my welcome to the Class of 2018. -- a special class in a special place – Pomona College. I have a sense of your background, and how you arrived here. I know that many of you have been through anxious moments and sleepless nights to get here, but the next 4 years at Pomona will prepare you for what the world has to offer. However, even in this grand moment of celebration of your achievement, you must also recognize that we are living in one of the most terrifying and frightening moments in the history of the world. We hear about the struggles in the Crimea, Iraq, Iran, Syria, the Gaza Strip, and hear terms like HIV-AIDS, Ebola, the Prison-Industrial Complex, PRISM and names like Oscar Grant, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Omar Abrego and Ezell Ford (the latter 2 were recently killed by the LAPD only blocks from the house where I grew up, [and where my sisiter now lives] in South Central LA). According to spurious and unreliable statistics issued by the FBI there have been approximately 400 “justifiable police homicides” **each** year since 2008. In 1970, I almost became one of those statistics, after being racially profiled, handcuffed, roughed-up and chained to a fence. If not for witnesses, a group of old Black men playing dominoes across the street, I doubt that I would be standing in front of you today. My crime you ask, DWB or “driving while black,” returning from a night class at California State University, LA, two blocks from my home. All of these are connected in one way or another to three very important issues: economic decline, cultural decay and political malaise. Yes, these are often the result of increased poverty, fear of poverty and/or the intentional creation of poverty.

Yes, it also includes the addictive cultural consumption that tries to convince us that we are only vital and vibrant when we are consuming. Bored ? Go buy a new Smart phone and download a song from i-Tunes or play Candy Crush. Down and out? Go to your Twitter, SnapChat or Instagram app. Still feeling down and out ? Turn on the television and watch “unreality” shows like “Keeping up with the Kardashians” or TMZ that reinforce mind-deadening passivity. Yes, unfortunately, this is so much of what this consumer culture promotes today.

Moreover, the political malaise -- especially given an ineffective President Obama in the White House and a recalcitrant Congress -- this can give rise to a deep sense that maybe, just maybe, private liberal arts institutions like Pomona College no longer have the wherewithal to respond to the deep divisions in society and the world. However, I believe we at Pomona College (and that includes all of you) can contribute to lessening this divide.

At this point, I have probably succeeded in completely depressing and frightening you...but, hopefully, getting your attention, let me say, there is a bright side...and it is each one of you in the Class of 2018.

Now, this is the part of my speech where I – as a wise old professor, enrobed in medieval garb -- am supposed to give you -- as young impressionable students -- some incisive advice to help guide you through your college years. Often, this is done through the use of metaphor, by evoking some image that captures the essence of how to get the most out of your college experience.

Some obvious metaphors come to mind. For example, we might think of your time in college as something like scaling a mountain. This appropriately implies the need for sustained effort, it suggests that you'll encounter unexpected challenges along the way, and undoubtedly you will. And, of course, it implies that with determination, skill, and some luck you'll eventually triumph and reach the top.

Another metaphor for college is that it's like a rite of passage. We ask you to accomplish certain tasks, and once you've completed them, you're given a diploma - - a sort of badge of stick-to-it-iveness indicating you're a full-fledged member of that august group known as "college graduates."

These metaphors are OK, too, but it still doesn't quite work for me. I believe there is a better one.

I believe the Akan symbol of Sankofa is more appropriate. The Sankofa symbol has been adopted as an important symbol in the African American and African Diaspora context to represent the need to reflect on the past to build a successful future. The word in the Akan language of Ghana translates in English to "reach back and get it" or "It is not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten." The Akan use the symbol of a bird, with its head turned backwards, but its feet firmly planted in the present, and body facing the future. How about this: let's think of your Pomona career in terms of a Sankofa symbol. I say to the Class of 2018 that you can make a fundamental difference. Not alone, but using the past...the notion of Sankofa... to play a very crucial role in the future. You can do it in the following way: know your human history so you can try to revitalize public life in the present and in the future.

By public life, I mean acknowledging our interdependencies and interrelationships upon one another. I am talking about that rich notion of citizenship, the idea that ordinary people are capable of ruling, not simply being ruled. It is a precious ideal. It is called democracy – real democracy and liberty. A quote often incorrectly attributed to Benjamin Franklin reads, "*Democracy* is two wolves and a lamb voting on what to have for lunch. *Liberty* is a well-armed lamb contesting the vote." While there is debate as to whether Franklin used these words, to me the point is clear. In order to have true democracy and liberty, you must arm yourself with knowledge and a knowledge of history.

Keep in mind how rare democracies and liberty are in human history, and how short-lived they often are. Especially when they're undermined, it usually has much to do with the levels of poverty that produce a despair and desperation, or levels of paranoia that produce levels of distrust and suspicion.

There was a recent Time magazine article entitled "The Coming Race War Won't Be About Race," written by the legendary athlete, actor, producer, cultural ambassador for

the US, philosopher and historian -Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. [For those of you who only know him for his “skyhook,” he has co-authored eight books and produced a film on African American History] In the article, Kareem reflects on the recent events of Ferguson, Missouri, and popular protests. He wrote the following:

Dystopian books and movies like *Snow piercer*, *The Giver*, *Divergent*, *Hunger Games*, and *Elysium* have been the rage for the past few years. Not just because they express teen frustration at authority figures. That would explain some of the popularity among younger audiences, but not among twentysomethings and even older adults [like myself]. The real reason we flock to see Donald Sutherland’s porcelain portrayal in *Hunger Games* of a cold, ruthless president of the U.S. dedicated to preserving the rich while grinding his heel into the necks of the poor is that it rings true in a society in which the One Percent gets richer while our middle class is collapsing” [and I would add, the working class is being ground into dust while carrying the burden for the one percent who now own more wealth than the bottom 90 percent.]

Therefore, my advice, my humble advice, to the Class of 2018 is to expand public and private dialogue about democracy and liberty by first having a deep and abiding sense of history.

I say to you, one must have a tragic sense of history; not in the sense of bad or catastrophic, but in the sense of how it has affected the lives of people. Many of you know George R. R. Martin, whose novel series *A Song of Ice and Fire*, was adapted into the popular HBO series, *A Game of Thrones*. Martin understands the tragic sense of history, which is why his material feels so authentic and historical, even though it sometimes deals with Dragons and “White Walkers” as literary tropes. Many of you may not realize that much of his material is based in history, for example, the controversial “red wedding” episode is based on two events in Scottish history that took place in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Much of what makes Martin and his series co-writers so successful are their focus on the tragedies -- where good people often die, and bad people often prevail.

Martin's ultimate aim is an exploration of the internal conflicts that define the human condition, that’s history and that’s real. Fredrick Hegel said History is a slaughterhouse because of the blood, sweat and tears of people, [although I should mention that his 19<sup>th</sup> century Eurocentric worldview led him to postulate, “Africa had not history.”] Another historian, Edward Gibbon in the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* said history is a series of human crimes and follies and misfortunes. Moreover, yes, we know history is inextricably interwoven with wounds and heartache and sorrow and grief, but it is more than that. We ought not to confuse the tragic with the pathetic or inevitable. The tragic is about the exploration of human possibilities for freedom. That is what Martin’s works are about; that is what Shakespeare’s *King Lear* is about; that is what Gabriel García Marquez’s *One Hundred years of Solitude* is about; that’s what Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* is about: the exploration of the human possibilities of freedom, which are often thwarted by power and domination.

A tragic sense of history will give you a view of the world in which no culture, no civilization, and no society has a monopoly on wisdom or virtue. It would allow you to see ambiguous legacies in the past, to emphasize hybrid cultures, because every culture that we know is based in part on fragments of antecedent cultures. No pure

or pristine traditions here: no either/or perspectives here. It is about complexity and subtlety.

In addition, going hand in hand with that tragic sense of history, is an all-embracing moral vision, because a tragic sense of history should generate a sense of empathy, sympathy and most of all understanding, of trying to identify with the frustrations and anxieties of others, of those who look “other,” come from other places and have other sexual orientations. It is an All-embracing moral vision - never losing sight of the humanity of others.

What brought this to mind as I prepared this talk, was a group of meetings last year where students of color expressed anger and consternation at the conditions they faced on campus. As a Posse 7 mentor for 3 years, I heard many of these same things: they felt isolated by an unwelcoming environment of entitlement and privilege. One thing I learned from these students is that this should not be interpreted as a plea for special treatment, but rather a demand for equal treatment. The Pomona College administration and faculty will, hopefully, do their part, but the class of 2018 can also play a vital role in changing that situation. Not all at once, but by being thoughtful and proactive fellow students and, above all, decent human beings.

Simone Weil, the great French philosopher and political activist, said it well when she said, “Love of thy neighbor and all of its fullness - being able to say to him or her, ‘What are you going through? Can I be of service?’” An attitude, hopefully, you will adopt.

And, yes it is true that an all-embracing moral vision means that we often have to run counter to our own feelings or ideas because we live in a moment of frenzy about the “other,” most often connected to xenophobic hatred, fear of all Muslims as terrorists, of documented and undocumented immigrants (even innocent children), of groups and parties and nations that many want to exclude, put up thick walls and electrified fences to segregate them. This makes it more difficult to build the kind of bridges that we know are requisite to create not simply a sustainable, but a just, enlightened and environmentally verdant society and world.

Last, but not least, there is a need for daring hope. [Yes, I avoided the phrase audacity of hope]. Moreover, I do not mean just optimism. I am in no way an optimist. I have been a Blackman in America for 68 years. No grounds for optimism here, especially given the progress and regress, or as V. I. Lenin once said “one step forward and two steps backward.” In my mind, Optimism is a notion that there is sufficient evidence that would allow us to infer that if we keep doing what we are doing, things will get better. This brings to mind Albert Einstein’s definition of Insanity: i.e. “doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.” I do not believe this...but I am a prisoner of hope, which is something else. I believe in cutting against the grain, against the so-called “evidence,” against popular conceptions and misconceptions. William James said it so well in his 1879 essay called “The Sentiment of Rationality,” where he talked about faith being the courage to act when doubt is warranted. That is what I am talking about.

Of course, I come from a tradition, the African American tradition, in which we defined faith as stepping out on nothing and hoping to land on something. That is the history of many Black and poor folks in this country. Hope against hope, and yet

still trying to sustain the notion that we, and all peoples, of all races and all religions in this global society, can be energized and galvanized around causes and principles and ideals that are bigger than us; that can appeal to the better aspects of our nature, so that we, in fact, can reach the conclusion that the world is incomplete - that history is unfinished, that the future is open-ended, that what we think and what we do does make a difference. The symbol of Sankofa: be rooted in the present, but know the past in order to make a better future.

I want to leave you with the immortal words of Tyrion Lannister (the so-called Imp) from an episode of *Game of Thrones*. He said “Never forget what you are, for surely the world will not. Make it your strength. Then it can never be your weakness. Armour yourself in it, and it will never be used to hurt you.”

If I may, let me elaborate a bit more on this quote:

**"never forget what you are, for surely the world will not"** - meaning if you respect yourself, and if you carry yourself with pride, do good things and be proud to be called by your name and who you are, then everyone else will remember you.

Most people who are remembered, are the ones who do the good things . Like Martin Luther King jr., Cesar Chávez, Rosa Parks, Frida Kahlo and Nelson Mandela among many others. [all of whom at one time or another were branded Communist and/or Terrorists] As James Baldwin said “If you know from whence you came, there is really no limit to where you can go”

**"make it your strength. Then it will never be your weakness"** –

Make who you are your strength and have confidence in yourself. Don't be afraid to speak your mind against injustice. Work on your flaws, while sharpening your self-awareness.

**"Armor yourself in it, and it will never be used against you "**- Arm yourself with knowledge and be strong in your convictions, so the “unenlightened” or ignorant individual you may encounter can not use it against you. (Obviously noone you will meet here at Pomona College)

Yet, I must caution, don't interpret this as a call to maintain or reinforce race, gender or class privilege, rather it's a call to become part of a global community that attacks what we social scientist call interlocking systems of oppression (i.e. Racism, Sexism, Classism, and Homophobia).

Finally, remember, no matter if you decide to major in the Sciences, the Humanities or Social Sciences, this all applies to you. But it's not just about you alone, but the society you want to live in and you want to build !!! As we used to say in the sixties “if you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem.” **BE PART OF THE SOLUTION !!!**

Good luck, and ...Thank you so very much....Remember Sankofa.