President Stewart, Dean Urgo, Trustees, Board members, faculty, staff, friends, family, and especially fellow students, I am deeply honored to greet you. I am also surprised and still a little shocked that I should have this honor because I’ve spent the better part of my four years feeling antagonistic, critical and somewhat separate from the traditional idea of Hamilton. I’m particularly surprised and even a little stunned by Dean Urgo’s introduction because the first time I met him my sophomore year, he told me there were no circumstances under which I could address the faculty and now he’s letting me speak in front of this huge crowd. Maybe, they thought if I didn’t have permission, we would take it over.

Or perhaps the world really can change. When I first came to Hamilton, I was shocked with the contradictions between the institution’s ideals and the actual experience here—the de facto segregation, racial and otherwise, of Hamilton. We see one surface manifestation of this in the segregation of the dining hall where the white students eat in the main room, while the students of color mostly eat on the porch. We all know this reflects deeper problems that are not limited to race, but also related to issues of class, sexual orientation, gender and physical ability. The awareness of these contradictions makes it very hard to live and learn here.

I could not have excelled at Hamilton—no – I could not have survived Hamilton if I had not been part of a community of strong women, especially women of color. These women not only taught me the most important lessons I’ve learned at Hamilton, but also stood with me through my hardest times. Insofar as this honor recognizes the work that we have done to make Hamilton a better and more inclusive place, I cannot accept it alone. Instead, I hope to recognize this powerful and undervalued community.

The first time I met the students who would eventually become the women of sji, I was blown away by their ability to develop a nuanced and critical analysis of their experiences at Hamilton, and to do so faster and more thoroughly than I could. That’s what brilliance is—applying the critical thinking that is so emphasized in the classrooms to their own lives. By looking at their experiences through the
lens of the social structures and complex histories we learn about in class, they made the connection between Hamilton’s sometimes hostile environment and their own academic experience here.

At the same time, I was lucky to take a series of Comp Lit courses that really pushed me to understand my own ethical responsibility when I see injustices. If I believe something—for instance, that we all deserve a good Hamilton experience—and don’t act on it, then it is not a real belief; it’s a lie. One of my favorite professors often says that Hamilton made her a feminist and in the same vein, Hamilton made us activists.

Faced with a world in which we cannot ethically live, we can either search for various ways to escape or avoid the problems or we can set to work trying to make changes. Those students and I chose the latter. First, we identified the ways in which Hamilton could reasonably improve and then figured out what we could do to work toward those goals. Looking back at Hamilton as we prepare to leave it, it does seem a different place—a changed world. The conversations we started about diversity on campus are already being included in our faculty’s discussion about the curriculum and they are currently working on a cluster of courses around social complexity for the fall. The Cultural Education Center will finally—so they say—have a space next year with an office for our wonderful director. Most important, we created the kind of community that was lacking at Hamilton, a community that transcends boundaries of race, class and sexuality.

By no means is Hamilton now a perfect world and we rely, as we always have, on our wonderful professors and underclassman comrades to make our changes last and to make their own. As Dean Urgo mentioned, I believe as Proust says in In Search of Lost Time that “The creation of the world did not occur at the beginning of time, it occurs every day.” Everyday, we have not only the opportunity to make the world change, but also the obligation. And the best parts of Hamilton—our challenging but supportive professors and our outstanding peers—have well prepared us for that work. Thank you.