Hello fellow graduates, current students, and esteemed faculty! My name is Tiara Mawree Smith and I am greatly honored to be recognized as this year’s valedictorian for the Women and Gender Studies Department. To the graduating class of 2020, this year’s commencement looks startlingly different from years previous, but however different it may be, it does and should not mean any less. I know I speak for many when I say that all of our graduates this year have worked very hard to get where they are today, and although we cannot walk across the stage with our friends and family cheering us on, just know that we DESERVE this moment and that we all should feel PROUD of ourselves for making it this far! Our hard work has led us to this very moment, and I couldn’t be more thrilled to be the one to congratulate our seniors on their many successes in college, and the many more to come.

I would like to thank the Women and Gender Studies Department for recognizing me as valedictorian for the 2020 graduating class. I feel incredibly honored to have the privilege of speaking on behalf of the department and my fellow graduates. I wish that I were standing at a podium reading this speech, rather than having it read online, but I am extremely grateful that the department not only supported its students during these uncertain times, but also constructed a way in which we are able to congratulate our seniors on their many accomplishments. I would also like to thank the Women and Gender Studies faculty for passing on their knowledge in ways that went far beyond the classroom walls, and for offering support and guidance to students when needed most. Thank you for all that you do for your students, for the department, and for your communities; you are an inspiration to us all. Finally, I’d like to thank my fellow students for the memories that will be cherished for years to come, for the knowledge that we have shared with one another, and for the love and support we have given each
other over the years. It has been an honor to learn and grow beside each of you.

The Women and Gender Studies major and minor are unlike any other majors and minors offered at California State University, Fullerton. I stumbled upon the major as I think many of us did; we were not really searching for it, but once we found it, we knew that that is where we were meant to be. I wouldn’t be who or where I am today if it wasn’t for a general education counselor who suggested that I add a minor alongside my English major. She has suggested Women and Gender Studies because I told her that I was curious about the injustices that I was continually seeing in the world. I was apprehensive at first, because I didn’t know what the minor fully entailed, but once I began the introductory course, I knew that it was exactly what I’ve been missing in my education. I ended up changing the minor to a Women and Gender Studies major, and am very glad that I did so. Not only does the Women and Gender Studies major compliment my English major, but it has also benefited me in the greatest of ways.

I know I speak on behalf of all of the Women and Gender Studies majors and minors when I say that this department means so much to us. For many, it has been our home away from home, our haven when other places seem out of reach, a supporting friend that encourages us to keep going, and a confidant when we need it most. Countless times, I have viewed this department as a place where I can critically question the world around me and actively learn from what others have to say. It has also given me a space where I feel accepted in the classroom, and where I can express my ideas and beliefs with like-minded individuals. I will be forever grateful for what I have gained from this major, and will always remember the department staff, the professors, and my fellow students who have touched my life in the greatest of ways.

Maya Angelou once said “People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you
made them feel”. We may forget some of what we have learned throughout our college days and we may forget what others have done for us while taking class after class, ever looking towards graduation, but I know in my heart that we will never forget what it means to be a part of Women and Gender Studies. On behalf of the Women and Gender Studies Department, I welcome the graduating class of 2020 to the next chapter of our lives. May we never forget to turn the page, and to always trust the next chapter because we are the authors of our own stories. Congratulations Class of 2020!

Tiara Mawree Smith, Graduating Class of 2020 Valedictorian

Women and Gender Studies at California State University, Fullerton