Disobedience Is What NWSA Is Potentially about

Adrienne Rich
KEYNOTE ADDRESS: THE NWSA CONVENTION

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For those of you who are unaware of it, I want to start with the fact that the advance coverage of this Convention by the Hartford Courant on May 19, 1981, was headlined “Lesbian Housing Available for Women's Conference at UConn” and focused entirely on the arrangements for a “lesbian section” of the dormitory, where “between 60 and 75 women” would by request be lodged. Heavy emphasis was laid on alleged difficulties between lesbians and heterosexual women last year in Bloomington, and the issue of “segregated” housing. There was no mention whatsoever of racism as the theme of the Convention.

I feel it is important to start by analyzing this. It is, first of all, a deliberate erasure of our declared purpose here. The National Women's Studies Association chose, as a part of the feminist movement rather than as a dutiful daughter of academia, to address the estrangement, ignorance, fear, anger, and disempowerment created by the institutional racism which saturates all our lives. Many of us have come here in a mixture of hope and fear, hope and anger, hope and determination. Many, it may be assumed, have stayed away: some for lack of money, some for lack of hope, some for lack of determination, some for lack of caring. But these meetings have a purpose, and this purpose, visibly stated in NWSA's literature, has been wiped out by the local press.

It should be obvious to us by now that this kind of erasure serves and supports the racism of the larger society. Over and over in the past, women have met or tried to meet across barriers of color and lines of privilege, only to have those efforts erased in the historical record and the academic curriculum. We thus lack transformational models and the evidence that what we are trying to do has a history with its own mistakes and advances, from which we could learn. Even more, the woman of color herself has been obliterated from the record. To quote from the title of a forthcoming collection edited by Patricia Bell Scott, Barbara Smith, and Gloria Hull: All the Women Are White. All the Blacks Are Men. But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies. How simple, then, for the Hartford Courant to erase the issue of racism, in a state where the Ku Klux Klan openly marches, by playing on a different string of bigotry and fear—the New Right's vocal antifeminism and homophobia. How easy, as well, for these tactics to touch the strings both of homophobia and of racism in the enclave of Women's Studies itself, where lesbians are still feared and women of color are still ignored.

It would be very easy —given the demands of the task NWSA has set itself here—for us to lose our hard-won threads of connectedness and purpose, to focus, as the media intend us to do, on their choice of agenda for us. But we don't have to do this. We can choose to see the connections between what is being floodlighted, targeted, on the one hand, and what is being rendered invisible, on the other. White feminists and lesbians are not, on the whole, immediately identifiable: we have to be pointed out. Women of color are, on the whole, identifiable, but they aren't supposed to be here anyway, so their presence, and whatever we have in common as women, must be erased from the record. White women who seem to be crossing the lines drawn for us by the white fathers must be targeted so we can be ordered back behind those lines; the white community must understand that these women are not acting like their fathers' daughters. Women of color who are found in the wrong place as defined at any given time by the white fathers will receive their retribution unseen—if they are beaten, raped, insulted, harassed, mutilated, murdered, these events will go unreported, unpunished, unconnected, and white women are not even supposed to know they occur, let alone identify with the sufferings endured.

There is a word which has been resounding in my head for several months, since I first read it on the cover of the Southern lesbian/feminist journal Feminary: that word is DISOBEDIENCE. (The latest issue of Feminary is devoted to that theme.) And in thinking about this week of meetings of NWSA, it has seemed to me that disobedience is what NWSA is potentially about, in choosing to build a conference around women's response to racism. The question now facing Women's Studies, it seems to me, is the extent to which she has, in the past decade, matured into the dutiful daughter of the white, patriarchal university—a daughter who threw tantrums and played the tomboy when she was younger but who has now learned to wear a dress and speak and act almost as nicely as Daddy wants her to; and the extent to which Women’s Studies will remember that her mother was not Athena, but the Women's Liberation Movement, a grassroots political movement with roots in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s; a movement blazing with lesbian energy, whose earliest journals had names like “It Ain’t Me, Babe,” “No More Fun and Games,” “Off

Our Backs," "Up From Under," and "The Furies." In other words, how disobedient will Women's Studies be in the 1980s: how will this Association address the racism, misogyny, homophobia, of the university, and of the corporate society in which it is embedded; and how will white feminist scholars and teachers and students practice disobedience to patriarchy?

In that same issue of *Femininary*, Minnie Bruce Pratt writes the following in an essay on "Rebellion":

I did not understand until years after I had left home that the heroes I worshipped for their individual willful pursuit of the honorable right were men who were doing this for their rights, for the rights of white men; that it was very true that the War had been fought for states' rights, but that this was the same as fighting it for slavery, since at issue was the right of the white men who ran the Southern states to maintain their rule over black men and women, and white women too; that some were kind, thoughtful, gallant, even principled men in their way, but they were not going to give up control of that state. I did not see until years later that while I admired those dead heroes, the living men around me were miserable; that the heroes had fought not for change but for the right to keep things the way they were; that, in fact, every war that I knew of that had ever been fought was between two sets of men, each wanting to run things their way. I understood finally that I had fantasized about the Great Rebellion because I wanted some vicarious motion, change, control of my life, but that this was a delusional daydream, one that white people of the old Confederacy have been caught in since before the War, the daydream, the romance of rebellion, the breaking out of the nightmare of slavery, race hatred, economic differences, sex differences; that this was a romance because the act of rebellion satisfied the need for change while the values which were defended, those of white male supremacy, remained the same. I understood years later that I was fascinated by Jackson and Lee and Stuart because I was confined in my life as a white woman, as a girl; that they satisfied in me the great need to move, to rebel, to change, without my having to change at all; that their obsession with will attracted me because I was allowed a will only in regard to those "below" me, black men and women, and later, children. I was not encouraged to consider using my will against those white men who determined how things were. Such a use of the will was never discussed in my home; the will that was valued was the will of the dead heroes, the will for things to remain the same. I understood years later that my mother and grandmothers and great-grandmothers had been heroines, in one way, and had used their will to grit their teeth and endure, to walk through the ruins, blood, and mess left by men. I understood finally that this heroic will to endure is still not the same as the will to change, the true rebellion.

And at the end of the essay, Pratt writes:

After the February 2d anti-Klan march in Greensboro I wore my bright yellow button that says "Stop the Klan!" around Fayetteville. And at 7-Elevens and at garage sales, white men would stop me and look at it and smile and say, ever so politely. "Why, I belong to the Klan" (whether they actually did or not was, of course, irrelevant), and then become violently abusive when I refused to accept this as a joke. I had crossed their line between white and black; I had, to them, repudiated whiteness and joined with the others. I had never had this sort of reaction to any women’s buttons I had worn, but I realized that they had literally not been radical enough—they had been "Pass the ERA" buttons. If I had worn a button that read “Support Lesbian Mothers,” I’m sure the abuse would have been intense, because I would have absolutely crossed the line they have drawn between man’s world and woman’s world.

To understand where as white women we have been situated in the overall system of oppression which also oppresses us, is crucial knowledge if we are serious about our lives. Pratt's essay is really about the difference between true and false rebellion. False rebellion is to varying degrees in varying places acceptable to the white fathers. True rebellion is something that, with each step we take, cuts us further from identification with racist patriarchy, which has rewarded us for our loyalty and which will punish us for becoming disloyal. It does not matter how we change our names or what music we listen to, or whether we celebrate Christmas or Chanukah or the Solstice, or how many books by women we teach—so long as we can identify only with white women, we are still connected to that system of objectification and callousness and cruelty called racism. And that system is not simply a "patriarchal mindfuck," an idea, which the feminist can assume she has tossed out along with "mankind" and God the Father. It is a material reality of the flesh and nerves; and our relation to it as white feminists is a complex function. As the Black writer/activist Michele Russell writes, in her "Open Letter to the Academy," addressing white women in the university:

Your oppression and exploitation have been more cleverly masked than ours, more delicately elaborated. The techniques, refined. You were rewarded in minor ways for docile and active complicity in our dehumanization. At base, the risk of your complete alienation from the system of white male rule that also exploited you was too great to run. The perpetuation of the race depended upon your reproductive capacity: your willingness to bear and rear succeeding generations of oppressors. While your reproductive function has been the only reason for your relative protection in the colonizing process, ours, on the contrary, has sharpened the knife colonialism applies to our throats and wombs. Witness government-sanctioned mass sterilization in Puerto Rico, New York, and Brazil.

And in thinking of the issue of enforced sterilization, we must also inevitably think of the issue of NWSA's position on the presence of, and funding by, agencies such as A.I.D. Russell continues, still addressing white women scholars:

I draw on these discrepancies in our condition not to assign blame or to suggest that you are blind to the implications of this process. We also know that history is full of examples of white women rejecting the cultural and economic blackmail that kept you in service. You walked out on your jobs: in the home, in mills and mines, in heavy manufacturing, in bureaucracies. Occasionally, small minorities succeeded in creating artistic and intellectual communities that sustained elements of a culture independent of the dominant commodity relations of bourgeois society. But on balance, that history—the one of your resistance—is still to...
be discovered and amplified by this generation. All of you. That is why you are important.

The central question, of course, is “What version of civilization will you construct?” What stories will you tell each other and leave for future generations? What truths will consistently inform your plot? How will you define yourselves in relation to the central patterns of domination in the world, and how will you align on the side of freedom? How rigorously will you face your own past with all its warts?**

Only as white women begin to understand both our obedience and complicity, and our rebellions, do we begin to have the tools for an ongoing response to racism which is neither circular, rhetorical, nor resentful. White women’s antiracism, and lesbianism, have both been profound refusals to obey.

It seems to me that the word “guilt” has arisen too often in discussions such as these. Women of color in their anger to stand between white women and disobedience, white women each other of provoking guilt; it is guilt, endlessly, that is supposed even to think about, or are supposed to think about only what rewards we have reaped from our obedience, and what our selves in relation to the central patterns of domination in the world.

Each of us needs to know that no other white woman has any competitive monopoly on understanding racism. Each of us needs other white women as allies in meeting the immense rush of forces which are stirred up at the mention of something we are not supposed even to think about, or are supposed to think about only in the terms the fathers have taught us. Only then can we come to some notion of what our docility and complicity have meant, how we as victims of objectification have also objectified other women, what rewards we have reaped from our obedience, and what our present and future responsibility must be.

Finally, I want to say something about my personal understanding of racism. For a long time, particularly in the 1960s, I had to believe that, though white, I was not a carrier of racism. If, as a political choice, I was actively engaged in teaching Black and Puerto Rican and Asian freshmen instead of white graduate-school poets; if I joined in the fight for Open Admissions at the City University; if a kind of nobility and heroism my spirit craved had become opened to me through King’s Letter From Birmingham Jail, Baldwin’s essays, the letters of George Jackson; if the words of Frantz Fanon and Malcolm X felt cathartic and cleansing to me, why did those words also feel accusing and menacing? What in me felt accursed or threatened, even while something else in me felt those words as a lifecycle of sanity?

The white male Left offered no answers. The racists were all “out there”: the pigs, the rednecks, the reactionary bourgeois professors, Nelson Rockefeller, the “Jewish” landlords. The racists were my parents, my Southern family, not those whites who marched singing “We Shall Overcome,” and certainly not anyone white who had worked in the early days with SNCC or traveled to Mississippi. Credentials were important: particularly a Black lover, a Black child; as if they could solve, once and for all, the problem of how and when, if ever, the white person stopped thinking racist thoughts or seeing in racist patterns; became washed clean, as it were; became “part of the solution instead of the problem.” There was a very “born-again” spirit among white anti-racist activists in the 1960s—as if we could discard our pasts, as if we must, having once seen the political light, have no fear or hatred of darkness anywhere in our souls.

I speak of that period because it has been part of the history I have needed to face rigorously, in particular as a feminist committed to the struggle of all women for liberation. I think we need to get rid of the useless baggage that says that by opposing racist violence, by doing antiracist work, or by becoming feminists, white women somehow cease to carry racism within us.

As Chris South writes, “The roots may be in the patriarchy but they’ve grown into us.” What was true for me was that in growing into feminism and coming out as a lesbian I found a sense of personal and collective history and identity, affirmed by the words of white women who had struggled in the past for justice and freedom as women; the Grimke sisters, Anthony, Schreiner, Goldman, Gilman, Woolf, to name a few. Feminism became a political and spiritual base from which I could move to examine rather than try to hide my own racism, recognize that I have antiracist work to do continuously within myself. Increasingly, the writings of contemporary lesbian and feminist women of color have moved and challenged me to push my horizons further, examine with fresh eyes the world I thought I knew and took for granted. There is an inner tension and dynamic I need to be constantly checking, between my beliefs and standards for myself, and how I still think and act as a daughter of white patriarchy. If I say that I am trying to recognize and change myself certain failures to see or hear, certain kinds of arrogance, ignorance, passivity, which have to do with living in a white skin, that is, which have to do with racism, I can say this as a woman committed to the love of women, including love for myself.

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Adrienne Rich’s newest book, A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far: Poems 1978-81, will be published in November by W.W. Norton.