

Dawson Cegep - Womxn/Gender Studies Celebration Speech

Kwe, Adaberz, hi

First, I want to acknowledge the unceded Kanien'kehá (Mohawk) land that we are gathered upon today. For those of us who are not Indigenous to this land, I ask that we reflect on ongoing struggles led by Indigenous Nations; that we reflect on struggles of self-determination and land sovereignty that have taken place on this very land, and anti-colonial struggles that continue to take place in these spaces. I ask that we celebrate Indigenous warriors, particularly Indigenous Womxn, and those whose gender expression continues to be constructed as a threat to colonial and hetero-patriarchal structures of power.

I acknowledge everyone who has put in time and thought into making this event happen. Most of all, I want to thank you, the students, for having me at your celebration. I congratulate you for having the guts to engage in Womxn and gender studies, and in this way, in subverting patriarchy.

I acknowledge Michelle Smith for a very flattering invitation, asking me to speak here today. I had crossed paths with Michelle at the South Asian Women's Community Centre at an annual event last summer. The event was organised to celebrate anti-colonial resistance of the Kanien'kehá:ka nation in Kanehsatake. The event also aimed to discuss ongoing feminist solidarity between Indigenous nations and Racialised and Migrant settlers.

I place importance on listening (vs talking) particularly as a settler on occupied Indigenous land, and so accepting this invitation, as flattering as it was, was not an obvious decision. I was asked to speak on intersectional feminism. However, it is precisely the theory and praxis of intersectional feminism that encourages me to reflect on who it is that takes up space, who gets asked to speak, and who does not. I try to reflect on access, on power, and privilege in both obvious and complicated ways. I think about my mom who, for me, has become an embodiment of inspiration, resilience, and resistance, but does not have access to the same spaces I do. I so wish that Young Racialised Womxn I have had the privilege of working with can be offered such a space so that they can tell their stories to you. I wish that people without immigration status, and those defying deportation orders would consistently be asked to share their stories. There are stories in detention centres, in prisons, stories on the streets, stories within school corridors, stories behind closed doors. There are countless of stories in this very space, both past and present. And so, I speak today recognising that my story is an important one, but one that is part of many stories, stories that make up the tapestry of our collective struggles for justice. Just like any of you here, my story goes beyond 15 minutes. It even goes beyond the chronological age of my existence. My story cannot be effectively narrated in the language of British colonizers that invaded the lands of my ancestors. When a white person asks me where I am from, I feel anger, but it also elicits confusion. I was born on this land, but I am not Indigenous to this land. I am still figuring out my story across realities of colonialism, imperialism, hetero-patriarchy and capitalism. I wish I can say that I have figured it all out, but then, we wouldn't be here, needing to study gender, needing to understand oppression at the intersections of gender, race, class, immigration status, ability, sexual orientations and sexuality. And so, with vulnerability and honesty, I share with you part of my story as my way to contribute to collective resilience and resistance against systems that divide people and impose power imbalances between them. I share part of my story as a way to contribute to your celebration, a celebration of your resistance, a celebration of your engagement with womxn and gender studies.

I begin part of my story with:

I do not want to be a feminist

I don't.

Intergenerational spaces are incredibly crucial for gender justice.

Intergenerational spaces are tremendously powerful and inspiring

But, intergenerational spaces can also be incredibly frustrating.

Along with other Young Womxn, I keep telling some of my elders (and I say some, because I do not mean to generalise) that I do not want the organisation that they courageously founded over 30 years ago to continue to exist for another three decades.

I do not want the organisation to exist period, because I want state and interpersonal violence to end, now.

I do not want there to be a reason for feminist organisations to have to exist.

I tell them that in order for me to struggle, I need to imagine this, to imagine a world that is different from this one

I need to reflect on all the moments of beauty now, even if brief, and to multiply them by infinity

But, I realise that in this moment, state and interpersonal violence do exist.

And so, I choose to be an anti-racist feminist.

Not because I want to, but because I have to.

I do not wish to box myself in with labels

But I'd rather reclaim the identities that structures of power attempt to take away from me.

So, I am a Queer anti-racist feminist.

For me, this means that I am an artist-activist;

Using my talents and passion to express my love and rage on canvas, and in poems;

For me it has meant being part of youth-led projects, community marches and events, and anti-street harassment campaigns.

Being a feminist means that I am critical, that I am fighting against systems that are out to crush me, and those I care for.

But I also recognise that it is hard to fight.

It is hard to resist.

Because systemic oppression is violent

Because white-supremacy and racism are violent

Because capitalism, ageism, ableism, and hetero-normativity are violent

Because misogyny and Transphobia are violent

Because rape culture on occupied Turtle Island, in the context of ongoing genocide and rape of Indigenous Womxn is violent.

And these intersections are deeply violent

They are so violent, that sometimes, just sometimes, we will try so hard to end the system, that we will burn ourselves out trying to do so.

I have seen groups fall apart, I have seen people burn-out, I have seen myself burn out.

I have experienced moments of speechlessness at the brutality of this world.

I have experienced trauma and hopelessness

I have felt profoundly broken.

In these moments, I have had to reach out to my community.

I have had to reach out to the fighter within me, to remind myself that actually, I am not broken that I may feel broken, but that I am not.

I have needed to remind myself that many of us are forced to live in this unjust world fragmented, but that I need to see my existence as threads of resistance, as they migrate across concrete slabs and oceans, on journeys of struggle and heart, between breaths of love and rage, between confusion and compassion, between binaries that do not exist, and across borders that never should have been.

And so, subsequent to trying so hard to smash the system and burning out, I have learned to breathe again.

I have learned that intersectional feminism means embracing my existence as a form of resistance.

I have learned about self and collective care in ways I could never have imagined.

I have learned to seek inspiration over warm pupusas with an Indigenous Queer Feminist street-artist, as she talks to me about her beautiful and fierce Decolonising street art organising.

I have learned to be inspired by youth shouting in megaphones in the streets as gendered bodies reclaim public space through presence and poetry.

I have learned to be inspired by two racialised teenagers as they support each other in friendship and dance as they resist oppression and violence in their daily.

I have learned that instead of internalising the brutality of this world, to try and internalise all the beauty I experience in it, to ground myself in interactions with some of the most amazing Womyn of Colour I have had the privilege of organising with as part of the South Asian Youth collective - to remember revolutionary discussions, to remember funny discussions, ways of relating with each other, and organising together, including some pretty bad-ass zine making! I remind myself of the beauty in people I have had, and do have, in my life, and the importance of not only offering love and support, but also in receiving love and support while the system tries to tear us apart from each other.

I have learned to accept losing a battle but to never let misogyny in its many manifestations defeat me in this war.

I have learned that victory is when we are able to facilitate safer spaces, safer spaces to be able to talk about sexual health, about empowerment, safer spaces that allow us to be weird, to be unconventional, and to be rebellious. Safer spaces where we are accountable of our actions, where we understand how systems of oppression marginalise us, but also how we benefit from them. For me, this can mean that as someone who is non-Indigenous, non-Black, as someone who has citizenship, as someone who is not Trans, as someone who can converse in colonial languages, I need to recognise that my feminist struggle is inextricably linked to those who are at the margins within different intersections, and that my actions of solidarity need to be inspired by the leadership of those who are directly impacted.

I have learned that intersectional feminism is not just about what we are against, but in applying this theory, it is also about reflecting, in all its complexity, what we are actually for.

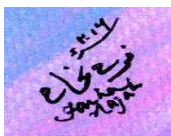
bell hooks states that "The function of art is to do more than tell it like it is-it's to imagine what is possible".

And so, I have learned to imagine again. I have learned to imagine through anti-authoritarian and empowerment-based art learning with fellow artists and activists who have shared their skills and visions with me, as they tell me about story telling and rule-breaking through photography, paint and graffiti.

And so, I envision a time and space where people are put first, not secondary to capital,
A world where people are treated justly, not deemed to be mere commodities
where a person is free to openly love romantically any other person in all their beauty and layers
where the earth is taken care of.
where people are free to migrate, to move, to laugh, to shed a tear, to breathe.
I imagine a world without border fences, without detention centers and reservations.
Where artificial lines are erased from concrete slabs
And are replaced by tantalizing trees
A world where pollution no longer overpowers the smell of jasmine
Where an 11 year old girl can sit on the warm brown sand
The granules firmly pressed against her hands
And the fierce sun sets on the free ocean waters
The waves culminate into an enchanting melody
In a moment, she feels the emancipation course through her veins
In this world that I imagine, she smiles sitting next to her friend,
A drop peers from her glittering eye and trickles down her cheek
She thinks, 'we've finally achieved our vision of a just society'
"Finally", she says, "we are all free."

Intersectional feminism has brought me to a place of ongoing imagining of a just world. Suheir Hammad, poet, author and political activist, states "The machine will grind you down, but the machine is not bigger than the imagination. Rome fell in a day. We know this." And so, on the occasion of this celebration, I wish you ongoing learning of rules that are imposed on us by systems of oppression, in order for you to then break these rules. I wish you rule-breaking. I wish you story listening, I wish you story telling. I wish you ongoing strength as you continue to acquire tools of resistance in order to collapse flawed gender binaries. I wish you ongoing learning and praxis of decolonisation, of critical thought everywhere you go. And most of all, I wish you imagination.

Thank you and congratulations.



farha najah, 2016