

**Baccalaureate Address**  
**Bard College**  
**May 2025**  
**Valerie Barr**

When I received the invitation to speak to you today, three thoughts immediately popped into my head. The first thought was how much I dislike public speaking – that might seem odd given that I have spent decades teaching, but I maintain that teaching small classes is wildly different than speaking to a large assembly of people!

Next came a question. What of merit can I, a computer scientist, possibly say to all of you who are about to embark on your post-college journey? Some of you might be expecting me to talk about all the ways in which technology will advance in the future, all the wonderful cool things it could be used for, and there are many. Others might be expecting me to talk about how social media and generative AI are destroying democracy and the fabric of society, that we should pull the plug on all of it. While I do think along those lines, the third thought that came into my head drowned out the first two.

My third thought was the final portion of the final line from Adrienne Rich's poem "*The Burning of Paper Instead of Children*". This fragment of poetry, quite simply, is "and this is the oppressor's language". I considered this for a while, I considered whether, as a computer scientist, as a member of the Science, Math, and Computing Division, I dared to get up here and talk about poetry. After all, as my partner said to me, what do I know about poetry? But I, like you, had a liberal arts education, so bear with me while I do my best.

The complete final stanza of *The Burning of Paper Instead of Children* is

I am composing on the typewriter late at night, thinking of today. How well we all spoke. A language is a map of our failures. Frederick Douglass wrote an English purer than Milton's. People suffer highly in poverty. There are methods but we do not use them. Joan, who could not read, spoke some peasant form of French. Some of the suffering are: it is hard to tell the truth; this is America; I cannot touch you now. In America we have only the present tense. I am in danger. You are in danger. The burning of a book arouses no sensation in me. I know it hurts to burn. There are flames of napalm in Catonsville, Maryland. I know it hurts to burn. The typewriter is overheated, my mouth is burning. I cannot touch you and this is the oppressor's language.

For context, Rich wrote this poem in 1968, with her references to Joan of Arc, the fight against slavery, and opposition to the Vietnam War. I kept probing, asking myself why, of all the poems I have read, this was the one that leapt into my brain when asked to speak to you today. As I considered what to say, I learned that the same final line stuck with bell hooks. Hooks was Distinguished Professor in Residence at Berea College and wrote extensively on race, feminism, and class. In her text *Teaching to Transgress*:

*Education as the Practice of Freedom*, hooks wrote “That poem, speaking against domination, against racism and class oppression, attempts to illustrate graphically that stopping the political persecution and torture of living beings is a more vital issue than censorship, than burning books.”

Much has struck me about you, the students, during my time at Bard. And much of what I will say to you applies as well to the faculty and staff, not just here in Annandale, but throughout the Bard Network. One word that keeps coming to mind when I think about you is resilience, and one word I hope will continue to describe you is resistance. I think that is why Adrienne Rich’s poem lodged in my head – because she was referring to situations that have demanded resilience and resistance. I have been awed by those of you who have come here as refugees, escaping a horrible situation that this country helped create - yet you came to Bard and embraced the opportunity even though you might have many reasons to hate the US. Some of you have come from countries with fascist regimes and currently are not able to go home if you wish to re-enter the U.S. for jobs or graduate study. Some of you have been sitting in collegial dialogue with fellow students while your two countries are at war. Some of you have been here safely studying while your families, friends, and neighbors have been victims of unspeakably horrific military assault and genocide. And some of you have been trying to study these last few months while you watched your own country, this country, devolve away from democracy at the hands of white supremacist misogynistic hateful billionaires and tech broligarchs.

I have been awed by your ability to come to classes and office hours and sproj meetings, eager to engage.

So, why this line, this poem, at this point in time, for this student body?

Adrienne Rich showed, with her poetry, that we all have tools with which we can resist: language, music, science, art, economic and political and literary analysis. When someone says lies are truth and the truth is a lie, we have to resist with the means available to us. That will differ for each of you – but you leave here with the ability to resist with language, with music, with theatre and film and photography. To resist with science, and to resist with the critical reading and speaking skills you have developed during your time here at Bard. It may have felt onerous at times, but it was so much more than merely course work.

Thank you, and congratulations.