**Additions? Revisions? Who knows, this is what came out of my ‘jumbled musings’ and so here we are.**

**Spaces and How We Occupy Them**

There was so much heat in that room. The heat of emotional wreckage and broken spirits and shattered trust. But there was also hope. Hope and mirth and respect and so many voices speaking so many truths that were all allowed to be held in that space. And while that room was burning and sighing and creaking under the weight of what was held there, while blue-grey flames licked at our ankles and singed our hair, while those who spoke burned brighter than the rest of us, and hurled flaming prose into the air, unhinging the charred rafters that crashed to the ground around us, while ash drifted about us in flakes of sorrow, while big plops of salty tears slipped from tired eyes and sizzled in the heat of the room, while we burned and watch our peers and colleagues and friends and community burn, we stayed. And we sat. And we listened. I hope.

The space that was made at the town hall I spoke to in the passage above was a space that had to be constructed. It was a space that has not and continues to not exist on Bryn Mawr’s campus in any organic capacity, and it is this lack of space for so many marginalized identities at Bryn Mawr that brought us to that room, burned and singed and alight in a new kind of artificially constructed space.

For the purposes of this paper, I will define space as any physical or intellectual place that can be occupied. Just because a space can be occupied, however, does not mean that everyone in that space truly has access to it, which yields the question, who defines a space? For the most part, any space in the United States is defined and held by white people. In the context of “the tears that white women” shed in a mixed space, that space immediately becomes defined by the emotions of the white woman, the tears she floods the space with and the privilege that she concretizes in the space that she continues to posses. Because white people inherently posses almost any space they walk into due to the power imbalance of privilege skewed towards white people, only a white person is granted the choice to relinquish space. A white person can choose to concede a space or continue to hold it, but that same choice is not afforded to a person of color, they must wait to have the space surrendered to them.

The space of Bryn Mawr is occupied always by white voices, inherently because the spaces of the United States are always occupied by white voices. And because of the overwhelming majority of white voices that cannot seem to agree unanimously to relinquish space, we create a vacuum for students of color, a void where space that they can hold is almost never found or experienced without an active transition and construction of such a space. And because a space always needs to be constructed for black students and students of color to hold, they find themselves needing to push back against the entire space of Bryn Mawr, otherwise our white space constantly squeezes them out. They need to physically, and abruptly crash into that white space, that Bryn Mawr space. Their capacity to hold space is so consistently denied, by the action and inaction of white people at Bryn Mawr not surrendering space, that the only choice that is left, a loud and impolite reclamation of space, is not a choice at all, but a necessity.

*A short analogy: Think of the space I am speaking about as the air that we breathe. White people have access to air wherever we go in the U.S. but people of color only have uninhibited access to air in specific places, places where white people are not. People of color can have access to the air that a white person breathes when a white person actively decides to hold their breath, but as soon as a white person continues to take up that air, a person of color must immediately hold their breath again. People of color may have enough air to survive, but it is nowhere near enough to flourish.*

Inmates face this same debilitation, although perhaps on a different level. Inmates do not hold any space inside of the prison unless someone allows them to hold it. For Bryn Mawr’s students of color, they are allowed to hold space when a white person makes the conscious choice to relinquish space. For inmates, they are allowed to hold space when any ‘outside’ person actively chooses to give the space to those on the ‘inside’. Almost like a gift.

The cruel irony of this paradox of space arises when we acknowledge that the places where marginalized people are forced to fight for space, are that very places that have been constructed specifically for those marginalized identities. Bryn Mawr’s admissions policies create an opening for individuals that would probably not otherwise have access to an institution like Bryn Mawr. But as soon as that access is granted, they are thrown into a place, theoretically made, in part, for them, that works immediately against them. Prisons are constructed as a place to give ‘deviants’ a space. But this space, originally constructed for the purposes of rehabilitation and reintegration has become a place made only to silence people on the inside. Inmates face a space that is always their own and never their own. They must be in the space they are forced into and yet they hold none of it. And so we find ourselves constructing space where black voices and voices of color can hold and be held, within a space that denies that everyday, even though the purpose of the larger space was originally meant to alleviate that very structure.

*A second analogy: Think of an air tank that scuba divers use. White people always have an air tank, one that never runs out. But black people and people of color don’t have one. So we built a space under the ocean (where for the purposes of this analogy we all live) that was filled with air. But the air was not breathable, it was the wrong kind of air for human lungs and white people got to keep their air tanks inside the waterless space, but black people and people of color still didn’t have anything to breath with. Even though we made a space for those without air tanks, white people are still the only ones with the choice of sharing the air in their air tanks. And while it can never run out, while we might all thrive together should we truly share our air, most white people live in a space of ‘what it?’ What if the air does run out? Perhaps then where we’ll all be suffering, so isn’t it better to keep things the way they are?*

The irony of an existence such as this cannot be understated, because it is this very irony that allows race relations to progress in this country not by repairing but by burying. Racism gets buried under subtleties and micro-aggressions allowing us to point to all the external progress we have made and ignore the undercurrent of racism that has taken deep, deep root in our nation today. We (read: white people) still own almost all spaces in the U.S., but that is a much subtler notion than outwards violence towards people of color. The tools we’ve used to build a solution are tools that we have always used to oppress, and we’ve built a foundation that cannot sustain the growth and change it was intended for. It is so easy to point to the gleam of our newly constructed progresses and ignore the faulty foundation that still only supports white people. That still creates room for white people to walk into a room and own the space, while people of color seem at every turn to be forced to walk on the fault lines of our cracked foundation, carefully, invisibly, and always at risk.