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Experimental Essay

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Basically just lots of jumbled thoughts about BMC, #BlackLivesMatter, the world, and other general musings through the lens of a synesthetic white lesbian

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I wonder at the world,

in horrified awe

At its dazzling capacity

to absorb yet another blow.

I wonder at the world,

But mostly, I wonder at myself.

I wrote this poem in response to some of the recent events that we have been discussing in class and on campus the past couple of weeks. I wonder at the way the world seems to be always alight in flames, at the way that somehow, someway, the earth predictably rotates on its axis, and night turns to day turns to night, and my life continues on. It is in these moments of self reflection, when I wonder most at myself, that I feel truly selfish.

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This Thursday I decided not to attend class. Instead I attended the discussion in TGH. Thomas Great Hall. A building and a room who’s very name has immortalized the racist foundations that Bryn Mawr was built upon. And again, I am reminded of Antigone’s brother, and Creon’s reign built upon the rotting flesh of stubborn pride. Racism, bigotry, classism, ableism, it all lives in the decaying walls of Bryn Mawr, and I wonder at our capacity to heal in an institution built on the very sentiments we hold so evil but carry out every day.

Again, the image of burnt flesh,

the rotten poison spread over Thebes

from that vile pillar of reign springs to mind.

If poison be the medicine we use to remedy,

how can we expect ever to rise from our sick bed?

Our bedsores fester and groan,

with our only relief a moment

of placebo induced safety

until the poison we believe so fervently can heal,

continues to slurp away at our body

our only fortress once all is said and done.

And so this is my fear; That these discussions, while so vitally important because they are a space to tear open wounds never properly healed, to bear forth the festering infections that have led us here, so that we can begin to tend to our hurts and begin to heal, maybe for the first time with true remedies, I fear that they are yet another placebo. A breaking of a silence that will end only with placation. And yet I also feel as though we are on a precipice, a ledge that we have found ourselves at so many times before, peering over into an unknown that we only know must be better than the cracked and broken landscape behind us. And each time we find ourselves here, we turn back. Back to the barren bramble we should have left behind, in a futile effort to make life bloom. And each time we have produced a flower or two, sealed some of the fissures and covered over the fractures. But inevitably, the façade only lasts so long, and we find ourselves back at that edge, and this time, I hope beyond hope, that we are ready to jump.

I also want to speak to the emotion in that was in that room, and I want to acknowledge that there is no way I could possibly do justice to it. But I want to attempt to impart some sense of the emotional turmoil that hung so heavily in the air in TGH for those few hours.

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.

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The past few months in this 360 has tapped a artery in me that I thought was long gone, buried under a web of academic muscle and dermis I have been meticulously constructing in an effort to stem what once flowed from me so freely, what I thought had no place in an institution of higher learning. I have always read in color, and once, I wrote in color too. Vibrancy and light gushing forth in hues that always mirrored what I had read last. What I read last though, before my first piece of writing was due in this 360, was Citizen. And the dull gleam of steely of academic writing that I had paralleled for so long was washed away in the beautiful heartbreaking kaleidoscopic of Claudia Rankine’s prose. And as Citizen with my starting point I have accrued over these weeks and months a prism of my own, reflective of the emotive beauty I kept buried away for so long, because what place did it have in an essay constructed of black and grey and purple? But all the while, unbeknownst to me, it lived. Rushing and pulsing through that artery I had concealed long ago.

I wanted to read some of the pieces that I wrote, partially for self validation, how can I deny that it makes me feel good to share writing that I know is well crafted and that others often receive so positively? And partially because I want to examine, again, how an historical voice, (mine) is permitted to paint with words the way I do, while ahistorical voices, voices that were finally heard this past week in Bryn Mawr, (although whether they were listened to is yet to be seen) and voices who are still fighting to break through the noise and static that bleeds through the United States, are too often points of contention or dismissal because their voices make us (read; white folks) question who and how we are what we are.

Words, and these colors I paint with, have become, now, the primary way that I have found I can accurately, or just adequately express myself. But I also wonder at whether this art that I have so carefully crafted, has a place in the Arts of Resistance. Only I can see the tints and shades of my words on the page, to others, is it merely a white woman expressing momentary grief at a structure I inherently benefit from? I want to examine this through the lens that both Abby and Anne brought to my attention this past week, called White Woman’s Tears and the Men who Love Them.

This was not one of the assigned readings so if you did not get to it, here is a quick bullet point list of some of the most important things that I took away from it:

White women’s tears and the men who love them

* “White Fragility is the term I use to describe the inability of white people to respond constructively when our racial positions are challenged. Because we so seldom encounter this challenge, we are thrown off balance and withdraw, defend, cry, argue, minimize, ignore, and in other ways push back in order to regain our racial equilibrium.”
  + I think in many ways, many people have moved beyond this preliminary “Well *my* family never owned slaves” reaction. However, we so clearly see this played out on the local level, (in reference to many of the inflammatory and anti-black comments on yik yak these past few weeks) as well as on the national and international level (politicians claims vehement claims of “*I* am not racist but..” or “they started it”
* “ ‘When a white woman cries, a black man gets hurt.’ ”
  + We must acknowledge the fraught history of harm brought to black men by the presence, actions, testimony, of white women and the perceptions imposed upon black men who have too long been defined in part by white women. And while I do not wish to deny anyone their lived experience or personal narrative, there is a larger structural and historical narrative that must be acknowledged in order to begin to share space in an accountable way.
* “Whether intended or not, when a white woman cries over some aspect of racism, all the attention immediately goes to her, demanding time, energy and attention from everyone in the room when they should be focused on ameliorating racism.”
  + White folks are face with the option to relinquish space or continue to possess it. It is an option that only a white person has in a heterogeneous (mixed) room. To visibly and viscerally emote is too maintain control of that space.
* “For people of color, our tears are an enactment of our racial insulation and privilege. But because we see our tears as specific to us as individuals, we take offense when people of color find them problematic. In turn, based on past experience, people of color who question us can now anticipate some form of backlash.”
  + This is one of the key points, I find, in this piece. My tears, my immediate emotional response to shed tears in light of the horrors perpetrated against black bodies is a confirmation and perpetuation of privilege that I have as a white person to choose when I get to acknowledge racial prejudice. My tears, and white tears are not, and cannot be attributed to the individual in the moment, because they are a response to a larger structure. The two cannot be held in the same space by a white person because it actively denies their part as a beneficiary in the structure of racism.
* “Freely expressing our immediate emotions without attention to impact demonstrates that as white people, we have not had to think about the effects of our engagement on people of color. While white women cannot cry in the white male-dominated corporate culture without penalty, in cross-racial interactions we are in the power position. Thus, we have not had to rein in or control our racial responses and can indulge in them whenever and however we want.”
  + This notion was what really drove it home for me. As a woman, and specifically as a gay woman, I am almost never comfortable in the presence of a man that I don’t know extremely well, and even then, the times are few and far between when I am truly at ease. And yet the power structure flips when I am in the presence of a person of color. And tears that signify weakness in one space become a beacon of power in another.

Trigger Warning: This next point contains triggering language

* “ ‘We are abused daily, beaten, raped and killed but you are sad and that’s what is important. That’s why it is sooooo hard to take.’ ”
  + This was a quote from a woman of color that the author works with.

Finally….

* “White people do need to feel grief about the brutality of white supremacy and our role in it. In fact, our numbness to the racial injustice that occurs on a daily basis is key to holding it in place. But our grief must lead to sustained liberatory action.”
  + And this is the crux of the allyship that the author talks about. In order to *accountably* feel grief at the ‘brutality’ of race relations (read anti-black and anti-other sentiment) in the United States and abroad, there must be an acknowledgment of the history of power that white women’s tears invoke in a heterogeneous (mixed) space.

As my title states, here lie the jumbled thoughts of a synesthetic white lesbian. I don’t know where I want this paper to go, I don’t know exactly even what my point is, but in light of everything that has been clattering around my sphere of consciousness and beyond these past couple of weeks, this was what came out of me. I felt I couldn’t really speak to most of the readings we did this week, I’d just be preaching to the choir about the atrocity that the Boston Globe article was, the necessity of hearing from the people we heard from in the short film about Ferguson, the truths that Alicia Garez spoke and the analysis that Shulman provides on the ‘newly thinkable’. What I felt I could do however, we reflect on the emotional self, *my*self, and the complex places I hold in this conversation at Bryn Mawr, in the BlackLivesMatter movement and in a life lived to assist in the emancipation of the us all from the oppressive status quo.