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The Politics of Space and Importance of Rebuilding the Master's Residence

During the Winter 2020 semester, I took Dr. George Grinnell's ENGL309 course titled Modern Critical Theories. This course offered "a survey of developments in the fields of Literary and Cultural Theory over the past 150 years [and] investigat[ed] what theory is, what it does, what principles guide it, and what it can offer" (ENGL309 Syllabus). In this class, I had the opportunity to virtually engage in a discussion about the importance of intersectional feminism and of allowing all voices to be heard and appreciated. Certainly, as intersectional feminists, it is imperative that we value all voices and support one another as a collective. Historically, however, there has been a privileging of which voices are heard and, consequently, which are ignored. In patriarchal contexts, the voices of white men have been at the forefront of many spaces and institutions, including government and education, among others. The politics of space, and who is privileged to take up space, are complex while at the same time simple. There are structures in place that uphold patriarchy and whiteness. I have noticed these structures in everyday life—including virtual spaces such as Zoom lectures. Whilst my online English classroom strived to be an inclusive environment, I was not surprised that white male students were eager to first initiate the class discussion on feminism. Initially, it appeared female students were more comfortable voicing their thoughts and opinions in the Zoom chat. I have to wonder if this is because women have been conditioned to believe that they need to be meek, convenient, and take up as little space as possible? Do these unspoken boundaries remain rife within institutional settings that were built for men? Sara Ahmed explains "[t]o live a feminist life is to make everything into something that is questionable" and these questions must be asked even in feminist spaces

and feminist discourses (2). To be sure, our class emphasized valuing a variety of voices, yet I could not help notice the irony in that discussion when many women in the class felt the need to type their opinions rather than vocalize them. Perhaps women's voices were delayed because we have been taught to stifle our own voices—to be seen and not heard. This unequivocally reminded me that the University classroom itself is inherently structured by patriarchy; despite efforts of deconstruction. It is telling, then, that in a virtual and supposedly nondiscriminatory setting, women (including myself) might feel as though they need to let men speak first or more loudly before sharing their own thoughts. Perhaps this dynamic was inadvertent due to the constraints of Zoom, or, was it, at least to a certain extent, a reproduction of the structures of patriarchy? Moreover, were white, cis-gendered women such as myself speaking before BIPOC and/or LGBTQ+ women?

Ahmed encourages women to consider how the University becomes something we work on as well as at: “those of us who arrive in an academy that was not shaped by or for us bring knowledges, as well as worlds, that otherwise would not be here. Think of this: how we learn about worlds when they do not accommodate us” (10). Ahmed explains that women's experiences within male dominated institutions can generate a wealth of knowledge and reimagine spatial boundaries. The act of women taking up space in places not intended for them is a powerful act of patriarchal resistance in and of itself. However, the act of taking up space needs to be approached with a consideration of privilege in mind. Though my voice undoubtedly has value, and the voices of white male students have value, it is crucial to remember which voices have historically been devalued. Consequently, feminists must consider positionality when dwelling in spaces that are inherently structured to prioritize certain voices. People who are in positions of privilege, like myself, need to ensure that they pragmatically consider how much space they take up and reflect upon how they can work to use their privilege in an intersectional manner. Sara Ahmed explains that “[w]e can be space

invaders in the academy; we can be space invaders in theory too, just by referring to the wrong texts or by asking the wrong questions” (9). It is important, then, to be aware of how one can become a “space invader” even if it is unintentional. As such, feminists must consciously and actively work against invading spaces and use their privilege in order to make space for those who are often pushed to the corners of rooms. To be aware of space and positionality is to bring feminist theory home; to make feminism work in the places we live and in the places we work (Ahmed 10). Living a feminist life means being cognizant of who inhabits which spaces and ensuring feminist work is at play in everyday scenarios. Feminism cannot be an intermittent practice. Furthermore, “rebuilding the master’s residence” requires conscious effort, especially because “patriarchal reasoning goes all the way down, to the letter, to the bone” (Ahmed 4,7). I especially notice the prevalence of patriarchal reasoning within the demure ways in which I conduct myself in class, how I modify my emails to appear likable and pleasant, and how I soften my speech to be less striking. However, as intersectional feminists, we need to resist patriarchal reasoning and be acutely aware of the ways in which we might participate in reproducing sexist structures. To actively resist patriarchy and injustice in the everyday, and to make space for those who have been denied space, we need “to build feminist dwellings, we need to dismantle what has already been assembled; we need to ask what it is we are against, what it is we are for, knowing full well that this *we* is not a foundation but what we are working toward” (Ahmed 2). Clearly, there is a reason Ahmed refers to feminist work as homework and housework. The feminist tasks ahead are not easy or straightforward—they require labour, trial and error, and, perhaps most importantly, a desire to succeed.

Work Cited

Ahmed, Sara. "Introduction. Bringing Feminist Theory Home." *Living a Feminist Life*. Duke University Press. 2017. pp. 1-18