The discomfort of safety
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On 14th September 2016, the topic of 'safe spaces' made an appearance during the UK's Prime Minister's Questions. In response to calls from Conservative MP Victoria Atkins for Theresa May to offer a condemnation of safe spaces in universities, the Prime Minister asserted: "Freedom of speech is a fundamental British value which is undermined by so-called 'safe spaces' in our universities where a sense of ridiculous entitlement by a minority of students means that their wish not to be offended shuts down debate." In inhibiting 'lively debate', May stated that safe spaces threaten 'innovation of thought', which is fundamental to the development of the country, society and the economy.

In the UK and elsewhere, 'safe spaces' have been the object of much recent derision. The past few years have seen many newspaper articles, comment pieces, blogposts and tweets criticising safe spaces for the apparent limits they place on freedom of expression. Indeed, May's remarks join a series of condemnations of safe space policies and practices by high profile figures in the UK such as Mary Beard, Richard Dawkins, and Stephen Fry. Such condemnations typically figure safe spaces as 'echo chambers' that provide shelter from the discomfort of being challenged on one's views or hearing about 'difficult' topics such as sexual violence, child abuse and racism. Safe spaces are positioned as symptoms of a 'fragile', 'entitled' and 'coddled' generation, unable to cope with the necessary brutality of the 'real world'. They erroneously encourage softness in the face of hardness, promote emotionality in the face of reason and 'rational' debate, and display a surfeit of resilience in a hierarchical and violent world.

Yet the "fundamental British value" of free speech that safer spaces purportedly threaten has always been partial and selective: its virtue only extends so far. Indeed, May's remarks are striking given the Prevent

legislation introduced during her time as Home Secretary. A 'counter-extremism safeguarding strategy' compulsory in universities (and many other charitable and public service institutions, including nurseries, schools, and healthcare providers), Prevent "aims to stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism" by responding to "[the ideological challenge of terrorism and the threat faced by the UK from those who promote it.](link)" The programme seeks to generate ["knowledge sharing for a safe [sic.] learning environment"](link) requiring organisations to 'monitor' and 'report' people they suspect of developing or being vulnerable to extremist views. Where the 'safe spaces' of student activism are held to predicate safety on the avoidance of hurt feelings and conflict, Prevent relies on a muscular state-sanctioned concept of 'safety', which sees the rights and freedoms of an exceptionalised minority suspended in the name of counter-extremism. Indeed, Prevent has led to students being withdrawn and questioned on tenuous grounds: in 2015, [Umar Farooq](link), a Terrorism, Crime and Global Security Master's student at Staffordshire University was questioned under the Prevent initiative on his views on ISIS, Al-Qaida and homosexuality after a university official saw him reading a book on terrorism in the library. Yet where safe spaces have been the subject of much attention and column space from both the 'left' and the 'right', Prevent has garnered comparatively little high profile opposition. This disparity raises the question: whose 'safety' and whose 'freedoms' matter; and at what and whose expense?

In contemporary public discourse, safe spaces are typically associated with universities, colleges and 'student politics'. Yet the historical roots of safer spaces lie in grassroots feminist, queer and anti-racist organising and activism in the US, UK and beyond. In her discussion of the history of safe spaces in US Black feminism, Patricia Hill Collins (2000) describes safe spaces as resistive sites of independent self-definition. Safe spaces represented somewhere that Black women could freely examine the issues that concerned them and, in the process, foster their empowerment and enhance their ability to participate in social justice struggles. The freedom to examine these issues was predicated on exclusions: "By definition, such spaces became less 'safe' if shared with those who were not Black

and female." Yet the exclusions of these safe spaces are best understood as strategic and temporary: "safe spaces rely on exclusionary practices but their overall purpose aims for a more inclusionary, just society." (Collins, 2000: 110). In *Mapping Gay L.A.* (2001), Moira Kenney associates the notion of safe space with the gay and lesbian bars of the mid-60s. These were spaces in which one could be out with others, although safety from hetrosexist violence was by no means guaranteed. As Kenney notes, however, the 'safety' of safe spaces was about more than freedom from crime and harassment by the police or otherwise. Rather: "community – as a safe space with well-known boundaries and entrances – was the goal, while community building was the method." (Kenney, 2001: 21) Likewise, in the history of the UK and US women's movement, safe spaces implies "a freedom to speak and act freely, to form collective strength, and generate strategies for resistance." (Kenney, 2001: 24) The 'space' of the safe space was not just a particular, physical location but also a symbolic and discursive space of community and collectivity, organised around a shared political goal, perspective or experience.

As these accounts suggest, there is not one but multiple forms, functions and ideas of safe space that emerge within the histories of activist practice. Typically, safe spaces operate around a set of principles, expectations and 'ground rules' agreed by consensus, which seek to provide a supportive, compassionate environment in which participants can talk about issues, experiences and resistive strategies; and in which harmful behaviour is collectively addressed and met with consequences. As one of a number of community strategies that are used to navigate relations of trauma and power, safe spaces have been understood as a means of providing agency and support for those who have experienced harm and identity-based oppression, helping to amplify their voices and needs. Safe space practices are often used in attempts to tackle racialised and gendered harm within activist communities without recourse to criminal justice frameworks. More generally, they are used to foster conflict resolution: rather than simply suppressing viewpoints or providing a shelter from conflict and disagreement, safe spaces are

intended to be a trusting and understanding environment in which conflict and disagreement can be worked through in a productive, caring and accountable manner. Safe spaces strategies are not static, either: ongoing debates regarding the problems of 'inclusion' and 'oppression' in light of intersectional critique have contributed to a discursive move from 'safe' to 'safer' spaces, which better indicates the relativity of the term – the 'safety' of safe(r) spaces is not guaranteed nor unquestioned. Safe(r) spaces, then, might be best understood as an umbrella term for a variety of anti-oppressive and anti-carceral practices, processes and policies that are used to (re)produce a reflexive and sometimes exclusive material-discursive space, grounded by principles of accountability, justice and social transformation. As should be clear, these two aspects – safe(r) spaces as a set of anti-oppressive practices and policies; and safe(r) space as material-discursive space that is occupied and participated in – cannot be cleanly separated from one another: the relationship between these aspects is both co-constitutive and mutable.

The activist roots of safer spaces reveal an important tension between their political language and that of many of their critics. Where mainstream attacks on safer spaces repeat the liberal notion of free speech as a transcendental good, safe(r) spaces – particularly in the context of radical political organising - often stem from the failures of such politics to account for structural inequality and protect against racialised and gendered violence. Indeed, Patricia Hill Collins pre-empts many recent critics when she describes how safe spaces practices risk stigmatism within a desegregated, 'post-racist' and 'post-sexist' geo-political context: the friction between a 'colour blind' rhetoric which overlooks social inequalities by aiming to treat all people the same; and groups that seek to organise around their own self-interests results in safe(r) spaces being labelled 'essentialist', 'separatist' and 'anti-democratic'. (Collins, 2000: 110) It is thus unsurprising that to the 'common sense' of liberalism, safe(r) spaces appear to be restrictive, unnecessary and a threat to freedom.

None of this is to say that safe(r) spaces aren't fraught with difficulty. Indeed, bringing to the surface particular tensions and complexities that need working

through is precisely the point of safe(r) spaces. At their worst safe(r) spaces practices can obscure and elide these difficulties. A written or spoken declaration of a space as 'anti-oppressive' may mean very little in practice; simply announcing 'safe(r) space' does not make it so. At their best, safer spaces practices *make life difficult*: they require us to attend to oft-unarticulated power dynamics and hierarchies that exist 'in here' as well as 'out there'. They require us to become sensitised to forms of encounter that we are too often desensitised: to soften to that which we are otherwise hardened. They force us to rethink common-held understandings of violence and harm; and to take seriously the action of speech-acts. This is not easy work to do. And it is never over: those who take safe(r) spaces seriously should know that there is not a point at which one can sit back and declare a space unquestionably safe. Nor is it always easy to identify 'oppressive' relations. Audre Lorde's (2008) famous axiom of "there is no hierarchy of oppression" is not an invitation to draw false equivalences. Oppressions manifest themselves differently: those who are subject one form of oppression may also partake in others. What does it mean to protect against oppressions, when oppressions are complex, multiple and co-constitutive? What does it mean to talk about 'safety' when that word carries with it such classed and racialised connotations? What does it mean to talk about 'safety' when this concept is so often weaponisd by the state through strategies such as Prevent? At their very best, safe(r) spaces take this challenge head on.

The perennial difficulty of safe(r) spaces means they are often far from comfortable. Or, more accurately, we can say that they are frequently discomforting for those whose comfort is habitual. If comfort is "the effect of bodies being able to 'sink' into spaces that have already taken their shape" while discomfort is "the effect of bodies inhabiting spaces that do not take or 'extend' their shape" (Ahmed, 2004: 161); then safe(r) spaces, in attempting to generate a comfortable space against the (racialised, gendered, classed, queer, ableist) discomfort of everyday life can denaturalise comfort-as-norm. As Sara Ahmed (2004, 149) notes, comfort can operate as a form of 'feeling fetishism' insofar as comfort, as a relational affect, is an effect of the work of others. When comfort is 'normal', this work can become obscured from view.

By organising space around marginalised subjects and their needs, the habitually comfortable body may no longer 'sink in' so easily. In providing (relative) comfort for the politically discomforted, safe(r) spaces can also serve to discomfort the politically comfortable.

Safer spaces may also be discomforting insofar as they require us to come face to face with uncomfortable truths about own complicities and ignorances, shoring up the investments we have in ourselves as 'good people'. The radical self-reflexivity and vulnerability that safer spaces require means that such investments become untenable. We are forced to acknowledge "the entanglement of all our bodies in the unhealthy body politic we co-compose' whilst 'still doing something." Challenges to our harmful behaviours often sting; and the stinging discomfort of being challenged may generate defensiveness –a desire to extract oneself from wrongdoing. Hannah Black captures the affectivity of facing uncomfortable truths in her description of being challenged for using transphobic language:

> "I know from this experience that it hurts to be experienced as hurtful, or at least that it stings the pride to be wrong....Like the writers of ungenerous caricatures of campus politics, I don't enjoy being yelled at, or hearing that I've wounded someone, or being made to feel ignorant. My first response is also a kind of panicked cringe, or a lashing out: No, you can't mean me! It's you who are wrong! But I did, eventually, thankfully, realize that my suspicion of trans people was based on the worst kind of self-justifying nonsense... I am grateful to the people who yelled at me, told me that I'd hurt them, and made me feel my ignorance, to get me to this now-obvious point. The experience was not intellectually limiting, or an attack by the thought police: to the contrary, my realization about the complicated untruths of gender, and of my own previous bigotry, was one of the most intellectually expansive experiences of my life. It released me into a new, gentler conception of my own body and the bodies of others. It

> brought new people into my life and gave me a greater,
> sometimes scary, sense of possibility."

The discomfort of coming face to face with our own involvement in harm, is by no means unproductive: it is not – or should not be – needless, gratuitous suffering, nor should it be fetishized as such. Instead, this discomfort has the potential to come as a shock to thought, prompting an important re-learning of relations. For Black, the experience of being challenged prompted a reconfiguration of her relationship with her own gendered body and her relationship with other gendered bodies: discomfort is relieved by being and doing differently. This re-learning through discomfort is by no means guaranteed, for discomfort is often abated through strategies of avoidance rather than through a re-configuration of body-other-world relations. Nonetheless, safe(r) spaces, in remaining open to the transformative potential of such experiences, can be thought of as practicing what Foucault refers to as an 'ethic of discomfort'. For Foucault, an ethic of discomfort requires us 'to 'never to consent to being completely comfortable with one's own presuppositions. Never to let them fall peacefully asleep….to be mindful that everything that one perceives is only familiar against a familiar and little known horizon'; while also recognising that deeply held assumptions about ourselves and others are not easily transformed nor substituted: 'never to believe that a new fact will suffice to overturn them; never to imagine that one can change them like arbitrary axioms.' (Foucault, 1994: 448) It is this critical openness to being, doing and thinking otherwise that safe(r) spaces can hope to foster, all the while recognising that this openness is not easily achieved and requires direction.

In foregrounding the ways in which power and oppression are cultural, structural and collectivised, safe(r) spaces ideally promote an understanding of harm that goes beyond the 'victim-survivor'/'perpetrator' relationship. Going beyond this individual binary does not require a denial that there are people whose behaviour is abusive and people who suffer this abuse; rather, it is to recognise that addressing abusive behaviour is a communal responsibility. Nonetheless, safe(r) spaces sometimes require the exclusion of individuals as

part of holding them to account for their actions. In such instances, safe(r) spaces may be discomforting not only for the person excluded but for others who invest in them as friends and comrades. Political activism – be it within the university or outside – often relies on trust, friendship and 'solidarity'. Yet neither our friends nor ourselves are 'perfect'; and holding friends to account for their actions can be emotionally difficult. Defensiveness over friends and friendships, suspicion at accusers and/or a reluctance to take action are common thematics that occur in accounts of failed safe(r) spaces practices and can be revealing of a fear of discomfort or an anger at experienced discomfort. As Sara Ahmed (2010) observes, "there is a political struggle about how we attribute good and bad feelings, which hesitates around the apparently simple question of who introduces what feelings to whom. Feelings can get stuck to certain bodies in the very way we describe spaces, situations, dramas." (Ahmed, 2010: 39) In the realm of political activism, bad feeling often gets stuck to bodies that are a hindrance to smooth-functioning collectivity. However what is often presented as a 'hindrance' is the identification of harmful behaviour, rather than harmful behaviour itself.

The Salvage Collective, a research group that explores gendered harms in activist communities notes in their recent report that many interviewees who have experienced abuse 'were told to stop speaking about what happened to them because of an established friendship with the abuser' – one interviewed participant recalled how after disclosing what had happened, she was told by a friend: "these people are my friends that you are talking about I can't talk about this." In seeking to minimise the 'bad feeling' introduced by a survivor's disclosure, such responses often result in the amplification of harm: they fail to recognise the ethical and political necessity of sometimes rupturing the 'happy atmosphere' (see Ahmed, 2010). As Sophie Lewis argues, by trying to ensure that sexual and other forms of violence are met with consequences in 'our' communities, thus taking seriously the harm that the world so often overlooks, it may be that things feel worse for some people before they feel better. If they are to be effective, safe(r) spaces require those involved to ask how a radical and accountable friendship might function: how might we help

each other bare responsibility for abusive behaviours and actions without simply resorting to minimization or permanent exclusion?

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On November 9th 2016, Donald Trump was elected President of the United States on the back of promises of racial violence and surrounded by allegations of sexual violence. Within a day of his victory – amongst all the rage, hurt and fear – there were accusations that 'safer spaces culture' and the concomitant 'stifling of debate' was to blame for his election. Within two days of Trump's election, Marine Le Pen of the fascist Front National was provided with an accommodating platform on [the BBC's flagship Andrew Marr Show](), where she discussed her candidacy in the forthcoming French Presidential election. Trump's election also follows Brexit, and the corresponding intensification of racial violence in the UK; and is shadowed by the growing popularity of far-right parties across Europe.

To perpetually inhabit an uncomfortable world is draining. While liberal critics will continue to chastise safe(r) spaces for the limits they place on unfettered freedoms of expression, it is clear that – in a political climate in which the safety of already marginalised people is further diminished – spaces of respite and resistance are needed now more than ever. The former is necessary for the latter: if the exhausting emboldenment of white supremacy and rape culture are to be collectively countered then spaces of care, support and understanding will be key. Such material and symbolic spaces are not an end (for there can be no end) but a means: a strategy through which relations of solidarity can be built and through which we might collectively struggle for a better, more comfortable world for all.

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