Queering Safety? An Introduction

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Concepts and ideas about the construction of safe(r) spaces have been around for decades; the labor of creating social space as a safe space within queer communities is a task of great importance (Hanhardt 2013). This special issue of borderlands offers an interdisciplinary investigation of the ongoing discussion on queer safe spaces, seeing them as a contemporary and radical understanding and practice. The idea for this special issue developed as a result of the III Geographies of Sexualities Conference in Rome, in which we held a triple session on queer safe spaces in the summer of 2015. These sessions enabled an academic discussion on the topic, highlighting and starting to fill in the gaps in theorization and the numerous dilemmas it raises—both in academic and activist arenas. This special issue presents a collection of papers that aim to improve our understanding of the construction of safety within queer spaces, discourses, and realms, and the challenges such spaces face. This introduction presents a general theoretical framework of queer safe spaces, focusing on two dimensions: first, the logics that are produced through discourses of queer safe space and second, the practices that produce spaces as safe.

Logics

In order to give the reader a general introduction into our discussion of queer safe spaces, we would like to first discuss one of the ways in which the rhetoric, constructions, and expectations connected to queer safe spaces might result in unsafe spaces. In other words, we will examine one of the ways in which, paradoxically, the logics of queer safe spaces work to undo or restrict the sense of safety within queer

spaces, reproducing hegemonic power structures. As we will discuss, this fallacy is a result of the different expectations that tend to collide within queer safe spaces. We suggest that there are two separate perceptions of the meaning of 'safety' in relation to queer safe spaces: safety as allowing *room for error*, and safety as allowing *room for difference*. These different perceptions of 'safety' are tied to different potentials of the utopic construction of safe space: Seeing safe spaces as either sterile places free of vulnerability, or as spaces free of violence.

Room for Error

The *room for error* vision of safe space is one that allows its participants to ask questions and make 'social mistakes' without severe consequences—therefore encouraging the learning potential inherent in such encounters, discussions and experiences. This logic encourages the participants to engage with—and practice—new ideas and behaviors. Queer safe spaces based on the principle of safety as *room for error* will work to create a space as enabling and open to newcomers as possible.

Room for Difference

The *room for difference* vision of safety is a space in which everyone can comfortably be, look, and act according to their own definitions, without feeling disrespected or unsafe. Such a space is envisioned as a safe haven from the violence of everyday life—creating an atmosphere in which situational variables (such as location, structure, social array, affective array, goals, and participants) coherently function as inoffensive/non-harmful/un-destructive, in all possible situations.[i] Such a construction of safety attempts to make room for all kinds of differences; a space devoid of normative (and normalizing) power. Queer safe spaces based on the principle of safety as *room for difference* will work to construct a space focused on creating differentiation and separation from the violent surroundings of hegemonic space; a space as welcoming as possible to non-normative identities and practices.

At the same time, we are reminded of Michel Foucault's claim, 'one is always 'inside' power, there is no 'escaping' it' (1978, p. 95); resistance is never outside the strictures of power. Queer spaces, similar to other spaces, stage and recreate problematic power dynamics—making safety not necessarily an essential and stable quality of specific spaces, but rather a temporal and subjective matter.

In this sense, on a basic level, the safety of queer safe spaces can be understood as (1) spaces that allow *room for error*, allowing learning and questioning, even at the expense of other participants' comfort; and as (2) spaces that give *room for difference*, policing the kinds of discourses and practices allowed within the space. These two sets of expectations and framings, however, can come into conflict, as

participants enter the same safe space with different expectations and assumptions about the 'correct' ways in which to act in it. For instance, a participant that came to a queer safe space without prior knowledge and understanding of the queer community's conventions might assume that, since making mistakes is part of learning, it is ok to use the wrong pronouns when talking to a genderqueer person; for a genderqueer individual, however, being approached and described by the wrong pronoun might feel like a triggering, uncomfortable experience—reducing their sense of safety and ability to perform their true identity. In such a situation, the participants' different expectations can result in a sense of unsafety for both.

On a more concrete level, there are many cases in which both *room for error* and *room for difference* co-exist in the same space. These two different mechanisms are affected by social norms and rules and are constructed by their operational differences from hegemonic power. These tensions are examined by all the contributors to this special issue.

Other disturbances to the queer safe space's feeling of safety can be either external or internal. Internal disruptions take place when members disobey the rules, intentionally or unintentionally. External disruptions occur when the break is committed by individuals who are not community members—either individuals who are hostile toward the space's intentions and participants, or individuals who do not know or are not willing to practice the agreed upon rules of the space.

For instance, Asante (this issue) describes journalists who enter Facebook groups of queer African migrants in order to expose the names of the members and put their life in danger. The presence of an outsider who is not well acquainted with the space's rules, or of a member who did not apprehend the situation correctly, can recreate the violence that queer individuals experience in normative spaces. These instances, while not always understood as violence by their initiators, are moments in which heteronormativity and its oppressions penetrates the queer safe space; turning it, in the blink of an eye, into an un-safe space.

Practices

In discussing queer safe space construction practices we would like to highlight four distinct points that characterize queer formation of space, in contrast to other forms of safe spaces: (a) the transformation of safe space from being a space of opposition to heteronormativity into a space of *resistance and subversion*; (b) shifting the focus from seclusion and isolation to a focus on *constituting a formative community and culture*; (c) a transformation from substantial and physical boundaries into *subjective boundaries*; and (d) a shift from safe space as a space of dissociation into creating *a new temporality,* which engenders a refuge and allows for the continuation of identity and

performance. All of these practices are illustrated throughout the papers in this issue.

Resistance and Subversion

LGBT safe spaces have often been constructed in order to offer a space free of heteronormative and homonormative normalizations and power dynamics (Frye 1993; The Roestone Collective 2014; Johnston and Valentine 1995; Duncan 1996). Queer safe spaces, in contrast, seek to achieve a substantive shift of the normative social structure in the wider homonormative society. Queer safe spaces are often designed to stand in active opposition to their heteronormative surroundings, while at the same time offering a space of resistance and subversion. In a queer context, queer safe spaces are framed as spaces of agency, engaged in resisting heteropatriarchy, heteronormativity and homonormativity. In addition to creating an alternative atmosphere in the space itself, this active stance is produced through the acknowledgement of affects such as rage and shame and encouraging their use against heteropatriarchy. Thus, while normative safe spaces focus on sheltering their participants from oppression and violence, queer safe spaces add to this construction a mode of action intended to pose an alternative, a counter-discourse, and a space of resistance. Similar characteristics can also be found in leisure spaces, social gatherings, cultural events, and parties.

Ziv's paper (in this issue) provides an interesting view on teaching queer theory and pornography in academic settings, questioning whether safety is even feasible in such contexts and showing how educational processes serve as a means to shape political and sexual subjectivity. Such processes are achieved by resisting discourses of vulnerability. A mode of resistance is also apparent in David, Hartal and Pascar's paper (this issue), which shows how a queer community center that flew a rainbow flag towards the main street in downtown conservative Jerusalem both constructed the surrounding space as a queer space and, at the same time, challenged the spatial production of Jerusalem as heterosexual and religious.

Constitution of a Formative Community and Culture

Safe spaces are often conceptualized around differentiating from or opposing their violent surroundings—spaces of isolation and seclusion directed at the individual or family, offering an alternative to social and structural power mechanisms (Gamson 1996; Polletta 1999). Queer safe spaces, by contrast, focus on social formations and power relations within their space and between its participants (Nash 2011; Hartal 2016), focusing on alternative community formation and on creating cultural infrastructures.[ii] Queer safe spaces allow their participants to build a community and establish nuanced affective, social, and political cultures of their own. Unlike women's shelters, for example, which provide a safe space but do not necessarily aim to promote external community building, queer safe spaces play a

formative role in shaping queer culture and its interactions with heteronormative culture. This mechanism is particularly important for individuals who resist and deviate from the power of hegemonic normalization.

Thajib (this issue) also explores the fragility of the struggle for queer safe spaces within the Indonesian context for Muslim queers; a struggle that faces not only external threats from the homophobic surroundings, but internal ones as well. The community's adherence is tested through such interruptive moments, which are part and parcel of the production of a live community. David, Hartal and Pascar (this issue) also address the subject of community formation, showing how the need to create a safe space produces community relations of inclusion and power all at the same time.

Subjective Boundary Construction

Michèle Lamont defines symbolic boundaries as 'conceptual distinctions that we make to categorize objects, people, practices and even time and space' (1992, p. 9). While Lamont mentions that she does not relate to spatial and temporal boundaries in her research, her conceptualization of boundary work is highly relevant to our discussion. Lamont and Molnar articulate: 'Social boundaries are objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities' (2002, p. 168). One can identify in queer safe spaces a transformation from utilizing physical or material boundaries to subjective boundaries. These subjective boundaries are bound to a queer ideological discourse that is understandable and coherent only to in-group members. Unlike the established and well-known rules of a space constructed upon material boundaries, queer safe spaces call for an ongoing decryption of the space's rules. In this sense, subjectivity plays a central role in the construction of queer safe spaces, by contributing to a sense of belonging.

Boundaries' subjective elements manifest in the special attention given to rules of conduct in most queer safe spaces. As opposed to heteronormative spaces, these rules are not taken for granted, and are instead fluid and constantly under debate—based on general guidelines combined with the participants' specific needs. A note outlining the guidelines is sometimes even hung at the entrance to the space. In some queer safe spaces, the organizers appoint 'safe space supervisors', responsible for dealing with any discomfort that might arise from participants' interactions. In addition, in some cases, a 'trigger warning' might be given. For example, a queer party might begin with an announcement that some of the performance's content may pose difficulties for individuals with specific sensitivities.

Mishali (this issue) discusses the ways in which a relationship between a lesbian femme and an FtM transperson influence their sense of safety in queer safe spaces, revealing how the rules change as the people

who occupy the space change. David, Hartal and Pascar (this issue) also question these boundaries through their discussion of a queer youth group in which boundaries were crossed.

A New Temporality

While safe spaces generally delineate splits or dissociations between spaces thought to be safe and spaces thought to be unsafe, queer safe spaces aspire to create continuity and cohesion. This practice aspires to fill the gaps between individuals' inner sense of self and identity, and their ability to express that inner sense of self. In this narrative, everyday space symbolizes 'the closet', embodying vulnerability and the sometimes-painful processes of identity questioning and identity formation. Queer safe spaces offer a break; they allow for temporary safety and ease, and enable the possibility of creating a home, a space of being 'one's true self'. Such spaces, therefore, separate everyday lived experiences and the experience of escaping from it, and in that sense, work to deepen the dissociation between the experienced identity and the desirable identity. This transforms queer safe space from being a place of refuge, a place of momentary relief from a hostile environment, to a place that symbolizes 'truthfulness'—a heterotopia (Foucault, 1986).

For many queer individuals, their 'everyday' home and family life, are not perceived as a safe location or a space of acceptance and comfort; instead, these are places where they are required to live in a closet, or in which they face homophobia and violence (Bell 1991; Valentine 1993, 1995; Johnston and Valentine 1995; Duncan 1996). The same is true, of course, for the public space, which is often homophobic, endocentric and violent (Binnie 1997; Bell and Valentine 1995; Valentine 2000). The shattering of the queer safe space's safety can result in an intensification of these feelings of danger and isolation, creating an even more urgent need for a space of safety and comfort. In this sense, queer 'safe spaces' operate as 'paradoxical spaces' (Rose, 1993), rejecting the binary divisions that create exclusions and instead adopting a policy that seeks to contain contradictory politics and incorporate LGBT individuals' diverse embodiments, as well as oppositional political standpoints.

All of the papers in this issue reveal in different ways how the imagined or real time-space in which a feeling of safety is produced is an essential component of being for queer individuals. It is only through these moments of transformation of the everyday into a queer time-space that queerness can become an affective and material ontology, rather than an imagined epistemology.

The four practices discussed above present both instrumental and essential dilemmas, demonstrating the difficulties in constructing 'safe spaces' and securing safety in queer spaces.

Constructing Safe(r) Queer Spaces

In light of what we identify as an emerging academic interest in the construction of safe space, queer activism, and the everyday life of queer cultures, we believe that discourses surrounding queer safe spaces are becoming ubiquitous and have a substantial influence on queer subjects' lives and subjectivities, as well as on queer communities' construction and maintenance. However, given this concept's cultural centrality within contemporary queer communities, it is still surprisingly under-conceptualized, theoretically and practically. There are only a few articles that discuss this central topic, and even when the subject of queer safe spaces is discussed in academic and activist discussions, its meaning and consequences are usually taken for granted, rather than questioned or examined. In other cases, these questions are raised, but only as a non-central issue. In contrast to this matter-of-fact approach, the papers presented here show that queer safe spaces are a fluid and complex practice, located in multiple places along axes of space, body, identity, citizenship, technology, feminism, and more. Through these differences, and the consideration of diverse subjectivities, queer safe spaces reveal themselves to be a highly contested socio-spatial category.

This special issue discusses and analyzes some of the compelling intersections between queer spaces, queer lives, and constructions of safe spaces. The papers introduce a wide range of conceptualizations and multi-scalar perspectives, brought to light by the encounter between beliefs regarding safe spaces and actual intersectional experiences.

The focus of analysis throughout the issue is on three major questions. The first is *how do queer safe spaces work?* More specifically, how do queer subjects construct queer safe spaces? Where are queer safe spaces produced and practiced? What practices are employed in this construction? And how different safe space constructions (re)produce exclusion and incorporation within diverse power structures and contexts?

When discussing where queer safe spaces are produced and practiced, some of the papers relate to a number of physical spaces (e.g., community queer safe spaces located in the USA, Israel, and Indonesia; academic classrooms), while others discuss one of queer safe spaces' new frontiers—digital spaces—and the specific opportunities and challenges that such spaces bring with them. This line of inquiry explores the part digital spaces and new technologies play in the construction of queer safe spaces. Asante, in his paper '"Where is Home?" Negotiating comm(unity) and un/belonging among queer African men on Facebook', discusses how social media sites enable queer Africans in continental Africa and in the diaspora to create trans-national diasporic relations in a virtual space. This paper explores aspects and perceptions of belonging and the dynamics within queer safe space among queer African men in closed Facebook groups.

Some of the papers consider the connection between queer safe spaces and intersectional identities, asking how different standpoints either allow for or prevent specific possibilities. Most of the papers focus on specific intersections of axes of power, revealing a particular location-based understanding of queer safe spaces.

This issue also asks *how different constructions of safe spaces (re)produce inclusion and exclusion within different power structures and spaces?* Some of the papers examine normalizations and exclusions within queer discourses, providing an opportunity for reading queer cultures based on a rejection of coherent sex-gender divisions. While critical of heteronormativity and homonormativity, many queer communities still maintain a common conceptualization of identity. In many cases, those who cannot fit into this conceptualization are not recognized as part of the specific community and have limited access to the symbolic power and resources offered by it. This dynamic is discussed in the issue specifically in relation to queer 'plus' identities—such as femmes.

Through understanding the meanings and practices associated with queer safe spaces in different locations, identities, and communities, these papers offer possible answers to the second question: *What is (and isn't) safe about queer safe spaces?* The papers discuss: What narratives about safety are constructed around queer safe spaces? How is the concept of safety understood within queer lives and queer culture? How do different intersectional standpoints allow for or prevent specific possibilities for safety?

Mishali, in her paper '(In)visibly unsafe: passing under the radar and the limits of queer space' wonders 'how safe is it for a femme who is in a relationship with an FtM transperson to keep using 'lesbian' to present herself within LGBT or queer spaces?' Taking into account her own experience as a lesbian femme in queer safe spaces, Mishali considers the possibility that gender performativity is used in queer safe spaces to stabilize some gendered identifications while destabilizing others; a process which results in an exclusionary safe space.

Ziv, in her paper 'Questioning safe space in the classroom: reflections on pedagogy, vulnerability, and sexual explicitness' questions the feasibility as well as the desirability of safe spaces in queer theory and pornography academic classes. Such classes, she contends, allow for a reexamination of the meanings of trauma and agency and bring to the forefront new forms of feminist and queer subjectivities.

Finally, our third question touches on *the global context of queer safe spaces*, looking into the ways in which the discourses and practices of queer safe spaces are shaped by a wider cultural, political, and economic global context. Through a close examination of these emerging themes, some of the papers show how the global and local interrelate. Specifically, current discussions of the surveillance state, homonationalism, and the construction of queer safe spaces within

current regimes of (un)safety are addressed. A better understanding of queer safe spaces provides us with insights into the ways in which safety, queer spaces, and queer life are constructed in relation to contemporary precarious terms of living.

The subject of belonging is further explored in Thajib's paper, 'The making and breaking of Indonesian Muslim queer safe spaces'. Offering an affective perspective, Thajib probes the grammars of crisis vs. ordinary, discussing violence and safety within policed spaces. Additionally, David, Pascar and Hartal's article focuses on the formation of queer safe spaces within the Israeli context. Taking into account Israel's continuous state of unsafety caused mainly by Israel's militarist culture, the case study examines how borderland spaces, the surveillance state, and homonationalism shape the construction of queer safe spaces.

This special issue offers a vital and innovative perspective on queer safe spaces from Western and non-Western locations, exploring social, digital, and physical spaces, intersections and nuances of the construction and conceptualizations of queer safe spaces.

Notes

[i] This notion is detailed in accounts such as *The Roestone Collective* (2014) who argue that a safe space is always subjective and context specific.

[ii] The understanding that LGBT spaces include violence and internal power dynamics is not new. This reproduction of power structures and hierarchies is based on gender, race, class and other axes of oppression (see Nash 2011; Oswin 2008; Brown, Browne and Lim 2017).

Acknowledgements

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