equally safe? surely the same?
conceptions of (queer) feminist safe spaces

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Safe spaces have a long tradition as a politcal instrument. From the colletive experience of sexualised violence and the awareness of structural inequality came the wish for spaces that should be as free as possible from the societal structures of domination that oppress and create barriers. Women fought for and created spaces that were to provide protection from sexual violence, sexist objectification, and masculine domination. In a context in which it is not necessary to fight against everyday sexism—so goes the idea—space can emerge for the exchange of experiences, for the appropriation of new behaviors, for empowerment and solidarity, for the formation of a political identity, and for joint political action.

These concerns have not become redundant at the beginning of the 21st century. Spaces still exist and emerge that refer to a feminist tradition and are characterized by the idea of protection. In the following article we take a look at such spaces and their strategies.[1] The focus of our investigation is on flyer texts, websites, and email transmissions that describe (queer) feminist spaces and their politics of protection and invitation. The examples we cite are mainly from Vienna, where the connection between social movements and academia is a relatively close one, and from Berlin, which has a vibrant history of autonomous feminist and queer politics.

The article does not intend to historically reappraise the idea and practice of feminist safe spaces, but to analyze their strategies and arguments. Many feminist safe spaces pursue a strategy of gender-based invitation policies, which is what in this text we are particularly interested in. Many debates in recent years have revolved around these policies of invitation, emanating from activist and academic contexts and also taken up in fields of pedagogical action, at universities, and in leftist groups. The discussions are often characterized by a strong emotional involvement of the participants and a high potential to polarize. This is not surprising, since the topics are about feeling safe, belonging, or being excluded—topics that can be associated with insecurity, fear, or anger. This article analyzes the arguments of these discussions, outlines central questions and areas of tension in current Safer Spaces debates, and concludes by offering points of reference for confronting them in a reflective and differentiated manner.[2]

Safety through commonality?

Women's counseling centers, women's shelters, festivals, summer camps, women's groups, parties, rural communities, vacation and educational houses, women's universities, sex parties and workshops—(queer) feminist spaces have a variety of functions. What they have in common is the goal of offering their users protection from various forms of violence and oppression that they experience in patriarchal society:

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[1]We focus primarily on (queer) feminist spaces that explicitly place protection from patriarchal violence at the forefront. However, we also include spaces where empowerment and exchange are central goals and where the idea of safe(r) space is implicit.

[2]This text is based on a lecture given by the authors at the Frauen*FrühlingsUni 2014 in Wagrain/Salzburg.

protection from sexual assault, from dominance, from the reduction to female roles, from sexism; in some spaces also protection from triggers related to masculinity, homophobia, and transphobia.

Since the emergence of autonomous women's spaces in the 1970s, the idea that the safety that safe spaces want to guarantee can be established through equality or commonality among those present. Crucial to safety is the feeling of being 'among equals'—and in the beginning that meant, of course, among women. Shared womanhood meant shared experiences, shared concerns, shared political goals. Although differences have been much addressed in feminist contexts since the 1970s, even queer feminist safe spaces in 2014 are still based on the assumption that a space for "women*, lesbians*, intersexuals*, transwomen*, and transmen*"[3]. (Queer Feminist D.I.Y. Action Days, 2014) is a safe space qua shared experiences of discrimination. Here, too, an assumed commonality is sought to establish safety. Here, too, gender seems to stand for certain experiences—but it becomes clear that the range of welcome gender identities has expanded.

Differences have become clear between the users of the women's spaces presented in the same way—not all of them identify with the category of woman. And not all women feel safe in the women's spaces. Before we turn to the question of who can feel safe in feminist spaces and on what basis, we want to look at the differentiation of gender identities that is evident in the invitation policies of many safe spaces.

Different Identities, Common Concerns?

With the designation '*FrauenLesben*' (lit. Women-Lesbians) lesbians gained visibility in women's spaces where their presence was partially problematized by heterosexual women (GLADT e.V. 2011, 8). The explicit naming was also an indication that the spaces were also meant to protect against lesbian hostility and contributed to the formation of a collective feminist lesbian identity. The radical lesbian movement viewed a woman-identified life independent of men as resistance to patriarchy and fought for spaces for this politically understood way of life (Lenz 2010, 229). In the naming of lesbians in addition to women, being a lesbian also resonates as a gender identity.

Masculinity has long been present in lesbian subcultures and spaces. While it was represented in the 1920s by virile women and later by saucy dads and butches (Schader 2009) who largely located themselves as lesbians, today it is also embodied by people who identify as (trans*) masculine. Many trans* men who were socialized in the lesbian community prior to their transition still feel a connection to it. For some, this reduces to their self-designation as lesbian or as a Transman.[4] Others

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[3]Notable and atypical of queer-feminist invitation policies is the lack of mention of transgender people who locate themselves outside the gender binary

[4]In contrast to using trans* as an adjective, this spelling suggests that they are a "different kind of man," not "real men," a notion that can be supportive of inclusion in lesbian communities.

identify not as men, but as, say, tomboy, boi, neither-nor, or trans* for short. Even though their demand for participation in feminist spaces was sometimes met with resistance (Schuster 2010, 280ff.), trans* masculinities increasingly succeeded in their inclusion in women's-lesbian spaces, some of which they had been part of before coming out or transitioning. While some feminist spaces stick to a strict women-lesbian policy, many have opened up to trans* masculinities and extended their invitation policy to women-lesbian-trans* (*Frauen-Lesben-Trans**, FLT*).

Continuing to follow the paradigm of 'security through equality' was now more difficult. Gender was no longer suitable as a basis for commonality, so this was established on other levels: although there are strong differences between women-lesbians and trans* men on the level of bodies, it is precisely here that attempts are often made to establish commonalities—for example, by attributing female bodies to trans* men, which is enough for some women-lesbians not to perceive their presence as threatening. This does not do justice to the self-perception and outward appearance of many trans* masculinities. In an online debate about masculinities at the 2014 Berliner Osterkonferenz[5] it quickly becomes clear what it is all about for many: the penis (Schmacht 2014). If a penis is missing—and this is assumed across the board in the case of trans* men—then it is a matter of non-threatening masculinity and the safe feeling of 'being among us' is preserved.

Another way to argue for the inclusion of trans* masculinities is via a claimed shared socialization experience. Analogously, the exclusion of trans* women who are attributed a masculine socialization is also repeatedly argued (Schuster 2010, 283). However, it does not do justice to the reality of many trans* people to assume a particular gendered socialization based on the gender assigned at birth.[6]

The queer appropriation of masculinity in feminist spaces experienced an upswing in the 1990s that continues today. Drag kinging became popular on stages, parties and festivals and a symbol for the queer(feminist) rebellion against the biologically determined binary gender order—as long as masculinity is staged by a body that can (also still) be read as female. Bodies that are perceived as masculine often trigger alienation or rejection, and, despite the FLT* invitation policy, many users assume to be in a women's space (Janssen 2012). Even trans* women, who are invited simply as women or at least via the T*, experience subtle to open exclusion because of male attributions and often cannot feel safe (w.i.r. 2011).

Especially in academic queer-feminist contexts, intersex people have increasingly been invited into safe spaces in recent years. This then reads FLTI or FLIT. Some invitation policies use *Inter** to refer to people with *intersex conditions* who claim Inter* as their gender identity "in the sense of defining themselves as hermaphrodite, hermaphrodite, intergender, etc." (Sauer n.d.). In many cases, however, blanket 'in-

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[5]The Osterkonferenz is a BDSM conference for FLT* that grew out of a lesbian BDSM community. The acronym BDSM stands for three pairs of terms: bondage/discipline, dominance/submission, and sadism/masochism.

[6]From a trans* perspective, a hegemonic concept of socialization is criticized for disregarding the resonance of the individual in the process of socialization. See, for example, Allan 2014.

tersex' persons are invited. It is reasonable to assume that event organizers envision people with *intersex conditions* as *genderqueer* or 'living between genders' (Costello 2010).[7] Intersex activists criticize the appropriation of intersex people by queer theory and activism to deconstruct the two-gender system (Zwischengeschlecht.org 2010). The political concerns of the intersex movement are rarely on the agendas of queer feminist groups that open their spaces to intersex people.

Increasingly, in queer feminist contexts, we no longer read of women but of women* being included in a space's invitation policies. Originally introduced to point to the constructedness of the categories of man and woman,[8] the asterisk has since developed a life of its own. Depending on how it is understood, women* can mean people who are socially ascribed the category of woman but who do not fully identify with it; or it can be a collective term for cis, trans*, and intersex women. In this understanding, however, the asterisk singles out trans* and intersex women, because why shouldn't they already be included with women (without an asterisk)? (Vesper 2013).[9]

In summary, it can be said that the debates about the target groups of (queer) feminist shelters have not been concluded. The demand for the recognition of gendered self-locations and the role of masculinity and remain frequently discussed topics. Currently, in addition to spaces that have a women-lesbian invitation policy, meaning only cis women, there is a strong tendency towards FLT* or FLIT* invitation policies, which—as shown—contain certain contradictions. Spaces only for women, but for all women, no longer seem opportune in queer feminist contexts (Reitsamer 2014, 45f.).[10]

Differences in Us

In addition to questions of gender identities, differences within the category of woman are an important part of the safe space debates. The critiques from women of color and women with disabilities made and still makes clear how short-sighted the assumption is that safe spaces are possible solely on the basis of the common location as women, lesbians or trans*: FLT* who are affected by racism are also affected

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[7]Which can be inferred, for example, from an invitation to a workshop series for women*, intersex, and transgender persons organized by the Women* Advancement Council of the University of Vienna. Here, the invitation policy is justified as follows: "Women*, intersex, and transgender persons are still confronted with disadvantages and unequal distribution of opportunities in their everyday study life." (via email statement, 22/3/2013)

[8]See, for example, http://germinal-vienne.org/warum-dieser-blog/nach-den-sternen-greifen/ (8/1/2015)

[9]The collective Frauen*referat der HochschülerInnenschaft an der Universität Wien subsumes even more under Frauen*: "With Frauen* we address all women, lesbians, transpersons and intersexpersons" (2012, 9). Whether trans* men and all intersex people want to be understood as women* is doubtful.

[10]An exception is the—not queer-feminist but feminist understanding—FrauenFrühlingsUni Graz 2009, which was directed at "women and transwomen" (cf. Rohn 2011, 189)

in white-dominated protected spaces; FLT* with disabilities are confronted with barriers; workers with the exclusions of academic scenes. Dominance and exclusion based on race, class, or ability—or the entanglements of these hierarchical orders of difference—are not always easy to pin down. They can be expressed, for example, by the fact that the needs and tastes of some are taken into account far more than those of others in the design of shelters; that some feel seen as 'the others' and are accompanied by a diffuse sense of unease and insecurity, while others feel comfortable and at home.

While the critique of racist, classist and anti-disability exclusion aims at critical reflection and structural change of safe spaces, spaces are formed alongside the existing structures that focus on other commonalities in addition to gender. The Viennese Black_women*_space meeting, for example, which invites exchange about "self-empowerment/empowerment of Blackness and life situations of Black women*" sees itself as a safer space for "Black lesbian women*, Black trans women*, Black bisexual women*, Black intersexuals* and Black women*" (Black_women*_space meeting 2014). Another example is the autonomous feminist initiative ARGE Dicke Weiber, which is about self-empowerment for fat women and activism against anti-fatness structures. Women are invited who "see themselves as fat and whose lives are shaped by the topic of 'being fat'" (ARGE Dicke Weiber n.d.).

Commonalities that often serve as the basis for shelters in combination with gendered location include shared identity (such as femme), shared experience (such as migration), shared affectedness (such as by sexualized violence), shared political concerns (such as sex workers' rights), or a shared sense of belonging (such as to the lesbian BDSM community).

Behavior Instead of Shared Identity?

Using commonality among users as a guarantor of safety is not the only strategy for the implementation of safe spaces. In activist (pro)feminist and anti-sexist contexts, where there are no gender restrictions in the invitation policy, approaches have emerged that focus on the behavior of those present (see, for example, Huber/Doucette 2010). Starting from the question of what a space is supposed to protect against in concrete terms, rules of conduct applicable to all have been developed to ensure just that. The term safer space is used in the awareness that social power inequalities are also perpetuated in countercultural spaces—to speak of a safe space would obscure the real violence taking place within the space and thus make it more unsafe.

The goals of such a safer space are formulated positively by the Berlin project Minor Treat: "We want to create a space that contrasts directly with the oppressive norms of mainstream society, is critical of the power structures that affect our everyday lives, and where the effect our behavior has on others is carefully considered." (n.d.) However, there is often a strong focus on behaviors that are not tolerated:

This includes, for example, racist, sexist, anti-Semitic, anti-Islamic, homophobic, transphobic, classist, ableist, or lookist behavior, but also "otherwise discriminatory" behavior (for example, LaD.I.Y.fest 2013). Many behavioral guidelines contain rules that aim to make physical or sexual advances as safe as possible. For example, they call for respecting the boundaries of the other person ("No means no") and asking for explicit verbal consent before touching; a practice for which extensive guidelines exist under the catchword consent concept. In the case of assaults or discriminatory behavior, the users are required to intervene or get help. For support in the case of assaults, there are awareness teams in some spaces, whose task is, among other things, to mediate with the affected person.

Behavioral safe spaces—which in (queer) feminist safe spaces are often combined with invitation policies based on gender—aim to make spaces safer for as many users as possible with different social positionings. But they also produce exclusions. For example, the language in which the rules are formulated is often a distinctive one. The strong focus on potential boundary-crossings can also create an atmosphere characterized by the fear of making mistakes and little space for encounter and learning from each other (Copenhagen Queerfestival 2011).

Areas of Tension in Current Safe Space Debates

In the analyses of safe spaces (e.g., w.i.r. 2011, Hoenes 2006, Non Chérie 2014) and the self-reflections of organizers (e.g., Copenhagen Queerfestival 2011, Günther et al. 2007, 17-20), some central areas of tension in the conceptions of safety can be identified, which we outline below.

In many cases, it becomes clear that 'being safe' and 'feeling safe' are often not clearly separable. Since the actual safety of a space is difficult to measure, the users' feeling of safety becomes the central criterion. Here we find a parallel to security discourses about public urban space, in which the displacement of begging, homeless or addicted people is currently often not about preventing criminal activity, but about taking measures against the subjective feeling of insecurity of privileged citizens. Even in feminist safe spaces, we suggest, what makes us 'feel safe' does not always correlate with what makes us 'be safe.' For example, it is conceivable that at a queer-feminist all-gender party, where hardly any alcohol is consumed, there are fewer sexualized assaults than at a women-lesbian-trans* party, where there is a lot of drinking. Nevertheless, the FLT* party will probably feel safer for many members of the scene.

In addition to 'feeling safe,' there is also talk of 'feeling comfortable,' and often the two cannot be clearly separated (see for example GLADT e.V. 2011, 13ff.). If, with regard to safe spaces, it becomes an important question who should feel comfortable there, then it can easily happen that their meaning shifts away from a space of protection from violent social structures and towards an extended scene living room. This contradicts the proclaimed openness of many feminist spaces,

because in a feel-good space understood in this way, only those who largely conform to the norms of the scene can feel unbrokenly comfortable and safe. We suspect that it is often primarily the shared codes, shared language, and unspoken norms of behavior that make for a sense of well-being and thus a sense of safety. If the scene is largely white, academically educated, and non-disabled, the exclusions that white, non-disabled, and academic spaces already produce are reinforced by the claim to 'feel comfortable' by the socially privileged users—they then do not have to leave their own comfort zone to deal with differences and unequal distribution of privilege.

The Copenhagen Queerfestival questions the privilege of a sense of safety that arises in this way:

> "Therefore we are not sure that everyone should feel safe at all times. Not every position is safe, while feeling safe as a queer is important at the festival, feeling safe as a white person might not be an exclusively good thing. We have to remember that every time we interact with each other we represent different positions. Sometimes our privileges are limiting other peoples freedom some times our freedom is limited by other peoples privileges. And so, to really challenge or positions we might have to give up on the idea of personal safety from time to time to be able to make a safe space for others. And this very process in it self is not safe. It is scary and challenging and even painful at times." (2011)

The tension we identify here is between different social positionalities (which can be associated with lacks of safety) and the desire for a sense of safety (which often comes from commonalities). However, such a sense of safety on the part of the privileged comes at the expense of those who are underprivileged in the space.

Terms such as power relations, norms, and privileges refer to a socially critical language that politicizes interpersonal relations. Politicizing the seemingly private or individual was and is an important feminist strategy. Understanding how individual experiences are socially shaped allows for collective empowerment, solidarization, and a starting point for social change. However, in debates around safer spaces, we observe that politicizing and moralizing discussions often lead to hardening and new hurts rather than understanding and constructive dialogue. With the tendency to politicize feelings, an area of tension is lost from view; namely, that between a politicizing perspective that first sees social power relations in interpersonal interactions and a 'psychologizing' perspective that focuses on individual experiences, feelings and needs. Reopening this field of tension could—we believe—contribute to broadening the repertoire of actions in dealing with difficult interpersonal situations.

Situational Clarity and Collective Responsibility

The areas of tension outlined show that there can be no simple answers and no universally valid solutions for safe spaces, and that questions of safety are closely linked to questions of inclusion and exclusion. Safe spaces want to open up spaces of possibility. When designing them, it is therefore essential to first ask who is to be protected from what in them. Is it about protection from sexual violence, from (cis-)sexism, from racism? Is it about protection from masculine behavior, from stereotypical roles, from othering? Is it about feeling safe, so that the exchange of experiences, the acquisition of new behaviors or joint political action become possible? Only when this has been clarified as far as possible can strategies for implementation be sought that are appropriate to the situation. They vary according to the space, the political framework, the needs and habits of the target group or the resources of the organizing team, etc. Sometimes it might be necessary to close the rooms for certain groups of people, sometimes additional resources for a part of the users are needed, sometimes behavioral agreements or contact persons in case of unpleasant or discriminating situations. Sometimes it might be important to raise awareness in the organization team or among the users with flyers or workshops, for example, about hostility to femininity or lookism. Or it makes sense to offer less alcohol.

Between all these variables we consider some points of orientation important: The chosen protection strategies have to be made transparent for the users and the invited groups of people have to be considered in the design of the space. The recognition of self-definitions in identities and affectedness is inevitable.

Perhaps the (old) insight that there are no absolutely safe spaces can encourage shifting the focus of the desire for safety. Even in shelters, situations can arise for all those present in which they are confronted with anger, fear, pain, sadness or loneliness, possibly triggered by the behavior of others: statements that hurt, people who come too close, objectifying looks, situations that trigger or the feeling of being the only other. Social structures of domination also have an impact on shelters and hurt here as well. Each brings their own history and their own vulnerabilities that others do not (cannot) know. Not least for this reason, responsibility for one's own safety and well-being cannot be delegated to the organizers, the rules of conduct, or the invitation policy. Perhaps a different kind of safety can emerge when the focus is not only on preventing injuries, but also on dealing with them. A hurtful incident can no longer be changed, but its interpretation and how it is dealt with can be shaped—which has the potential for feelings about it to change as well.

What might such a way of dealing look like? Can ritualized forms of public sharing of difficult experiences be useful? Can strategies be derived from community accountability approaches (see, for example, Bierria et al. 2006)? We consider it necessary to be sensitive to power inequalities in order to be able to see the insecurities and concerns that arise from different social positionings—and this is

not only a matter for the organizers. At the same time, we believe that creating an atmosphere of taking oneself and others seriously and caring for them is just as important for the development of constructive manners. Such an attitude could start from the organizers of the shelter and involve all users: for example, as a personal welcome, especially for new visitors, combined with an introduction to the space and its demands, as well as with an indication of who to contact in case of questions or difficult situations; or through the role of a host who seeks direct communication with the users. In addition to the role of the taken seriously, each person also has the role of the taken seriously—and this requires the willingness to endure differences and a certain amount of courage to learn.

Knowing that safety means different things to all of us, perhaps such strategies can create "*braver spaces*" (Arao/Clemens 2013), in which we sometimes cannot prevent injuries, but can trust that there are willingness and tested forms for dealing with these experiences collectively.

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