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Negotiating the Paradoxical Binaries of 'Safety' in Queer Spaces: Autoethnographic and Socio-Spatial Reflections

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ABSTRACT

Amidst a backdrop of attacks on both LGBTQ+ individuals and LGBTQ+ venues coupled with the ongoing changing landscape of urban queer spaces across the UK, this article offers a timely autoethnographic and socio-spatial account of queer "safety." This article examines when and how queer spaces are experienced as "safe." Specifically, the article offers reflections from the author's experience of two queer spaces: (1) The Proud Place, a purpose-built community center in Manchester, England and (2) The concert of a queer female artist that took place in Bristol, England. The article concludes that queer spaces are contextually safe spaces. Through an analysis of (in)visibility and exclusivity in queer spaces, the article reveals the social structures and power dynamics impacting perceptions of safety.

Introduction

> Rethinking queer safety is imperative to queer futurity. In Lewis et al. (2015) article about safe spaces for women, they distinguish between safety from and safety to, arguing that when women are safe from harassment, abuse, and misogyny they feel safe to be cognitively, intellectually, and emotionally expressive. I taken aback by the very idea of safety to: I wondered, what would I—we—do if I felt safe to do whatever I wanted? [field note: 24/08/22]

Amidst the recent rise of hate crimes across the UK toward the LGBTQ+ community, discussions about LGBTQ+ safety are pertinent right now. Hate crimes involve a crime targeted at a person because of prejudice or hostility toward that person's race, religion, sexuality, disability, or gender identity. Hate crimes can be verbal or physical and include threatening behavior, assaults, or harassment. Despite an increase of visible queer bodies in the media, there has been a sharp increase in violence toward queer people in public spaces and an overall increase in hate crime toward the LGBTQ+ community, with an estimated 112% increase in

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hate crime on the basis of sexual orientation in the last five years (Office of National Statistics [ONS], 2022, 2023). The UK was once ranked the safest nation for LGBTQ+ people by the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA); as of 2023, the UK is ranked 17th out of the 49 European nations (Europe, 2023; Perry, 2023). However, violence, hate, and discrimination toward LGBTQ+ people are not only targeted toward individuals. There have been several reports of attacks on and in LGBTQ venues (Brooks & Murray, 2021; Rawlinson, 2023) because these venues are considered a "safe" environment for LGBTQ+ people to explore their sexuality, form a positive gay identity (Valentine & Skelton, 2003) and create social networks (Asante, 2022), meaning that these spaces become ideal targets for anti-LGBTQ+ attackers.

The paradoxical nature of safety in queer spaces reveals itself to us in many ways. The straight cis security guards checking your ID before you enter the gay bar; the police marching alongside us at Pride; the inappropriate groping of a drag performer by a drunk hen party; queer spaces are full of moments of unsafety. I began thinking about the DNA of queer spaces, considering how "safety" is managed and negotiated in these spaces. The more I observed my own thoughts and perceptions of safety throughout this autoethnography and the more I read about other people's ideas or experiences of safety in queer spaces, the more I realized that queer safety is perhaps inherently paradoxical. Indeed, safety is not a characteristic we can simply build into the space and forget about, safety is also not a written promise, safety is contextual, in flux, and always moving. Considering this paradoxical nature of queer spaces, when and how are queer spaces experienced as "safe"? Building on this understanding of safety in queer spaces, along with the literature in queer and trans geographies (Doan, 2007; Gieseking, 2020; Stella, 2012), this article explores how I—we—negotiate safety in different queer spaces through a series of autoethnographic and critical socio-spatial reflections on inclusive/exclusive, visible/invisible, and temporary/fixed queer spaces. In doing so, it blends rich narrative autoethnographic accounts with emerging theoretical ideas concerning safe spaces to (re)think queer "safety."

An understanding of how I—we—negotiate safety might have a broader positive effect on how we can understand the nature of queer safety and thus how we can continue to build and maintain "safe" queer spaces. This article also contributes to the nascent field of queer geographies, helping to refine conceptualizations of safety and offer new ways of thinking about the complexities of building and maintaining "safe" queer spaces. Doing this through autoethnography provides an opportunity to promote "insider" knowledge and engage in reflexivity, leading to a more critical and nuanced analysis of the negotiations involved in seeking safety amidst the paradoxical binaries present in queer spaces.

This article begins with an overview of the literature on LGBTQ+ safe spaces, before introducing queer spaces more broadly as safe spaces. This is followed by a discussion about the criticism of the "safe space" literature. Then, the article will touch on the method of autoethnography and how an autoethnography of the concert informed a grounded socio-spatial analysis of the Proud Place, before offering a series of autoethnographic and socio-spatial reflections concerning inclusivity/exclusivity, visibility/invisibility, and temporary/fixed queer spaces that demonstrate the contextually safe nature of queer spaces. I will then weave between autoethnographic accounts and the academic literature throughout the discussion section.

Queer space as 'safe space'

There is a growing body of literature on LGBTQ "safe spaces:" at work (Barnard et al., 2022); on university campuses (Poynter & Tubbs, 2008); and in communities (Meyer, 2011). The presence of the pink triangle surrounded by a green circle (the safe space symbol) on classroom doors, office walls and community centers is meant to indicate that LGBTQ+ individuals are welcome. However, queer spaces, more broadly (i.e., not specifically curated safe spaces), have received less attention. The literature that does exist in this area tends to focus on Pride parades (Ammaturo 2015). Queer spaces are often marked, instead, by the use of the progress pride flag. The progress pride flag retains the common six-stripe rainbow design but adds a chevron of black, brown, light blue, pink and white to represent marginalized people of color, trans people, those living with HIV/AIDs and those who have been lost. The progress pride flag demonstrates the progress of the LGBTQ+ movement. Indeed, queer spaces, much like safe spaces, respond to the patriarchal and heteronormative "other" spaces of society and operate as an important part of LGBTQ+ people's lives. Queer spaces have been widely conceptualized as sites of resistance (Stella, 2012), as a "safe" environment for LGBTQ+ people to explore their sexuality and form a positive gay identity (Valentine & Skelton, 2003), or to create networks and form alliances (Asante, 2022). Queer spaces then, function much like other "safe spaces." However, queer spaces have historically—and continue to be—subject to raids and attacks, contesting the idea that these spaces are *entirely* safe. A critical interrogation of "safe space" literature may offer fruitful discussions about how safety is negotiated in queer spaces, where the very purpose of the space becomes used as a reason to target the space.

After the 2016 attack on Florida's Pulse nightclub, where 49 people were killed and 53 wounded, bars across the US hired more security staff and ran active-shooter safety drills. Since then, multiple other attacks on queer venues in the UK and US have been recorded (Gabbatt, 2022). In the UK, there has been a spate of homophobic attacks outside of or near

LGBTQ+ venues in UK cities (Brooks & Murray, 2021; Osborne & Swash, 2023). The attacks on queer venues or toward LGBTQ+ individuals represent a rise in negative attitudes toward LGBTQ+ rights and acceptance in the UK, which has coincided with a specific wave of hatred and discrimination toward trans people, with a rise in hate crime toward trans people up by 11% in the year ending March 2023. The Home Office has linked this rise to negative political commentary and media around trans rights (ONS, 2023). At the same time as these attacks are happening in and around LGBTQ+ venues, reportedly these spaces are disappearing off the map. There has been a drastic drop in urban queer-friendly venues; over half (58%) of London's LGBTQ+ venues have closed since the early 2000s (Campkin & Marshall, 2017). However, Nash and Gorman-Murray (2014) complicate the idea that queer spaces are simply disappearing by suggesting that the decline of queer urban spaces reflects "a new motility" (p. 776). In other words, LGBTQ+ people, considering their status as "modern subjects with full citizenship rights" (p. 766) can embrace and participate in mobility, which might look like refusal of a place-based identity (i.e., the "need" for gay villages or urban spaces). For some LGBTQ+ people, then, the once popular "gay village" may rather be a thing of the past. Instead, we might rather think of "queer space" as an act of doing, than an act of permeance. Spaces that are otherwise "straight" can be challenged and transformed into "queer" space, therefore, again, minimizing the need for gay villages.

Beyond the changing landscape of queer urban spaces and attacks on queer spaces, these spaces battle with their own internal hierarchies and complexities. There is a growing body of literature looking at the relationship between queer spaces and safe spaces. Queer spaces as imagined to be safe spaces for LGBTQ+ people (Hartal, 2017), however, they have been criticized for assuming safety means the same to all queer people, where rather, safety is inherently racialized, gendered, sexualized, and classed (Doan, 2007; Fox & Ore, 2010). In other words, to speak of the experience of the queer "community" begs the question, which one? (Ingram et al., 1997). In *A Queer New York*, Gieseking (2020) discusses the lack of lesbian physical long-term or purpose-built space; something Gieseking has attributed to both the gender pay gap and belonging to a sexual minority group. This is in stark contrast to gay male spaces which have typically been the focal point of urban queer space analysis (Bell & Valentine, 1995; Knopp, 1998; Pritchard et al., 1998). Beyond this, there has been extensive research demonstrating the exclusion of bisexual people (Nelson, 2023) as well as trans people from the wider LGBTQ+ community. For example, Browne and Lim (2010) explore the experiences of trans lives in the "gay capital of the UK" – Brighton. Browne's analysis demonstrates that trans lives are both lived within the LGBTQ+ community and marginalized by the norms created by the community.

Furthermore, other literatures have highlighted the contradictions and complexities of creating safe queer spaces. Through their examination of Pride as a safe space, McCarten and Nash (2021) demonstrate the complexities and contradictions of creating "queer safe space," suggesting that there is an unintentional compromise of what "queer" and "safe" means when negotiating queer safe spaces. Importantly, their work highlights that different people have different ideas about what "safety" looks like, and therefore, preexisting tensions among different groups within the LGBTQ+ community can arise when theorizing what constitutes a queer safe space. David et al. (2018) examine queer safe space in West-Jerusalem, demonstrating how attempts to create queer safe spaces often failed to produce *actual* feelings of safety and instead reproduced feelings of insecurity and violence, shaped by militarized and securities practices.

Indeed, the term "safe space" has appeared in and been used in many different contexts; however, the exact meaning of, and acceptance of "safety" as a necessary/positive spatial attribute has been brought into question (Barrett, 2010; David et al., 2018; Quinan, 2016). Safe space might refer to the physical space (i.e., appropriate ventilation, and lighting) but also the metaphorical aspects of the social environment. The notion that the classroom, for example, must be a safe space to promote student engagement is a key tenet across education literature (Frusciante, 2008; Hunter, 2008; Toynton, 2016). In defining a safe space, the latter, metaphorical aspects of the social environment tend to be the focus of discussion, in which "discriminatory activities, expressions of intolerance or policies of inequity are barred" (Hunter, 2008, p. 8). Safe spaces are also defined by how well the space facilitates artistic and aesthetic risk-taking from participants of the safe space (Hunter, 2008).

However, Barrett (2010) argues that safe space is an undertheorized and overused metaphor and that there has been an uncritical acceptance of safety as necessary. Barrett challenges the idea that safety is a positive attribute to a space in the context of the classroom, highlighting the impossibility of safety for marginalized students. By this, Barrett means students who are racially, socially, and economically marginalized. Similarly, Ludlow (2004) argues that the classroom is a microcosm, therefore social norms, structures, and processes of power and privilege permeate the classroom. As such, students who belong to racially, socially, or economically deprived groups who may face violence and oppression in the 'outside' world, are likely to continue facing these same problems in a "safe space" (Brim, 2020). To think otherwise, Ludlow argues, is a function of our "privileged perspective" (p. 45). Safe spaces, far from suppressing conflict, then, can often—accidentally, but not always (Valentine, 1997)—reproduce existing hierarchies. To contend that classrooms (in this case)

can be a safe space is considered "not only unrealistic, but dangerous" (Barrett, 2010, p. 7). Kumashiro (2001) has written extensively about the failed commitment in accounting for the intersection of racism and heterosexism in many safe spaces, demonstrating how, in attempting to challenge one form of oppression, we unintentionally contribute to other forms.

The Roestone Collective (2014) have offered a reconceptualization of safe spaces as paradoxical spaces, recognizing them as complex spaces understood through relational work and not simply through a contextual notions of "safe" and "unsafe." Their article recognizes the importance and need for safe spaces, but encourages us to think of them as paradoxical, in flux, and never *completely* safe. In other words, there will always be conflict within the process of creating safe spaces (Hartal, 2017). Even so, they encourage the cultivation of safe space "as a site for negotiating difference and challenging oppression" (p. 1346). This reconceptualization of safe spaces might offer fruitful discussions for other spaces where "safety" is considered a primary characteristic of the space. This article uses Roestone Collective (2014) reconceptualizing to better understand queer spaces, sites that aim to provide safety from harm and discrimination—yet face frequent homophobic and transphobic attacks as well as their own internal hierarchical problems. Queer spaces, in other words, represent a paradox within themselves—spaces that are meant to bring people together and offer refuge from discrimination are facing targeted attacks because of the very promise of refuge. The question of when and how queer spaces are experienced as "safe" might encourage possible avenues of understanding the negotiations and complexities involved in queer safety. Understanding such negotiations and complexities involved in queer safety is imperative to bettering, protecting, and maintaining these spaces.

Throughout this autoethnography then, I approach queer spaces as not inherently safe spaces, as spaces that are in flux. I search for moments of safety, and I take note of moments that evoke a feeling of unease or a lack of safety. I try to reflect on the deeper reasons for my feelings of safety and unsafety throughout the autoethnography in order to answer the question, when and how are queer spaces experienced as "safe"?

Method

Safety is a complex individual perception, complicated by our identities and histories. Autoethnography is known to be a useful method when topics of experience and identity arise (Nelson, 2020) as it allows us a route to mapping personal experiences onto other social and cultural experiences and events. An analysis of safety in queer spaces told through a queer person's voice allows the complexities and contradictions of these spaces to be explored more thoroughly, in turn, working to eliminate mainstream narratives that might create monolithic representations of the queer community. Therefore, an

autoethnographic approach to study the question of when and how queer spaces are experienced as safe proves to be a productive method.

I write about my experience at a concert of a queer female artist. My writing of the concert came about after conversations with my partner about the contrast of my feelings as I stood in the queue waiting for the venue to open and then during the concert. The concert space also accurately reflects many of the queer spaces available today. In a period of gentrification and the closure of many LGBTQ+ venues (Campkin & Marshall, 2017), LGBTQ+ populations must instead rely on these one-off, temporary spaces. The concert, in turn, informed a grounded socio-spatial analysis of the Proud Place which I visited in the months after the concert. Amid the changing landscape and ongoing closures of LGBTQ+ spaces, I was surprised to learn of The Proud Place—a newly purpose-built LGBTQ+ community center located in Manchester, England. The Proud Place was therefore chosen because it provides a rare opportunity to reflect on how safety is managed, negotiated, and *purposefully* built into a queer space. Together, the concert and the Proud Place provide valuable insight into ideas around (in)visibility, safety, and exclusivity. Indeed, by examining both a temporary and a permanent queer space, we can gain a more nuanced understanding of the function and evolution of safety.

Doing autoethnography requires a combination of introspection and deeper cultural analysis (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), resulting in thick descriptive accounts that can generate broader insights. Without this link between the micro and the macro, autoethnography would not be so useful (Nelson, 2020). Autoethnography as an approach requires a careful and balanced conversation between the "autobiographical and personal" and the "cultural and social" (Ellis, 2004). The autobiographical and personal requires allowing what we see, hear, think, and feel to become part of the research "field" before mapping these experiences to the broader cultural and social context. Autoethnography is considered analytically reflexive rather than perspective, it is not necessarily a method or a set of procedures but a way of "seeing and being" (Denzin, 2006).

The "how," then, of an autoethnography is less clear. This can sometimes lead to researchers clutching at straws to form a coherent and linear narrative that constitutes and makes up a "method," however the process of autoethnography is neither coherent nor linear (Albion, 2012; Wall, 2006). At the concert, I had not considered myself collecting data, or analyzing the space. I was not, therefore, in the space as a "researcher." It was not until I left the concert that I began talking to my partner about the stark contrast of how I felt outside the concert venue to inside. This then led to some initial writing about visibility and safety, which later became a focal point of this article. At the point of writing these initial ideas down, I had already interviewed the architect who was involved in and documented the process of building the new LGBTQ+ community center in Manchester—the Proud Place. I visited

the center with the goal of reflecting on the space in this way. However, it was the critical reflections on (in)visibility and exclusivity in queer spaces from the concert that then informed a critical socio-spatial analysis of the Proud Place. I approached the Proud Place mindful of how I described the process of moving within and between visible and invisible at the concert, and what that, in turn meant for my feelings of safety and belonging. I took these ideas into the Proud Place and approached my analysis of the space with those thoughts at the forefront of my mind. This analysis involved a range of empirical, social and spatial observations. For instance, I spent time in the Proud Place observing and documenting ongoing activities and events, such as staff meetings, youth group events, Pride preparations and a book event. In addition to this, I spent time engaging in analyzing the physical layout and use of the space. I paid particular attention to the concepts described at the concert and brought these topics to conversations with the architect and the manager. While these conversations—in part—shape my socio-spatial analysis, they were not recorded or transcribed. Rather, they simply helped bring the space to life and offer additional context to my field notes.

The autobiographical and the personal, while requiring a degree of vulnerability, came naturally to me. I have kept a research diary for some time now and many of my reflections come from there. I made a conscious effort over the period of a year to reflect on my perceptions of different queer spaces I visited. I also wrote extensive field notes during my visit to the Proud Place, including taking lots of photographs. Many of the other reflections from this article came from analyzing these fieldnotes. Both the field notes and research diary were analyzed through a process of immersive reading and critical reflexivity that later formed narrative accounts as presented below. These accounts were integrated with the social and the cultural, requiring me to revisit a broad range of literature around safe spaces, queer safety, and identity. I also benefited from colleagues reading my work and encouraging deeper engagement with the literature in areas.

Another element that was central to both the autoethnography and the critical analysis of the Proud Place was reflexive writing. Writing reflexively about questions of safety and identity required me to look inward and reflect on my positionality. In the following pages, I write about my experiences of safety from the position of a white, cisgender, queer woman. Doing this research has resulted in some internal resistance about the value of my experience in queer spaces as a white, cisgender woman. Thinking about and writing about my perceived sense of safety encouraged me to think about and reflect on my both whiteness and my cisgender identity in these spaces. I recognize that accessing these spaces, traveling to and from these spaces, engagements in these spaces, and not only my perceived sense of safety but my actual safety is and was inherently tied to both my whiteness and my cisgender identity in ways that my privilege overshadows and hide from me.

Despite my brewing fears of doing autoethnography, I was encouraged by Jones and Adams (2010) Chapter "Autoethnography is a Queer Method." The chapter highlights that both queer theory and autoethnography have been described as "too much" and "too little" at once. Otherwise, too personal, too easy, too sentimental, and yet also too impractical, with too few real-world applications. However, the real "hinge" according to Jones and Adams is both queer theory's and autoethnography's oppositional forms of consciousness, in other words, their rejections of norms and will to both undermine and over-throw dominant systems. As someone who often works and writes within a queer theoretical framework, I connected to this chapter. Working within a queer theoretical framework means that I recognize that sex and gender are socially constructed (Butler, 1990, 1993), and that the broader social and cultural contexts I refer to throughout this autoethnography are in effect, creating "appropriate" or "accepted" ways to do gender and sexuality (Worthen, 2016) that are having a profoundly negative impact on the LGBTQ+ community.

A queer approach to autoethnography, then, is one that recognizes the contradictions and contingencies of lived experiences, one that recognizes that we cannot and should not paint ourselves into corners where boundaries are policed and disciplined, instead allowing us to create good, incomplete— messy, even—stories using a combination of personal narrative and cultural analysis.

Autoethnographic and socio-spatial reflections

Below I present two sets of reflections. The first comes from the concert and is primarily autoethnographic reflections, as described in the method section. The writing is created from observations, reflections and diary entries from multiple days following the concert. The second is a similarly crafted analysis of the Proud Place, which is presented as a series of socio-spatial reflections that were informed both by my experience at the concert and a series of empirical, social and spatial observations that were noted during my visit to the community center.

The concert

The concert, in contrast to the center, was a fleeting, temporary "queering" (Doderer, 2011; Vitry, 2021) of the O2 Academy in Bristol, England. The O2 academy in Bristol is a popular music venue, hosting a variety of musical guests each month. The venue is not known as a "queer" space. But in May 2022, the O2 filled with 1500 queer-looking individuals ahead of a Fletcher concert. Fletcher is a gay female artist who has publicly dated and subsequently written breakup songs about numerous well-known other queer

women. Since moving from the lively city center of Edinburgh, Scotland to the more reserved Bath, England I had not visited many—if any—gay bars. This concert was also during the pandemic so visiting gay bars was not an option due to social distancing guidance in the United Kingdom at the time. Going to this concert was the closest experience of queer nightlife I would be experiencing in a few years, so I was really looking forward to it.

However, approaching the O2 that night, I did not look nor feel particularly excited. As I approached the venue, I noticed the queue stretching all the way down the street. To reach the back of the queue, I had to walk from the front to the back, passing hundreds of people lined up along the street. It felt as though everyone's eyes were on me as I slowly made my way to the back of the queue. Despite my later feelings of ease among this crowd, in the queue my relationship to the crowd was complicated by my broader visibility to other members of the public. I can only describe the feeling as exposed. There was a hypervisibility in being seen by not only those in the queue but others around the city passing by the venue. The people in front of my partner and I in the queue made friends with the people in front of them. I remember desperately hoping we would not be roped into the conversation. I wanted to disappear into the crowd. I noticed others further ahead in the queue had also made friends with the people next to them. I overheard someone else admit they were at the concert alone to a group of people; they immediately welcomed them into the group.

When I got inside, things changed quickly. I was no longer visible to the broader eye of Bristol, but only to the other who are in the room with me. The feelings I previously anticipated began brewing. At some point in the night, it dawned on me that I had never been in a room with primarily queer women before. My time spent in nightclubs in Edinburgh or London has typically been dominated by gay men. I lived just minutes away from the strip of gay bars in Edinburgh and I spent most weeks, specifically on a Sunday night for their drag show, there. Every week I would see the same faces. Rarely were those faces of other queer women. I felt safe in those clubs, but rarely did I feel like I necessarily belonged in those clubs.

There is an element of exclusivity/inclusivity present at the concert, then. The event, while not formally exclusive to queer women, appeals to an audience of queer women, which, in turn, makes it an inclusive space (for queer women). It is both inclusive and exclusive at once. Queer women only, or women only spaces are growing in popularity for their promised "safety from" and "safety to" as detailed by Lewis et al. (2015). While the element of inclusivity I am referring to here, and indeed the inclusivity expressed by Lewis et al. (2015) creates a safe space for *me*, or in their case, cisgender women, spaces of exclusion run the risk of creating a hostile environment for others (i.e., non-binary folks who may be misgendered in the space; trans women who may feel unwelcome in the space). Furthermore, the audience was largely

white, which may have changed the landscape of "safety" for a Black queer woman in the audience, who may have felt this shifting sense of safety even inside the venue. This echoes some of the "messy negotiations" (Hartal, 2017, p. 18) referred to in the safe space literature. As Roestone Collective (2014) consider the role of inclusivity and exclusivity in safe spaces, they suggest that inclusion must be critical as uncritical inclusion can reinforce existing oppressions.

I realized just how quickly that feeling came and went, how quickly the comfort and the safety of that space disappeared when I exited the venue. The drastic change in my feelings of safety from being outside the venue to inside the venue demonstrates how visibility, belonging and safety interact in complex and nuanced ways; depending on who I was visible to and who I shared the space with. Outside the venue, I had no desire to belong and certainly no desire to be visible among the group. Inside the event venue, in an otherwise dark, empty room, I felt as though that space was for me. I wanted to be part of the collective feeling of belonging and togetherness in the O2 that night.

The proud place

The Proud Place is a purpose-built community center run by The Proud Trust in Manchester, England. Not only is it home to The Proud Trust, but it also serves as a community hub for the LGBTQ+ population across Greater Manchester. The site has a rich history of operating as an LGBTQ+ community center. In 2015, £2.5 million was raised to rebuild the Center. In 2020, the existing building was demolished, and new building work began. The center then reopened in 2022. There are three floors to the center, the ground floor is the community lounge, a fully fitted commercial kitchen and a library. The second floor is home to the staff offices and a workshop area. On the third floor, there is a training room and a rooftop terrace. I had the opportunity to visit for 3 days during the opening summer. Given that it is a purpose-built queer space, the center provides a unique opportunity to consider how safety is managed, negotiated, and built into the space.

I do not know Manchester well, so as I walked in the direction of the Centre, I followed the map on my phone. When I turned onto Sydney Street, I glanced up to see the glistening gold façade of the Proud Centre ahead of me. Immediately, I was struck by just how bright and bold the building was, among a row of other, unassuming university buildings and shops. (See Figure 1 below of the Proud Place).

I had not considered how it might feel to be, in broad daylight (and by myself) entering what was colloquially known as "the gay centre." My experience of LGBTQ+ venues are, admittedly, primarily bars or clubs, where I typically enter from the dark, into the dark, with a group of friends. The center, on the contrary, is in plain sight. I tried to imagine coming here for the

Figure 1. Photo of the proud place from Sydney street entrance. Source: the author. Taken: 26.08.22.

first time as a teenager questioning their sexuality and seeing the building for the first time. How would I feel? Encouraged, proud? Or scared? Probably a mix of both. The space inside represents a space for LGBTQ+ exploration and acceptance (Valentine & Skelton, 2003), in doing so, also making it a space of contention for potential anti-LGBTQ+ attackers. Indeed, the hyper-visibility of the building risks drawing unwarranted attention. Thus, I question, for a moment, the "safety" of the community center. The bold exterior came up in conversation when I sat down with the manager of the Proud Place for a cup of tea. We talked about the process of involving the young people who would use the space in the design of the building; many of them specifically wanted something loud and proud, something they felt was theirs. In other words, they wanted a space that was purposefully in contrast to the pre-2020 existing building which, by any standards, was dull and had little sign of life inside.

This example clearly demonstrates how (in)visibility interacts with safety in such a complex and contradicting way. The young people, the very people who would be using the space, wanted a bright, bold, and proud building to demonstrate their belonging and acceptance in the community and to offer a rightly deserved juxtaposition to the old building. However, in practice, this could lead to feelings of unsafety and uncertainty for those entering the building, particularly for the first time. Certainty, it made me consider the very same questions as I approached the building on the first day. These questions and concerns echo evidence around generational queer trauma

(Kelly et al., 2020) as well as demonstrating the fear and discomfort experienced by young queer people being visible today. In a time of increased hate crimes toward LGBTQ+ people and a government being actively and publicly transphobic (Hunte, 2023), being visible is without a doubt a safety concern for many of us.

Beyond the visibility of the building from the outside, visibility and safety became intertwined yet again indoors. It was a particularly sunny week when I was in Manchester. I sat by the patio doors in the lounge, with the door perched open slightly, observing, chatting, soaking up the sun and generally people-watching as groups of students and shoppers went by. Of course, that much natural light comes at the cost of privacy, which in this particular building is laced with other overlapping issues, again, such as safety. I mentioned this to the building manager. The young people and staff who had spent time in the lounge had noticed just how much footfall went by each day, which will likely only increase during university term time. To help ease some of the concerns and offer more privacy, blinds were installed on all the windows. Yet, interestingly, these blinds had never been in use. The blinds, then, rather, produce a sense of security and option at least, even if that never needs to be utilized. In addition to this, the bookshelf had been strategically placed to create a slightly hidden section to sit on the sofa and chat without being entirely visible to those passing by. This kind of heterogeneity in the surroundings offers spaces of both visibility and invisibility, allowing people to move in, out and between depending on the situation.

The community center provides a unique example of how safety or safety features can be built into a space, but it also demonstrates this paradoxical want and need for visibility and invisibility. Indeed, depending on the day, the time, and the individual entering the building, one's experience of "safety" is different. Combatting this by offering spaces where the young people can move in and out of visibility depending on how they feel is just one of the ways in which safety can be negotiated.

Discussion

Throughout the autoethnographic reflections, safety appears to be tied to both visibility/invisibility and exclusivity/inclusivity. At the Proud Place, the (hyper)visibility of the building led to questions of safety as I (and others) entered the building. Once inside the center, the exposed windows onto the busy street again highlight the complex relationship between visibility and safety. At the concert, my perception of safety changes depending on who I was visible to. Outside of the venue where I was visible to the wider public, I felt uneasy. It is worth highlighting my conflation here of "uneasy" and "unsafe." Feeling unsafe can take on different meanings, unsafe can mean feeling at risk of attack but it can also mean uneasy or out of place. Inside the

venue, whereby I was only visible to other (presumed) queer people, my sense of safety (or perhaps my sense of belonging?) shifted dramatically. This example highlights the lack of clarity around conceptualizations of "unsafe." Much like conceptualizations of "safe," it is likely that "unsafe" takes on different meanings for different people. To return to the field note that opened this article, I said that "rethinking queer safety is imperative to queer futurity." Where queer futurity imagines a future where safety is guaranteed, we must deconstruct the complexities and contradictions surrounding conceptualizations of 'safe and "unsafe," or indeed, different conceptualizations of 'unsafe as part of this process. Clearer conceptualizations of what constitutes "unsafe" can help us identify the experiences and needs of LGBTQ+ people in queer spaces better.

Beyond visibility, there are elements of exclusivity that impacted my sense of safety too. For instance, my experience at the concert in comparison to my experience at any other gay bar was stark despite the space being similar. The concert, however, was predominately filled with queer women, unlike the male-dominated gay bars I have visited. Warner (1993) writes about the dominance of white affluent gay men in queer spaces, typically because the spaces that have been made available to queers (market-mediated spaces, in this case, bars) creates an environment which is accessible to those with the most capital. Typically, even within LGBTQ+ communities, this is white gay men. It is unsurprising then, that I was in my mid-twenties before being in a space with mostly other queer women, and indeed, even less surprising that that had an impact on my sense of inclusion, belonging and thus safety.

Furthermore, the autoethnography and socio-spatial reflections reveal the constant movement between safe/unsafe, demonstrating the contextual nature of safety in queer spaces. Race, gender, age, sexuality, class, and geography all undoubtedly play a role in what constitutes this contextual nature of safety. However, these things do not result in a fixed perception of safety in any given space. Instead, they play a role in the way in which we move in and out of safety, they help us find moments of clarity and belonging, but the very same identity categories can thrust us into unsafety at any point. Indeed, both spaces offered, at the same time, feelings of immense safety and belonging and thoughts/moments of unsafety and discomfort, resembling a sort of trade-off. While I felt safe and comfortable expressing myself during the concert, I had to stand in the queue, visible to the wider public, feeling uneasy prior to this. To feel as though they had a space to visit and spend time in that was representative of their community, the youth groups at the Proud Place had to endure those fleeting feelings and questions of unsafety as they entered the golden building. The safe space literature can help us make sense of this back-and-forth, shifting sense of safety, suggesting that while it may be the case that safe spaces cannot always be entirely safe, safe spaces are a combination of reactive and productive work, a combination of symbolic and material work,

they are incomplete and thus "full of possibilities" (Roestone Collective, 2014, p. 1360), therefore, we should embrace the paradoxes of these spaces and work toward better negotiations of said paradoxes (Roestone Collective, 2014). The Proud Place demonstrates the kind of material work that goes into making queer spaces "safe." Indeed, even in purpose-built spaces, "safety" cannot be taken for granted and room for negotiation must be part of the space. The center has managed to take steps to ensure individuals have some control over their visibility within the space, allowing them to move in and out of view. Of course, not all queer spaces have the capacity to make material changes, but where possible, this is a helpful step in allowing the users of the space some agency over their visibility and thus, their sense of safety. Importantly, the Roestone collective's reconceptualization does not attempt to create rigid recipes for creating safe spaces, instead, they move into a discussion about making better use of safe spaces for what they are. They consider the ultimate role of inclusivity/exclusivity, and they encourage others to reflect on what exactly they are seeking safety from and safety for. This autoethnography again brings us closer to understanding the constant movement between safe/unsafe, and the kind of material and symbolic work required to allow for better negotiations of their own safety.

To work toward better negotiations of safety, it is important to revisit how my own identity impacted my negotiations of these paradoxical binaries within queer spaces. My feelings of belonging and safety at the concert were tied not only to my identity as queer but my identity specifically as a queer woman. The space, unlike other queer spaces I have spent time in, was not dominated by men. Inside the venue, where I was only visible to those inside a space I perceived as a space for queer women, the impact on my desire to be visible (and therefore, we can assume, my sense of safety) was profound. To be visible in this space meant to relax, to not alter my natural posture, to wear the clothes I wanted to wear, to hold my partner's hand. Unlike outside the venue, where I wanted to conceal my identity (in this case, through my reserved body language and avoidance of small talk with those around me) from the wider public, the shared affinities I felt inside the concert hall allowed me to, and indeed encouraged me to be comfortably and visibly queer. There are parallels here to the literature on the importance of other "exclusive" spaces, for example, Black queer spaces, where authors have identified the importance of spaces that cater to the multi-faceted nature of identities (Lane, 2016; Livermon, 2023). Black queer space seeks to affirm and celebrate Black queer and trans identities away from the racism of many other queer spaces, which typically privilege whiteness. Queer spaces then, in working toward better negotiations of safety, must at the very least, acknowledge differing identities within the queer communities and consider who the space is for, and how this might impact people's feelings of safety and belonging. This brings me back to Barrett's (2010) assertion that safety can be dangerous, supposing

that we simply cannot guarantee safety (for everyone) in any given space and attempting to create perfectly "safe" spaces is not possible and, instead, reflects a degree of privilege to assume that we can achieve total safety in equal measures for everyone.

Queer spaces, then, are contextually safe spaces. Indeed, those with more privilege (whether it be race or class etc) will likely experience "safety" more of the time than those with multiple marginalized identities. Rather than assuming we can create perfectly safe queer spaces, we should consider these spaces as contextually safe and ever evolving; making room for better negotiations of the paradoxical binaries present in queer spaces. This autoethnography offers interesting reflections on "safety" for queer geography as well as queer studies more broadly, to consider queer spaces as contextually safe, while not diminishing their importance has implications for the future of building and maintaining "safe" queer spaces. Rather than attempting to build totally safe spaces, instead, this autoethnography suggests these spaces are ever evolving and in constant motion. Finally, this research demonstrates the way in which autoethnography can contribute to queer studies, offering the author a chance to critically interrogate their own (insider) experiences as part of a broader cultural analysis of safety in queer spaces. Allowing what I saw, thought, and heard to become part of my field has allowed for a richer, more nuanced, analysis than other methods may have allowed.

Conclusion

This article has explored how I—we—negotiate the paradoxical binaries of queer safety in two different queer spaces. More specifically, this article has offered reflections on how visibility/invisibility and exclusivity/inclusivity operate as complex nuanced paradoxical binaries to one's sense of safety. The Proud Place has offered a unique opportunity to reflect on a purpose-built queer space during a time when many LGBTQ+ venues are disappearing. The way safety is built into the center yet continually re-negotiated depending on the context, i.e., time of year (additional footfall from university students) or indeed the individual demonstrates the relational work involved in queer safety. The concert, on the other hand, provided the opportunity to reflect on the experience of safety before, during and after the event. The space in question, the O2 Academy in Bristol, is by no means a purpose-built or queer space on a regular day. The concert presented interesting reflections both on the role of visibility and inclusivity/exclusivity, particularly highlighting the change in who I was visible to and who I was sharing the space with.

Queer spaces are, then, contextually safe spaces. They are "safe" and they are "unsafe," depending on an array of experiences, identities and situations. While queer spaces can offer refuge from hate and discrimination, they cannot offer *total* refuge and they cannot eradicate *all* hate and

discrimination. Indeed, queer spaces can and do reproduce the very hatred and discrimination they seek to eradicate at times. They are, nonetheless, important spaces that we should continue to find ways to build, maintain and negotiate. It is not, then, about creating totally safe (not possible) queer spaces, it is about findings ways to better negotiate the paradoxical binaries that are inherently bound up in the idea of "safe spaces."

Using Roestone Collective (2014) reconceptualization of safe spaces to understand and reflect on queer spaces has helped to unpack the messiness of "safety" in these spaces. Safety is indeed not static, and to consider "safety" as such misses opportunities to expand on our definitions and conceptualizations of safety. I hope this research encourages others to also engage in autobiographical or autoethnographic work exploring how their own geographies are shaped by gender, sexuality, race and/or class. There are infinite experiences and combinations of intersecting identities that would help continue to refine definitions and understandings of queer "safety" that can help us on our way to understanding how to better negotiate safety in these spaces.

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