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Editorial: Rethinking ‘safe spaces’ in children’s geographies.

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Rethinking ‘Safe Spaces’ in Children’s Geographies.

In this editorial we provide a preliminary definition of ‘safe spaces’ before exploring how the collected authors have taken a fresh approach to understanding ‘safe spaces’ through a geographical lens. Until now, the material ‘location’ of safe spaces have remained under theorised, but by turning attention to how children and young people co-produce and bring safe spaces into being through their situated practices, this Special Issue provides rich ground for re-evaluating why places ‘matter’ in children’s lives. This editorial maps out those common threads that are uncovered across a diverse collection that spans playful protest in Johannesburg, family food struggles in Warsaw, to the theatrical parodies of second generation Somali youth in London.

Keywords: safe spaces; emotional geography, affect, play, free expression, methodology

In recent years a number of controversies have led to a public debate over what ‘safe spaces’ mean and if they should be encouraged and protected. As a consequence a negative perspective has emerged fuelled by public and media interest, which equates safe spaces with a restrictive form of ‘political correctness’ that curtails freedom of speech and debate. Safe spaces are negatively portrayed as sanitised forums for a ‘snowflake generation’ (Thompson and Sylvester 2017) or else the unpoliced forums for radicalisation (BBC News 20th Sept 2017). This narrowing of safe spaces to the rights and wrongs of ‘free expression’ obscures its broader origins within psychology, education and the subaltern activism of early feminist and LGBT groups. In reality, ‘safe spaces’ describes a diverse set of social and therapeutic practices and conditions that can be found throughout social institutions and informal networks, emerging in education, youth work, and therapeutic support groups, in addition to activists seeking to raise consciousness or encourage political mobilisation. Given this diversity, no single definition of safe spaces is quite appropriate. Instead we have identified

three common threads that vary in importance and application depending on ones' vantage point.

In its simplest form, 'safe spaces' describe locations of physical safety that are 'free from harm' (The Roestone Collective 2014). Such spaces have become significant in understanding children's lives given how they are increasingly subject to surveillance and restricted freedom of movement by a risk adverse society fearful of children as both perpetrators and 'victims' of unsafe environments (Karsten 2005; Monahan 2006; Rudner 2012). Safe spaces also describe the social and emotional conditions required for 'psychological freedom' (Fry 1987) – freedom to try new ideas, to experiment with identities and ways of being, to make mistakes while learning – essentially describing the conditions necessary for discovery, play and creativity (Hancock and Gillen 2007). It is a definition that is often found in educational context, associated with the intellectual and emotional safety required for learning (Butcher and Manning 2005). Finally, safe spaces describes the conditions required to facilitate 'free expression'. This includes those spaces perceived to be free from the dominant hegemonies that silence or restrict subaltern groups (Boostrom 1998; Fetner *et al* 2012).

In the latter definitions, 'safe spaces' are imaged as psychosocial, experiential spaces (Stengal and Weems 2010), where one feels secure enough to explore and take risks; where trauma survivors feel 'safe enough' to share their experiences; where alcoholics may speak without feeling judged; where children might push themselves outside of their 'comfort zone' to learn something new; and where people can speak out about aspects of their live they may otherwise self-censure to avoid social criticism. Exploring how safe spaces are created and used can therefore deepen our understanding of the situations and environments which enable children and young people to express themselves, to play and experiment with multiple

selves, and to resist, negotiate, escape or rewrite the social and structural pressures that influences control over many aspects of their lives.

And yet, a fundamental aspect of ‘safe spaces’ remain under theorised: namely how do ‘spaces’, as physical, material or even imagined environments located in broad social and political webs, impact on the creation and experience of safe spaces? It is fitting then that this Special Issue finds its home in the debates and discussions foregrounded within *Children’s Geographies*, in order to rethink ‘safe spaces’ through a geographical lens.

There have been significant developments in how we think about emotional and affectual geographies (Horton and Kraftl 2006; Pile 2009; Deleuze and Guattari 2008), and the porous location of bodies and objects within and through spaces (Merlau-Ponty 1945; Heidegger 1953; Ingold 2000). It is no longer wise to think of space as simply the background to human action. Instead across the social sciences, research orientated to understanding the significance of place has been exploring how practices, identities and experiences emerge through, rather than apart from, the world we live in. In *Children’s Geographies*, Horton and Kraftl (2006) have called for greater attention to the affective qualities of space, to consider ‘space’ as a ‘verb’ of becoming (86), and Anderson and Jones (2009) have encouraged us to look more closely at our ‘emplaced methodologies’.

If we perceive the relationship between people, objects and place to be mutually constitutive, part of embodied practices that generate and rework meaning through an ongoing dialectic process (Casey 2001; Horton and Kraftl 2006), then how might we rethinking what ‘safe spaces’ look like in children’s geographies? How do ‘safe spaces’ emerge with(in) the world? How does the materiality of these lived spaces influence children and young people’s ability to express emotion or to ‘feel’ comfort? How do they facilitate the freedom to explore, create or play?

In this Special Issue, all the authors have turned their attention to the ‘spatial’ element of safe spaces. In doing so we re-evaluate the significance of safe spaces when viewed as an emplaced practice that emerges through children and young people’s ongoing, evolving relationships with the material and social world.

In the first article for this collection, Djohari, Brown and Stolk explore how safe spaces emerge in the affectual geographies of waterscapes. They focus on how disaffected young people ‘escape’ their troubling experiences through recreational fishing. But it is not ‘nature’ or ‘green spaces’ themselves that are identified as having a therapeutic value. Instead it is how young people interact with(in) the natural landscape, though the situated, embodies practices of angling, that generates the ‘comfort’ of the bankside. Most significant for advancing our understanding of safe spaces, Djohari, Brown and Stolk stress that it is what people to ‘do’ and their interaction with space that explains how and why ‘safe spaces’ become mentally, physically and emotionally restorative. In this case, waiting and watching for fish is experienced as a mental and physical ‘attunement’ to the ongoing stimuli of the present that becomes totally absorbing. The bankside emerges then as respite from a difficult life because it is a place where young people do not have to think or worry, where they can enter into a flow state and just ‘be’.

How safe spaces are continually brought into being through young people’s actions and interactions with the world around them, those assemblages or what Anderson (2012) describes as ‘practice-centred becomings’, runs throughout the papers in this collection (2012: 575) As the contributors demonstrate, safe spaces make little sense divorced from the material and social relationships that compose young people’s lived experiences.

In this issue, Irving and Lee, draw our attention to the ‘enchanted’ playscapes that are created through children’s *living relationships* with the surrounding East Anglian fenland. Through

the visceral experiences of puddle splashing, ditch jumping and den building children are rooted with the places where they live. Because of this, far from the dangerous ‘wild’ of outside, ‘home’ stretches out into the fenland, becoming places of refuge and personal space away from adult eyes. The surrounding fen landscape is recognised by the children as a ‘safe space’ precisely because they are made social as *lived* spaces through play.

Santos, Anderson and Hutchinson continues this focus on play as a means of engaging with a lived space in their exploration of the playful appropriation of public spaces through ‘pop-up’ play events in Johannesburg. Children engage with the city through their playful encounters: they build ‘fox’ dens that echo awareness of the changing cityscape, but also demand spatial justice by making visible their need for safe play spaces. Significantly, Santos, Anderson and Hutchinson draw our attention to how children and adults co-create safe spaces. Children need adults to facilitate a time and space to play, sometimes they need them to play alongside, and at others to leave them to play alone. It is through the interaction of playworkers and children *together* that the den making in these pop-up play events is given folklore meaning and emerges as a critique of spatial politics.

This emphasis on co-creation runs throughout the collected paper. In Irving and Lee, we see how children’s mobility through the fenland is not independent but social: they wonder through the routes first encountered and constituted by family and friends. Going on dog walks or blackberry picking become the scaffolding for later exploring these same routes on their own. Similarly coaches introduce young anglers in Djohari, Brown and Stolk, to watercraft as a way of ‘seeing’ and knowing with(in) waterscapes that opens their senses to a different way of being in the world. Those same young anglers then go on to spend time with family members, co-experiencing and co-weaving that bankside world together as a means of repairing strained familial relationships.

In Boni's article we see this emphasis on the co-creation of safe spaces emerging in food practices within family homes in Warsaw. For Boni, safe spaces are about opportunities for expression and a degree of autonomy over what one can and cannot do. In a situation where food choices are restricted by parental surveillance, children find ways to negotiate, and control when, what and where they eat. Food becomes an expression of safe spaces: hiding in a room eating hidden chocolates expresses autonomy but also the continuation of a nurturing relationship with grandparents 'allies' that provided the sweet treats. Boni goes on to suggest that awareness of food as an expression of safe spaces can also attune researchers into knowing when they are 'let in' to children's safe spaces — in Boni's case being offered a share of the contraband.

Fay continues this focus on how relational understandings of safe spaces might impact on research methodology in her exploration of children's reactions to corporal punishment in Zanzibar schools. Exploring how children, safety and spatiality intersects with place and personhood, she questions the assumption that schools might be 'safe spaces' for research or that 'child friendly' participatory methods can successfully facilitate children's free expression in this context. Through critical reflection on her own fieldwork methods, Fay demonstrates how place and personhood are mutually constructed. Children are relational subjects not individual ones: the social networks that define their lives also matter to them, so they cannot easily detach themselves from the social expectations placed on them. Fay calls for a focus on personhood to better understand what constitutes safe research spaces and how social expectations might limit children's participation and free expression within research.

The significance of a relational understanding of safe spaces attuned to expectations and personal histories is taken one step further by our two final contributing authors. For Pyndiah, 'safe spaces' emerge and are most visible in classrooms when there are opportunities for emotional exchange. Her paper proposes that deeper engagement with complex subjects such

as contested histories, requires the provocation, recognition and expression of fears, doubts and anxieties to be shared in learning environments. However, 'safe' emotional spaces within classrooms are not experienced equally. In learning about the British Empire and World War Two, some students at a London school begin at a disadvantage and find themselves unable to freely express the doubts or conflicts that emerge from their differing colonial heritage. We learn from Pyndiah that safe spaces are dynamic, emerging in the informal spaces of learning created in the collision between what teachers do and the existing informal knowledge and experience of students. In Pyndiah's paper, and indeed we see similar among the anglers of Djohari, Brown and Stolk, safe spaces are temporal. Safe spaces are continually forming and reforming depending on changing relational configurations and personal histories. As such we cannot assume that what becomes a safe space for one person may be experienced the same for another.

The relational temporality of safe spaces is exemplified in Gembus's paper on the plays created by Mustaqbal, a second generation Somalian youth group based in London. The safe spaces created by Mustaqbal are not physically located but a property of a relationship, found in the liminal gap that opens up between each other and their audience during their performances. They play with the carnivalesque and surreal element of their lives both on and off stage, using humour and parody to open up intergenerational dialogue on issues they would never discuss with their parents face to face. These performances are also a playful way to break and remake their fractured selves in order to view their conflicting identities from multiple angles. For Gembus safe spaces are not anchored to 'place' but are created in the moment through performative dramatisations. While other papers in this issue stress the significance of the material and tangible to understanding the significance of 'space' in safe spaces, Gembus's paper acknowledges the fleeting, the spontaneous and the emergence of unanchored spaces.

All the collected papers in their Special Issue exemplify how ‘safe spaces’ are not fixed ‘places’ but ongoing, evolving, dynamic relationships that emerge through people’s active interaction with(in), through, and alongside the material and social world. Echoing Horton and Kraftl (2006), a safe space is best thought of then as a ‘verb of becoming’, it describe a dynamic social and material relationship, a way of being and interacting that continually makes the conditions required for free expression, playful exploration or escape. By pushing this perspective to the foreground, our intention in this Special Issue is to demonstrate the *active* way children and young people shape and reshape safe spaces, rather than be subject to them. They do not do this in isolation: safe spaces are co-created, co-imagined and co-experienced, born out of ongoing, renewing and ever evolving relationships with others. These relationships are shaped by prior histories and memories, both personal and collective, within a changing socio-political landscape. Consequently, we cannot assume that the experience of being in a safe space, and indeed the very emergence of such ‘locations’, is shared by everyone just because a group shares a physical space, demographic or common cause.

Accepting that safe spaces are made in the convergence between what people do, the material world they interact with and the presence and absence of other co-creators, means we can also begin to see safe spaces as something mobile and temporal, moving in and out of existence with people and practices. Such a perspective challenges us to not only think about how children and young people can be better supported in society, but also how we as researchers need to continually assess our research locations in order to better enable children and young people to express their views and opinions.

To understand safe spaces is to understand something about affective geographies: that they ‘matter’ to children and young people because of how they can be knowingly used to transform feeling states, to express and grapple with multiple conflicted selves or feel secure

enough to explore and take risks. Attuning ourselves to the safe spaces that are formed, however fleeting, by children and young people offers us a fresh lens for investigating how young people actively experience, transform and express emotionally complicated lives.

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