Safe space online: The construction of intersectional safety in a South African feminist Facebook group

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by

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Abstract

In this thesis I investigate the construction of an intersectional 'safe space' in a closed South African feminist community on the social networking site Facebook. Drawing on my own experience as a group member, observations of group dynamics, focus group interviews with administrators, and interviews with past and present members, I discuss the practices and guidelines employed to ensure the safety and intersectionality of the group. This research spans a period of more than two years, and there were a number of developments in the group over this time. It is a relatively large and well-established feminist Facebook group in South Africa which enforces an intersectional approach to social justice, and it is explicitly formulated and closely monitored so that marginalised voices are privileged in group interactions. Despite the best efforts of group moderators, however, interactions between the privileged and the marginalised tend to reproduce existing power inequalities and jeopardise the safety of those the group is meant to serve. Although some interview participants feel that safe space practices such as the call-out system and exclusionary groups and posts serve to fragment the group and cause conflict, these complaints mainly originate from white women who were required to acknowledge their unearned privilege. Their presence in the group and the problem of 'white derailment' makes the space feel unsafe for many POC. Ultimately, a splinter group exclusively for POC was formed in order to provide a safer space for feminists of colour to find solidarity and support, discuss issues affecting them, and do the important and necessary work of self-definition. I conclude that while these spaces are limited – and absolute safety can never be guaranteed – these exclusive spaces are an integral starting point in the development of a transversal intersectional politics of solidarity between different actors and movements that share the same values.

Acronyms and definitions

Cisgender: A term for people whose gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth

CR: Consciousness-raising

GLBTQ: Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer

IRL: 'in real life'

POC: People of colour

WOC: Women of colour

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Chapter 1: Background and context

Context of the research

Feminist movements that strive to overcome the different and intersecting power imbalances characterising contemporary society are caught in a paradox. How does one acknowledge difference without reinforcing inequality? How does one incorporate the unique lived experience of diverse groups of people into a shared utopian project? What is the link between our personal experiences of privilege and oppression and the broader structures and institutions governing our lives? The personal dimension of political struggles has found expression in many different ways, including the formation of exclusive 'safe spaces' organised around shared subject positions, cultures, and values. In this research, I investigate the ways in which an online feminist community in South Africa has formulated the concept of 'intersectionality' and how group rules are enforced in order to ensure safety for marginalised group members. Ultimately, it is the question of how this online community is grappling with the problem of difference in their struggle for social justice. The following questions form the basis for this inquiry:

1. How has the group changed over time in the efforts to become a safer and more intersectional space?
2. How do group principles inform the rules and common practices?
3. How do the rules work to ensure safety and intersectionality in the group?
4. What is the role of moderators in online safe spaces?
5. How are existing inequalities reproduced or challenged in this community?

Since I joined the group in 2014, I have been interested in what I perceived as the paradox between creating a safe space for marginalised groups, and building a united feminist collective that crosses social and geographical boundaries. I have chosen this specific group for the study because it is the largest of its kind in South Africa. Unlike historical safe spaces within black feminist movements, they do not restrict membership to specific groups. This means that the group is engaged in a constant, shifting negotiation of difference and power, with the group rules serving as a guide enforced by the group administrators. I am also very interested in the possibilities the internet and related technologies could open up for transnational feminist

movements – as well as the dangers that being online pose. At the time of writing in 2016, it was a well-established closed Facebook group that had just reached 3,000 members and had 12 administrators. I had been a member since a few months after it was started, and I have witnessed a number of conflicts, resolutions, and transformations as the group struggles to become a safer space, able to contain all of the massive complexities and contradictions of diverse identities and subject positions. As the group is explicitly South African, the history and context of the country needs to be taken into consideration to inform group policies, practices and interactions. The legacy of Apartheid lives on in many different forms. Racial inequality still largely governs economic distribution and labour in the country, and decades-old geographical divides remain largely unshifted (Mtose, *et al.*, 2011). Because of the continuing legacy of racial injustice in South Africa, race remains an important organising factor in many aspects of everyday life – we are socially and culturally 'racialised' (Seekings, 2008: 1). As one of the most salient factors affecting the lives of most, if not all of the group members, race and racism are particularly important considerations in the group's struggle for social justice and seem to come up more often than other intersecting social categories such as ability or gender (cis/transgender). Often, the tension brought about by racial inequalities and power imbalances within the group jeopardises the safety of the space for POC, and throw into stark relief the contradictory forces inherent in safe spaces that are also widely shared. Although the group and its administrators go a long way in accommodating these tensions in a supportive, encouraging and inclusive environment, they proved too much to hold in such a large shared space. These tensions – between safety and education, between personal experiences and shared political values – ultimately lead to the formation of two splinter groups, one of which restricts membership to POC only.

Contested spaces

In order to understand the complexities of creating safe spaces for marginalised groups, it is important to understand the context and political climate in which safe spaces operate. Derived from critical pedagogy, 'safe space' was originally used to acknowledge and address the power imbalances inherent in dialogue (Kenway & Modra, 1992). Safe spaces also have a history in the Black feminist movement, considered important, exclusive spaces in which black women could foster their own, self-defined identities (Collins, 2000). Today, however, the concept is most often found on university campuses – and on the internet. The idea of creating 'safe

spaces' for marginalised groups is often closely linked with a politics that places great importance on personal experiences of oppression and individual subject positions. Over the past 60 years, questions of culture and identity have become increasingly important in social justice movements that have been organized to address social inequality and injustice. Starting with the rallying cry of 1960s student and feminist movements – 'the personal is political' – these movements started to place more emphasis on the connection between personal, subjective experiences and the broader social structures that influenced them. This move was in response not only to the injustices of patriarchal, capitalist, white supremacist society, but also to the assimilationist, ethnocentric treatment of 'difference' by the Left (Yuval-Davis, 1999). Many critics have pointed out the tendency of identity-based politics to reify social boundaries, homogenize social groups, and further marginalize those on the periphery (Yuval-Davis, 2006). The flaws of so-called 'identity politics' have turned it into a legitimate target for criticism from progressive social movements as well as conservative forces. The year 2015 has been dubbed "the year of the Social Justice Warrior" (abbreviated to SJW) (Rosza, 2015), a mainly derogatory term for social justice activists and people who 'call out' sexism, misogyny, racism, ableism, and other forms of discrimination, especially on the internet. The pejorative 'politically correct' or PC is used in much the same way to denote a commitment to valuing multiculturalism, historical redress, and the portrayal of marginalised people in respectful ways (Robbins, 2016: 1). Social Justice Warriors are derided for what is referred to as "speech and culture policing", with critics going so far as to call the SJW struggle against institutionalised forms of discrimination "dangerous pseudo-progressive authoritarianism" (Young, 2016: 1). Critics of the implementation of 'safe spaces' at Western universities or in online spaces argue that it infringes on the right to free expression and thought and shuts down debate in what should be a space of intellectual rigour. 'Safe space' policies at universities, they argue, amount to little more than tyrannical censorship, where students' "right to be comfortable" and unoffended trumps free speech and expression in institutions that should be aimed towards critical, constructive debate (O'Neill, 2014; Beckett, 2014; Dunt, 2015; Agness, 2015; Shulevitz, 2015). Critics link the 'safe space' concept to the 'no-protest' policy of the National Union of Students in the 1970s, arguing that the 'no fascism' policy has been transformed into 'political correctness gone wild' (NUS, May 2012). With a nod to George Orwell's dystopian classic 1984, one commentator dubs SJW ideology 'SocJus'. The basic tenets of SocJus are "the evil of oppression, the virtue of "marginalized" identities… and the perfectionist quest to eliminate anything the marginalized may perceive as oppressive or 'invalidating'" (Young, 2016: 1). A large part of contemporary (online) feminist work includes

calling out 'microaggressions': everyday "verbal, behavioural, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional" (Sue et al., 2007: 276), showing hostility or condescension based on race, class, gender, ability, and so forth. Although most current critiques of safe space practices do not stand up to scrutiny and amount to little more than veiled attempts at re-establishing privilege, there have been pointed and thoughtful critiques of identity politics (Yuval-Davis, 2012; Hancock, 2011) and safe spaces from within queer and feminist communities. There has been a tendency in identity politics to treat oppressions as additive, dividing groups into thinner and thinner slivers of the oppressed and the more-oppressed (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Identity politics tend to "homogenize and naturalize social categories and groupings, denying shifting boundaries and internal power differences and conflicts of interest" (Yuval-Davis, 2006: 131). Moreover, basing our social movements on "seemingly essentialist categorizations promotes divisiveness that often effectively disables collective opposition to the existing order" (Bystydzienski & Schacht, 2001: 4). The 'Oppression Olympics' sees politically allied subjects divided into myriad different subject positions afforded legitimacy based on their social positioning, the limits of discourse narrowed down to include only those with direct lived experiences of specific sorts of marginalisation and unique intersections of oppression (Hancock, 2011). Whereas previously, social movements were based around structural inequalities and institutional critiques, identity politics stresses the "internal dynamics of social movements and focuses on how the development of shared identities and attitudes provides the basis of many contemporary social movements" (Renowned queer theorist and activist Jack Halberstam has come out in strong opposition to what he calls the "re-emergence of a rhetoric of harm and trauma that casts all social difference in terms of hurt feelings and that divides up politically allied subjects into hierarchies of woundedness" (Halberstam, 2014: 1). Looking back on his experiences in the queer community in the 1970s and 1980s, he traces the development of a "neoliberal rhetoric of pain [which] obscures the violent sources of social inequity" (Halberstam, 2014: 1). Back then, "in a world of cultural feminism and lesbian separatism",

> …[h]ardly an event would go by back then without someone feeling violated, hurt, traumatized by someone's poorly phrased question, another person's bad word choice or even just the hint of perfume in the room.
>
> (Halberstam, 2014: 1)

Halberstam sees a ray of hope emerging in the 1990s, as "weepy white lady feminism" gave way to a "multi-racial, poststructuralist, intersectional feminism", and critiques were aimed at the economic origins of socio-political inequality (Halberstam, 2014). However, he sees the re-emergence of the post-political, individualistic subjects of identity politics, where the concepts of harm and trauma have been completely reinterpreted: psychologizing political difference, individualizing structural exclusions and mystifying political change" (Halberstam, 2014: 1). The "discourse of offense and harm has focused on language, slang and naming", and a 'call-out' culture of shaming offenders causes the movement to lose "all sense of perspective and instead of building alliances, [...] dismantling hard fought for coalitions" (Halberstam, 2014: 1). I turn once again to Black feminist epistemology for the solution to this problem. Exclusionary safe spaces were seen as important and necessary tools for marginalised groups – especially black women – to come to terms with their oppression, name their pain, and work together on self-definitions away from the oppressor's watchful gaze (Collins, 2000). However, these spaces are only one of the many types of spaces that are needed to build a successful social justice movement. Safe spaces are a starting point from which marginalised groups are empowered to move out into the world and create transversal coalitions with those who share their values and goals.

Chapter outline

This thesis consists of six chapters. **This chapter** provides the context and backdrop against which this research was conducted, and introduced some of the main debates surrounding intersectional feminism and safe spaces.

Chapter Two outlines the theoretical framework that informs this research. Here, I discuss the history and development of feminist principles such as intersectionality and safe spaces, and locate my research within wider bodies of work about online communities, safe space practices, and intersectional feminist movements.

The practical and ethical considerations of research into online safe spaces are described in **Chapter Three**, illustrated by a case study of unapproved research conducted in the same group in 2015. I outline the methods I employed during this research – observation, focus

groups and interviews (both online and off) – and argue for the importance of reflexivity on the part of the feminist social researcher.

In the following two chapters, I draw on my experiences as a group member and insights gained through interviews with other members, ex-members, and moderators in order to unpack some of the concepts and conundrums surrounding the nature and role of safe spaces.

In **Chapter Four**, I discuss developments in the group between 2014 and 2015 and present my findings on the way group rules are enforced in order to ensure intersectional safety for marginalised group members.

In **Chapter Five**, I turn my focus to the implementation of an intersectional politics in the group and the implications this has for the safety of different group members. I look at the ways in which existing power inequalities can be reproduced or challenged in this online safe space.

In **Chapter Six**, I conclude that while the main group might not be able to serve as a safe space for all of its members all of the time, it does facilitate the formation of a transversal feminist politics of solidarity in which participants 'root' themselves in their own experiences and 'shift' in order to understand those of other people (Yuval-Davis, 2012).

Chapter 2: Theoretical framework and literature review

In this chapter, I chart the development of intersectional feminist 'safe spaces' – physical or conceptual places where conventional power dynamics are deliberately challenged and minority voices are privileged. Feminist principles such as intersectionality and consciousness-raising, two cornerstones of contemporary safe spaces, are discussed as they have developed throughout the three historical 'waves' of feminist movements. Along with a growing number of other feminist theorists and commentators, I argue for the existence of a Fourth Wave of feminism in which the internet allows networked, intersectional feminist movements to create revolutionary spaces online in the fight for social justice against kyriarchical power relations. This includes not only divisions along the lines of sex and gender but also race, class, ability, and culture. I draw on Black feminist epistemology for a constitutive model of intersectional social categories (Yuval-Davis, 2006) and my argument for the political role of exclusionary safe spaces (Collins's 2000: 110). I discuss the origins of the concept of 'safe space' and its implementations – both online and off – today. They have a rich and interesting history in critical pedagogy, Black feminism (Collins, 2000), and the feminist consciousness-raising 'rap' groups of the 1970s (Freeman, 1971). On the internet, blogs, forums and social media groups bearing the safe space badge are a welcome respite from a global internet culture which often exposes users to violent imagery and language, prejudice, hate speech, harassment, and threats – but a number of critics (both online and off) accuse safe spaces of 'censorship' and divisiveness. After finding a working definition of what a 'safe space' entails from pedagogical theory, Black feminist epistemology, and more contemporary 'manifestos' posted online, I address these debates and synthesize a number of rules and principles guiding the maintenance and moderation of online safe spaces.

Feminism in the 21st century

While liberal first-wave feminists in the United States were primarily concerned with issues of citizenship and suffrage in the 19th and early 20th century (Baumgardner, 2011; Krolokke & Sorensen, 2006: 3; Cochrane, 2013: 17) and managed to win women the vote in 1920 (Krolokke & Sorensen, 2006: 3), a parallel socialist/Marxist strand of feminism emerged in "in workers' unions in the United States, in reformist social-democratic parties in Europe, and during the rise of communism in the former Soviet Union" (Krolokke & Sorensen, 2006: 6). While both

movements championed equality and fought against gender discrimination, the socialist/Marxist movement focused on the rights of "working class women and their involvement in class struggle and socialist revolution" (Krolokke & Sorensen, 2006: 6-7). In the early stages in the US, the feminist movement was "interwoven with other reform movements, such as abolition and temperance, and initially closely involved women of the working classes" (Krolokke & Sorensen, 2006: 3-4). Through their public activity and agitation, suffragists "confronted stereotypes of women and… claims of proper female behaviour and talk" (Krolokke & Sorensen, 2006: 5).

Without abandoning their commitment to fighting for legal and civic equality, second-wave feminists blurred the boundaries between the personal and the political to expose the effects of patriarchal gender relations and misogyny in every aspect of a woman's life (Munro, 2013; Krolokke & Sorensen & Sorensen, 2006: 7), with women becoming the authorities on their own lived experiences (Baumgardner, 2011). The Second Wave mainly refers to "the radical feminism of the women's liberation movement of the late 1960s and the early 1970s" (Krolokke & Sorensen & Sorensen, 2006: 7), although there were reformist as well as radical movements (Freeman, 1972) that were aimed at different aspects of personal and civic life. In the Second Wave, "sisterhood and solidarity" were key (Krolokke & Sorensen & Sorensen, 2006: 9). Feminists formed "women-only 'rap' groups or consciousness-raising groups (Krolokke & Sorensen, 2006: 9; Freeman, 1972), which will be discussed in relation to the concept of feminist 'safe spaces' later in this chapter. The radical Second Wave is argued to have developed from critical leftist post-war movements such as "student protests, the anti–Vietnam War movement, the lesbian and gay movements, and, in the United States, the civil rights and Black power movements" (Krolokke & Sorensen, 2006: 8). However, in their fight for the interests of other "oppressed" groups, women found themselves at the service of every revolution but their own (Krolokke & Sorensen, 2006: 8-9; Freeman, 1972, 1973; Baumgardner, 2011) and experienced the elitist sexism in the hierarchical organisation of many leftist movements first-hand (Freeman, 1972, 1973). This phenomenon is placed within the South African context by Hassim, who argues that the oppositional politics of 1980s South Africa had "the effect of reinforcing rather than challenging patriarchal relations of domination" (1991: 65). Radical second-wave feminists argued that "patriarchy is inherent to bourgeois society and that sexual difference is more fundamental than class and race differences" (Krolokke & Sorensen, 2006: 9), with women constituting an oppressed class of their own. This conception hinted at a problematically essentialist view of women "as a class

with overarching shared values and experiences" (Baumgardner, 2011: 248). Despite the influence of the radical leftist movements listed above, the women represented by the mainstream Second Wave were a seemingly homogenous group: it was mainly practised by white, middle class women who "defined feminism to suit their particular historical-cultural circumstances" (Garrison, 2000: 150). They attracted critiques from the left as well as others for excluding the young, the poor, the queer, the non-white (Garrison, 2000: 150). While some authors view these critiques aimed at understanding difference and identity (Krolokke & Sorensen, 2006: 22) as a particularistic continuation and development of the Second Wave (Krolokke & Sorensen, 2006: 15), others have described it as a break into a new, Third Wave (Baumgardner, 2011; Gillis *et al.*, 2007; Heywood & Drake, 1997) aimed at addressing the perceived failure of the Second Wave to respond to critiques such as those outlined above.

Most discussions about the history and development of feminism and feminist principles – including this one – revolve around feminism in the Western world, with a strong focus on developments in movements in the United States, Britain, and parts of Europe (Van der Spuy and Clowes, 2007: 212). This mainstream development and definition of 'feminism' is by far the most documented and widely accepted history, but it is definitely not the only feminist story. Many scholars have tried to unpack the complex issues facing feminists in other places, and a small but rich body of literature regarding the concept of African feminism(s) has emerged (Mohanty et al., 1991; Mama, 2004; Kemp et al., 1995; Bádéjọ, 1998, Mekgwe, 2008). Although their discussions and concerns are divergent, like feminist positions in general, they share a common aim in the past, "critiquing western feminisms" (Lewis, 2011: 4), and setting themselves apart, outlining their own particular and contextualised concerns as separate from those included in the dominant narrative of feminism's history. For example, Mekgwe writes about the 'colonial question' in relation to African feminism(s), and while maintaining the fluidity and hybridity of feminisms on the continent, stresses the tendency of African feminism towards anti-Western feminist critiques (Mekgwe, 2008: 11) and its close relationship with postcolonialism in African literature (Mekgwe, 2008: 12). She sees African feminisms as rooted in "an approach that while it seeks difference from the West, is anti-'difference'; while anti-gender-separatism and pro-male, [...] seeks female agency and autonomy" (Mekgwe, 2008: 12). However, African feminist dialogues "have become less concerned with critiquing western feminisms and progressively more goal-oriented and pro-active" in their critique of the intersections between gender, race and imperialism (Lewis, 2011: 4). Bozzoli, who discusses the relation between Marxism and feminism in the South African

context in the 1980s (a time at which issues of race and class were at the forefront of social analysis), points out "the absence of a significant South African feminist movement" and a "lack of awareness" and communication between research and scholarship on social and gender issues (Bozzoli, 1983: 139). She is referenced by Van der Spuy and Clowes (2007: 212), who address the same debates:

> Within South African historiography, questions concerning the relationship between (South) African feminism/s and women's histories are relatively recent, and the impact of transnational, African, and local, feminist theory and scholarship continues to be felt unevenly.

An important critique levelled against white feminists – and indeed against the history of mainstream feminist movement in general – is that they are at best ignorant of other forms of oppression besides gender and sexuality, and at worst, perpetuate these oppressions. Intersectional feminism is an approach that considers the intersection of the different axes around which power relations turn, such as class, race, ability and culture, for example. Intersectional politics has been a cornerstone of the critical cultural studies movement in media studies as well as many contemporary feminist movements, and serves as a tool for theorists and activists to make sense of and unpack the complex relationship between social structures and individual agency. Although it has been deployed in a number of different contexts and for a number of different purposes, the intersectional approach has its roots in the Black feminist movement and in the work of scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins (1999, 2000), bell hooks (1981), Audre Lorde (1984), and Yuval Davis (2006). What these Black feminists have in common is an insistence on the interconnected and indivisible nature of different systems of oppression: they were not *either* black *or* women at any given time, but *black women.* The term 'intersectionality' was coined by legal and Black feminist scholar Kimberlè Crenshaw in 1989 to describe the way systems of society overlapped in people's lived experience (Crenshaw, 1989). In her paper, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics', she describes a shortcoming in anti-discrimination laws using an example from General Motors: their hiring policy for manufacturing jobs ensured jobs for black men, and white women benefited from their secretarial hiring policy: black women were excluded, having no case either as black people or as women (Crenshaw, 1989). Importantly for feminist theory, "[these]

debates led to the decentering of white, western, heterosexual, middle-class women and a pluralizing of feminism" that took into account people's lived experiences and the way different facets of their lives constituted these experiences (Valentine, 2007: 13).

Intersectionality

Although Crenshaw coined the term, the intersectional feminist approach has been an ongoing project of Black feminist and critical race scholars and authors for quite some time. Audre Lorde brought her concerns as a queer black woman born in New York during the Harlem Renaissance to the second-wave feminist movement (Saxena, 2016: 1). She insisted on the importance of acknowledging and examining difference with "significant input from poor women, Black and Third World women, and lesbians" (Lorde, 1984: 110). She saw difference not as something to be tolerated or diminished, but rather "as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic" (Lorde, 1984: 110). In her first major work entitled "Ain't I a Woman: Black women and feminism", bell hooks (1981) explores the intersections of race, gender and class in the lives of black women. She discusses the way in which "the dominant white patriarchy and black male patriarchy conveyed to black women the message that to cast a vote in favour of social equality of the sexes i.e. women's liberation, was to cast a vote against black liberation" (1981: 185). Black women, she argued, found themselves in a double bind of oppression, facing racism in the feminist movement, and sexism in the anti-racist movement. She called for an acknowledgement of "the complexity of structures of domination" within feminist movements that were at the time placing an emphasis on individual lived experiences (hooks, 1989: 32), linking the personal to broader "strategies for resistance and transformation" (1989: 32). In "Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment", social theorist and prominent Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins explores similar perspectives employing the concept of the "matrix of domination", in which different social classifications and systems of oppression are interconnected in historically and socially specific ways (Collins, 2000: 7). Her discussion of a black feminist epistemology carries a number of important implications for intersectional feminist movements. Social categories are not only interdependent and mutually constitutive, but also fluid and flexible, constructed in conjunction with and in relation to others (Collins, 2000: 7). Her approach to intersectionality is not a simplistic, binary view of oppression in which they can be compared and added up. Not only did the complexities of each person's

background make her lived experiences and positionalities along the axes of oppression completely unique, but the relation between different people and social categories is dependent on the context (Collins, 2000: 8).

Yuval-Davis (2006) provides a conceptual framework for dealing with some of the analytical issues attached to intersectionality and difference that draws on and encapsulates much of work on the complexity of intersectionality from a black feminist epistemology. She argues that treating intersections of oppression and privilege as additive – for example, the 'triple oppression' of "Black [working class] women [who] suffer from three different oppressions/ disadvantages/discriminations/ exploitations" –is premised on essentialism and the conflation of "narratives of identity politics with descriptions of positionality as well as constructing identities within the terms of specific political projects" (Yuval-Davis, 2006: 195). Alongside Collins and hooks, she treats intersecting social categories and power dynamics as located within specific, shifting historical and political contexts. When social categories are treated as permanent fixtures which can be added up in order to quantify oppression and privilege, Yuval-Davis argues that this tends not only to divide movements and marginalize those who fall outside of essentialist categories of identity, but it is also an inaccurate and ineffectual way of understanding social dynamics (2006; 2012).

In this "additive" approach to intersectionality, "hegemonic discourses of identity politics" are merely reproduced, further marginalising those on the outskirts of the "right way" to be 'black' or 'working class' a 'woman' (Yuval-Davis, 2006: 195). This is the opposite of what is meant by intersectionality – instead of a dynamic, interlocked and fluid system of relationships, subject positions, identities and institutions, we are left with a series of endlessly multiplying and fragmenting social categories (Yuval-Davis, 2006: 195). Subject position, identity, and values are conflated and movements are fractured (Yuval-Davis, 2012: 51). The divisive and regressive nature of what has retroactively been coined 'identity politics' – political activity largely based around the experiences and oppression of members of specific social groups (Heyes, 2016: 1) – has been discussed at length in the debate about how to treat difference (Schlesinger, 1991). Identity politics were originally developed in response to the "assimilationist 'universalistic' politics of the Left" – in South Africa, this is best reflected in the pluralist notion of the 'rainbow nation' and 'colourblindness' to racial difference (Puttick, 2012: 34-35; Crenshaw, 1997). But relativistic identity politics proved deeply essentialist, "reifying boundaries between groups and, via homogenizing and collapsing individuals into

collective identities, undemocratic within groups" (Yuval-Davis, 2012: 50). Yuval-Davis draws on Hancock's 2011 'Guide to Ending the Oppression Olympics' in her continued critique of the additive notion of intersectional politics. Hancock employs the phrase 'categorical multiplicity' to argue that "multiple categories are significant and due to the multiplicity of such categories, there are multiple sites of power that need to be reformed" (2011: 4). Categories such as race, sexual orientation, class and gender are understood to be equally important, but not reducible or identical (2011: 6). She describes the additive view of intersectionality as quantitative, leading to an 'Oppression Olympics' in which people compete to prove their oppression and compare injustices – "Who has it toughest?" (Hancock, 2011: 5). In short, it is the belief that "that 'the more subordinated the group,' the 'purer' its 'vision'" (Collins in Yuval-Davis, 2012: 48). She argues that this approach limits our ability to investigate the way "incorporating race, class or gender into a single analysis *qualitatively* changes the characteristics of subordination" (Hancock, 2011: 5). Hancock uses categorical multiplicity as a lens through which to focus on social categories within their historical context, investigating their political relevance on multiple levels – "the self, the group and government/society" (2011: 6). By separating the different analytic levels in which intersectionality is located – namely, the institutional, the intersubjective, the representational, and the experiential – Yuval-Davis (2006: 205) hopes to provide a framework for the analysis of how specific subject positions, "identities, and political values are constructed and interrelate and affect each other in particular locations and contexts" (Yuval-Davis, 2006: 200). As Lorde puts it: "I am a Black Lesbian Feminist Warrior Poet Mother, stronger for all my identities, and I am indivisible" (1984: 222).

Yuval-Davis's solution to the shortcomings of the additive notion of intersectional identity and justice lies in a "transversal dialogical politics of solidarity" (2012: 47). Such a politics is characterised by a constant vertical and horizontal flow of communication in the construction of "a radical political group as a collective subject" (2012: 51). It employs "dialogical collective knowledge, imagination and judgment, aided by intersectional analysis, in its ongoing political struggles" (2012: 52). From this perspective, there is a distinction between positionality, identity, and values (2012: 51). These politics, then, would be based on shared values instead of subject positions, which only provide one perspective on the world and are therefore "unfinished" (Collins in Yuval-Davis, 2012: 51). The implications of a dialogical perspective on intersectionality will be discussed in relation to the findings of this research in later chapters. The critiques of exclusivity and a Western-centric focus – alongside the acknowledged

victories of the First and Second Waves and critiques of feminism from outside – formed the foundations for a Third Wave of feminism that started sometime between the late 1980s and early 1990s and is characterised by numerous different strains of feminist activity and study (Baumgardner, 2011; Fisher, 2013):

> Black women, women with disabilities, Latinas, lesbian and bisexual women, and others began critiquing the broad philosophies of the [second-wave feminist] movement from within, causing splits that were rife with both tension and detailed feminist theory.

The Third Wave draws on queer theory for a better understanding of gender and sexuality as "fluid categories" (Munro, 2013), combating LGBT discrimination and breaking down restrictive gender stereotypes by drawing on a post-structuralist interpretation of gender and sexuality as socially constructed and performative (Heywood & Drake, 1997: 153; Gillis *et al.*, 2007: xxv). Often referred to as a postmodern turn in feminism (Garrison, 2000: 149), the Third Wave also drew on new technological concepts such as network (Garrison, 2000: 151) and cyborg theory (Haraway, 1985), and subversive, punky DIY 'grrl' politics that found expression in the form of punk bands, pop culture and home-made 'zines (Garrison, 2000: 145). This wave is characterised by a great proliferation of different 'feminisms' from a number of different perspectives, focused "less on laws and the political process and more on individual identity" (Fisher, 2013). Issues that seemed clear-cut in the early years of feminism – for example, the legitimacy of sex work, the use and reclamation of misogynistic language, and body image and beauty issues (Baumgardner, 2011) were thrown into question. "Activists spoke from personal places, not to overshare, but to tell the truth about their lives and what had happened to them" (Baumgardner, 2011). Third-wave feminists "rejected the idea of a shared political priority list or even a set of issues one must espouse to be feminist" (Baumgardner, 2011). These feminist 'sisterhoods' that formed part of the Third Wave closely mirrored the consciousness-raising rap groups of the Second Wave, and featured many women-only 'safe spaces' (Garrison, 2000: 154). However, the issue of trans feminism, gender issues affecting men, and Butler's influential conception of gender performativity (Butler, 1988) – gender identity as "instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler, 1988: 519) – challenged the legitimacy and usefulness of 'women-only' spaces in the feminist movement (Baumgardner, 2011). Authors discussing the Third Wave are also interested specifically in

"the role of democratized technologies, the media, subcultural movements and networks, and differential oppositional consciousness in the formation of feminist consciousness" (Garrison, 2000: 142).

A Fourth Wave?

A growing number of more recent authors and commentators have referred to an emerging Fourth Wave in the history of feminist activism (Peay, 2005; Baumgardner, 2011; Munro, 2013; Cochrane, 2013) in which the internet is playing a large role (Munro, 2013). Instead of the zines and punk music of the Third Wave, Fourth Wave feminists are making "blogs, Twitter campaigns, and online media with names like Racialicious and Feministing, or [writing] for Jezebel and Salon's Broadsheet" (Baumgardner, 2011), commenting on the news, and posting pictures. Fourth Wave feminists rely on social media and ICT for information-sharing, networking, organisation and online petitioning (Cochrane, 2013), and it also acts as a platform in which many different formulations of safe space can be created and maintained. Many 21st century online feminist projects encourage the formation and growth of revolutionary, intersectional grassroots social movements and share their experiences online. The internet has become a platform for what Munro (2013) describes as the digital 'call-out' culture, where misogyny and sexism can be highlighted and challenged through public sanction, petitions, or boycotts. These projects…

> …[embody] that feminist phrase 'the personal is political', a consciousness-raising exercise that encourages women to see how inequality affects them, proves these problems aren't individual but collective, and might therefore have political solutions.
>
> (Cochrane, 2013 1)

The impact and role of the internet, some critics argue, has been large enough to delineate a Fourth Wave of feminism in which a new set of politics and concerns has been added to the feminist agenda, and the playing field has shifted radically (Munro, 2013). Feminists of the Fourth Wave have a wide range of concerns, ranging from inequality in the form of street harassment, sexual harassment and workplace discrimination, to body-shaming, sexist media

images, and online misogyny (Cochrane, 2013) – with a strong focus on the intersectionality of power and discrimination, and the specificity of personal experience inherited from the Second Wave. Fourth Wave feminisms draw on critiques of the Third Wave to develop and inhabit new positions and perspectives, which are argued to be more culturally sensitive (Carrier, 2015), intersectional in nature (Carrier, 2015), focused on wider global issues of justice and the "creation of a global community of feminists who use the internet both for discussion and activism" (Munro, 2013): "transgenderism, male feminists, sex work, and complex relationships within the media [characterize] their feminism" (Baumgardner, 2011). The creation of 'safe spaces', online and off, forms an integral part of 21st century feminist practice and allows for people to experiment with a new kind of social contract: one in which respect and active listening are valued and existing inequalities are confronted head-on. For example, Connelly's humorously titled 2015 research 'Welcome to the FEMINIST CULT', where she explored feminist activities on the hyper-popular image blogging network Tumblr, found that it had become an ideal location for a "feminist community of practice" (Connelly, 2015: ii).

Although the awareness of diversity and the intersection of gender, class, race, culture and ethnicity fuelled much of the feminism of the Third Wave, much of the contemporary Fourth Wave is characterised by a move away from the individual identity politics dominating mainstream feminism since the 90s. Many contemporary feminists combat the perceived depoliticisation of these identity politics of the Second and Third Waves, and work to effect deep structural change on all levels of society (Halberstam, 2014; Hancock, 2011; Yuval-Davis, 2011). The development of a reactionary radical feminist position that discriminates against transsexual people (TERF, or trans-exclusionary radical feminism) has also been criticised in intersectional feminist movements (Munro, 2013), with most contemporary Fourth-wave feminists moving away from essentialist or exclusionary notions of womanhood or feminism to include trans rights and the emancipation of men from repressive gender roles in their agenda (Baumgardner, 2011).

Safe space as feminist practice

As discussed in the previous section, contemporary or Fourth Wave feminism draws on a number of principles and critiques from previous waves. In this section, I return to the literature

on feminist consciousness-raising groups of the 1960s and 1970s, linking these meetings to the concept of 'safe space' as it is used in online communities and critical classrooms today. 'Safe space' is a term used to refer to a place – physical, digital, or symbolic – where specific rules have been put in place regarding discourse and interaction, and where certain people or modes of conduct are excluded in order to make the space as inclusionary as possible. Kenney's 2001 book 'Mapping Gay LA' traces the concept of 'safe spaces' to gay and lesbian bars in the American mid-60s (Kenney, 2001), when there were still laws in place such as the anti-sodomy law (Harris, 2015). As the police could still break down the doors and arrest someone without a moment's notice, it is important to note that 'safe spaces' are in no way guaranteed safe and free from threats of harm or discrimination (Harris, 2015): just as internet trolls join feminist groups online to share graphic pictures, sexist jokes or anti-feminist sentiments. However, a safe space *is* somewhere "people could find practical resistance to political and social repression" (Harris, 2015: 1). Safe spaces also have a history in black feminist thought (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1981), where they were most often described as spaces designated for black women only (Collins, 2000). Collins describes safe spaces as "social spaces where Black women can speak freely", express their ideas, share their experiences and learn from one another (Collins, 2000: 100). Spaces in which members of oppressed groups can "express themselves apart from the hegemonic or ruling ideology" are common across different social categories – for example, the women-only consciousness-raising groups of the 60s and 70s (Freeman, 1971). These spaces provided opportunities for "self-definition", which Collins considers to be "the first step to empowerment: if a group is not defining itself, then it is being defined by and for the use of others" (2000: 101). These safe spaces offered a welcome reprieve from "objectification as the Other" in the images of black women perpetuated in the media and broader culture that surrounded them (2000: 101). Safe spaces, therefore, allow for the formation of communities that are much more diverse and complex by virtue of their self-definition (2000: 101). Despite their focus on diversity, these spaces were by nature exclusionary (2000: 110). These exclusions, paradoxically, are aimed at producing "a more inclusionary, just society" in which self-defined and self-determining Black women play an active and equal role (2000: 110). Collins stresses, however, that safe spaces should not become "a way of life" (2000: 110). Understanding one's positionality and defining one's own identity should only be seen as the starting point for transversal feminist coalitions based on solidarity and shared values (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

As a normative theoretical framework, 'safe space' relates to dialogue and communication and is usually associated with critical feminist pedagogy (Ellsworth, 1989; Chancy, 1997; Donadey, 2002; Harris, 2012; Boler, 2004; Kenway & Modra, 1992) and feminist research methodology (Campbell *et al.* 2004; O'Connor & Madge, 2003; Atkinson & De Palma, 2008) as a tool for addressing the inherent tensions and power imbalances in discourses around difficult issues in classroom environments. The logic underpinning the concept of 'safe space' draws on a poststructuralist understanding of culture and identity that foregrounds the power of language and discourse to oppress or subvert, and the nature of identity as socially constructed and contested (Canagarajah, 1997: 117; 121). Canagarajah describes these spaces as 'safe houses' in her 1997 discussion of the formation of paradoxical and complex student identities (Canagarajah, 1997). Her interrogation into how learners negotiated "competing subject positions in conflicting discourse communities" in the acquisition of a new language is informed by the 'realizations' that the "Self is shaped considerably by language and discourses" and made up of "multiple subjectivities derived from the heterogenous codes, registers and discourses that are found in society" (Canagarajah, 1997: 117). These "subjectivities enjoy unequal status and power", which causes conflict not only between different subject positions, but also within individuals (Canagarajah, 1997: 117). For marginalised groups, designated 'safe spaces' act as "social and intellectual spaces where groups can constitute themselves as horizontal, homogenous, sovereign communities with high degrees of trust, shared understandings, and temporary protection from legacies of oppression" (Pratt in Canagarajah, 1997: 121). She investigates the ways in which "minority communities" collaboratively construct "sites of community underlife wherein they can celebrate suppressed identities and go further to develop subversive discourses that inspire resistance against their domination" (Canagarajah, 1997: 121). Safe spaces, therefore, act as places where marginalised groups can evade the oft damaging and silencing effects of the unequal power relations that dominate discourse, debate and discussion in almost all other spheres of life and interaction. Ultimately, a safe space can be created when a group of people committed to inclusion and resistance to unequal socio-political power relations – whether that is for one specific group, or whether it aims to address intersectional inequality – enter into an explicit social contract which holds them to certain standards and ideals:

> …essentially asking that people entering such spaces prepare for discourse (which, yes, can include disagreements and

> ideological differences) in a way that treats all participants like people. That's it.
>
> (Speller, 2015: 1)

Many of the manifestoes and guidelines about safe spaces online revolve around self-expression and respect for others. The most important factor is that people will not be made to feel uncomfortable or unwelcome. There are three main criteria for the minimization of harm – one or more of which must be in place for a space to be deemed a safe space – that can be synthesized from the number of online guides and descriptions in personal blogs, feminist websites, digital classrooms, community forums, and of course, Facebook groups. Firstly, a safe space does not tolerate violent language or imagery, and often requires a 'Trigger Warning' (TW) for material that might trigger a traumatic reaction. For example, descriptions of rape, depictions of abuse, or discussions of abortion come with a mandatory TW because of the strong reaction some people might have to this type of content, including post-traumatic stress disorder. Secondly, a safe space is one in which prejudices, discrimination and stereotypes (for example about race, sex, gender, class, ability, and so forth) are unwelcome. In other words, marginalised groups are not subjected to the same "standard mainstream stereotypes and marginalisation" they face in everyday life (Geek Feminism Wiki, 2015). For example, feminist safe spaces do not tolerate any form of 'victim-blaming' (the victim-centric approach to rape that posits it can be 'prevented' by wearing less revealing clothing, not drinking, etc.), which would also be seen as harmful and triggering for rape survivors. Although a safe space may focus on one specific criterion – being a safe space for gay men or young black women, for example – the overwhelming majority of online feminist safe spaces embrace the concept of intersectionality and the myriad different ways in which different criteria of our lived experiences intersect. Lastly, safe space participation might require "a shared political or social viewpoint" (Geek Feminism Wiki, 2015). Advocates for Youth, a non-profit advocacy group based in the US, defines 'safe space' as follows in their online GLBTQ glossary (2008):

> A place where anyone can relax and be fully self-expressed, without fear of being made to feel uncomfortable, unwelcome, or unsafe on account of biological sex, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, cultural background, age, or physical or mental ability; a place where

> the rules guard each person's self-respect and dignity and strongly encourage everyone to respect others.

Whether physical or metaphorical, 'safe space' seems to imply a place where (often marginalised) groups of people can get together and express themselves without fear of marginalisation or judgement (Gajjala, 2002: 182), with the opportunity of finding new and more equal ways of relating to one another. The exhortation of safe space policies is "that 'space' is needed for diverse groups or individuals to express their identity" (Boostrom, 1998: 406). This can be seen in the rationale and experiences behind the #ForBlackGirlsOnly picnic, where black South African women could find a brief but welcome reprieve from everyday racial and misogynistic violence, discrimination and microaggressions. The very nature of dialogue and interactions in our daily lives, proponents argue, tends to recreate and exacerbate existing inequalities: "oppression comes in myriad forms, and it works to deny [interlocutors], through the problematic of distorted dialogue, the understanding we all crave" (Redmond, 2010: 12).

From this perspective, anti-feminist views are necessarily excluded from the realm of the rational, from what is defined as acceptable discussion and debate. Gajjala's engagement with the SAWnet forum demonstrated to her that "all safe spaces have, implicit within their formations, certain ideologies and visions that exclude and disenfranchise some members" (2002: 182). While certain exclusions are explicit – for example, the exclusion of anti-feminist views from a feminist safe space – others are implicit, such as the heteronormativity Gajjala observed in SAWnet which, she argues, "excludes the possibility that South Asian lesbians might find this women-only list to be a safe place" (2002: 182). Often finding its expression in relation to multicultural or diverse contexts such as university campuses or high-school classrooms, Boostrom argues that the call for 'safe space' should not be interpreted as a call for the "bland acceptance of all opinions and beliefs" and the complete absence of criticism, argumentation and debate (1998: 406-407). 'Safe space' applies to the self-expression of identity, he argues, and in these spaces "expressions of self (individual or collective) cannot be challenged" (Boostrom, 1998: 406).

The concept of 'safe space' is informed by a number of feminist principles, for example "consensual, collaborative, non-hierarchical processes of learning/teaching" in critical pedagogy (Kenway & Modra, 2014: 63). 'Safe space' policies encourage reflexivity and

awareness of personal subjectivity and on behalf of classroom teachers and university lecturers, community moderators, other authority figures and interlocutors in positions of privilege or power. The tactic of 'privilege checking' – "reminding someone that they cannot and should not speak for others" about their own lived experiences (Munro, 2013) draws on an intersectional understanding of power and privilege and is often used in online discourses, where the phrase "check your privilege" was originally coined (Munro, 2013). However, this concept has been strongly critiqued for its use "as a means of deflection" in online discourses, aimed at shutting down debate, "rather than with any hope of understanding or rapprochement" (Munro, 2013: 1). In the feminist context, safety involves protecting members of the community in question who might have strong traumatic emotional responses to certain types of content, for example rape survivors or people who have overcome an eating disorder or experienced domestic abuse: "Safe spaces may require trigger warnings and restrict content that might hurt people who have strong reactions to depictions of abuse or harm or mental illness triggers" (Geek Feminism Wiki, 2015). Although the concept of trigger warnings originates from online communities (Medina, 2014), it has made its way into offline situations and socio-political scholarship as well (Manne, 2015; Carter, 2015). In 2014, Medina wrote about student groups at the University of California, Santa Barbara, who called for trigger warnings from their professors before presenting potentially upsetting or graphic material (Medina, 2014). Campbell *et al.* discuss the methodological value of 'safe space' in their research about rape survivors, arguing that creating "physical space and emotional space" that take into account the well-being of participants (Campbell *et al.*, 2004: 255) was crucial for this specific community to share and listen to the stories of each other's lives (Campbell et al., 2004: 253).

Second-wave feminists formed "women-only 'rap' groups or consciousness-raising groups, through which they sought to empower women both collectively and individually using techniques of sharing and contesting" (Krolokke & Sorensen, 2006: 9; Freeman, 1972). Freeman describes the rap groups, "essentially an educational technique", as fulfilling two primary functions: the first was simply bringing women "together in a situation of structured interaction" and overcome the divisions of family life and class divisions (Freeman, 1972). Beyond simply providing women with an opportunity to get together, however, the group interactions were seen as mechanisms for social change in themselves, through the process of consciousness-raising (Freeman, 1972: 1). The consciousness-raising efforts of Second Wave feminists were aimed towards creating physical and metaphorical spaces in which women

could come together and talk about their personal experiences. A 1970s publication by The Chicago Women's Liberation Institution provides practical guidelines for holding your own feminist CR group. It states the two goals of women's consciousness-raising as follows: "understanding one's self in relation to one's society", and "understanding what it is to be a woman in a patriarchal society that oppresses women" (1971: 1). The collective then presents a number of guidelines to ensure productive CR sessions. It is clear that the majority of these rules form the basis for what would be called a feminist 'safe space' today. Although Freeman does not mention the concept of a 'safe space', these women-only consciousness-raising groups seem to be the 1970s counterpart to 21st century feminist 'safe spaces' for marginalised groups, both online and off (Reger, 2004; Morris & Braine, 2001; Macdonald, 2014).

There are a number of critiques that have been raised against current safe space movements: while some feel that they pathologize survivors of violence and members of minority groups, others feel that 'safety' amounts to little more than censorship. Increased calls for 'safe spaces' free from discrimination at Western universities have sparked a heated debate about the role and nature of university communities and education and the limits of free speech in the US and UK that has started to make its way from the realm of think-piece debate into the world of academia and research. The 2016 editorial for the Journal of Social Work Education drew together a number of these articles and debates, linking them to a "growing apprehension about constraints on free speech newly emerging campus speech codes, and student sensitivity" (Robbins, 2016: 1). Some critics feel that the contemporary 'safe space' policies being implemented at universities represent a "much broader and more nebulous" phenomenon, where "the potential for offence is trumping the right to free speech" (Dunt, 2015: 1). Ultimately, these critiques are aimed at the implementation of 'safe space' policies at large social institutions such as universities, and represent specific values and beliefs about what the role and purpose of tertiary education should be (Dunt, 2015) and whether or not emotional and psychological harm and the perpetuation of systems of oppression constitute 'real' damage. These debates beg questions about other kinds of spaces that have been set up with the express purpose of being 'safe spaces', such as the feminist Facebook group under discussion. They also belie a crucial difference in the value between SJWs and their detractors: the difference lies in what is considered 'up for debate'. In her vitriolic missive against the 'new' feminist movement taking social media by storm, Young rattles off a list of offences she believes are wrongfully punished and shamed by the SJWs: she would like the right not to 'believe' in the gender of a trans person who has not undergone surgery, and she does not see the problem with

wearing racial stereotypes as Halloween costumes (Young, 2016). While Young might not see the harm in questioning the validity of someone's gender, intersectional feminists would argue that this erasure of their identity forms part of a larger system of institutionalised injustice which sees trans children kicked out of the house by their parents (Ray & Berger, 2007) and the ongoing murder of trans women (TGEU, 2009) that goes largely unaddressed by the authorities. In an article entitled "The trigger warning myth", Hanlon deftly dismantles the so-called "P.C. backlash" by highlighting the importance of power relations in determining what does and does not cause harm (2015: 55). Critics of political correctness and social justice activism "see pushback from the margins and mistake it for threats to the most institutionally powerful" (Hanlon, 2015: 55).

Although calling safe space policies authoritarian or totalitarian regimes might be extreme, a number of commenters and theorists have produced thoughtful and constructive critiques of safe space practices, both online and off. Young (2016) argues that because new feminist movements strive to be intersectional, they tend to be "uniquely vulnerable to internal conflicts and tensions" because of the multiplicity of different factors at play in each and every interaction (2016: 1). From an intersectional perspective it can be a difficult process coming to terms with your own subject position and identity, and seemingly impossible to practice a politics that works for a mass social movement. Bell's 2013 work on a major scandal that rocked the queer social justice community on Tumblr highlighted an important critique of safe space and call-out culture that should be kept in mind. Instead of providing space for "a queer oasis for the users away from an overbearing, hetero-normative world," the safe space ethos on social media rather "introduces a complicated set of rules and mores that presents new complications" (Bell, 2013: 31) that make these spaces difficult and often scary to navigate.

Safety versus contestation

Critics from within feminism and critical pedagogy have found the literature on safe space to be lacking in a number of ways (Macdonald, 2014; Ludlow, 2004; Boostrom, 1998). "The vast majority of literature on safe space… uses the phrase uncritically, providing little detail about what is meant by safe space or how it is created" (Macdonald, 2014: 63): 'safe space' is "invoked as a goal toward which educators should strive" (Redmond, 2010: 2) without much by way of what that entails and why. Moreover, most of the literature fails to question the value

and purpose of aiming for 'safety' in the first place (Macdonald, 2014: 63). Scholars from the tradition of critical pedagogy have presented a number of challenges with regards to the creation and maintenance of safe space in classrooms, and some have discarded the concept in favour of other modes of communication and values. Boostrom, for example, reflects on the concept of 'safe space' as a metaphor, or "a way of talking about teaching" (1998: 397). The danger of using metaphors, he argues, is that "because it is through them that we are able to see, we rarely look closely at them" as they become a sort of "unexamined private language" (Boostrom, 1998: 397):

> This is hazardous not so much because they obscure our efforts to communicate with those outside the business, but rather because they successfully communicate ideas we have never intended.

Boostrom argues that once this metaphor makes its way into mainstream discourse, it is simple: a safe space aims to protect participants – students, in this case – from stress, isolation, alienation, threat, or intimidation (Boostrom, 1998: 405). Understood this way, he argues, the implementation of 'safe space' policies as metaphors act to "[drain] from classroom life every impulse towards critical reflection" (Boostrom, 1998: 406). Although he remains uncertain about whether it is possible to "attend to the plurality of consciousnesses without censoring critical thinking" (Boostrom, 1998: 407), he argues that it cannot be done by ruling out conflict in learning spaces. He argues that 'safe space' policies should apply to self-expressions and personal identity, but should not preclude all constructive debate and criticism in the classroom. Instead, he says that "if critical thinking, imagination and individuality are to flourish in classrooms, teachers need to manage conflict, not prohibit it" (Boostrom, 1998: 407).

From her perspective as a tertiary instructor, Redmond presents her "view of a rich university experience [as] one of a continual dialectical process characterized by challenge(s), be they from the course materials, facilitators and/or classmates" (Redmond, 2010: 5). But she is still uncertain about the kinds of interactions that will or should form part of such a dialectical process. She points to Holley and Steiner's 2005 findings that the "catch-all term" of 'safe space' is understood differently by different students, arguing that, "ironically, the very processes of discomfort that [safe space] is meant to abate may be exacerbated by the

expectations these varying formulations necessarily entail" (Redmond, 2010: 4). Redmond ultimately aligns herself with Boler (1999) and other theorists who call for a "pedagogy of discomfort" that "aims to invite students and educators to examine how our modes of seeing have been shaped specifically by the dominant culture of the historical moment" (Boler in Redmond, 2010: 11). She concludes that the "primary calling of the critical educator is not to create understanding(s), but to name the obstacles that keep them from us" (Redmond, 2010: 12).

Ludlow also writes from her own experience as a teacher which has caused her to discard the concept of 'safety' in favour of the concept of 'contention' (2004: 9). She found that "the very existence of feminist discourses is itself perceived as threatening to some students" (2004: 9). For this reason, the question of whose safety we are talking about is crucial. Just like Redmond, Ludlow values a critical understanding of power and identity in society, even if this might cause discomfort and agitation at times. In her discussion of the South African University of Cape Town's *Khuluma* project, Helen Macdonald traces the origins and development of the phrase 'safe space' as a *keyword* used "to navigate the changing meanings of words and concepts under the pressure of societal change". She stresses the emergence of such concepts as "active [responses] to a changing social and political reality" (Higgins in Macdonald, 2014: 62) that provide "exclusive physical and discursive spaces for sexual minorities or women to come together to talk and support each other" (Macdonald, 2014: 61).

Macdonald bases her discussion of 'safe space' (and its ultimate impossibility) on her personal experience of the dynamics at work during the *Khuluma* project which was aimed at creating a "protected space [for Wits university staff and students] to engage with South Africa's apartheid past, the institutional culture and with each other" (Macdonald, 2014: 60). She says that, as a white, foreign researcher, she did not experience the workshop as a safe place (Macdonald, 2014: 62-63), and goes on to discuss a variety of different reactions – both positive and negative – to the *Khuluma* model. She argues that 'safe space' is applied as a symbol aimed at summarising social systems and what they mean to participants in "a clear and undifferentiated way" while also smoothing over uncertainties and contradictions, which does not encourage reflection (Ortner in Macdonald, 2014: 70). She argues that despite the aims of the project, "Khuluma challenged participants to embrace, not to avoid, the uneasiness of participation, the shocks of awareness and the dangers of vulnerability" (Macdonald, 2014: 72). Like the participants she interviewed, Macdonald comes to an implicit understanding of

"the paradoxical 'unsafety' located in the metaphoric 'safe space'" (Macdonald, 2014: 73): the discomfort of explicitly confronting the implicit and unequal power relations that shape our lives and interactions. Ultimately, she suggests that 'unsafety' (what she calls "the production of a profoundly unsettling social space") is "part of creating a new kind of safety, one in which diversity rather than homogeneity is the norm" (Macdonald, 2014: 73):

> …the instrumental assurance and appeal of the term 'safe space' crumples under the inevitable realisation of the real difficulties of intervening in the concrete messiness that 'safe space' names.
>
> (Macdonald, 2014: 62)

Indeed, social inequalities by their nature can never be "risk-free to those who are subject to them, and to prevent discomfort is to sanitize issues that do harm" (Vanderbilt Center of Teaching, 2012). The attempt to remove stress and conflict from discussions about structural inequality "thus reifies those structures and can invoke the psychological violence feminist pedagogy aims to end" (Vanderbilt Center of Teaching, 2012). By privileging contestation over the nebulous and slippery concept of 'safety', "we open our classrooms to a discourse that engages inequity in all its brutality". However, this should not be taken to mean that all contributions – including possibilities such as homophobic hate speech or threats of violence – are regarded equally:

> Instead, each classroom community must map out the limits of valid contributions and appropriate speech for itself. This can be done through explicit discussion on the first day of class, syllabus statements, instructor modeling, and meta-discussion, in which a class turns its attention to the quality and tenor of its own in-class discussions.
>
> (Vanderbilt Center for Teaching, 2012)

Searching for safety online

While the academic and research community employing the concept of 'safe space' might be vague on what it entails, internet authors and commentators have taken up the cause and a number of useful resources can be found online that address the questions academic literature has largely left unanswered (Geek Feminism Wiki, 2015; The Safe Space Network, 2012; Vanderbilt Center for Teaching, 2015; Advocates for Youth, 2008): What is a safe space? How does one create a safe space? What is the value of a safe space and who is it safe for? What are the alternatives? The Safe Space Network, a Tumblr blog managed by a number of individuals who call themselves 'admins', define a 'safe space' as a place for "any identity, orientation, thoughts, beliefs and/or people, as long as that identity, orientation, thoughts, beliefs or person does not oppress another" (The Safe Space Network, 2012).

The feminist website Everyday Feminism features a page of Community Standards and Guidelines governing the use of their website as well as their Facebook page (Everyday Feminism, 2015). Their Facebook page is "for people who want to incorporate intersectional feminism into their lives and support each other's healing and growth" through a better understanding of patriarchy and kyriarchy, discover new ways to "survive and thrive in a society that marginalizes them", critically reflect on their own privilege, and learn how to dismantle systems of oppression from which they benefit (Everyday Feminism, 2015). Their guidelines for discussion on the Facebook page are geared towards creating an "engaging, respectful and supportive space" (Everyday Feminism, 2015). In critical pedagogy, the role of the educator is argued as establishing and fostering constructive exchange amongst the numerous different voices and experiences that come together in a classroom (Ellsworth, 1988) – a role reflected in that of the online feminist community administrator and moderator. Key to the maintenance of any safe space – be it online or offline – seems to be strict community moderation and active administration: this usually takes the form of an explicit set of rules delineating acceptable engagement in the space (Workman, 2014: 48; Herring, 2002: 381), and outlining the consequences of disobeying those rules, and active moderation of discussions: whether that entails guiding discussions, deleting offensive comments or threads, warning members who are out of line, and banning members who threaten the safety of the group.

Based on the notion that "no space is entirely safe and free from oppression", the administration of the Safe Space Network blogs aims to create a 'safer space' where ideas, thoughts, beliefs and experiences are respected, information is kept confidential, "offensive, oppressive and shitty" behaviour is not tolerated (The Safe Space Network, 2012). Put simply,

it aims to create space for the expression of "any identity, orientation, thoughts, beliefs and/or people, as long as that identity, orientation, thoughts, beliefs or person does not oppress another" (The Safe Space Network, 2012). Oppressive beliefs and opinions, they argue, are those that erase or deny the experiences of marginalised groups, for example 'fat shaming', 'cultural appropriation', 'mental illness-shaming' or 'trans-misogyny' (The Safe Space Network, 2012). Online safe spaces such as the Safe Space Network represent an intersectional approach to building and protecting feminist communities that take into account the inherent power dynamics at play in issues of race, class, ability, and culture alongside issues of sex and gender. The Safe Space Network also requires 'trigger warnings' to flag potentially traumatic material that might trigger a strong post-traumatic response (The Safe Space Network, 2012). The use of 'trigger warnings' or "explicit alerts that the material they are about to read or see in a classroom might upset them or… cause symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder in victims of rape or in war veterans" (Medina, 2014) is a common practice in online feminist spaces and closely linked to the concept of safe space. The body of literature on trigger warnings is small and very recent, but growing (Livingston, 2014; Veraldi & Veraldi, 2015; Wyatt, 2016; Bell, 2013; Hardwick, 2014). While some argue that trigger warnings are "a practice of consent" for survivors of violence "to take their power back by telling a bit of their trauma narrative and requesting accommodations and accountability" (Livingston, 2014), others argue that it amounts to censorship and anti-intellectualism (Hardwick, 2014; Veraldi & Veraldi, 2015). While the concept originated in digital communities (Medina, 2014), it is increasingly being called for in safe space policies at universities with regards to potentially disturbing course material (Shulevitz, 2015; Agness, 2015).

Trigger warnings and the privileging of marginalised voices about their own experiences are only two principles that seem to characterise online spaces. Rules and guidelines defining the architecture of safe spaces on the internet place a heavy emphasis on forms of acceptable dialogue and the positionality of interlocutors becomes key to the perspective from which they navigate the 'safe space'. From my survey of different sources and online communities that create and maintain 'safe spaces', other important principles include educating oneself by reading available literature, practising respectful and 'active listening' when engaged in dialogue, and an assumption of the 'good faith' of other interlocutors until proven wrong. Crucial to feminist discussion, then, are "the purposeful acts of listening, thinking, and internalizing" (Vanderbilt Centre for Teaching, 2012). For this reason, certain forms of debate and dialogue are negatively sanctioned in safe spaces for "silencing" marginalised members or

"erasing" their experiences – from eliciting a warning to an immediate ban (Everyday Feminism, 2015). Recent research and writing in the field of computer-mediated communication has focused on certain types of hostile communication on the internet such as 'trolling' and 'flaming' (Jane, 2015: 66). Arguing that this literature "has missed the growing power and prevalence of hostility on the internet, as well as its gendered nature, and its ethical and material implications" (Jane, 2015: 66), Jane conceptualises "a variety of ostensibly variegated denunciatory speech acts" under the heading of "e-bile" (Jane, 2015: 66). Trolling, or "saying things for the sake of getting an angry reaction from other participants or to damage the atmosphere of a community" (Geek Feminism Wiki, 2015; see also Herring et al., 2002; Binns, 2012; Bergstrom, 2011), is a very clear violation of the safety of any space, as is flaming: hostile, vicious and often violent personal attacks in an online argument (Jane, 2015). These speech acts have been outlined and discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

A number of authors who have written about online communities have questioned whether the Internet – which is by nature an open and difficult to regulate space – *can* or *should* be expected to facilitate the creation of safe spaces for marginalised groups (Atkinson & DePalma, 2008; Mitra, 2006; Harris, 2005; Workman, 2014; Gajjala, 2002). From a practical perspective, discursive 'safety' is impossible to guarantee in each and every interaction. Even with strict moderation guidelines in place, racist and misogynistic microaggressions are likely to take place wherever discussion and debate are taking place, and it is impossible to avoid triggering or upsetting subject matter in groups with hundreds or even thousands of different people. In her discussion of her failed cyberethnography of SAWnet (South-Asian Women's network), a women-only electronic discussion group where she was not allowed by the participants of the group to continue her research, Gajjala addresses some of the most important questions and contradictions about 'safe spaces' in the digital world, or "feminist e-spaces": "What does it mean to define a 'safe' women-only social space? What are the inclusions and exclusions implicit in the notion of being 'safe' online? Who speaks for whom?" (Gajjala, 2002: 177). Gajjala's research about online space and "the privilege of being able to speak and to write in hegemonic spaces" (Gajjala, 2002: 189), which are situated inside of existing power relations, is useful for its discussion of what she calls "the politics of enunciation" in online spaces (Gajjala, 2002: 178). She reviews a growing body of work examining women's interaction with the web "that invokes past feminist debates regarding the need for safe spaces for women, while engaging and questioning the (im)possibilities of safe women-only spaces online", for example Blair and Takayoshi's work on the role of websites created for and by women "that

offer women spaces for active participation in the construction of more productive, supportive, and encouraging subject positions for women and girls" (Blair & Takayoshi in Gajjala, 2002: 182). She is also interested in exploring the inclusions and exclusions inherent in "the creation of a supposedly safe space for specific groups of women", which by default must lead to "exclusionary, homogenizing identification practices that are oppressive to certain members of the groups" (Gajjala, 2002: 182). Her work with SAWnet leads her to conclude that "a women-only e-mail list is not necessarily a safe space or a private space" – a conclusion that could just as reasonably have been made today, fourteen years later, in an age where social media has blurred and shifted the boundaries between "ideas of private/public, closed and open spaces" (Gajjala, 2002: 182). In addition to this blurring of boundaries between our public and private lives, Gajjala also argues that cyberspace brings people "face-to-face with [...] the fact of multiple subject positions (and the unequal power which permits their voicing and silencing)—based in contexts mediated by class, gender, geographical location, race, caste, and other unequal power relations" (Gajjala, 2002: 182-183).

As Harris (2015) puts it, unequal power relations will always be recreated to some extent in all our interactions. Following a Foucauldian take on socially constructed meaning and power relations, the outcome of safe space policies is that each person becomes responsible for the ways in which they "reproduce power relations at their most micro level" (Harris, 2015: 1). Like Gajjala, Atkinson and De Palma are interested in the way power relations and structural imbalances inherent to our offline lives were recreated or challenged in online 'safe spaces' (Atkinson & De Palma, 2008). Their analysis confirms what other studies on the matter have found regarding the digital embodiment of difference in online spaces: namely that forum interlocutors "re-embody themselves, consciously or unconsciously, in ways that invoke social meanings and effectively import socially constructed power asymmetries into the virtual space" (Atkinson & De Palma, 2008: 192). Echoing Macdonald's concern about the danger of discursive spaces for marginalised groups when it is their very identity that is in question, they argue that "for marginalized groups, discursive spaces, whether physical or virtual, are always threatening" (Atkinson & De Palma, 2008: 185).

In her research about the women-only support and discussion group called '2X' on the popular web forum called Reddit, Workman (2014) reiterated Atkinson and De Palma's (2008) findings on the importance of community moderation in the creation and maintenance of online safe spaces. Despite this realisation, research into the nature and role of moderators in an online

feminist community is severely lacking. While Crawford and Gillespie (2014) investigate the role of social media reporting tools and the vocabulary of complaints, the role of moderators in these communities and the wider social media ecology has not been adequately addressed. There is a small but growing body of research into what is referred to as "digital immaterial labour" (Scholz, 2012; Jarrett, 2014; Roberts, 2014). Although it is not discussed in this research, Nakamura's recent critique of social media platforms which generate "huge profits from free user data" while community volunteers – often women of colour – do the hard work of moderating and calling out misogyny and sexism in their online spaces without pay (often attracting the wrath of internet trolls and rampant sexism) (Nakamura, 2015: 106) warrants further inquiry in future research. Alongside Nakamura, a number of other researchers are looking specifically into the emotional or civic labour online moderators and other internet workers perform (Matias, 2016; Menking & Erickson, 2015).

Chapter 3: Methodology

In order to find out how the online feminist community in question constituted and maintained itself as an intersectional safe space, I have drawn on my own experiences of participant observation of the group for over a year, interviews with a handful of past and present group members and administrators, and a review of documents in the group as well as safe space regulations and practices from other places on the internet. This research focuses on one purposively selected South African feminist online community of which I had been a member for more than two years at the time of writing, and analyses not only the group's practices, but the evolution of these practices in the efforts over the observation period to become a truly intersectional safe space.

In this chapter, the process and methods I used in this research are outlined, as well as the ethical and practical challenges I faced. First, the process and rationale of sampling and selection in terms of the community I chose as well as the research participants involved is briefly discussed. This process involved a number of challenges that, far from limiting my research into safe spaces, allowed for much greater and more reflexive insight into not only what this safety entails in the South African context, but also how to understand my own role as a feminist social researcher. In order to find out how admin moderation and group rules contributed to making the Facebook group a safe space, I planned to use methods such as interviews, focus groups, and observation of group interactions, debates, discussions, and the type of content that is shared. However, due to developments in the group and moderators' sustained efforts to maintain the safety and privacy of group members, my interactions with possible research participants were severely curtailed. Instead of drawing on group posts and conversations, which are generally expected to be protected by the privacy of the group, I relied on message-based focus group interviews with the current group of administrators, online interviews with past moderators and members, analysis of a number of group documents I was given access to, and a handful of face-to-face interviews with contacts I had built up over the two years of my research. I made use of emails, social media and instant messaging services to conduct interviews online, and I also supplemented these methods with traditional face-to-face interviews with group members situated in my city wherever possible in order to compensate for the detail and nuance that gets lost in text-based online communication. These interviews and focus groups helped to contextualise my own experiences as a group member and my observations of developments in the group as a social researcher.

The chapter describes and justifies the methods employed, explaining how my personal experience and information gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and focus groups have allowed me to answer questions about the ways in which moderation and group guidelines shape discourse in the Facebook group and create a safe space for self-expression, societal critique, information-sharing and debate. First, I briefly discuss the research process, including the rationale behind the sampling and selection of research platforms and participants. Then, the qualitative nature of the research is explained, with a focus on the role of interviews, focus groups and participant-observation in feminist and online research. The practical and ethical concerns that affect research on social media and using digital technology in general are then discussed, especially with regards to semi-private safe spaces such as the Facebook group in question. While social media platforms provide a rich and interesting field of study for social researchers, it has raised issues regarding participant privacy and anonymity, data reliability, and the constant churn of new content that makes locating and collecting data difficult. Combining my own long-term experience as a group member with interviews with past and present moderators and members allowed me to find out how the online community in question constituted itself as 'intersectional' and 'feminist' through discourse, how the rules of discourse were implemented, and the inclusions and exclusions implicit in this discursive formation. This research forms part of a small but growing body of qualitative, historically specific and critical research into social media use in developing countries.

Qualitative research online

Choices about research methods are often dictated by certain specific epistemological positions (Byrne, 2004: 181) and underpin a specific belief system about the way knowledge is produced and gathered, what constitutes this knowledge, and how it is warranted (Bryman, 1984: 73). Epistemologically, qualitative research methods such as participant observation, focus group and semi-structured interviews are often associated with a phenomenological understanding of experience and human consciousness and the distinctness of different contexts and experiences (Babbie & Mouton, 2001: 28). This understanding "takes the actor's perspective as the empirical point of departure", therefore preferring methods which provide it with this kind of "inside view" that allows researchers to "get close to [their] subjects and so see the world from their perspective" (Bryman, 1984: 73): in this context, insight into the lived experiences and

perceptions of group members of the group as a 'safe space'. In this research, qualitative methods have provided me with insights into the way the online community in question is constituted and controlled and how different kinds of members experience the group differently. Common qualitative research approaches employed within critical cultural studies to understand cultural production include political economy approaches, textual analyses and sociological or ethnographic approaches such as interviews and observation (Davis, 2008: 54-59). This research falls within the latter category, "looking first-hand at the practices and conventions that are involved in cultural production" from within specific communities of interest (Pickering, 2008: 7). I conducted this research using a combination of interviews (in most cases computer-mediated) with key online actors and my own observations of group interactions and developments as a long-term member of the feminist group in question.

I chose to conduct focus group and in-depth individual interviews and rely on my own observations as a group member because of the qualitative character of the information I needed and the subjective nature of the experiences I wanted to find out about. Qualitative studies of the use of ICT represent a relatively recent approach, complementing quantitative research on the impact of the spread of ICT and its consequences for social and economic development and inclusion (Kreutzer, 2009: 5). Qualitative interviewing offers researchers a better way of ensuring that interviewer and interviewee understand each other and the terms and concepts as well as possible, and often produce rich, detailed and nuanced findings that would not be possible using other methods such as surveys, observation, or content analysis. It is also the only way to access those details that inform this piece of research: the texture and detail of people's experiences from different subject positions. Although the inherent nature of communication precludes any kind of certainty about these shared meanings, the flexibility, detail and dialogical nature of qualitative interviewing does allow for the researcher to "adapt in response to the reactions and responses of the interviewee" and "offers the possibility of exploring the interviewee's understanding in a more meaningful way than would be allowed by a less flexible survey questionnaire" (Byrne, 2004: 184). While in-depth personal interviews help to produce detailed data about the nature and motivations of experiences and interactions, focus groups emphasize "shared and contested meanings" and communicative processes, and are interactive. Focus groups allow researchers to elicit information and explore attitudes in detail, asking follow-up questions and observing group dynamics. They "enable the researcher to examine issues that are not always easily observable in the field" (Byrne, 2004: 197) and can provide information about shared opinions and perceptions within the South African

feminist cyber-community in question. Focus groups have a "dual relation" to other qualitative methods such as interviews, "providing both a tool in research design and a complementary method of data collection" (Byrne, 2004: 196). In the beginning, focus groups "can help researchers to formulate qualitative interview schedules: defining terms, raising themes…, clarifying the wording or order of questions, or assessing participants' understanding of key concepts and language" (Byrne, 2004: 196). Together, focus groups and interviews can provide material to be used in the body of the research, each addressing the shortcomings of the other. While sometimes the group dynamics of focus groups may be inhibiting, in other situations people might feel shyer in a one-on-one interview (Byrne, 2004: 197). Methodologically, material gathered using qualitative methods such as interviews and focus groups can also be used both as a resource (analysed for "what interviewees say about their lives and experiences") and a topic (analysed for "how the information is communicated and the accounts are told") – in practice, researchers often apply a combination of these two approaches (Byrne, 2004: 183).

I chose the Facebook group represented in this study because it was the only one of its kind and size active in South Africa at the time. I was added to the group by a Facebook friend around the same time as the group was founded early in 2014. I conducted preliminary email interviews with two group members and a face-to-face follow-up interview with one of these participants in 2014, with the aim of establishing a number of possible research questions and mapping the terrain that 21st century South African feminists have to navigate. Once I had conducted these interviews, I contacted group administrators to obtain their permission to post a call for research participants in the group. At the time, there were only a handful of administrators, and gaining permission was a straightforward process. Because of the sensitive nature of much of the content that is shared in the group, the privacy settings of the group, and my prior level of involvement with the group, I decided to take a completely transparent and explicit position as a social researcher in the group and made a number of posts telling people who I was, what I was doing there, and inviting them to talk to me. In these preliminary interviews and my observation of group discussions for a year, the issue of safe spaces – and strategies for creating and maintaining them – came up repeatedly. I realised that it was one of the most important criteria of the group, and in feminist communities on the internet in general. In order to understand the role of groups such as this one in feminist activism, I first needed to understand the nature and characteristics of such groups as 'safe spaces'. I chose to pursue this topic going into 2015, finding out how the communities in question constituted themselves as feminist, intersectional, and safe, which topics and modes of communication were included

and excluded by the group rules, what those group rules stated and how they were implemented through moderation.

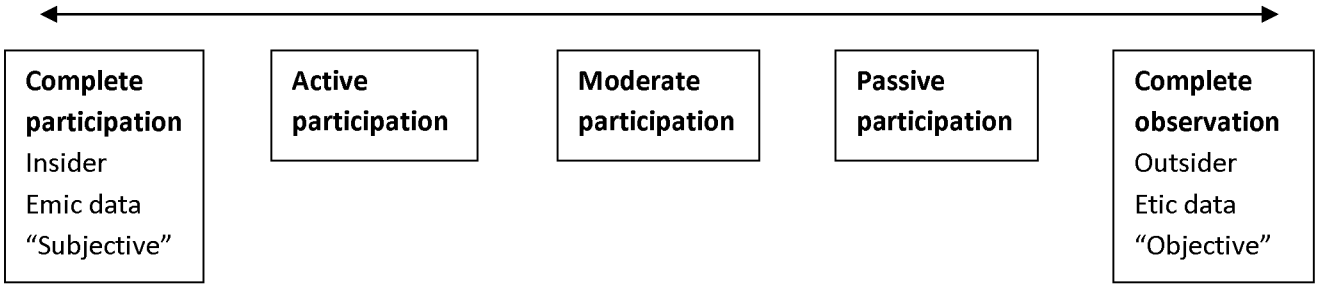
When I returned to the group in the middle of 2015, the moderators making up the administration had completely changed, and the group responsible for moderating the group had doubled in size since 2014. In line with an ethical, feminist approach to social research, especially in private or restricted spaces, I decided to renew my request with this group of administrators and provide an outline of my updated research proposal. I approached the new group of moderators with my new research plan in order to gain permission to post in the group, recruit participants, and monitor group discussions, which I sent to all the administrators in a group message. The group of administrators discussed my request amongst themselves, returning with a list of five practical, ethical and political concerns about my proposed interactions with the group going into the future. They provide invaluable insights into not only the criteria for creating and maintaining a safe space online, but also into the problematic nature of social research (especially the use of ethnographic methods, which have a questionable history) in private feminist spaces that aim to challenge existing inequalities and power relations. I radically revised my planned approach, eliminating the analysis of group discussions and comments – essentially protected by the group's privacy settings and explicit commitment to safety – from my methodological toolbox. Instead, I relied on my own experience, focus groups, interviews with administrators, shared documents such as the group rules, and interviews with a small number of members, both past and present. From a practical perspective, I also needed to make sure the administrators felt comfortable with my research as it was in their power to remove me from the closed Facebook group at any point during the research, cutting off my access to the group and its members. Therefore, I tried to address the admin group's concerns one by one, agreeing not to use the textual samples I had collected from group discussions and not to approach group members for interviews. These criteria for conducting research in the Facebook group meant that my pool of possible research participants was limited to particular groups. Once the moderators in the group felt more comfortable with my research proposal, I asked them to indicate whether or not they would like to be interviewed about their work and experiences as administrators of the group. When the majority of the administrators responded positively, we decided to turn the Facebook Messenger group chat into a cyber focus group (the details of conducting an online focus group are discussed in more detail later in this chapter), where a lively discussion on the group's history, development, and current practices followed. Although there were 12 administrators on the page in total at the

time the interviews took place and they were all members of our 'group chat', only six of them took part in the focus group discussion. Once this discussion died down, I contacted the most active participants on an individual basis requesting follow-up interviews, which were conducted using Facebook Messenger in most cases, and supplemented by a Skype voice call interview afterwards. These individual follow-up interviews were conducted with four administrators. Since the conditions under which I was allowed to continue my research meant that sourcing participants from and speaking to current group members was out of bounds, I had to try different ways of finding research participants. Combined with the fact that most social media platforms have a very low rate of participation (or ratio of active to passive members or 'lurkers'), this limited my ability to obtain a representative sample of how the majority of the group experienced the rules – even from my personal observations. However, I am not trying to make generalisations and therefore this limited, purposive method of sampling suits the scope of the research. I am interested in the texture and detail of the experiences of specific group members, especially the administrators enforcing the rules. Other participants that were still accessible to me were those with whom I had already established a relationship throughout 2014 and 2015. This group includes the old moderators from whom I had obtained permission (I interviewed three ex-moderators) as well as real-life acquaintances who had shared their personal stories and group experiences with me when I told them that I was doing research in and about the group. I interviewed four ex-group members, one ex-administrator, and six current group members of different genders, sexual orientations, and races. These interviews were conducted on an individual basis, either face-to-face or over Facebook Messenger and Skype when there was a geographical divide. I conducted one face-to-face focus group with three group members (including an ex-moderator) who lived in Grahamstown.

Participant observation as cybermethodology

Because of the ethical concerns surrounding the approach I planned to employ at first, I decided to opt for a blended approach largely informed by my own experiences as a long-term group member and the developments I had witnessed over the preceding two years as part of the group, as well as inputs from key informants regarding their own experiences of the group. In this way, group members' anonymity and their feeling of safety was not compromised by my presence as a social researcher. Participant observation can be understood as "one among a

number of methods" typically employed in anthropological fieldwork, where the observer "takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of the people being studied as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their culture" (Dewalt *et al.*, 1998: 260). It usually extends over a long period of time, although the length of the observation period differs – from visiting the site for a couple of months to observing and participating in community life for generations. Researchers can set out to describe the total way of life of a community with a comprehensive ethnography (Spradley, 1980). Conversely, as in this research, the researcher can choose to focus on a specific issue, conducting topic-oriented research that aims to answer a specific set of questions (Spradley, 1980: 59). Researchers can also take on different roles depending on the type of interactions that are possible and their level of engagement with the community they are studying. Participant observation is a contradictory term by nature: it requires both participation in and membership of a group, and the ability to critically reflect on the group from an outsider's perspective – and ultimately leave the group once the research is over. Spradley (1980:58-62) devised a continuum to describe the "degree of participation". This continuum and related concepts are represented below:



Adapted from Spradley's (1980: 58-62) "[degrees] of participation"

Throughout the period of study, my role as group member and social researcher fluctuated between passive and moderate participation – even though I was a part of the group before I started to research it, which also makes me a complete participant. As discussed in the next section, the internet allows for a completely new set of configurations for participation and observation. Social researchers can easily "lurk" on public platforms, collecting data without the knowledge of any of the participants. They can be members of closed or private groups without actively posting or entering into discussions on the group. For this reason, I have devised my own continuum to describe membership in private online groups: a practice quite

common in a number of online forums where members are ranked according to their level of activity in the group, the number of posts they have created, and reviews from their peers.

When I first became a group member, I was a moderate participant, joining in the occasional discussion and even posting a few times. However, when I decided to conduct this research into the group and its workings, I took a step back and became a passive participant, lurking around the group wall and watching discussions as they unfolded naturally. I recognised the challenges and opportunities Spradley attached to different subject positions. As a moderate participant, I enjoyed a good combination of involvement and the necessary detachment I wanted to maintain as a researcher (Spradley, 1980: 59). Reminding group members of my presence with regular posts allowed me to ensure that group members remained aware of my role. While I was working through the material I had collected in preliminary interviews and trying to find my position in the group, I stopped participating and adopted the role of the lurker. I made a cardinal mistake in participant observation, which severely limited my ability to establish rapport with group members and gain their trust, as the administrators pointed out to me, when I sought their permission to conduct research. Establishing rapport – getting to know group members and the site of study, becoming accepted into the group – is the first step in Howell's (1972) phases of participant observation. The second phase – working in the field – requires the researcher to form a connection with the community, "talking the talk" and "walking the walk" (Dewalt *et al.*, 1998: 58). In this phase, the researcher aims to fit in with the community she is conducting her research on and about through moderation of language and participation (Howell, 1972). Although I conformed to the common group practices when posting (for example, avoiding gendered or ableist language, and using TWs), the constantly changing nature and membership of the group meant that once I started lurking, it was only a short time until nobody knew me or anything about me anymore.

The third phase of participant observation, recording observations and data, often overlaps with the second as the researcher moves between the objects of her study and the documentation she

continually creates throughout the process (Howell, 1973). This record consists of a number of different kinds of data: recorded interviews and focus groups, documents created by and circulated in the group, spontaneous and planned group events and interactions, field notes about the researcher's observations, and a journal in which she critically and reflexively reflects on her own experiences as a group member, her position as a researcher in the community, and what influence her own subjective position might have on her research in terms of selection, interpretation, and interactions (Howell, 1973; Dewalt, *et al.*, 1998). Some researchers have put different spins on the term participant observation, with Tedlock (1991: 69) describing her work as the "observation of participation":

> Narrative ethnography combines the approaches of writing a standard monograph about the people being studied (the Other) with an ethnographic memoir centering on the anthropologist (the Self).

In the fourth and final stage of participant observation, the researcher must analyse the data collected using a method of her choice: the most common choices being either thematic analysis, or narrative analysis. While the former organises data according to recurrent themes in the datasets, the latter requires the researcher to categorize and use information to construct a coherent story (Howell, 1973). My observations, interview questions, and reflections were focused on one specific issue (i.e. the group as a safe space), and I used all the resources at my disposal (field notes and interview transcripts as well as documents created by group administrators) to construct a narrative of the group's endeavours for safety and intersectionality in its interactions. Although this research employs ethnographic methods, it does not qualify as ethnography: it does not provide a rigorous and deep understanding of the community in question as a whole and many of the nuances provided by IRL observation (for example, non-verbal cues) are lost. These are only a few of the limitations and characteristics of research into online communities. Rather, this research investigates one aspect of virtual community life using methods traditionally employed in anthropology and ethnology. So, while this research cannot be called an ethnography, certain ethnographic methods have been employed in order to get at the texture and detail of everyday life as a member of the group.

Focus group interviews echo the "consciousness-raising (CR) groups" of the women's liberation movement of the late 1960s and 1970s and adhere to the basic principles of feminist

research (Montell, 1999: 46). They are also used to achieve the qualitative, subjective depth demanded by cultural studies approaches (Pickering, 2008). While there is no such thing as a truly 'feminist method', just as there is no such thing as a 'non-feminist method', there are certain feminist principles against which methods can be tested. In relation to research methodology, these principles include a concern with the relationship between the researcher and the subject which is addressed using "more egalitarian and less objectifying" methods such as focus groups and interviews (Montell, 1999: 49-50). Montell identifies "five basic epistemological principles that concern feminist researchers": gender as a key focus; acknowledging the need to "challenge the norm of objectivity and the rigid separation between the researcher and the researched"; the importance of "consciousness-raising as a methodological tool"; the aim of transforming patriarchal institutions and empowering women; and sensitivity towards the ethical implications of research (1999: 46-47). These methods are also used by feminist researchers because they "allow participants to exercise a fair degree of control over their own interactions" (Morgan, 1996: 133) and treat them as 'experts' on their own lived experiences (Montell, 1999: 46). Pini (2006) discusses the value of focus groups as a useful method for feminist social research as they "provided space for discussion and reflexivity" (2006: 339). The openness and emphasis on self-narration and determination in interviews and focus group research is what makes these methods so valuable from a feminist perspective.

A number of social scientists and technologists have studied the emergence and formation of online communities and the ever-increasing importance of ICTs in our everyday lives and practices. Rheingold's *The Virtual Community* (1993) is a seminal text on virtual ethnographies, elaborating on the author's experiences and observations as part of the early network system called The Well. While some opt to call this type of research 'virtual ethnography', others have eschewed this term in favour of 'cyberethnography' to delineate the differences between traditional ethnology and the study of new digitally formed communities and the changes in ethnographic spaces, positioning and objects of study (Teli *et al.*, 2007). However, I have not entered into these debates about what to call social research in and about online communities. For the purpose of this research, it is sufficient to highlight some of the major characteristics and limitations of performing participant observation online, based on an online community. The use of technology to communicate and organise encounters that inform a discussion of the practices of an online feminist community seems a natural one: after all, it's the medium in which the community under investigation exists and operates. Throughout the

period of my research, I conducted semi-structured interviews and focus groups using Facebook Messenger, via email, and also in person to find out how participants experienced social interactions in this virtual community, and what methods they have devised to regulate social order in this relatively new and fluctuating environment?

Interviews, observation, reflexive field notes and focus groups are all established methods in feminist research, but in this research they will be applied with a cyber-twist. The methods I have employed come from the toolbox of 'cyber-ethnography' (Ward, 1999; Keeley-Brown, 2011: 331), or the study of online interactions and communities. One of the biggest differences in conducting research about online communities as opposed to offline communities regards time and space. While traditional communities are bound by geographical location and time (even communities who meet up occasionally need to be at the same place at the same time), virtual communities are not restricted by the same spatial-temporal frameworks and can often consist of members from all around the world, often around topics of interest or shared projects. Like the group in question, there might still be a geographical element (it is a South African group, for discussing feminist issues facing South Africans) in order to provide context and delimit discussions. While researchers living or working in the field and performing classic ethnographic research are privy to a number of non-verbal communication cues such as body language, facial expressions, tone of voice, and other physical practices, online researchers have to rely on the body of texts that comprise the community under investigation.

While this can be seen as a limitation, it can also be seen from another perspective: because this community only exists online, researchers have potential access to *all of the artefacts and symbols of that community* – in other words, the text, visual materials, profiles, audio materials, and so forth that make up the community. Unlike offline social research in specific communities, which inevitably misses many interactions and events (simply because it is impossible to watch and participate in everything, all of the time), researchers looking at online communities have at their disposal a literal record of the community and everything it comprises of from the beginning – mostly with time stamps and other metadata (eg. place and type of content) attached. Not only can researchers literally 'scroll' back to the beginning of a specific online community's time in the digital sphere, but some platforms such as Facebook even allow them access to the history of changes made to specific documents. For example, the pinned 'Group guidelines' post in the feminist Facebook group I looked at was a very important document in my research. In order to track the developments and changes in the

group, I could access all the previous versions of this specific post: I could see what rules were added, changed, or taken away, and I could even see when. Document analysis is not the only thing that is revolutionised by the web, however. While offline researchers often face ethical dilemmas regarding when and what to record, how to take notes, and reminding participants of their identity and the purpose of the research, I did not face the same issues in the online group. All my interviews and focus groups were recorded automatically because they took place on platforms such as Facebook Messenger and email. As described above, my interactions with group members were limited, and I did not find myself in a situation where ethical questions regarding informed consent and boundaries came into play.

Cyber methods "[allow] the subjects being studied to talk back even as the process is occurring." Indeed, this "talking back is part of the cyber-ethnographic process" (Gajjala in Ward, 1999: 1.6). From a feminist perspective a medium such as email and IRC (Instant Relay Chat) allows participants a greater level of control over, and consideration of, their answers and self-representations. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups can take place on online forums, social media pages and groups, on public platforms such as Twitter, and privately via email or instant messaging services. Cyber-ethnographic methods are aimed at exploring "the same problems of representation that both feminist and non-feminist ethnographers have been confronting for the past two decades" (Ward, 1999: 1.8) and in this research is not taken to signal a radical break from traditional ethnographic methodology: rather, it should be understood to provide a "research tool to explore, analyse and document social processes within text based virtual space" (Ward, 1999: 1.8). Some argue that cyber-ethnography could hold "the potential to be more reflexive than ethnography" (Ward, 1999: 1.8) and allows cyber-researchers to encourage and hear a "plurality of voices" even as it takes the situation out of the ethnographer's control (Ward, 1999: 1.12), and it should also manage to avoid "any pre-conceived ideas concerning the existence of the online community" due to the multi-faceted, fluid and complex nature of online communities (Ward, 1999: 1.7). The inherently dialogical and flexible nature of the internet suits a feminist ethnography, researcher, and subject involved in a "collaborative reciprocal quest for understanding" (Stacey, 1988: 23). While interviews and focus groups form an important part of this understanding, the researcher can also participate in online observation to enrich her understanding of the cyber-community in question. Such observation involves watching and noting group interactions on various platforms such as comments sections, Facebook groups, and forums, without influencing the

conversation (Ward, 1999: 1.12), and then writing extensive and reflexive field notes about these observations.

Ethics, power, and positionality

Online participant observation faces many of the same epistemological problems as traditional ethnographic research (alongside some new difficulties and dilemmas as outlined previously) – especially when it comes to the subjectivity of interpretation and the power relations that characterize our interactions with the world, both within research situations and outside of them. This is the centre of the controversy of validity and reliability that continually surrounds anthropological as well as much other qualitative social research (Dewalt *et al.*, 1998: 288). "[While] ethnographers attempt to represent a social situation, they often re-produce it, thus constructing a new version of reality" – therefore, they need to acknowledge their own position and influence as researcher, and their selective and subjective representation of the cultures (Ward, 1999: 1.8). The value of reflecting on the process as well as my own position as a researcher is that it serves to "demystify" the process of doing participant observation, making visible the methods I employed and how I came to my conclusions, as well as how my own subjectivity could influence the process and my interpretation of the data. If our biases are made explicit and we check our data with the use of triangulation with more formal methods of data collection (interviews, focus groups and document analysis) and member-checking (the process of presenting participants with materials and conclusions for feedback), it is possible to improve both the quality and consistency of our work (Dewalt *et al.*, 1998: 288). All researchers bring their own "biases, predispositions, and hang-ups to the field", but it is imperative for them to be made "as explicit as possible so that others may use these in judging our work" (Dewalt *et al.*, 1998: 288).

In critical research which is aimed at uncovering and ultimately challenging unequal power relations in society, researchers need to be cognizant of all the ways in which these inequalities can be reproduced in the research process. Community-based participatory research (CBPR) is an approach that aims to address structural, socio-economic, and racial/ethnic inequities within the discipline of healthcare research through collaboration with community actors (Muhammad *et al.*, 2015: 1046). Taking a reflexive, intersectional approach to power dynamics in research, researchers have listed a number of ways in which power works in the research process:

1. The positionality of the researcher to the communities being researched
2. The research process itself
3. The representation and writing of findings... (and)
4. The epistemology of power.

(Muhammad *et al.*, 2015: 1049)

As a feminist social researcher working in an online community, I have immersed myself in a virtual reality of which I have been a part for more than two years in order to understand that community (Ward, 1999: 1). In contrast to the 'detached observer' of traditional social research, the feminist researcher "[challenges] the viability and utility of concepts like objectivity and universality altogether" by focusing on the "specificity and uniqueness of women's lives and experiences" (Hesse-Biber, 2011: 9) and negating the traditional, hierarchical relationship between herself and her research (Hesse-Biber, 2011: 8). Although I have been immersed in this community for some time and consider myself as one of the South African feminists of whom the group consists, constructive, self-reflexive critique (Hesse-Biber, 2011: 10) forms part of our feminist politics and practice. My involvement and commitment to the group in question should not preclude me from maintaining a critical distance from the research: in fact, this tradition of reflexivity has been an integral part of the process, with research participants such as group participants pointing out my positionality and speaking back to the research and the researcher. The traditional "bias of romanticism" that often plagues participant-observers (Dewalt *et al.*, 1998: 288) has no place in this community or my interpretations of it: rigorous reflexivity forms part of daily individual and group practice. However, it is important to remember that knowledge and awareness of the self and our reactions to the field are not the goal of the research, but rather the starting point from which we set out to understand the question at hand (Dewalt *et al.*, 1998: 289).

During the period of research, an incident occurred in the group which raised a number of serious questions regarding ethical research in closed safe spaces like this one, and provided me with direction regarding my own ethical stance and relationship to the group. Early in August 2016, the administrators of the group came across a paper written by a group member – a "self-identified white American woman" as she was referred to in an administrator post. In the paper (entitled "A Study on how Two Intersectional Feminist Groups in South Africa Challenge Mainstream Feminist Thought"), the author focused on two feminist communities

based in South Africa (Ives, 2015): one of them was the group in question, and one was a public Facebook page. The researcher had not discussed it with anyone or attempted to obtain permission from the administrators to conduct the research: it was, in essence, a piece of covert research. The group is not only mentioned by name in the paper, but the author also details specific incidents and interactions. In line with their approach to moderating the group and dealing with a number of different types of issues, the administrators first discussed and deliberated amongst themselves, crafting a post together to tell group members about what had happened, and to find out how they felt it should be handled. Group administrators and members took this incident very seriously. The administrators felt they should contact the university and publishing body in question, but first they opened the floor to suggestions from group members. Although they were aware that it would always be difficult to ensure safety in a group of more than 2,500 at the time, they felt that a response was necessary.

Administrators and group members agreed that the author's supervisors should be informed about the ethical breach, as the way the paper was written did not make it clear that the author had taken these ethical shortcuts. Although she acknowledged that the group was a closed (i.e. private) Facebook group and also mentions the group guidelines (which forbade unauthorised research, and which all members are required to agree with by 'liking' the post, which she described doing), she relied on a piece of fancy rhetorical footwork to get herself out of a tricky ethical bind. Her justification for performing covert research was two-fold: firstly, there were over 1,500 members in the group at the time. To her, this meant that "general terms and themes within [the] Facebook posts as archival information" could be used without identifying individual members (Ives, 2015: 15). However, as the administrators point out in their post about the paper, "[it] speaks of a few incidents and discussions in the group as well as the actions taken by the group administrators in handling those situations, and all of us *ARE* easily identifiable from the group description." The author not only referred to specific events, but paraphrased member comments and posts and even quoted from them directly. The following paradoxical quote further illustrates the author's misunderstanding (at best) and disregard (at worst) of the rules that ensure the group's safety:

> While the page is technically a 'closed group', there was no entry restrictions placed upon my entry, merely a request that I express consent to the group guidelines by 'liking' the post that included them.

(Ives, 2015: 15)

If the author had spoken to the administrators, they would have outlined the various entry restrictions they employ when accepting membership requests – of which 'liking' a comment on the guidelines post is only the final step. The second branch of the author's justification for performing this research covertly was more complex. She claimed that the reason for her purposeful avoidance of interviewing as a method was because of the inherent power imbalances in social research of this kind and the designation of the studied 'other'. "Thus, to avoid the inherent problems of a white American studying an 'othered' group through the process of interview, the available material already relating to Black feminism was consulted" (Ives, 2015: 16). By avoiding "direct contact" in the form of observation and interviews, the author argues that "the participants in the study were protected from any form of subjugation caused by the relationship of power between researcher and participant" (Ives, 2015: 29). Puzzlingly, the author referred to "participants" in her research, although it is not clear who this was, since nobody participated in the process.

The author felt that her project succeeded in "[representing] participants as individuals with agency, critical thought, and powerful contributions to make" (Ives, 2015: 29-30) – everything the group felt she took from them. As the administrator post pointed out, the unintended consequence of performing the research without any consultation or participation was to silence and marginalize the very people she wanted to foreground (not to mention threatening the privacy of the safe space they have created together). Quoting the paper's intention of "[putting] the agency back into the marginalised groups that mainstream feminism excludes" (Ives, 2015: 30 in group admin post), the administrators felt "deeply uncomfortable with this assertion given that the entire paper does entirely the opposite by denying agency to any of the group members referred to by speaking of and for them without their knowledge and/or consent."

The absence of the author's engagement with the group while conducting this research had a number of negative practical and ethical consequences for her work. Firstly, on an epistemological level, the author misrepresents the political stance of the group as 'Black feminism' (Ives, 2015: 5, 29), which was pointed out as a mistake by the administrators in their post (and as far as I was able to deduct, the public Facebook page the author studied alongside this group also does not describe itself as a Black feminist group). In the same way as the lack

of informed consent delegitimized her research from an ethical perspective (especially in a private space in which many members were part of vulnerable or oppressed groups), the author's misidentification of the group's politics as 'Black feminism' delegitimized her research on a theoretical level. Although the paradigm of intersectionality has roots in Black feminist theory, this distinction is done away with in one fell swoop: "intersectional and therefore Black feminism" (Ives, 2015: 22). The irony of a white American woman cobbling together her own definition of Black feminism and its iterations in South Africa was not lost on the group.

Although my work overlaps with this author's work regarding the site of research, this incident raised a number of serious issues, questions and concerns that I needed to address myself. If I had not decided to take a transparent and collaborative approach to the research and in my dealings with the group administrators, it could easily have been my research paper they found and denounced. The paper not only incensed group members and made them feel unsafe, but it also misrepresented them: this was not what I wanted for any piece of research I did. When I first contacted the group of administrators I ended up interviewing, I brought them a brazen and, frankly, intrusive research plan. Not only did it involve observing and quoting from posts in the group, but I also wanted permission to contact group members individually to ask them about specific interactions. The administrators were understandably horrified by my plan, and sent back a list of objections to the research design. Some of my requests would constitute a breach of safety if I were to implement them. "Sending an inbox out of the blue to a member who is participating in the safe place we provide is invasive," they explained. "Members shouldn't feel like their every comment is being monitored for research, as that may make them feel inhibited, and unsafe." They also pointed out that, as a largely inactive member of the group for some time by that point, I had not "engaged in the group as a member in a way which could help other members to feel comfortable with you studying and/or messaging them". I clearly had a lot to learn about safe spaces at the beginning of this journey.

Administrators and group members felt that Ives's research and its publication was "a clear violation of the safety of the rest of us for anyone – but particularly a privileged person – to use the group in this way for their own personal and professional gain." In both of our research, our own privilege and positionality needed to be interrogated (found under the heading "Ethical reflexivity" in her research paper). My own privilege and position as a white, middle-income, educated woman (with the full force of the academy behind my position as a social researcher)

not only influenced the way administrators and research participants reacted to me, but it was inherently constitutive of the way I approached the research and the conclusions I came to. A number of their concerns with my original research plan came down to my positionality. I had referred to the concept of 'cyber-ethnographies' to describe research into online communities, and they warned that "ethnographic studies by white people tend to be problematic". They felt that my "position [as a white person and researcher] may make other members feel compelled to share more than they feel comfortable with OR could make them feel guarded and even hostile." One of the administrators discussed it with me in a follow-up interview. "White folks have been anthropologising marginalised groups for their own personal gain since forever and we would hate to be complicit in that," she explained.

In Ives's paper, the "most critical aspect of my methodology was to maintain the understanding that my own positionality and identity are inseparable from any understanding gained" (Ives, 2015: 3). However, this understanding never seemed to go beyond merely stating the fact of her whiteness and American-ness (and was indeed used as a justification for not informing the group of her research or involving them in it in any way). As the group administrators' and members' reactions showed, however, the "participants" of this research did not feel that it was conducted from a place of true critical and ethical reflexivity. In my case, I was in close contact with the administrators of the group throughout the period of this research. They were not only perspicacious feminists, but also took the issue of privilege and position very seriously in their efforts to make the group not only safe, but intersectionally safe. Put simply, I could not get away with a shallow or unreflective glance at my own role in creating the research and my position in relation to the community I wanted to understand. As described above, it was in close collaboration with them that my final research design took shape. While it cannot be denied that I conducted this research for personal gain – this thesis was written in partial fulfilment of the requirements of my Master of Arts degree – I chose this topic for a very specific and personal reason. I was deeply committed to putting my resources, skills and time to use in understanding how feminism can work in my natural environment (the internet) and how social media can further feminist principles such as social justice, equality, and self-determination for all people. I knew that by working alongside the group administrators rather than against (or without) them, I could ensure that my research was not only ethically sensitive, but that it could also be useful to the research participants. As discussed in the previous chapter, contemporary research on safe spaces is particularly sparse. Online, the literature is untheorized and the definitions and criteria shift according to the space and community in question. In order

to make my research as useful and relevant to this specific community and others like it as possible – as well as to mediate the influence of my privilege as a literate and educated academic – I plan to write a handful of accessible articles based on the key findings of this research once this thesis is complete, which an administrator I asked felt was a constructive step. These articles would be on topics such as the rules and guidelines that govern a safe space, how to moderate an online safe space, and how white members of intersectional safe spaces can be better allies.

From an ethical perspective, researchers employing participant observation have a number of responsibilities towards the people they encounter in the field and those who end up informing their research, and so doing this research on social media presents us with a new set of problems to consider. Researchers should make certain that research participants do not suffer any ill effects as a direct or indirect consequence of the research. In the digital world, feminist activists and writers attract much of the world's most misogynistic vitriol for simply being and working online. This means that the cyber-feminist researcher should endeavour to obtain the informed consent of participants, and go to the necessary lengths to protect their anonymity. They should be informed of their rights with regards to participation in the research, and there should be no obligation or compulsion to contribute to the research. In a group with a fluctuating membership of 3,000 Facebook users at the time of writing, it would be nearly impossible difficult to obtain the informed consent of every member (many of whom will probably never join or even follow most group discussions). Therefore, I made the necessary adjustments to my research design in order to accommodate group members' rights to privacy and anonymity in what is a purposely protected space.

Facebook's user interface allows for different kinds of profiles and interactions to take place. While individual users have profiles, public figures and organisations have 'pages' that allow them to attract 'followers' and communicate with their following. Small communities based on interests, geography, or other needs are called 'groups', and can be outfitted with different levels of privacy. While the content and membership of public groups can be viewed and joined by anyone, the content of closed groups is hidden – and secret groups are invisible to the public. Administrators of Facebook can then add different layers of extra controls over who gets to join the group and what is posted. Administrators of a closed group can choose to accept all new member requests automatically (this option is not commonly chosen because of the presence of 'spambots' or fake accounts that post spam in large, active groups). More often,

closed groups are set so that any group member can add one of their friends or approve new requests – this was the way the group in question was run at the beginning. However, administrators have since changed the settings of the group so that all new requests can only be allowed or blocked by a member of the administration team. By definition, users need an invitation from within to join a secret group, but when the group is simply closed (as in this study) then it is likely that Facebook users doing specific searchers, or who have a number of friends in the group, will stumble across the group organically. From 2014 until the start of 2016, the Facebook group being researched allowed members to post content without requiring admin approval beforehand. This meant that, when spambots or trolls got through the first line of defence, they could post inappropriate, offensive or problematic content and members would have to report the content and wait for an administrator to remove it. In early 2016, the administrators experimented with a new system in which all content had to be approved by administrators before it was published. However, due to practical time and communication constraints, this system was quickly scratched and the administrators returned to the previous system. This decision and other changes in group administration practices are discussed in more detail in the next chapter. These affordances in group architecture have allowed the Facebook group in this study strict control over membership and content, where a closed group system is linked with admin approval for new members, and administrators have the power to remove content and ban users at will.

The use of social media websites as tools and/or research sites presents many new opportunities for social research. Potential research participants provide a wealth of personal and demographic information on social media, often publically available. This has also raised a number of practical as well as ethical concerns and considerations surrounding privacy, security, the researcher-participant relationship, user-generated content as data, informed consent, and confidentiality:

> Technology creates all sorts of new mechanisms by which we can walk out into public and engage, share, connect. It also creates fascinating new opportunities for researchers to get access to data. But these advantages are not without their complications.
>
> (boyd, 2010: 5)

The social media giant has a number of confusing and obscure privacy configurations and is notoriously vague about what it does with the vast amounts of user data and metadata it collects (Harford, 2014; boyd & Crawford, 2012) and has even been known to conduct massive social experiments by manipulating users' news feeds (Flick, 2016). While these ethical concerns regarding privacy and autonomy are crucial to any inquiry into the role of social media in our lives and activism and present interesting directions for further research, this research focuses specifically on the actual practices and interactions of members of one specific group. For this reason, the ethical questions it poses centre on users' rights and researchers' responsibilities with regards to social research conducted online. These profiles have become a wealth of information for researchers, who have access to stores of personal information, interactions, and original content that were unthinkable even 20 years ago – and they disagree about how this information should be treated. It wasn't always like this: with Facebook's launch in 2004, it was lauded as a more private, intimate 'walled garden' where friends and family could keep in touch (boyd, 2010: 2). However, Facebook has implemented a number of changes since then that have served to obscure users' privacy rights, for example publicising previously available (but unlisted) information and complicating privacy controls (boyd, 2010: 2). While it is often stated that publically available information is 'fair game' for research (Moreno *et al.*, 2013; Woodfield *et al.*, 2013), many researchers disagree, as a simple Google search could re-identify anonymised research participants based on their blog posts, internet comments, and other types of content. In cases which involve private or secret groups with conditions attached to membership, the question of privacy and informed consent to participate in social research becomes even murkier. While some researchers 'lurk' in online communities and make full use of the anonymity and invisibility the internet affords users in order to observe group dynamics without influencing them (Androutsopoulos, 2008: 4), this attitude was not compatible with the feminist approach to social research I outline in the previous section. Some ethnographers working online face a unique ethical dilemma about participants' privacy and informed consent: they have found that participants may become more 'disinhibited' because of the perceived anonymity of the internet (Ward, 1999: 2) and say things they would not normally say. This did not seem to be the case in my research: the participants I had access to were more guarded and critical of our interactions than I had expected from literature about online social research – possibly echoing the protective nature of the group as a safe and respectful place. Ethnographer danah boyd provides a sensible framework for thinking about privacy that is well-aligned to a feminist cyberethnographic approach to social research that respects and values research participants' agency and privacy. boyd argues that there are no hard and fast

rules when it comes to privacy in the age of big data, an ever-evolving process that must be navigated by and taking into account real people (boyd, 2010: 4). The ethical approach taken should be considered in relation to the purpose of the research, the nature of the content, the needs and interests of the participants, and the relationship between the researcher and the research participants (boyd, 2010: 1).

Chapter 4: Discussion – Creating and maintaining safety online

At the time of writing in 2016, the online feminist community in question was a well-established closed Facebook group that had just reached 3,000 members and had 12 administrators. The group description reads as follows: "A group for South African feminists to discuss feminism and feminist issues" (Group guidelines, 2016). Members and administrators post in the group on an almost daily basis, although some days are quieter than others. Members often post seeking advice or letting off steam about difficult situations they are facing in their personal or professional lives. They discuss recent news from an intersectional feminist perspective, and rally against injustices. This often involves discussing incidents of misogyny, racism, sexual violence, cultural appropriation, and so forth. Sometimes, with the permission of group administrators, members post calls for research participants, collaborators and subjects for media projects, and notices about feminist events happening in South Africa. Below follows a basic list of the types of posts commonly allowed in the group:

- Posts about current events and popular culture to which a feminist reaction is appropriate and/or necessary
- Reactions to instances of injustice, here or abroad
- Posts aimed at mobilising a feminist response to injustice
- Requests for advice about injustices in members personal/professional lives
- 'Call-outs' after problematic exchanges
- Posts about how the group functions reminders of group rules

The group was started by two Facebook users at the beginning of 2014. One of them, an online acquaintance I spoke to a number of times during the course of this research, was approached by the other to start the group early in 2014. "I thought it could be really cool to create a meeting space for the South African feminist community, because South African feminism at the time wasn't as visible online as it is now," she explained in an offline focus group with two other group members. According to this interviewee, the original creator of the group started it because another feminist group (the only one of its kind for South Africans) that she was in had "become really problematic". Many of the members of the group being researched had belonged to this other group, but moved to the research group once it had been established. I am still a member of both groups although the older one has now become defunct. It was

ostensibly a group for 'African feminists'. However, it was moderated by a number of (mostly white) cisgender men who prioritised debate over the safety of group members. Despite their differing views on some issues the two women started the group. "I thought it was a good idea because I think these kind of discussion spaces are very good for activist movements so I agreed to be a moderator," explained one of the founders. She explained: "We wanted a space where people were encouraged to check their privilege … We wanted a space where people can speak about their own experiences without facing oppression and condescension." Very soon after it was created, this acquaintance added me to the group. For as long as I could remember, the internet (and especially social media) has been my gateway into the feminist community in South Africa, and this is how I 'met' many friends and collaborators over the years. For many of us, this group represented an opportunity very few of us had ever encountered, online or offline. It was a safe space in which we could talk to like-minded people, share our experiences and hear about theirs without having to defend our beliefs or our very existence to those who would deny us our rights. We would be safe from trolls, and hate speech was explicitly against the rules. We shared many of the same values and principles which meant we would not have to spend endless hours debating whether or not we even needed feminism. Many people were drawn to the group as a space to learn and grow. One research participant stumbled upon the group in 2015 and saw that some of her friends were already members. Having finished her university degree the year before, she was looking for situations that stimulated "conversation and intellectual/constructive thought processes around feminism". "I always knew I was a feminist, but it became harder to explain the movement to other people," she explained. "I guess in joining, I was hoping to hear other people put their thoughts across in a more concise way, so I could borrow their terminology and wisdom". One administrator I interviewed joined the group in 2015 "mostly because I was starting to [interrogate] my own understandings around feminism". She recognized a lot of people she respected in the group, and "the [commitment] to an expansive, evolving feminism" that she saw in the group was important for her. Many of the group members I interviewed valued the group most as a space for learning with and from like-minded individuals, reflecting the feminist principles of "consensual, collaborative, non-hierarchical" pedagogy that informed the first discussions of safe spaces (Kenway & Modra, 1992: 63). Personally I found the group incredibly interesting, as it was the first of its kind that I had ever been invited to and I could not remember having seen a similar group – a place where feminists in and from South Africa could get together to discuss issues, mobilise and offer support to one another – before then. My feelings about the group when I was invited to join – excitement, curiosity, and the feeling of finding a place of solidarity and

discussion with like-minded people – was reflected in the responses many of the group members I interviewed (past and present). "It sounded like a great idea, and I desperately wanted access to a safe feminist space, [b]ecause the average Facebook or Twitter profile is not," said one group member. In this group, members could escape the more violent and disturbing aspects of the internet (Harris, 2015). "For me, there are a couple of reasons [for joining the group]. One is obviously violent/abusive disagreement or harassment from e.g. meninists, MRAs, or just general chauvinists. I've been called a feminazi, man-hating dyke... which tends to ruin your day." As the challenges facing feminists change in the digital age, so do their responses. Safe spaces have emerged as "active attempts to come to grips with that reality and, by naming it, to work on it" (Macdonald, 2014: 63). They are responses to different kinds of exclusion and oppression – "to a changing social and political reality" (Higgins in Macdonald, 2014: 62). These spaces – which are often either physically or discursively exclusive – are designed for "sexual minorities or women to come together to talk and support each other" (Macdonald, 2014: 61). One interview subject felt that the nature of the group as explicitly and exclusively feminist provided her with the solidarity and intellectual stimulation she had been missing elsewhere online. "[We] need a space to talk and debate and vent our frustrations without having to explain the basics. It's hard to argue with someone if you first have to explain what white privilege is." These kinds of debates – which can happen on your uncle's Facebook wall or at a neighbours' dinner party – are "emotionally exhausting" to most members of the group, and they find that the conversation often ends up getting derailed before anything substantial can be discussed. "It's impossible to talk about important stuff when you have people crying #NotAllMen in your mentions," she half-joked. The group was by far the largest and most active South African "feminist community of practice" (Connelly, 2015: ii) on Facebook at the time of writing. Although Connelly's work was on the Tumblr feminist community, she could have been describing this group when she wrote:

> Through this platform comes the reshaping of feminism for the internet generation through female-to-female positivity, education and consciousness-raising, solidarity formed through the humor of ironic misandry, the increased importance and awareness of intersectionality and community reactions against anti-feminist content.
>
> (Connelly, 2015: ii)

Most of the people I interviewed could not recall a similar group existing before this one, and jumped at the opportunity to meet and talk to other feminists in South Africa. For many of us, this was and is one of the only places on the internet where injustices linked to structures like misogyny, racism, and patriarchal gender norms are not reproduced, but rather explicitly challenged. It was a place we could safely rant against the injustices we observed or faced in our daily lives, gain support and strength from other members, learn about each other's experiences, and organise petitions and meetings. Membership figures in the group had been growing steadily since it was formed, and members engaged in a steady daily stream of discussion and sharing, expressions of solidarity and support, and perhaps most crucially, critical reflection on the socio-political power dynamics that shape society and how they might be challenged – or recreated – in the group. Many group members interviewed valued the "validation and support" they received in the group. They could share their experiences – no matter how big or small – and "everyone [would] understand... telling you that your feelings of discomfort and anger are not wrong."

Beyond the safety it provided us, the group was also a space where we could discuss and learn more about our shared context in South Africa. "I joined because I wanted to hear more about feminism in a [South African] context as a lot of what I had been reading was American and whilst there are overlaps, the experiences of WOC in the US are not the same as what I have experienced living here," explained one administrator who joined the group in 2015. The group served as a consciousness-raising rap group for the digital age. In the 70s, women came together in small groups to discuss "their personal problems, personal experiences, personal feelings, and personal concerns" (Freeman, 1972: 1). Although this group consists of almost 3,000 members of all genders instead of about five to fifteen women, it fulfils the same purpose. By sharing their experiences publically, group members come to the realization "that what was thought to be individual is in fact common; that what was thought to be a personal problem has a social cause and probably a political solution" (Freeman, 1972: 1). When I asked her about the value she placed in a group like this, one respondent said:

> I think that through discussion we expand our perspectives on other people's lived experiences, and we also begin to see our own lived experiences in a new light. By discussing the everyday oppressions we face, a community can help us validate and comfort one another. By creating a space where

> people can share new ideas and opinions we can expose ourselves to those new ideas so we can open our minds and begin to empathise with one another.

Although the two group creators agreed that it should be a safe and intersectional space, my acquaintance says they had "very different ideas" about what that entailed. I was unable to find out much about what her partner's ideas entailed, because she declined my request for an interview about how the group was started. "[We] had a few disagreements on how to moderate the group, which was what led me to leave the group altogether," she said. While she felt that the language used in the group was important and that members should be asked to refrain from using racist and ableist language, she said her partner wanted to avoid "policing" group members and their expression and brushed off concerned members as being "oversensitive". To my acquaintance, it seemed as if her partner "wasn't checking her own white privilege". Her early experiences, both with her partner and with group interactions as a whole, were echoed by other research participants. "I liked many of the people but I often felt like it was difficult because quite a few people made others feel uncomfortable by being so oppressive," she said. "Often white, cis[gender] het[erosexual] men dominated discussions on issues that affected marginalised groups to the point where they were speaking over marginalised members," which compromised the safety of the group for those members it was meant to serve. Although she felt it was wrong, she was uncertain how to handle these situations as she was discouraged from warning or threatening to ban problematic members. I interviewed one of the administrators who had been a group member early in 2016. She noted the following about the group's administration which made her eventually leave: "I was there at the start and left for about a year or two… there was "no intersectionality" in the administration of the group. She also said that members were "accused of feminist 'elitism' when calling people out". She described the early incarnation of the group as "not even a little bit safe for POC". She said that to the first group of administrators, a safe space seemed to mean somewhere you would never be called out or have your position critiqued. She left after calling someone out for posting problematic content and subsequently being "tone-policed" by the administrators. Another group member, who joined the group when it started, said the group was "very White Feminist-y". "[But] since I didn't really understand the concept of white feminism at that time (and am of course white myself) I didn't pick up on it. So I felt at home." She enjoyed the opportunity to vent and "[let] off steam". It was one of those rare places where she "didn't have to pretend or censor my views or tone down [her] feminism". "There was the occasional reminder to mind your privilege, but

the discussions were very open. I felt like I had found my tribe." Since then, she had realised that "at that point the group really wasn't inclusive. There were POC members but little effort was made to make it safe for them specifically. So the space was safe for someone like me, but I didn't pay that much attention to other people's experiences that might be different from mine."

By 2016 nearly everything but the name of the group had changed. As discussed in Chapter 3, the group composition and the type of posts that could be found there had changed substantially since the start of 2014 – as had my research questions. When I started this research process in mid-2014, there were only a handful of moderators, who were open to my presence as a researcher. At the same time as I was narrowing down my focus to the group and its role as an intersectional safe space, the group itself was becoming more protective, enforcing old and new rules more strictly and employing a new, diverse group of moderators for the job. As group numbers grew and members called on moderators to do more to ensure the safety of the space from an intersectional feminist perspective, the list of group rules grew longer, more administrators were appointed (especially people of colour or POC), and they enforced the rules more strictly. When I returned with a refined plan for my research and new requests that focused on the group as a safe space, the moderator group had changed substantially since I had first contacted them: there were about 15 administrators instead of only four or five, and all were new. In the spirit of maintaining the safety and transparency of the group, I requested permission from this new group of administrators for my refined research proposal. I sent a message to all of them outlining my original research goals. These included a thematic analysis of data collected through online interviews, focus groups, and group comments and posts. After a period of deliberation, the group of administrators sent me a response which included a list of potential and actual problems with my research, from which it was clear they would not allow or accept the research in its current form. One of their biggest concerns involved my plan to observe group interactions and use them in my research, as well as to contact current group members based on the material I had collected. They worried that this would infringe group members' privacy, and that the feeling of being 'watched' by a social researcher would compromise their perception of the safety of the group. As a member of the group, I understood these concerns and did not want to spoil what could serve as a space of solidarity, learning, and support for like-minded feminists in South Africa. Their critiques also brought to light the ways in which my original research plan failed to take into account the power relationships inherent in social research, compounded by the fact that I am a middle-income, educated white

cisgender woman, and had been largely inactive in the group since the start of the research process. I therefore addressed their concerns one by one, adjusting my research plan to limit my infringement of the safety of the group and prioritising intersectionality and critical reflexivity in my approach to this research.

Group principles

The group defines feminism as follows: Feminism is a collection of movements and ideologies aimed at defining, establishing, and defending equal political, economic, cultural, and social rights for women. – We seek equality for and the end of gender-based oppression for all genders" (Group guidelines, 2016). Although it is a discussion group, it is first and foremost a feminist safe space. "The comfort and support of group members takes priority over debate," is an explicit rule, both in the guidelines and in the practice of the moderators. So, what does a safe space mean in this context? From my observations, I have distilled it into three main principles that inform the common practices and rules of the group:

- Minimise harm to group members
- Speak from your own experiences
- Respect the lived experiences of others

"For me, a safe space is where someone listens to me without judgement or prejudice, where people disagree respectfully, and where people make an effort to consider others' experiences before they say something," explained one group member in an interview. She had enjoyed a great feeling of support and validation a number of times during her group membership. When she was struggling with anxiety at the beginning of the year, she "posted about [her] fears and... feelings and there was an immediate positive response. I felt really shored up." While they gave her some practical suggestions, the feeling of solidarity was what really helped the most: "to know that they understood". One of the group administrators I interviewed during 2016 felt that feminism could provide marginalized identities with "the support of like-minded folks who accept you and champion your cause". For many people, "particularly for folks who feel isolated in their families or their cultures or their communities", the internet (and this group in particular) is the only space that provides them with any level of support and solidarity. "This is the only space that they can even be honest about who they are without fear of rejection,"

the administrator explained. "I think that can be the difference between life and death, and I've certainly heard that from a number of group members I've engaged with one on one." The commitment to safety in the group takes priority over everything else. As one administrator put it: "Truthfully, if all that happens on a day is that someone says they're feeling very isolated and frustrated because they're still in the closet and folks rally round to provide support, we've fulfilled our mandate of safety."

The group guidelines note that "we seek equality for and the end of gender-based oppression of all genders". This meant the group was not "anti-men, and we do not welcome anti-male sentiment". They "reject destructive, patriarchal definitions of masculinity, and oppressive male gender roles", which means that they are open to "discussions of masculinity and harm done to people who identify as mxn". Cis het mxn are not unwelcome in the group. "We don't have a lot of cis gender men or if we do, they aren't very vocal so we don't encounter too much overtly sexist commentary," explained one administrator. While there have been issues with them in the past, this administrator explained that since the rule changes, members had been much better behaved than before: "White men in particular have been very good at just shutting up and not dominating conversations," she said. When they did post, the group guidelines encouraged them to "start discussions about masculinity, [as] these discussions are very important and necessary". However, their primary focus is on serving as a safe space for "people belonging to oppressed gender groups, because the primary damage done by the patriarchy has been and continues to be to these groups" (including trans mxn).

Group rules

The rules and guidelines governing group interactions and moderation can be found in two main resources on the group wall. First, there is a 'pinned' post (pinning a post keeps it at the top of the page and stops it from being pushed down by new posts) which serves as an introduction to the group and how it functions. It starts with a list of the current administrators of the page, whose names are hyperlinked so that they can easily be contacted. It is broken down into different topics, the number of which has grown substantially since the group started in 2014.

Some of these rules were aimed at ensuring safety and harm reduction. Other rules were aimed at making the space safer from an intersectional perspective: for example, the practice of marking specific discussions, especially those related to race, as POC-only discussions. The group guidelines are summarised in a collection of more accessible graphics called the Quick guide. The rules echo many of the other safe space policies that can be found online (See Everyday Feminism's comments policy, the Safe Space Network, etc.). The group rules act as a kind of contract that all group members are required to sign by clicking 'like' on a comment on the pinned post. Members of a group of this size inevitably enter the space at different points in their feminist journey. "A lot of people come to the group as newbies who are finding their feet in the movement," said one of the administrators. "A lot of people don't know what a TW is or what racism even means," so it is imperative that the group rules are not only explicit, but also helpful in terms of resources for those who are interested in learning about feminist justice and how it is enacted in this sort of group. The administrator explained the function of the rules as follows:

> The group rules give the group structure and provide group members with boundaries within which to participate. The group rules also provide clear consequences for an unwillingness to participate within these boundaries which fosters a sense of safety for group members.

The creation and maintenance of this trust is crucial to the safety of this online space. Members know what is expected of them, and they know that violent and problematic behaviour will be met with repercussions. "I think those rules definitely help to make for lively but safe conversation, the administrator expanded. "I feel like other group members are emboldened to stand up for themselves because they know they've got our backing." Even though it is impossible to guarantee that violent or problematic behaviour will never happen in the group, the most important constitutive factor of group safety is the understanding that everyone agreed to the rules and know that administrators will act swiftly, consistently, and decisively should the rules be broken to avoid prolonging or exacerbating possible harm. "We need to be explicit about our ground rules for engagement so that our safety isn't just lip service," explained the administrator. In order to be as explicit and helpful as possible, the list of rules and guidelines is very long and detailed, with lots of hyperlinks and jargon – especially for social media audiences who are used to byte-sized chunks of information. It is worth returning to a couple

of Harris's warnings about intersectional safe spaces. In his historical look at the development of the safe space principle, he discusses the dangers of turning 'safe space' into "a label of compliance": firstly, aspiring activists and community leaders might give up on the concept because the normative ideal is, by nature of discourse and interaction, unattainable (Harris, 2015). Many members have left the group because they found the list of rules and ways in which they could be 'wrong' overwhelming or restricting. One ex-member bemoaned "the many rules about how to comment, how to follow, what 'liking' something means, when your comment is actually valid or not". "There was just so much. It's overwhelming." This frustrated reaction from some members echoes Bell's (2013) findings that the strict rules and complicated guidelines of safe spaces on social media tend to isolate members and complicate interactions. Another respondent described an initial "knee-jerk" reaction of irritation when confronted with the ever-increasing complexities of intersectional politics, "because I think, oh great, another thing I have to be aware of". Secondly and rather importantly, "it is alienating to the uninitiated, especially when those in the know come to believe that true respect can only be articulated in their proprietary dialect" (Harris, 2015: 1). Although the group administrators are cognizant of the exclusivity of academic feminist language, they did not recognize that their calls for self-education and strict abidance with the discursive policies could also serve to further exclude marginalised members. Young (2016) argues that, because new feminist movements strive to be intersectional, they tend to be "uniquely vulnerable to internal conflicts and tensions" because of the multiplicity of different factors at play in each and every interaction (2016: 1). From an intersectional perspective it can be a difficult process coming to terms with your own subject position and identity, and seemingly impossible to practice a politics that works for a mass social movement. For the administrators, the rules were the key to being able to do this difficult job. Using the guidelines as a baseline for approaching tricky situations in the group, the administrators are "better able to navigate [our] way out of conflict because we have recourse to different avenues of action depending on the behaviour". In the rest of this section, I have discussed a number of the rules that can be found in the group guidelines and how they were used to ensure intersectional safety in the group.

1. Guidelines for joining the group

Facebook users who want to join the group or add their friends have to click a button that says "Request to join group". When administrators receive a new membership request, they visit the user's Facebook profile. To avoid spam posts, they "try to weed out the profiles that aren't

obviously a real person". Taking a look at what is shared on the user's profile also helps to ascertain what they might be joining the group for. "We often get trolls [...] who join and immediately post [...] about how to increase your income and shit like that... Or posting about how Jesus will save you from homosexuality," explained one of the moderators. Facebook also offers group administrators some help in spotting fake accounts created to propagate spam. The overview of new members' requests revealed the following: Where they lived, where they worked, how long they had been on Facebook, how many other groups they were part of, and how many friends they had in this specific group. Once users have been added to the group, they are given one week to read through the guidelines and express their knowledge of and consent to them. Every now and then, an administrator would post a comment on the group guidelines in which they 'tag' all new group members since the last comment. These members get a notification about the comment, and need to click 'like' on the comment in which they are tagged. This helps the administrators keep track of who has consented to the group guidelines, because it is harder to follow who has liked or commented on the main guidelines post. When users fail to respond after one week (often because they missed the notification), they are removed from the group.

2. Guidelines for interacting with other group members

The group guidelines urge members to "assume other members are acting in good faith" but is firm on the point that "no bigotry of any kind" will be tolerated. It is explicitly stated that the experiences and voices of marginalised people – especially womxn, trans and non-binary people of colour – would be privileged, and that this was primarily a safe space for them. This understanding guides all group interactions. There are specific kinds of interactions that administrators and most active group members consider particularly harmful and draining, and most of them can broadly be described as trolling, such as:

- Playing devil's advocate: Advocating an unpopular – usually anti-feminist – position to elicit response invalidates the safety of the space. This is because of the group's commitment to being a safe space before a space for debate.

- Concern-trolling: A concern troll participates in discussions (often turning them into debates) posing as "an actual or potential ally who simply has a few concerns they need answered before they will ally themselves with a cause" – while they are, in fact, critics

(Geek Feminism Wiki, 2015). "I always see concern trolls as fence-sitters who don't ever really plan to commit to the cause," explained one administrator.

- "Tone policing": When interlocutors employ the argument that "feminists would be more successful if only they expressed themselves in a more pleasant tone" (Geek Feminism Wiki, 2015). This negates their lived experiences and their feelings about things they should, rightfully, be fuming about. Tone policing is explicitly banned in the group, whether it comes from non-feminists about the movement or even between one feminist in the group and another.

- Derailment: When someone, especially a person in a position of privilege, redirects conversation "to a tangential topic that doesn't further the conversation regarding the post's content" (Everyday Feminism, 2014). This is especially harmful if the derailment "redirects attention away from a marginalized group's experiences" towards the experiences of a more dominant group, or minimizes the marginalized group's experiences. This was a big problem in the group, especially when white group members derailed discussions about racism.

- 'Feminism 101' discussions: Where members need to be educated about the basic tenets of feminism. While some feminist communities indulge these discussions, others expressly sanction the "continual insistence on receiving Feminism 101 education" because they argue that it hampers "detailed specific discussion of issues between feminists" and centres the discussion around "the experiences, perspectives and beliefs of men" (Geek Feminism Wiki, 2015) or other dominant groups – often requiring marginalised groups to do the emotional labour of educating their oppressors (Nakamura, 2015).

3. Guidelines for posting in the group

At the time of writing, the use of Content Notes (CNs) to indicate the contents of a post had become mandatory for all posts. Trigger Warnings (TWs) were required to flag the discussion of potentially disturbing or sensitive issues. All links needed to be accompanied by commentary from the original poster for context. One administrator said this contextualising practice made the conversation "more robust and informed". "Simply posting a topic with zero

framing or context makes discussion difficult and leaves the admin with no point of reference if topics go off hand," explained the group guidelines. "Please don't post threads with a single emoji or an expression of annoyance." The guidelines summed up the requirements for all posts as followed:

> That may sound complicated, but it's actually pretty straight-forward – the CN kinda serves [...] as the subject line in an email, the TWs are to protect the group safety, and the synopsis is to generate discussion and understanding, otherwise your link might just end up hanging there with no response.

TWs and CNs are a common practice in online safe spaces, and even some offline spaces such as classrooms and lecture halls (Medina, 2014). One of the most important elements of creating a space in which participants feel comfortable enough to share and listen to the stories of each other's lives freely is taking their well-being into account (Campbell et al., 2004: 253). Their research, which involved creating a safe research space for rape survivors, was aimed at providing participants with "supportive listening and reflection", in line with the feminist values informing their project. They wanted to create connections, to support rape survivors and treat them with respect, to help them through the sharing of experiences, and to normalise their experiences and make them feel less isolated (Campbell *et al.*, 2004: 256). It can safely be assumed that many group members have survived traumatic experiences of some kind, and therefore trigger warnings form an integral part of their efforts and creating a safe space. When posting, the language that is used is important. According to the guidelines, "Swearing is fine, used with moderation and tact" (Group guidelines, 2016). While the obvious no-nos are generally accepted by all members – no hate speech or slurs, death threats and so on – there are other nuances of language to which the administrators and most group members are finely attuned. It is important to avoid gendered language (eg. ladies, guys, etc.) when addressing the group and in general to avoid being exclusionary of genderqueer, trans and non-binary identities. The group guidelines remind members to use TWs for "cis-sexist and trans-exclusionary language" in the links they share. Group members avoid (and are discouraged from) referring to males and females, as this reduced gender difference to biological make-up (and the word 'female' is often used to dehumanize women). "Gender-wise, we struggle a lot with trans and non-binary erasure and with overarching ideas of cisnormativity," explained one of the moderators. "We try as much as possible to remind folks about this and to persistently

say things like, 'Pregnancy is not just an issue for cis women. Some men have periods. Stop using the phrase 'you guys'.'" Cognizant of the fact that the intersection of ableism (oppression and discrimination based on ability and/or illness) with other factors is often overlooked, ableist language is not allowed. "A lot of ableist language was being used in the beginning," said one interviewee. "On the occasions where it was pointed out, I found myself irritated because I couldn't understand why terms such as lame or stupid could genuinely be considered ableist." Although she changed her mind when confronted with new evidence, hers is a common attitude of new group members who have not realised how heavily English speakers rely on metaphors of the body to convey messages about the mind. Regarding language use, the administrators also railed against what they called 'academic elitism' in the feminist movement. They felt that the jargon, complex language, and abstract concepts present in much intersectional feminist theory made it inaccessible to people without the cultural capital and educational background to interpret it. For them, access to academic spaces and language was another axis of privilege to be interrogated. "We [...] understand that we're having these conversations in a fairly privileged space where our engagement can be highbrow and academic at times," said one of the moderators. "This is [...] why we have taken a firm stance on language in the group, much to the chagrin of a couple of older white males in academia." Not only did they provide resources that explained feminist concepts in simple terms (they even featured memes), but they also reminded members to keep their own language use accessible. "We're [...] committed to stamping that out," she said. One of the other administrators observed that this 'academic posturing' often came from men as a way of "making yourself appear in command of a situation that you might otherwise be on the back foot in". At other times, however, "people are unknowingly using highbrow academic language because they've grown used to engaging on political subjects in such a way".

Guidelines for promotion in the group

Three types of posts fall under this category: the promotion of feminist-related events and projects (online or offline), the promotion of research in the form of calls for participants, and the promotion of a personal or professional blog or website. The first two items need to be approved by administrators for various reasons: research and events might be phrased or executed in a problematic way. Research can serve to fetishize participants or misrepresent them, employ problematic methods, or it could be based on a questionable and flimsy theoretical foundation. Events could easily be exclusionary or offensive in a number of ways

as well. It is crucial for moderators to vet these posts to ensure that group members are not exploited or excluded – harmed in any way. I had to keep these rules in mind when formulating my research design and in my interactions with the group as a social researcher. In compliance with the guidelines and from a desire to minimize the possible harm that could accompany this research, I communicated directly with the administrators and developed my plan in accordance with their requirements and considerations for the safety of the group. The self-promotion of members' work – usually in the form of blog posts and websites – is a tricky case. Because they are feminists, their work is usually feminism-related and therefore relevant. But when the self-promotion takes place without much engagement or reciprocation, it is frowned upon. "Loads of people do it and it's annoying because they don't engage with the group otherwise and we're not here to trial test your blog," one administrator said. "I told her that we will remove unsubstantiated posts and that, as a long standing member, it would be great to see her engage with the group about more than just her blog." But the member refused to add CNs "because she felt it would give too much away of the post and deter people from reading the blog" – so the moderators removed her posts.

4. Types of posts that are banned in the group

There are a number of ways of talking about specific topics – or when interacting with other group members – that are expressly forbidden in the group. Some of them are outlined in the rules, as discussed in the preceding section, but other ways of talking about specific topics are made taboo by tacit agreement amongst members and with administrators. "We don't try to put any boundaries on what people want to talk about provided it is framed in the appropriate way with CNs and/or TWs and that there is indeed something to talk about," explained one of the moderators. "Sometimes we also have to shut down topics when there have been a flurry of posts and heated debates about it which are violent and hurtful to others." All of the rules and their implementation, whether explicit or implicit, are aimed at ensuring the safety of the people the group is meant to serve: the marginalised and oppressed. There are a number of types of posts, topics and 'attitudes' that are not tolerated at all. "Obviously, behaviour like trolling, spamming, hate speech, etc. will result in instant removal. If you see anything like this, let one of the Admins know right away and we'll take care of it." (Group guidelines, 2016)

- Spam: Posts by fake accounts, links that contain viruses, marketing and content shared by hacked accounts without their owners' knowledge are all explicitly banned and

deleted on sight (mostly resulting in the member being banned as well, although if they were hacked it was possible to secure their account again).

- 'Trolling': Posting deliberately offensive content in order to elicit an angry reaction and 'wind up' group members (Herring *et al.*, 2002; Jane, 2015) is against the group rules and will result in an instant ban. Self-proclaimed anti-feminists occasionally make their way into the group planning to upset the feminist status quo (although this had not happened for a long time by the end of the research period). This includes posts falling under the categories of 'concern-trolling' or playing devil's advocate.

- Rage fodder: In the past, members sometimes posted very upsetting material, often shared with little comment. According to the rules it would be flagged and removed, or the poster would be asked to provide deeper context for a constructive discussion. Although this is a relatively well-known concept in feminist circles, there is no definition or discussion to be found beyond brief mentions in website comments.

While there are a number of ways in which members can recreate existing power inequalities and hurt one another, there are specific ways of speaking about specific topics that are so common they could be explicitly named and banned. The group and its administrators are wary of day-to-day 'microaggressions' which serve to reproduce existing power imbalances. A 'microaggression' is a term first used by critical race theorists to describe the "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of colour" (Sue *et al.*, 2007: 271). Because of the traumatic nature of sexual violence and the social stigma surrounding it, they are discussed with great care in the group. Attitudes or discussions labelled 'rape apology' (an "umbrella term for any arguments suggesting that rape is infrequent, misreported, over-reported, [...] or excusable" (Rational Wiki, 2016)) or 'victim-blaming' (any argument that suggests the victim of sexual assault is in some way responsible for their assault and/or could have avoided it) are immediately shut down. Another sensitive area is that of the language surrounding trans and non-binary identities, bisexuality, and related issues, because the group is also supposed to serve as a safe space for sexual minorities in which their sexual orientation and gender identities are not invalidated, misrepresented, or erased. Microaggressions such as referring to people as 'ladies and gentlemen', implying that women can only have boyfriends or husbands, or equating

femininity to the female reproductive system are not allowed. This is why members are required to use TWs for trans-exclusionary or cis-sexist language in links and posts they share, and to avoid using it themselves.

5. The public call-out system

In the past, there was little consensus about how to handle problematic comments and posts. Sometimes, administrators would comment and let the member know what they said is offensive or harmful and why. At other times, they would send the member a private message to let them know. Sometimes posts were deleted, and sometimes they were left up. Although the newest list of rules and guidelines is long, it is effective because it covers all of these issues and more. The guidelines outline the public call-out system in a number of steps that all members understand: problematic posts or comments are called out and the offender is required to engage with the call-out to show that they understand why their commentary is harmful. If it is a long-standing member with a good reputation in the group who made an uncharacteristic mistake, administrators send a private message to resolve the situation first. The person who is called out "is no longer allowed to further comment on the thread they've derailed" and have to respond on a new post by the administrator involved. In accordance with the primary purpose of the group, call-outs are about highlighting "hurtful and problematic behaviours that oppress people" so that group members know these behaviours will not be recreated or tolerated in the group and that the space really could be safe for them. The administrators understand that some group members might be new to feminism and are "still learning": "we are open to people making mistakes as long as they listen when their errors are explained and take the course of action proposed". Reflexivity, active listening and ownership seem to be key if group members want to take anything from a public call-out. Ideally, call-outs should serve as important learning moments for everyone involved. However, the administrators anticipated a backlash to call-outs and "an almost knee-jerk reaction to claim censorship or policing". Therefore, the administrators emphasise that they put a large amount of care and consideration into deciding how and when to call members out.

> We have to consider a whole host of other factors when we respond – who's going to do it, how best to avoid it going down in flames, how to try preserve the OP from being further delayed – and that's why we don't always respond to problems

> immediately. We're frantically talking to each other about what to do.

In its configuration at the time of our focus group interview, the admin team were sensitive to the way their privilege and positions affected the power dynamics of the group. "Our white mods are really wonderful at remembering their whiteness in any action they take in the group and how that will affect POC," explained one of the moderators. "I don't think we had that before." The moderators expect the same level of reflexivity and introspection from group members. If members take these call-outs in "good faith", the guidelines said, "the process should result in you and other members of the group gaining a better understanding of the issue at hand and minimising damage to the safety of the group space". However, public call-outs seldom reach that point. Sometimes offending group members decide to leave the group of their own accord rather than try to work through what has happened. Of those who responded, "most everyone [...] continued down a righteous path and were booted" from the group. As this administrator put it rather drily: "[the public call-out system] has a 100% success rate of the person either being banned when they continue to be violent or choosing to leave of their own accord."

The public call-out system is one of the most divisive and alienating group practices to come out of my interviews and discussions with group members and administrators, many of whom felt attacked and humiliated by 'call-out culture'. One white ex-member I interviewed was called out twice after posting about race. Although she understood why she was called out, she felt that "the reactions of mods [...] were way over the top. They responded in ways that were humiliating, hurtful and unnecessary". This ex-member was deeply upset by the tone and language used in her call-outs. When I asked the administrators about criticisms of the system, they mentioned two main arguments. The first, they said, "often [equates] to tone policing" because people are not happy with the way they have been addressed. According to the administrators, this argument almost always comes from people who are unwilling to investigate their own privilege regarding the issue being discussed. One administrator said she had never seen a POC put forward that argument. However, a black group member I interviewed in 2016 also felt "iffy" about the group's "call-out culture" because there was no room to make mistakes. "I understand you have to keep it a safe space, [...] but then there is some of this thing where they feel they're custodians of everything that's right," she said. However, she was acutely aware of what a difficult task moderating a group such as this one

must have been. "I don't know how I would fix it!" she exclaimed, and punched her fist into her hand. The second line of argument used by critics of the call-out system is that it is 'elitist' because it centres on language use and knowing which words were 'in' and which are 'out'. One of the administrators did away with it succinctly: "The 'elitist' argument is just nonsense [pandered] by those who don't want to make a concerted effort, on their own time, to learn to be better feminists and people."

The role of moderators

Almost all online forums and social networks have to be moderated to some extent to ensure control and thereby legal accountability for what is hosted on that website. Many forums are only moderated for very extreme or explicit violations of policy, such as spam or child pornography, and this usually happens through Facebook's overarching reporting system. Most news organisations moderate their comments sections since they could be held accountable for hate speech, defamation, and incitement to violence that takes place there. Unable to afford that option, many news organisations simply shut down their comments function and move audience conversations to social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, who also moderate content on their sites (albeit very differently, and sometimes, seemingly not at all). Online community moderation is "the work of creating, maintaining, and defining 'networked publics', imagined collective spaces that 'allow people to gather for social, cultural, and civic purposes'" (boyd in Matias, 2007: 3). It is often unpaid, especially in activist and community groups (Nakamura, 2015). Whether an online space is barely administered or strictly moderated, the importance of moderators in making shared digital spaces work has arisen in cyber-scholarship (Matias, 2016) – alongside a number of questions about their role in online communities:

> Are these moderators unpaid workers whose emotional labour is exploited by platforms, are they facilitator citizens upholding society's collective communications, or are they oligarchs who coordinate to rule our online lives with limited accountability?
>
> (Matias, 2016: 1)

A space like the Facebook group in question could not exist if it were not for the active group of moderators who are determined and enforce rules geared towards intersectional safety. "Very much like the Constitution which is a wonderful document to read, it's the practice of the theory that constitutes safety," explained one moderator in the focus group discussion. Without putting words into practice and actively intervening in group interactions, they felt the guidelines made for "interesting reading" and not much more than that. As discussed earlier in this chapter, moderating a group like this has not been an easy or straight-forward task for any of the administrators. From disagreements about how to run the group to dealing with racist group members, administrators put up with a lot in an average day. According to the group guidelines, "[the] admins of the group exist to keep the group and its members safe, and to make sure we continue to prioritise people of marginalised groups in this space". I have drawn up a list of duties from my observations and discussions with the administrators; these duties often overlap and are not exhaustive. The administrators have to:

- Vet potential group members
- Enforce group rules
- Act quickly and decisively
- Issue warnings and explain problematic behaviour to offenders (call-outs)
- Remove problematic members and posts when necessary
- Guide potentially problematic discussions in the right direction
- Shut down unconstructive or harmful conversations
- Ensure intersectionality and representativeness in discussions
- Update the rules when necessary
- Discuss important issues with the group
- Resolve intra-group conflict
- Resolve extra-group conflict, eg. Emailing the covert researchers' supervisor

A comparison between this group and the African Feminists Group (which it was formed in response to) could help to shed light on the role of strict moderation and intersectional representation in fostering dialogue. In our Facebook group there is a high level of moderation. There are strict guidelines and the consequences for breaking the rules are very clear. There are many, active moderators who intervene in discussions and enforce the rules. Our group's membership figures are very high and climb steadily every month. Members post nearly daily,

and most posts attract a few comments. Call-outs have become relatively rare, and conversation blossoms. In the original (now defunct) group, there were a handful of (mostly male) moderators – although members I interviewed seemed to remember "one male moderator" and a handful of "henchmen". There were no strict rules or guidelines to interacting or posting in the group. A small handful of men, most of them administrators, seemed to post most frequently and dominate any discussion that took place. Discussion was nevertheless rare, and posts (many with no context, almost none with TWs or CNs) would often pass by unnoticed. It was clear to most who watched that the same power inequalities dominating our everyday lives were being recreated in the group. When I visited the group again for the first time in two years, it was completely defunct. It had only three members, and even some of the main administrators had left. Since I was no longer a member but did not remove myself from the group, I assumed that a moderator had removed nearly all the members and shut down the dwindling conversation for good. Members in that group seemed to have felt censored precisely because of the lack of intersectional moderation. White men were allowed to dominate discussions and a lot of harmful, silencing behaviour was allowed to go unchecked – often coming from the moderators themselves. In contrast, the strict practices and active intervention of the moderators of our group seems to have opened up discourse. "I feel like other group members are emboldened to stand up for themselves because they know they've got our backing," explained one of the moderators. Members know their lived experiences will be respected and that unequal power dynamics will not be allowed to be recreated inside of the group. That members post actively and engage with each other on a variety of topics is testament to the success of moderation in subverting and challenging the injustices of the outside world. These findings reflect recent scholarship on the role of community moderators "to protect people's capacities to participate in publics" when conflicts arise in online spaces (Matias, 2007: 3). Moderators respond to and guard against harassment and harmful content or interactions using technical means such as the post approval system as well as strict application of the guidelines agreed upon by all members (Matias, 2007: 3). Not only do they apply the guidelines strictly and consistently, but they also employ the very infrastructure allowed by Facebook groups to help protect the group's safety.

Throughout its history, running this group has always been a complex and constant balancing act for the administrators. With a large membership that is constantly growing, and as there are as many different conceptions of feminism as there are members, administrators have to keep the space safe while fostering meaningful discussion. In order to stay on top of things,

administrators keep in contact behind the scenes, and have disabled comments when a discussion has "become more harmful than helpful and the safe space is threatened". "We try to be as pre-emptive of violence as possible so we'll turn on notifications of posts we think have the potential to get out of hand and let the rest of the team know why we're flagging it," explained one of the moderators in our focus group interview. "We're also working on being more hard line with the more blatantly violent posts especially where they threaten the safety of POC and WOC," added another moderator. This "unforgiving" hard-line approach has rubbed some group members up the wrong way in the past, some of whom have left the group after they started feeling too scared to post anymore. The administrators know that there have been some members who were unhappy with the way things are being run. On one specific thread, the administrators were "steamrolled" for "stifling conversation, [...] being heavy handed with our moderation, [biting] people's heads off for making mistakes, [and policing] free thought," explained one of the moderators. "[That] thread seemed to open up a space for people who'd been feeling that way for some time and chose that moment to come for us." One of the ex-members felt that the moderators' hands-on and hard-line approach "[hurt] the dynamic of the group" and said that there were people she had spoken to privately who agreed with her. However, she empathised with the moderators: "I think the mods have had an increasingly difficult job. It's emotionally draining and they have to keep a lot of things in mind". She thought that this might have led to them becoming "impatient or fed up". She also thought it could be possible that, knowing what the job entailed, "people more willing to take a hardline approach are more likely to volunteer".

Despite what some members feel is quite a heavy-handed approach to moderation, administrators mentioned that they try not to "dominate the conversation", are "reluctant to post about things a lot ourselves", and that they do not curate the content. Often, a pertinent national event such as the #Referencelist protests against rape culture at Rhodes University would pass by largely unnoticed – or at least, undiscussed in the group. Although the administrators discussed it, there was not much for them to do without 'steering' the group in a specific direction. When they decide to intervene in a thread it is only after careful consideration and deliberation. "We try to gauge the harm caused to other group members," one administrator explained. They immediately flagged and alerted each other to threads to watch. This system was "really helpful" in keeping an eye on what was going on in the group, "because we don't always just jump in, [particularly] if folks are handling it themselves." The active consideration they put into their moderation, the fact that they elected members from

marginalised groups, and the high turnover of moderators allowed this group to avoid the "iron law of oligarchy" (Shaw & Hill in Matias, 2007: 3). This 'law' has been found to affect other online communities such as collaborative 'wikis', where researchers found that "on average, a small group does come to control the positions of formal authority" in the community (Shaw & Hill in Matias, 2007: 3). I agree with Matias, however, that what critics mistake for 'oligarchy' might just be the experience and knowledge that is needed for the community to flourish (Matias, 2007: 3). The administrators I spoke to seemed to be doing a much better job at ensuring the safety of its most marginalised and oppressed members and fostering lively, thoughtful discussion than their predecessors. At the time I performed a focus group interview with the administrators, there were twelve of them and they were feeling very positive about the team. "I think it's a well-oiled machine and I'm pretty damn proud to be a part of it," said one administrator. The caring and supportive dynamic they had nurtured made the moderator feel "like we're doing something important together". This "magic" dynamic came across in the group's administration style. While all of them are rarely online at the same time, "there seems to be eyes on the group at all times". The administrators communicate via Facebook Messenger as well as a Whatsapp group to alert each other to particular issues. In the group guidelines, the administrators give the members the following assurance: "We may not always be online, but there are a lot of us, so someone should be watching and will be able to help".

Being an administrator of a group such as this one takes its toll. It costs the moderator group time and emotional energy to continually shape and protect the safe space they have built together. This group of people is performing vast amounts of "digital immaterial labour", a term coined to describe the exploitation of users' work – content creation and community management, for example – by large social media corporations (Jarrett, 2014; Roberts, 2014; Matias, 2007). They carry out this "self-directed cultural and social work", the economic value of which is extracted by social media platforms such as Facebook. This work is both "not financially rewarded (by platforms) and willingly given (by users)" (Terranova in Matias, 2007: 2) For most moderators, the work they do in the group seems to be like a part-time job which often runs into overtime. This job is not restricted to office hours, and through the advent of the smartphone, they are always and intimately available. "This is a huge responsibility, and I know all of the mods feel that pressure," said one of the administrators. The job always requires sensitivity and patience, and the emotional labour committed by administrators of spaces such as these is immense (Nakamura, 2015; Menking & Erickson, 2015). "It's hugely draining – and we all take time outs regularly," said one of the moderators. Throughout the

group's history, there has been a high turnover of moderators. While this is natural for a group that is constantly evolving and changing, as one admin explained, it is also because of the taxing nature of the job. Many of them need to take a step back every once in a while. "It used to [take a toll], definitely," explained one of the moderators in the focus group. "But we take time outs now and we know the others have got it handled." Self-care, or the act of looking after yourself and minding your health on a day-to-day basis, are important components of maintaining the ability to perform the labour of moderation. Sometimes, the costs seem to outweigh the benefits of moderated a space like this. 'Why do you even do it?' another admin was recently asked by a friend. They felt that the work they were doing was "vitally important" – "community management as a service to the community itself" (Matias, 2007: 3). "I care a hell of a lot about it, about the issues and the people," they explained. "There are members out there who refer to this as their only safe space, and that for me is enough." Many of the moderators felt "well matched to this kind of work". As this moderator put it, "I feel like it's something I can do, so I should, you know, as long as it is meaningful to people, and manageable for me." Despite how hard the job could be at times, the feeling of being there and providing safety for someone who needed it is what makes it worthwhile – and it was also personally rewarding for most, if not all of the moderators I spoke to.

Chapter 5: Discussion – Reproducing and challenging power

An integral component of the safety of this group is its commitment to intersectional justice, both materially and in representation and discourse. In this chapter, I discuss the ways in which existing power inequalities are reproduced and challenged in the group, and explore the possibilities around creating a truly 'safe space' for marginalised groups. A quote by writer Flavia Dzodan (from her 2011 online article of the same name) was prominently displayed in the group description and as the cover picture of the group: "Our feminism will be intersectional or it will be bullshit." The guidelines explicitly mentioned a number of different factors that needed to be taken into consideration in all interactions and activism, such as "race, gender, sexual orientation, sexual identity and expression, sexual activity/celibacy, body/physical appearance, disability, mental or physical health, religion, ethnicity, wealth, or class, age, [and] language". "We... need to be clear about stuff like that because there are so many feminisms out there," explained one of the administrators. "[And] what may fly in another feminist group definitely doesn't fly with us." Intersectionality, an approach that considers the intersections of different power dynamics and networks of oppression, has roots in Black feminist theory and scholarship which originally investigated and exposed the ways in which gender and racial oppression intersected in the lived experiences of Black women. In this group and for many feminists living and working in South Africa, racial and economic discrimination (especially the ways it intersects with gender) is exceedingly important. As one administrator put it,

> Intersectionality will always have to consider the way in which race intersects with other oppression so that part is not unique to us as South Africans but, of course, given our unique history and how our white minority still enjoys the most wealth and privilege in our societies, we are particularly sensitive to issues of race in our South African context.

Many of the rules and guidelines governing group behaviour and interactions are aimed at achieving this intersectional justice, at least discursively, and at least in this space, through a continuous interrogation and consciousness of our different subject positions and levels of privilege. In this chapter, I interrogate the ways in which the rules and guidelines of the group aim towards intersectional justice by privileging the safety and experiences of WOC and non-

binary POC especially. There are a number of issues – both practical and theoretical – with implementing a policy of intersectional safety. Firstly, on a practical level, the inequalities that govern our everyday lives will be reproduced in all interactions to some extent because of the nature of discourse (Harris, 2015), and because of this, intersectionality will only ever be an ideal. This can be seen in different ways throughout the history of the group when they have grappled with issues such as racism, ableism, academic elitism, trans* erasure and classism, refining the rules and developing systems to deal with the reproduction of inequalities within the group. There is a specific focus on issues of race in the group and in this research, both because of the origins of intersectionality in Black feminist scholarship, and because of the historical significance of race as a social category in South Africa. The role of white feminists in an intersectional struggle for justice – and in an intersectional safe space – is brought into question, leading to a number of theoretical questions with regards to identity and subjectivity. On a theoretical level, it is important to critically interrogate the group's practices in relation to the roots and politics of the concept of intersectionality, especially with regards to Yuval-Davis's critiques of 'additive' notions of intersectionality (2006) and her insistence on a transversal, dialogical politics of solidarity based on values and informed by lived experiences (2012). Often, in the effort to maintain intersectional safety, group rules and practices seemed to conflate the institutional, the intersubjective, the representational, and the experiential (Yuval-Davis, 2006), leading to fragmentation and identitarian politics which preclude the kind of dialogical exchange Yuval-Davis deems necessary for a truly intersectional politics. The presence of white women in the group has hampered the conversation for some respondents, while many others felt that their presence and interactions undermined the safety of the group. The problem of 'white derailment' and continued racist microaggressions necessitated the creation of a splinter group for feminists of colour only at the end of 2016. While the main group in question serves as an 'epistemic community' largely unified by shared political values (Assiter in Yuval-Davis, 2006: 199), it is apparent that different, more exclusive spaces are also necessary for the politicized self-definitions that form the foundation of intersectional feminist movements.

Although the picture of the group's shared ideals and principles has changed over time, one of the administrators felt that it ultimately came down to "a commitment to people being able to live, express and reach their full potential in a world where they are so many barriers to this: sexism, racism, homophobia, ableism". Most interviewees agreed with the prevalent sentiment in discussions around intersectionality as an ideal to strive towards. As one administrator puts

it, "I don't think you ever arrive at a place where it's all done, you know?" Another moderator explained that "our focus is [...] on the ideal, understanding, and a better world for all". From my experience as a group member and researcher, this group could be understood as an experiment, a microcosm of this "better world for all". Inside the electronic group walls, justice should prevail. It is a place where the inequalities governing society should be challenged, and to the best of everyone's abilities, be left at the door. These inequalities could hinge on differences in gender, sexuality, race, class, ability, physical and mental health, religion, culture, education, nationality, and more. All of these are taken into account – albeit more and less successfully – in the group, where discourse is governed by cognisance of these factors. "In its current construction, I think it's one of the safest spaces I am part of and we're always working on intersectionality," explains the administrator. However, the power inequalities that mark life outside the group have been recreated time and time again within the group. Our socialisation and experiences are powerful sources of knowledge and understanding we can draw upon, but they also influence the way we interact (Harris, 2015: 1). Inevitably, we will always recreate existing power dynamics in our interactions to a certain extent: but it is up to us to subvert and challenge them explicitly (Harris, 2015: 1). Harris warns against calls for safe space playing into and reinforcing existing power relations, as discussed earlier in this chapter. Many group members and administrators left the group after coming up against the same barriers and inequalities they face in the outside world one too many times. When trolls broke though the group's defences, the safety of their space was violated. Even seemingly innocuous interactions were imbued with significance by the different subject positions of the interlocutors (Harris, 2015). Most of my interviewees believed that being aware of one's 'positionality' is "the absolute basis of trying to form a group of this nature". "We're all coming to this conversation with a common interest but vastly different experiences, backgrounds and agendas," explained the moderator. Group members and moderators have a deep awareness of what Yuval-Davis calls the "situatedness of the knowing subject" (2012: 47). Group members were required to engage in what Yuval-Davis calls the process of 'rooting' and 'shifting' (2012: 52). Rooting, or "the reflexive knowledge of their own positioning and identity" that each participant brings to a dialogue is one of the cornerstones of the group. The group guidelines request that members "[always] be mindful of your positionality and how it might affect the way people read your posts and comments". New members need to come to grips with the fact that their specific subject positions would dictate how others receive their messages. They are required to consider the power dynamics of any group interaction in which they take part, which can be described as 'shifting' – "to put themselves in the situation of those with whom they are

in dialogue and who are different". If a group member was white, this would imbue their words with meaning as parts in a wider system of institutional racism and they would be called out if they were to judge, interpret and minimise black lived experiences in any of the ways that are so common outside of the group. If they are cisgender, they would not be allowed to make assumptions about or dictate the experiences of trans* and non-binary people. Showing the proper respect for the lived experiences of other people on issues one does not understand or experience in this group often involves refraining from commenting on or discussing posts about these specific issues. "The minute we begin to speak from positions that are not ours, we are operating from a place of ego, and that (to my mind) fundamentally affects our ability to move forward and evolve," explained one of the moderators I interviewed. In taking account of the different and specific ways in which we are situated, there are those who argue that inhabiting a specific social position endows the subject "with a privileged access to truth" (Yuval-Davis, 2012: 47). However, Yuval-Davis draws on dialogical epistemology for her understanding of 'truth', and argues that any subject position can only provide a partial, subjective knowledge of the world – "unfinished" truth (Collins in Yuval-Davis, 2012: 51). At best, Collins argues, "each group possesses a partial perspective on its own experiences and on those of other groups" (Collins, 2000: 247) – and even so, different groups are far from being internally homogenous. Thus, from the perspective of Collins's and Yuval-Davis's dialogical standpoint epistemology, the only way to "approach 'the truth' is by a dialogue between people of differential positionings, and the wider the better" (Yuval-Davis, 2012: 51). This is one of the most important implications of Black feminist thought for intersectional activists today: "the struggles for self-identity take place within an ongoing dialog between group knowledge or standpoint, and experiences as a heterogeneous collective" (Collins, 2000: 110). If truth and knowledge are seen as a dialogical endeavour, then a number of implications follow. Firstly, activists "cannot (and should not) see themselves as representatives of their constituencies", but rather as advocates who are "reflective and conscious of the multiplexity of their specific positionings" (Yuval-Davis, 2012: 51). This is something the group moderators do well, and it is treated as a requirement for any feminist advocates (or group members) who participated in group interactions. Secondly, this implies that activists or advocates do not necessarily have to belong to the constituency they advocate for – white people can advocate for anti-racism, men can advocate for feminism, and so forth. "It is the message, not the messenger, that counts" (Yuval-Davis, 2012: 51) – but who the messenger is, is still important.

Intersectionality was originally designed as a bottom-up approach "meant to help Black women see the ways their experiences are connected to one another and not a product of self-deficiency but structural real systems that have cultural and economic benefits for ruling/dominant classes" (Strugg, 2014: 1). Today, however, the definition has expanded to include myriad (and according to some, innumerable) other variables and factors that intersect to create the unique lived experience and its accompanying privilege and marginalisation. However, debates have arisen between those who advocate for this wider application of the term, and those who take into account the context of black feminist scholarship from which it arose, about which intersections should be considered and who should be able to call themselves an 'intersectional feminist' (Strugg, 2014: 1). From the perspective of Yuval-Davis's transversal, dialogical politics of solidarity, this debate seems to arise due to the conflation of positioning and values, of the experiential with the intersubjective (2006: 198, 205). Many contemporary critics argue that to be an intersectional feminist one has to be experience oppressions surrounding race and gender at the very least (McKenzie, 2015). However, taking into account the broader definition of intersectionality, some have questioned whether the intersection of different axes of oppression might produce "intersectional experiences" (Strugg, 2014: 1) as well. "I was wondering, [...] if we're talking about intersecting oppressions, let's say for a queer white woman with disabilities, can she also refer to herself as an intersectional feminist? Or is she merely an ally?" one of the administrators said. This debate makes the mistake of conflating the subject positionality of interlocutors with their values and politics (Yuval-Davis, 2006: 198). When this debate was raised in a post on the group wall in the form of a question about whether white people (based on their subjective experiences and social positioning) could call themselves or their politics (their values, in other words) intersectional, it was quite actively discussed. Most members agreed that while it seemed inappropriate to label oneself intersectional as a white feminist, it was an understanding that should underpin all their work. "The term 'intersectional feminism' was coined by a black woman academic and from that perspective, I'm inclined to agree," explained one of the moderators. Some have criticised the adoption of the word by White Feminists as a "feel-good mantra" to simultaneously validate their identities and avoid engagement with the ideas of the Black feminist ideas at the root of the approach (Strugg, 2014). Calling themselves 'intersectional feminists' has become a way for white feminists to let themselves off the hook and leave their racial (and often economic) privilege unexamined (Strugg, 2014). In one of our interviews, a moderator pointed me towards a post on a Tumblr account called Intersectional Feminism 101 by a moderator only referred to as 'Mod T' who explained why white people could and should not call themselves

intersectional feminists: because they do not experience race discrimination and are very far removed from the roots of the paradigm. "Those with power cannot be 'intersectional'," because they are not living "intersectional experiences" (Strugg, 2014: 1). These critics think of it as a sort of cultural appropriation. When white feminists appropriate the term 'intersectional' to describe themselves, it is most often without awareness of its roots in Black feminist thought and without an explicit dedication to the fight against racism (Strugg, 2014: 1). These critiques could be considered essentialist, flattening out the nuances that characterise different subject positions and placing the responsibility for achieving race and gender justice squarely on the shoulders of black women. There is little room for discussions about the similarities and differences between the experiences of a white working class woman and a black middle class woman, for example.

I interviewed two black womxn as part of a focus group interview in Grahamstown in 2016 who felt that the group and the discussions that took place in it were often irrelevant to them in their feminist journeys. They felt that the presence of white people and the commitment to safety above all else had tethered the conversation at the level of "Feminism 101". Not only does White Feminists' inability or unwillingness to deal with race hold back the conversation for many feminists of colour in the group, but it is also frustrating and emotionally taxing to have to educate people in positions of power in what is supposed to be a safe space (Nakamura, 2015; Sue *et al.*, 2007). One of the participants described what they called a "glass ceiling" for the group because discussions were not allowed to become uncomfortable and change people's perceptions. "There's a difference between being uncomfortable and learning something, and uncomfortable and unsafe," the participant explained. "As much as they try to be intersectional, it doesn't appeal to me [...] and the difficulties I face as a black womxn," explained another participant. She could not relate to the "whiteness", and was longing for a safe, political space in she could discuss the specificities of her lived experience with those who came from similar backgrounds (Collins, 2000: 110). "If I was to comment about my culture, there would be people who didn't want to comment, [...] not someone who understands where I'm coming from as a black Xhosa woman". For these women, the group had not fulfilled its mandate of safety nor had it served as a space for fruitful discussion because of the overbearing presence of white people who demanded to be kept comfortable. When I told one of the administrators that some group members felt this way about the group, she agreed. "It's because folks only post what they want to talk about," and because there are so many white women, they dominate the conversation with their interests and viewpoints. Just as the history of mainstream feminist

movements revolves around the lives and rights of middle-class white Western women (Van der Spuy and Clowes, 2007: 212), this group is also "demographically overrepresented by white people" as one administrator phrased it in an interview. "Feminism was always pre-packaged as a movement for white women," the admin explained. "The historical retelling of it is really focused on their story, and their problems," and this means that white women members of the group often have a hard time checking their privilege and knowing when to step down from discussions about experiences they do not share. This means that dealing with issues of race and class are especially difficult, especially when "white women [became] the problem demographic, totally outperforming white men" in terms of threatening the safety of the group. Because they are women, they see themselves as "oppressed by patriarchy" and therefore unable to be oppressive themselves. This "denial of individual racism" and the equation of different types of oppression is an example of a racial microaggression (Sue *et al.*, 2007: 276). "What I learnt was that whenever there's a conversation happening in the group, there's another meta-conversation happening informed by race which wasn't being addressed," the moderator said. One of the administrators described the group becoming "more vigilant and more attuned to their [white women's] behaviour". She said the admin group could easily predict when white women were going to get "in their feelings" or upset about a specific issue, and would flag the post for warning signs of racism or 'white tears'. These discussions can often devolve into what the administrator referred to as an 'echo chamber of violence', where (especially privileged) people support each other on a prejudiced position and exacerbate its effects. That many of the people in the group enjoy "class privilege and generational wealth" means that administrators have to be wary of classist language and interactions. "We try to steer folks away from poverty porn and also to confront themselves on how their class privilege skews their perceptions of the accessibility of services." Another hotly debated topic that comes up often in the group is cultural appropriation. "White folks seem to struggle with the idea that they cannot have access to everything and that you cannot declare yourself to be respectfully utilising parts of someone else's culture when those people are telling you straight that it's disrespectful". Administrators often had to address racial microaggressions in group interactions, because "some will be completely oblivious as to why something is even offensive. e.g. Complimenting POC on being articulate". This is only one of the many types of racial microaggressions that are perpetuated within the group (Sue *et al.*, 2007: 276). These findings reflect existing literature on the danger of discursive spaces for marginalised groups – especially so-called 'safe spaces' where complexities and contradictions regarding parts of

their very identity are the subject of discussion (Macdonald, 2014; Atkinson & De Palma, 2008).

There was a tension between the need for new group members and feminists to be able to ask questions (especially because of the way they asked them), and the safety of POC in the group. A common type of racial microaggression is the expectation that POC should educate white people about racism, and it was a problem that regularly arose in the group. "The labour of educating white men and women about racism and sexism is difficult, valuable, and unappreciated" (Nakamura, 2015). "Women of color and sexual minorities who post, tweet, re-post, and comment in public and semi-public social media spaces in order to respond to and remediate racism and misogyny online are, like venture labourers in the software business, knowledge workers" (Nakamura, 2015). In a space which is already vulnerable to the attacks of trolls and their flame-throwers (Jane, 2014), it is "tiresome and emotionally draining hard work [to] then turn around and become an educator in the same space – especially when that education is not always wanted, even if it is important." (Aberl, 2016: 42). Often, these calls for education came in the form of demands that other interlocutors explain "why something is racist" – the defensiveness of which often belied the fact that they were not true attempts at a dialogical exchange. The group's commitment to safety meant that "asking anything that would require a POC or other marginalized identity to answer questions and do that emotional labour for free" could constitute a racial microaggression. At the suggestion of a group member, a splinter group was formed "for 'newbie' feminists to ask questions" because "folks were getting shut down for making mistakes" in the main group. In this group, people could ask questions which were usually based on a misunderstanding or lack of understanding of one of the other axes of oppression besides gender – usually race – and people could volunteer their time and energy to answer questions if and when they wanted to. She explained that "Some are willing to do it and for others, it's a microaggression." The administrator said that while she thought the group was a great idea, it was not very active.

"The main way that we aim to subvert [IRL] inequalities is by privileging the voices of PoC and especially WoC," explained one moderator. "More generally, we try to elevate and support those oppressed [IRL] and shut down those who wield more power when they step out of line". One of the main questions I had when I started this research was whether strict rules and moderation merely served to shut down and stifle constructive conversation, or whether feeling safe allowed people to speak more, and more freely. Who decided when a group member had

'stepped out of line', and how? What purpose did 'shutting down' privileged group members serve in terms of intersectional justice? Some white members felt that the "segregation" (as one ex-member phrased it) of the splinter groups and "who could talk about what" was not conducive to the cause of feminism, or to learning from each other's experiences. While the administrators take comments and criticism from the group seriously, they also realise that most complaints about the group guidelines and strict moderation come overwhelmingly from white women members. "If there had been any POC in that bunch feeling the same way, I would say those folks had a point," one of the administrators explained, reiterating the group's primary commitment to serving as a safe space for POC, especially non-binary POC and WOC. Safety for POC means the group needs to provide spaces in which they "could freely examine issues that concerned [them]" (Collins, 2000: 110). It is important to have spaces in which at least some of the power dynamics characterising life 'out there' simply cannot be reproduced because they are not present: "such spaces become less 'safe' if shared with those who were not Black and female" (Collins, 2000: 110). Because of the problem of 'white derailment' in discussions between POC (especially about racism), the moderators introduced a new rule in 2016 that allowed posts to be marked 'POC-only' or WOC-only'. One of the administrators I interviewed "suggested it to the other admins when posts pertaining to issues raised by POC kept being hijacked by angry white women". Only people/womxn of colour would be able to participate in these threads, which included commenting on it or liking the posts and any comments on it. If white members wanted to follow a thread, they could turn on a setting so that they would receive notifications for the post – but otherwise they were asked to "respect the request for you to stay in your lane or you will be banned".

The administrators are aware that many members feel alienated or excluded by some of the rules – but also that these complaints come from members in a position of some kind of privilege. "Our mandate is to prioritise the safety of POC, WOC first," explained one of them. "Because there wasn't a single objection that didn't come down to unchecked privilege, I would say they can all take several seats." Ultimately, she said, they did: "Some left, some sat down". "We have a few grumbles about people feeling too scared to post or feeling victimised by this system," explained one of the moderators. "But we did reiterate (and continue to reiterate) that nobody gets banned for making mistakes." She explained that the members who complained often felt unsupported, or as if their voices didn't matter. Firstly, the admin said that because the group is generally very good at providing support and "rallying around" members who need it, it was not support these members are lacking. "They feel unsupported when they are called

out and no one stands up to defend them," the moderator continued. Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, "the reality of the situation for white people in an intersectional feminist space is that their voices often don't matter on many [...] issues". Their opinions are not always sought, appreciated, appropriate or even harmless – and this is not something many white people are made to feel before joining this group. 'Safe spaces', whether they restrict privileged groups' membership or participation, are "threatening to those who feel excluded, and so routinely castigated by them", precisely because these spaces "are free of surveillance by more powerful groups" and/or "foster the conditions for Black women's independent self-definitions" (Collins, 2000: 111). Many of the WOC I spoke to throughout the course of this research felt that the group would never become the kind of space they needed because of the presence of members from privileged groups, especially white people: the only solution they could envision was a new group, started by black womxn for all feminists of colour who needed a safer space than the main group. When I spoke to one of the most active administrators, she said this was her next project. "We started with POC threads only to see how it would go," she explained. "POC really responded positively so the next thing would be the satellite group". Indeed, by the time of writing in the middle of 2016, a closed satellite group had formed that was exclusively for POC: no white members could join the group or read the posts and discussions there. While interviewees who were members said things were relatively quiet in the new group, they felt it was a safer and more interesting space. The formation of this splinter group emphasizes "the importance that the expression of individual voice within the collective context of Black women's communities can have for self-affirmation" (Lorde in Yuval-Davis, 2006: 104). In order for this individual voice to find its full expression, the existence of safe spaces – whether metaphorical or physical – in which it can find an empathetic audience is crucial. "For African-American women the listener most able to pierce the invisibility created by Black women's objectification is another Black woman" (Yuval-Davis, 2006: 104).

There are serious concerns within intersectional feminist scholarship about "the infinite quantity of possible categories and combinations" of social identity (Hancock, 2011: 5). If political affiliation and group membership is dependent on subject positioning and lived experiences alone, then it is possible to envision a future in which ever-smaller splinter groups are formed to represent narrower and narrower social groups because of the endless, refractory ways in which social categories intersect. People sharing the same values "can be positioned very differently in relation to a whole range of social divisions (class, gender, ability, sexuality,

stage in the life cycle, etc.)", and vice versa – people inhabiting similar positions can have "very different social and political values" (Yuval-Davis, 2012: 51).

> Slicing the group of women or men into ever thinner, more politically isolated slivers is of particular concern in majoritarian political systems where numbers matter. The additive oppressions argument creates significant obstacles to framing claims in a way that brings people together rather than drives them apart.
>
> (Hancock, 2011: 5-6)

I asked the moderator about the possibility of the new group replacing the main group, fracturing conversations and demoting it to another 'remedial feminism' learning group – all concerns shared with me in a focus group. She explained that "POC won't be under any duress to abandon this group but if it turns out to be a better space, there might be some drop off in here". As she pointed out, POC were never driving conversation in the main group anyway. "I imagine this group will remain dominant and intact but perhaps with less POC bothering to engage anymore once they've found something more fulfilling," she continued. Even if white people were upset, she said, keeping them comfortable was not the point of making a safe space online. "Many POC are getting to the point of not caring what white people think." Creating a safe space for feminists of colour to discuss issues and experiences of racism and the way it intersected with sex, gender, and other issues is the first and foremost priority of the administrators, and this often requires shelter from ever-present racist dynamics between white people and POC. One interviewee felt alienated by the rules surrounding POC-only discussions, and she left the group when she no longer felt comfortable there. "I wasn't learning anything about feminism. It wasn't empowering anymore," she explained. For her, the "POC discussions" were "the last straw" when it felt as though race started to dominate every conversation. Although she agreed it was "very important to create a platform where as white people, we just sit and listen," she felt that the posts were not related to feminism. The essentialist, identity-based view that sometimes permeated the group's collective understanding of race left no room for her particular identity as a white-presenting mixed race woman with her own particular experiences. There was no room for the nuances of the situation, of "the ways different social divisions are constructed by, and intermeshed with, each other in specific historical conditions" (Yuval-Davis, 2006: 202). Because she looked white

and was afforded the according privileges, she felt that she was not even allowed to read POC-only posts. "It was like I was eavesdropping and it was very rude of me," she explained. As per Collins's (2000: 110) definition of a safe space, she would be right in feeling that her presence in the group – which aimed to serve as a safe space for POC and WOC especially – was inappropriate. She did not want to post or comment for fear of minimising someone else's experiences or make them feel unsafe. "I knew my voice had no place in those conversations," but she felt as though she could not discuss her own pain and get support. "It just made me feel like a terrible person. So much white guilt," she explained. But she said that she knew these feelings had no place in the group, and that this was not the group for her to explore her feelings. When I asked another ex-member who was white how she felt about the POC-only posts, she said she found the change interesting. "I think it's a great rule – I've seen POC feeling marginalised in threads taken over by white people, so providing safer discussions for them is important," she explained. As a white woman, she was surprised by how uncomfortable she felt when she saw POC-only discussions in her Facebook news feed. "It was a case of, I want to participate but I can't!" she explained, and continued:

> I think that was a good thing because as white people we need to learn that not all spaces have to include us. We are so used to being part of everything that it is uncomfortable and even hurtful to be told that this is a place where we don't participate.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The intersectional approach to understanding and resisting socio-political power imbalances has been developed in response to two incompatible approaches to difference. On the one hand, the "assimilationist 'universalistic' politics of the Left" has proved to be "ethnocentric and exclusionary" (Yuval-Davis, 1999: 94). On the other, many contemporary expressions of identity politics are "essentialist, reifying boundaries between groups and, by homogenising and collapsing individual into collective identities, undemocratic within groups" (Yuval-Davis, 1999: 94). It is important to link awareness and expressions of personal experience and identity with structural critiques and strategies for active resistance and transformation (hooks, 1981: 33). Black feminist epistemology has created spaces for marginalised groups to understand and define their experiences and positions (Collins, 2000). It has also provided a politics that connects these diverse experiences and reactions to common challenges through a common purpose – common values (Collins, 2000: 25; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Safe spaces serve an important function within transversal feminist coalitions that cross socio-political categories, based on shared values and the fundamental "recognition of one's own group position and seeing how the social location of groups has been constructed in conjunction with one another" (Collins, 2000: 247). In order to fulfil the need for safe space for free expression and self-definition, the group made necessary exclusions and created spaces in which specific power dynamics around issues such as race would not be reproduced in the same way as they are outside these spaces. When I had started my enquiry about the nature and purpose of feminist safe spaces online, I was convinced of an inherent tension between safety on the one hand, and widespread education and the mainstreaming of feminist principles on the other – a tension which was often repeated in group debates and my own interviews about the prioritisation of safety. Disgruntled group members often accused administrators of alienating would-be feminists and undermining the 'cause'. Yuval-Davis considers critical, non-hierarchical dialogue between different groups to be a crucial factor in a transversal, intersectional politics of solidarity – "the wider the better" (2012: 51). This transversal politics would address "common challenges" as identified by Collins – those cross-cutting interests and experiences based in racism, sexism, classism, and so forth – and the "diverse responses" and experiences prompted by the fact of intersectionality (Collins, 2000: 117). Collins warns that an epistemological overemphasis on "lived experience [...] can privilege individual experience and knowledge to the exclusion of a collective standpoint" (Collins, 2000: 117). However, after studying the group guidelines and talking to moderators, I learned that safe spaces like this are

not designed to accommodate this paradox. This is not the purpose of safe spaces. "I don't necessarily believe that we need to balance safety with education," explained one of the moderators. The group had been set up to fulfil only one purpose: creating a safe space. Collins believed that safe spaces were crucial to the "self-definition" of marginalised groups and indeed, their ability "to continue to exist as a viable social group" (Collins, 2000: 100). Collins identified three primary safe spaces for Black women: the black women's blues tradition, black women authors' voices, and Black women's relationships with one another (2000: 102-110). "Safety trumps discussions and education always which is why we end up with a lot of those censorship/policing criticisms," the admin continued. 'Mainstreaming' feminism or making it more "palatable" was also not a priority for moderators or group members. "That's definitely not why I do this," one of the administrators explained in the focus group interview:

> People always say, 'Well, if you only did X, Y and Z, more people would join your group'. Feminism cannot be palatable if our oppression isn't either. I can't be offended by racism politely so I'm not going to say it nicely so more white people join.

The administrator I interviewed about this felt that many critics had misunderstood the purpose of the group, and felt as though it should be a space where they could ask any question that was on their mind, or debate any topic under the sun. That is not what the group is for. Although it might seem petty or severe to some, it is incredibly important to many members of the group to have a safe space where not everything is up for debate – and where debate is not prioritised at all. As one moderator put it, "I'm a feminist in practice. I often feel like this is what it must feel like to be religious, but I feel like a lot of white folks have the luxury to tap in and out as it suits them." Being able to discuss and debate issues such as racism or trans erasure calmly with people who do not understand nor respect their lived experience was a luxury many group members could ill afford. "I'm not a feminist because it's interesting. I'm a feminist because without it, my life doesn't matter to a lot of people," she said. The Black feminist scholars who pioneered the concept of intersectionality warn that safe spaces "were never meant to be a way of life" (Collins, 2000: 110). Instead, they should be understood as "one mechanism among many designed to foster Black women's empowerment and enhance our ability to participate in social justice projects" (Collins, 2000: 110) – just like the early 'consciousness-raising' groups of the 1970s. Exclusionary spaces – whether they are for black women, disabled Jewish

lesbians, or gender-non-conforming atheists who live in the East-Rand of Johannesburg, South Africa – serve as a place where marginalised groups can come together to work through the realities (shared and distinct) of their daily lives and organise resistance to oppression (Collins, 2000: 110). It is about much more than "[naming] one's personal pain" (hooks, 1981: 32) or giving voice to one's experiences:

> When institutionalized, these self-definitions become foundational to politicized Black feminist standpoints. Thus, much more is at stake here than the simple expression of voice.
>
> (Collins, 2000: 111)

However, "these internal processes of self-definition cannot continue indefinitely without engaging in relationships with other groups" (Collins, 2000: 247). Since no group can exist in isolation from the perspective of a dialogical epistemology, "coming to terms with a particular group history leads to the realization that groups can neither define themselves in isolation nor resist social injustice on their own" (Collins, 2000: 246-7). Therefore, it is important to have spaces like this group that do not exclude anyone from membership, but instead require rigorous self-examination, awareness of socio-political power dynamics, and commitment to the common cause of intersectional feminism. This is the definition of a feminist 'epistemic community' (Assiter in Yuval-Davis, 2006: 199), explicitly formed around shared political values. The kind of safety aimed for in the group seems to be impossible in its current formation because social inequalities will always be reproduced in discourse. Rather, it can be described as an 'epistemic community', the members of which are united by a shared commitment to intersectional feminist justice. This group has the potential to further a transversal politics of intersectionality that draws on the strong, self-defined standpoints that safe spaces have enabled marginalised groups to shape. The "critical self-reflection and community organising" that takes place in safe spaces such as this group should serve as the "foundation for effective coalition" (Collins, 2000: 247). Critical introspection – 'rooting' – and the examination of one's positionality and privilege as an advocate for intersectional justice is an inherent part of active group membership, and very few users would remain in the group if they had failed to do so when they engage with others or post in the group. The processes of 'rooting' and 'shifting' are key in a group with such a large, diverse membership. These processes can help activists to distinguish between "differences that are of context and terminology and differences that are of values and goals" and create coalitions accordingly (Yuval-Davis, 1999: 97). Even though

the group was not a dedicated educational space, education definitely took place there for many of my interviewees. One administrator described it as a side effect of introspection, listening, and engaging with other group members, more than an aim in itself. A group member who at first found it hard to understand the extent and nature of ableism in the use of language such as 'stupid' and 'lame' went through a process of growth and realisation during the time she spent in the group. "When you are in a privileged position (I am white, able-bodied, cis) you don't always think about including those who aren't," she said. "I changed my mind about a number of things in that group and it has made my feminism better. It gives you space to learn about other people's experiences and it is hugely helpful." As Harris (2015) so eloquently put it:

> A safe space, despite the denotation of the phrase, is somewhere people come together and – in addition to whatever else they're doing – wrestle with the chicken-and-egg problem of how to change themselves and the world at the same time.

Safe spaces are an essential part of the ongoing struggle for social justice on every front. By combining strict and effective moderation with personal reflexivity, they can serve as enriching and empowering private spaces in which feminists can build solidarity, gain support, and begin the important and necessary work of self-definition.

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