

An Analysis on Autonomous Feminist and Queer Safe Spaces: The Case Study of PHYL.IS. A.U.Th.

Introduction

This paper aims to analyse the creation and preservation of an autonomous feminist and queer safe space utilising the case study of PHYL.IS. A.U.Th (The Student Union of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki for Gender Equality). This essay attempts to examine and answer a series of questions raised during our active time as members of PHYL.IS. Please take note that a part of this paper will discuss a distressing incident of gender violence and sexual violence that impelled us to take action by creating PHYL.IS.

How is a safe space founded? What do members of a community reap? Are there any problems or obstacles when participating in a queer and/or feminist community? What impact does living in a hostile and conservative environment, shaped by patriarchy, capitalism and racism have on these communities and on their members? Do we need to, or even can we meticulously tend to see how such a community can have a guaranteed longevity? Or maybe we think of the future too much? These are some thoughts and questions we tried to address and discuss during our roundtable. This paper attempts to further debate and offer possible answers to the research questions. Having that as a starting point, we will try to frame the current article around the main question of establishing and maintaining a safe space, by delineating what a safe space is and what it encompasses.

The analysis stands on numerous axes. Firstly, we present the beginning and foundation of PHYL.IS. as a recourse to a sentiment of hopelessness. The idea of PHYL.IS. originated during the COVID-19 lockdowns in Greece, all while the feminist movements were going mainstream due to a rise in femicides and domestic violence (Geniki Grammateia Oikogeneiakis Politikis Kai Isotitas Ton Fylon, 2021)¹, along with the concurrent start of the greek #Me-

¹ We would like to highlight that, up until the end of the lockdowns, no autonomous organisations had access to raw data regarding gender violence statistics to our knowledge.

Too movement (Chroni and Kavoura 2022) that brought feminism into the limelight. In this context, PHYL.IS was one of the feminist groups that came into life to satisfy our need for a safe space of resistance, where we, as feminists and queers, would shape the discussion around these issues ourselves. Secondly, we discuss the lived experience of participating in and actively shaping a community of people with shared interests and goals. An investigation of such practices inevitably leads to the experience of both positive and negative outcomes: the knowledge that we received and simultaneously personal and institutional obstacles and hardships when trying to struggle for the longevity of a community. Finally, we share some of our thoughts about the future of the Union, as well as why these thoughts should not be unidirectional in regard to what happens in the present. Nevertheless, it is a concept of humanity that the formation of such communities is inadvertently linked to their longevity.

All the sections above lead to the final one which contains our conclusions. These conclusions are not only derived by our own lived experience but also by commentary on the external factors and people that have been in touch with us and our actions. In addition, our conclusions aim to be addressed to our fellow feminist and queer communities, which possibly face similar struggles and obstacles (to be extended beyond the scope of PHYL.IS., in regard to all autonomous safe spaces within the feminist and queer movements of resistance).

At this point in the article, we feel the need to elucidate and reflect on our backgrounds and positionalities. The writers of this article are a cis lesbian woman who participated in the Union from the very start as a co-founder and a cis gay man who joined PHYL.IS. during its first months of action, both greek and brought up in middle-class families. In these four years of participating in this community, we witnessed the transformative power of autonomous feminist spaces first-hand. We experienced successful acts of community resistance, as well as failures and disappointments and were empowered but also traumatised after going through numerous tensions and burnouts, individual and collective. Along with all members, we found ourselves learning more and more about feminist and queer theory but also about resistance praxis. Most of all, however, we found ourselves changed, and despite the hardships we encountered, we would repeat it all from the beginning without a second thought.

This article is, above all, not just a recounting of our lived experiences in PHYL.IS., but also a love letter to all autonomous feminist and queer safe spac-

As a result, this rise was evident through data accessible only to the General Secretariat for Equality and Human Rights. As a governmental body, the General Secretariat takes into account only those incidents reported to the police. However, state violence, police brutality and systemic racism, sexism and homotransphobia are factors that eradicate the possibility of finding protection against gender violence through the justice system road and have rightfully cultivated distrust of authorities amongst survivors of gender violence. It is, therefore, obvious that many incidents of gender violence were never included in the aforementioned reports of the General Secretariat.

es, those that exercise their power towards justice, those that try to support and protect their members from discrimination and harassment, and especially those that survive by overcoming the adversities created by systemic state violence and sociopolitical discriminations.

The beginning of PHYL.IS.

PHYL.IS. was founded by eight students at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki in the fall of 2020. During that time, the second wave of lockdown measures against the pandemic of COVID 19 was imposed in Greece. Therefore, this was a time of anxiety and uncertainty, a time that found us watching the news in what felt like powerlessness and invisibility. This feeling was not new for us, as all of us were women, some of us queer as well. While we were spending our days and nights in confinement, away from our friends, chosen families and support systems, we started noticing a rising tendency in incidents of gender-based violence, something that enhanced our need to fight back, not only as students who did not have a voice within the university, but also as women and queer people within the conservative greek society. While greek media started covering the aforementioned cases of gender-based violence and the subsequent debates with more intensity, queers and feminists from all around the country started to organise themselves into new feminist groups, aiming to redefine this conversation that, up until this point, was echoing only liberal feminist stances². Thus, the feminist movement gained unforeseen momentum, despite being obligated to confine itself to social media and online discussions, due to the pandemic.

The starting point for our discussions was the media coverage of the trial for the femicide of Eleni Topaloudi (Feminist Fight Back, 2020). Eleni Topaloudi was a 21-year-old student residing in Rhodes who was raped and battered in November 2018 after denying the sexual advances of two men. After her assault, the men ultimately dragged her almost unconscious body to a cliff and threw her over it, thereby leading her to a torturous death. What followed was one of the most popularised criminal investigations and subsequent trials. Eleni Topaloudi's femicide compelled us to discuss the times we experienced sexual harassment. The most recent example that came to mind was the harassment by our professors at the university, a space where we are supposedly able to belong without feelings of insecurity. We felt our anger rising but had no place to express it, since all our personal endeavours to shed light on such issues had no result at all; sometimes, it even resulted in our public branding as "hysteric" or "deluded". Instead, we choose to see ourselves as "killjoys" in the sense that Sarah Ahmed describes it (Ahmed 2023). We kept, and we still keep objecting to being patronised about our feelings

² A clear example of the predominance of liberal approaches to feminism in Greece at the time is apparent in the way greek media enhanced and supported demands of stricter penal punishments for perpetrators of gender-violence related crimes, demands that the right-wing government later satisfied with changes to the greek Penal Code (Stilianidou 2021).

and our right to speak freely about grave issues that occur literally next to us. Without hesitation, we decided that, since a community that would promote our feminist and queer fights for visibility, respect and freedom in academia and in society as well, did not exist, we would try to create one.

It is essential to highlight that, at that time, none of us had any experience in forming safe spaces. The first form of PHYL.IS., as it was initially moulded, was a result of endless online calls, of ideas that were tested and failed, and others that seemed to have the potential to morph PHYL.IS. into something larger than what we initially imagined. Indeed, during the first months of shaping our Union, we came to the realisation that the students that had the same need we had, the need to explore ways of feminist and queer resistance, were many more than we thought. As they joined the Union, it slowly started to change, according to its people and the way they experienced their own vulnerabilities and expressed their feminist and queer identities. Therefore, there was the need to solidify that our community would be a safe space for all people who shared the same values and wanted to participate in our actions or be a part of our community. Suffice it to say that we made clear from the beginning that homo/bi/transphobic rhetorics, racism, misogyny, heterosexism and ableism would never be welcome in our Union. Establishing such a community is not an easy goal but is rather a bet, especially for autonomous communities trying to shape themselves and exist in authoritative environments and societies that promote state violence and heteronormative politics.

Indeed, such communities cannot but be flexible and adaptive to the needs of their members and the challenges that will undoubtedly arise during their course of action. This is exemplified in the way the shape of PHYL.IS. was transformed, even as a legal entity. Starting as an association without a legal personality, we quickly realised that one of our goals, namely providing support and assistance to students harassed by professors within academia, was not going to be accomplished safely (for us as well as for the survivors) if we retained this legal entity. Thus, we opted for the conversion of our legal entity to that of a Union. Regardless, the fabric of PHYL.IS. remained unchanged as a space aiming to protect and empower those oppressed to fight against their oppressors, mostly within universities but additionally outside academia.

All these experiences that have run across these last two years and a half are also a vital part of this communal structure. We started as a group of just 8 female students, but quickly, in a matter of 6 months, our efforts were joined by 800 people, the vast majority of them students as well, of various gender identities, sexual orientations and ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, each of them bringing their own experiences and concerns in regard to sexuality, gender, society and politics. Admittedly, this astonishing number of members was partly a result of what we might call “quarantine ennuï”; during the lockdowns, everyone’s activities came to a sudden halt, and, being confined to our houses and having nothing else to do than to survive, all our ways of communication, expressing ourselves and fighting for our rights had to exist solely within the online world. Within a community with such a high

number of members, creating and strengthening interpersonal bonds is an almost impossible task. This task seemed even more utopic when our only means of bonding were online video calls and chat groups.

We propagandised our actions and events through the internet since our spaces were in total lockdown, and we believe that these very lockdowns were an incentive that drew more people in; we all were confined in our personal spaces, while a lot of issues relevant to us were breaking out around us, as stated before. Hence, we believe that our online events, roundtables and open discussions with themes revolving around feminism and its numerous expressions in several aspects of our lives filled a gap in the university public sphere.

However, as our political and ideological fermentation progressed and simultaneously, our needs were pressing since the lockdowns ended and we could be actively present in the university, things changed rapidly. As a community that refuses to be sponsored by the state, the university or institutions that we believe contravene our goals and practices, we had to turn inwards for funding and be an automated community. This was not met with unanimity, and at that point, we realised that some of our then members did not actually share our goals and values as they became clearer after the lockdowns. Instead they approached feminism from an opportunistic, liberal stance and were dipped in individualistic aims, specifically including participation in PHYL.IS. for respective career pursuits. When reflecting upon that, we are more than happy to say that we are a self-funded community. Our members nowadays are far more solid in their reasons to belong in our collectives, albeit being less than back in the lockdown era.

Currently, PHYL.IS. counts approximately 180 members, a number easier to navigate that leaves room for us to create strong bonds of solidarity. Many of these members have joined PHYL.IS. recently, others have been members since 2020 and are now happy to assume coordinating roles. We can now safely say that people in PHYL.IS. connected, exchanged information and found new and more intricate ways to care for each other, by queering knowledge and experience; that is, queering in the sense of unlearning things we took for granted and learning them together from scratch.

What we learned through PHYL.IS.

As stated before, at the time PHYL.IS. was being formed, we found ourselves amidst moral, hygienic and scientific panics and at a moment in time when Greece was suffering a streak of femicides. A lot of people, who joined at that same time, felt similar sentiments in the sense that PHYL.IS. fostered a sense of belonging. Back in 2021, PHYL.IS. was a community at the dawn of formation, struggling to shape its communal structures and position itself somewhere among the vast greek political and feminist/queer landscape. Creating an autonomous safe space calls for time for its members to find a pace. Nowadays, we can safely state that our members don't feel that initial

struggle anymore; on the contrary, we feel like we've come a long way since. We firmly believe our political stance is getting gradually stronger, albeit remaining dynamic. Although our political stance had ideological foundations, it would be arrogant on our behalf to admit we were omniscient in those early years. Therefore, we had to correspond with other groups, communities and assemblies with shared values in order to accomplish larger political and ideological fermentation, and we still remain quite acceptant of political circulation. A primary deduction stemming from our correspondence with queer and feminist comrades is the assertion that safety and solidarity can only be acquired by a) strengthening the bonds between the people that comprise the space and b) aligning our needs, interests and objectives by forging allyships with other groups that share our principles. However, we needed to find out how to accomplish these goals.

We attempted to create work groups in order to conduct workshops, seminars and presentations related to feminist theory, queer theory and their intersections. On the aspect of socialisation, our online calls (back then there was no other way to communicate) also operated as social hangouts where people can assemble and converse on several topics, including their personal issues and, therefore, forging new relationships. These relationships essentially became the ones that made our Union survive throughout the years. Afterwards, we contacted other groups which ventured into the same spaces as we aspired to do. For example, at that point, a lot of artists' unions assembled in order to process the burgeoning #MeToo crisis in early 2021. Our exposure and cooperation with such groups helped us understand similar situations better and gain their insights about the way they survive the hostility of the conservative greek society, a society ready – or even glad – to succumb to extortions and power displays by powerful harassers³.

Later, when the lockdowns came to an end, we decided to actively take action in our university spaces. A first example that comes to mind was an anonymous collection of messages that we labelled “what would you like to say to your abuser”. We posted an anonymous form in our social media and concurrently we carried a ballot box in campus, where people could throw pieces of paper with messages from students. As members of the student community ourselves, we knew that the harassment rate on campus, especially from high-ranking professors, was extremely high, with students unable to report it, fearing they would get stigmatised and persecuted by the complex bureaucracy system that inevitably clears the abusers from all charges. Afterwards, we printed all digital responses and posted them, along with the physical ones, everywhere on campus for anyone to see. This was an attempt

³ To provide a concrete example of the readiness of greek society to “punish” those who break the silence instead of the perpetrators, we would like to highlight the infamous attempt, aided by the greek orthodox church and various governmental bodies, for a “1st Panhellenic Fertility Conference” to be held, in order to promote a duty to procreate and oppose bodily autonomy (Gill 2021) and the adoption of a new family law bill, influenced by anti-feminist lobbies (Human Rights Watch 2021).

to raise awareness around the harassment issue, and it operated also as a direct message to the oppressors: “We’re here, and we know who you are”.

Another example of an event through which we learnt a lot, was the feminist festival we organised in the spring of 2023. It was a two-day event brimming with discussions and workshops. We reference it here because we believe that a discussion held on the second day was a mind-changing experience. The discussion was titled “Queerness and disability” and the keynote speakers and hosts were disabled persons that are also our members. This discussion was another occasion where we were “forced” – in a good-hearted yet difficult fashion – to look directly into our able-bodied privileges and remain silent in order for their experiences to be heard loudly, something that does not occur often. This instance helped us realise once more that our oppressions can be intertwined, and that only by listening to our comrades’ experiences can a true allyship and sense of solidarity be forged.

Last but not least, we specifically recall coming together at a campus patio to create a feminist banner from the ground up. On the banner, we wrote all the names of women and femininities who had been victims of femicide throughout 2021 up to that point. We remember that day as particularly emotionally challenging since we were boiling with anger for our murdered sisters; the decision to punch through our anger and use it to our advantage and for our resistance was a silent yet unanimous consensus.

All these actions and activities taught us new ways, theoretical and practical, of working together towards resisting, but most of all, they taught us that unity of the oppressed is the only way to dismantle the power of the oppressors. These experiences strongly reflect the writings of Audre Lorde: *“Without community, there is no liberation ... But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretence that these differences do not exist”* (Lorde 1984, 112).

The understanding of the differences Lorde spoke of, is a necessary condition for any space to be regarded as “safe” and one of the biggest strengths of communities of queer and feminist resistance. These differences are the essence of intersectionality. As mentioned above, and just like any safe space, PHYL.IS. is essentially its people. Collectively, and through the mix of each of their own feminist and queer experiences, all of them different from ours, our members are the ones that shape the Union and lead it to new paths. This is also one of the most significant things we personally gained through our participation in such a community. Every new member carried a new way of perceiving life through feminist and/or queer experiences and participating in feminist and queer fights. When discussing the differences and intersections in our feminist and queer identities, we expanded our personal understanding of feminism as a movement and inserted feminist analyses of issues many of us had never even considered before, such as the way public spaces systemically feed inequalities or the way language can be used as a tool of feminist and queer liberation. By intersections, it needs to be specified that during the formation period of the Union, not all the people included were

knowledgeable or aware of their individual positionalities and intricately interwoven privileges.

Since universities in Greece are – as of 2024, when this article was being written – public and without fees⁴, there is a tremendous level of class diversity among the student community; people who started helping us build a community and students who were not members but attended our first events during the lockdowns belonged to a wide pool, including working-class and upper-middle-class backgrounds. Therefore, there was an additional amount of labour to be done, as we all needed to reflect upon our own backdrops and realise our lack of privileges in university spaces or, with a higher level of difficulty, realise that some of us were more privileged than others. Specifically, we remember a discussion between us where one person could not understand why we insisted on including female refugees and immigrants in our analyses because they believed that an anti-racist group would be more suitable to talk about respective issues. This very discussion operated as a Kickstarter for self-educating circles between us to comprehend that feminism does not pertain to white people only and how such kinds of arguments make clear that the people delivering them have to work through their own web of privileges in order to acknowledge them and see beyond them.

People constituting a community are of utmost significance. Through PHYL.IS., we found out the importance of inclusivity and diversity. By those terms, we certainly do *not* allude to their neoliberal and shallow manifestations. Contrarily, we mean that we came in contact with people and bodies that are rendered invisible in heteropatriarchal society: queer bodies, trans and non-binary individuals, immigrants and disabled people. We need to clarify that they are not hereby referred to as a means of tokenism, rather than people who helped PHYL.IS. become an even safer space. At this point in the article, we feel that it is a good spot to reconsider our own backgrounds and positionalities, as stated in the introduction, and add that both of us are currently; we therefore do not claim to speak on behalf of our non-binary and trans siblings, or other individuals that are less privileged than us.

It is unfortunately true that a lot of these people's experiences are easily erased in everyday life, therefore normalising abusive use of language even in humorous fashion. Especially when talking about disabled bodies, it is crucial to search for ways to include them in a community's activities and discussions. That can only occur when people are allowed to talk about their lived experience which we often – regrettably – omit. Similar things can be said for immigrant FLINTA (Female, Lesbian, Intersex, Trans and Agender) people, who are institutionally and systemically more oppressed due to the interrelations of their identities. Finally, autonomous safe spaces cannot be deemed neither feminist nor queer if they cannot include trans experiences in their

⁴ It must be noted that an unconstitutional legislation allowing the establishment of private universities in Greece is now in effect. This legislation is another example of the neoliberal tactics of oppression of the right-wing greek government, tactics that serve as means to enhance plutocracy and further marginalise those without power.

analyses. It is vital for a trans person to feel included in such a community if they can exist as their genuine selves.

Another important thing we gained through PHYL.IS. is empowerment in its most liberating form. Many of us found power in unity, a power that made us feel more able to not only survive in an environment that was built to destroy us but also break our silence and participate more actively in acts of resistance at a personal and a collective level. This unity also helped to liberate us from shackles that kept us down in our personal lives because we knew we could expose ourselves and discuss our experiences with issues such as eating disorders without being judged. On the contrary, we would be heard and supported. This made many of us less afraid to be vulnerable despite living in a society that condemns vulnerability⁵ and sees it as a lack of productivity, as the latter is situated in its capitalistic and heteronormative form (Coyle 2013). Breaking the norms that wanted us to feel powerless and alone, needing to hide, was possible only through a collective safe space, built upon feminist and queer values (Gear 2013). Belonging and participating in a feminist and queer community like PHYL.IS. made us realise that vulnerability is not a synonym for inadequacy. On the contrary, we found out that vulnerability is a strength, a source of power, a weapon that can be used to promote unity in our fights against systemic violence. After all, interdependence is a strengthening factor within our spaces, where the state and authorities fail to respond to our vulnerabilities, our communities are those who step up and offer us our much-needed support and care.

This realization proved to be an essential part of the evolution of our community but also of each member personally. Additionally, it led us to a search for ways to implement teachings of collective care in our community practice. In the context of our spaces, collective care takes the form of “mutual aid” (Spade 2020), meaning a symmetric relationship where all members are taken care of whilst taking care of others (Kavada 2023). The first step towards this can be as small as sharing our experiences of systemic, patriarchal and / or heteronormative violence, a step that immediately opens us to lessons from the experiences of others. Discussing the sources of our struggles and pain, but also of our sources of happiness, builds trust within our communities and paves the way towards developing methods of intercommunal support that can range from group talks, picnics or movie nights to self-education workshops, events for financial support.

Acts of collective care function as a source of empowerment and, ultimately, create a feeling of a powerful, unifying feminist and queer joy, a feeling that cannot be experienced otherwise. Removing care from its capitalistic, patriarchal and systemic signification (Nadasen 2021) and re-defining it within the framework of feminist and queer spaces essentially renders it an act of

⁵ Despite the fact that vulnerability is a concept mainly used in bioethics and biopolitics, belonging and participating in a feminist and queer space like PHYL.IS. proved to us that the embodied experience of vulnerability, wherever it may arise for each of us, has a certain unifying and transformative power when lived in a communal way.

resistance. Collective care is unequivocally connected to the aforementioned interdependence that stems from human vulnerability, and, as such, is a solid method of building resilience against systemic forces.

Obstacles

It is needed to remark that building a grassroots, autonomous feminist and queer community that aims to support its members while retaining the element of safety in its environment is a difficult task that needs the active engagement of each of the people participating. Undoubtedly, PHYL.IS. faced some struggles, some of them coming from within and others pertaining to the hostile systemic structures of greek society. As mentioned above, the students who began shaping the Union initially had no clue about how a community like that could function, leading to trials and errors. This became more intense after the lockdown measures regarding the Covid-19 pandemic were lifted in Greece. Our Union was brought to life online, and up until that point, it retained solely an online presence⁶. Transferring this space into the real world at first felt like an impossible goal. Indeed, at first our online seminars and workshops did not attract the same amount of people as they did in our first year when everybody was restricted. This led to initial frustration about what we wanted to confer, but gradually and collectively, we decided that we had to adapt. After all, the universities which were our original starting point were active again, and students were not attending classes online anymore. Therefore, if we wished our platform to be communicated, there would be a need for extraversion. We found available classrooms in various departments of the Aristotle University in Thessaloniki, and we were able to meet people in person for the first time. Many members met each other for the first time a year after PHYL.IS. was founded. The classrooms also functioned as spaces where we could hold our seminars/workshops/etc. in person, while also preserving the online version for people who could not reach us physically. It is significant to maintain that power lies in unity, and by uniting, the people of PHYL.IS. made it possible for it to exist as more than an online community.

Another collective struggle that inevitably changed the fabric of the Union was the emergence of a great number of reports of sexual harassment incidents within the greek universities. As a students' Union, we started to receive many messages from FLINTA students who had been through discrimination and/or harassment by their professors, and their pain became our collective pain, as many of us ourselves had also similar experiences. We realised that the way universities dealt with these complaints was not only inadequate but practically non-existent since it was created in a way that helped the perpetrators hide their accountability and promoted that breaking the silence was not an option for the survivors. This made us eager to shout even more and demand that the perpetrators be held accountable for

⁶ Funnily enough, many of the co-founders hadn't even met in person until that point.

their actions and the university authorities stop hiding the incidents under the rug and pretending to care about the well-being of their FLINTA students and members of staff. Further problems started to arise after the greek government announced the installation of police forces within the university campus, on the pretext of protecting students against supposedly dangerous anarchist groups that were established and predominantly active within the university⁷. Given that PHYL.IS is, first and foremost, a students' Union; this development felt threatening and scary and had huge impact on the collective identity of PHYL.IS., since its members, themselves part of the academic environment as individuals, protested and fought with even more intensity against the threat of police suppression and the authoritative forces within our spaces. During the subsequent occupations of various university faculties, our group chats were used mostly for raising awareness, uniting to join protests and support events of the occupations, and protecting each other by informing our members about imminent police attacks. Unquestionably, this extreme situation brought us even closer together and made us realise that resistance is best accomplished with the aid of our communities.

Both above-mentioned developments led us to question our own stance, not only individually, but as a community, within the academic environment. Undoubtedly, the latter is a place where systemic inequalities thrive and where power relations lead to countless cases of discrimination. We had therefore to openly position ourselves against the university authorities that enabled the suppression of our fights, whilst still noting that we were a part of the academic environment and questioning our participation in it. To do that, we have published a lot of manifestos online through our social media and website that clearly situated us against the authoritative powers within our campuses. Additionally, since 2021 when the university was not in lockdown, we have participated in plenty of events, discussions and roundtables in university squats, hence bluntly disputing the academic regime.

Apart from practical and institutional obstacles, there are also personal issues that emerge when participating in a collective like this. Firstly, engaging actively in such a space demands a huge amount of time dedicated to the enhancement of the community. This also means that many of us ended up feeling exhausted, experiencing a so-called "activism burnout", mainly due to us being informed about an enormous number of triggering incidents of gender violence almost daily. This ever-continuing awareness, needed for our efforts to demand that these incidents be addressed as what they are, incidents of gender violence, can be extremely stressful and mentally exhausting. At times, when some of us experienced this peculiar exhaustion, others were always there to support us.

Equally important to remember is the following: coordinating with comrades as members of a community with shared intentions, sometimes we

⁷ Clearly, the aim behind this fascist legislation of the greek government was to create obstacles for the politicisation of students.

have to overcome our own vices or share them with other members in order to collectively work through them. Different personalities may clash on a lot of aspects, and different people may have individual agendas. Therefore, being a member of a community comes with harsh realisations. A significant example would be the importance of personal time as a vector of participation. Different people have different personal lives and issues at hand, so it is clearly impossible for everyone to forfeit the same portions of time and energy for the community. Such discrepancies are also often the source of feelings of sadness, disappointment, bafflement and perhaps anger. It is necessary to take into consideration that we all process things and situations at a different pace. The understanding of these disparities, their open communication and management are all crucial for the preservation of the autonomous safe space.

On the same page speaking of difficulties, another cruel realisation is the level of corrosion that neoliberalism and individualism has inflicted upon us. By that, it's explicit that we mean that, as mentioned before, we have been occasionally approached by individuals or groups that only *pretended* to share our concerns. It is not uncommon that a lot of people have attempted to participate in the Union because they believe that it will benefit their personal goals, whether they be academic or career-oriented (like strengthening their CV) or drenched in an individualistic sense of ambition. It's always difficult when we realise it, but it is equally necessary for this agenda to be addressed. That's when the aforementioned community network relationships and care practices are advantageous in comprehending how different people have different needs and timetables. These resolute relationships between members of a community possess the capability to "spot odd ones out" (to crudely describe it). By that, we mean that people who have their own individualistic agenda and do not care for other members the way we all try to, eventually leave, because sooner or later they themselves realise that their mindset is not tolerated within a grassroots community that embodies affective structures, meaning that their individualistic goals will not be met by them relying on these structures.

In addition, it is highly probable, or perhaps even inevitable, that tensions and conflicts will arise within a community of a significant number of people, despite their shared views and struggles. This matter is a sensitive one, seeing that each member leads their own life, facing individual obstacles that are often rooted in the same sources as our collective ones. Conflicts between members need to be approached firstly with discretion by people of the community that are trusted by all parties. We also find it essential to underline that any conflict resolution should not be guided in a judgmental light, but always move towards one aim: that of guaranteeing the element of safety within said community. Conflict resolution within autonomous feminist and queer communities cannot share means – such as punishments or "trial" procedures – with carceral justice because the latter is formatted upon patriarchal structures that promote state violence; therefore, a community

that follows the patterns of “imposed penalties” cannot be a feminist one. Our communities cannot assume the role of courts by using methods of asking for evidence or witnesses and issuing judgments. On the contrary, they should rely on their inherent power to educate their members whilst offering them protection and support, thus preserving their identity as safe spaces.

It is needless to remark that all the above are sometimes easier said than done, as we ourselves got to experience, especially when the conflicts that arise are extremely grave. When our community was faced with such conflicts, we had to find a way to manage the situation by prioritising the needs of the person who survived the incident whilst simultaneously moving away from carceral roads of deciding between “guilt” or “innocence”. This led us to search for ways to collectively implement caring and anti-authoritative teachings of abolitionism in our own community. After our readings of various strategies and tactics of communal and transformative justice⁸, we compiled a harassment report management protocol based on consistent communication, primarily with the survivor, whose needs will guide the process and determine the possible outcomes (for example they will be the ones to decide which members will aid as a community-led de-escalation team, whether they would like to talk to the perpetrator themselves during the process and whether the rest of the members will be notified about the harassment report), but also with the perpetrator, by trying to promote self-accountability. We firmly believe that such grave incidents must be dealt with by communicating extensively with all parties, without making the ones responsible feeling judged or under trial, but trying to make them realise that they have to take accountability for their actions. In case self-accountability is not achieved – and always according to the survivor’s needs – the perpetrator’s participation in PHYL.IS. will be either paused temporarily, until further discussions take place between them and the de-escalation team to explore ways of re-education, or suspended indefinitely, if the perpetrator is escalating their reaction to the harassment report. The process has as a goal of protection of the survivor and the perseverance of safety within our community, whilst not ignoring that the logic of penalties and trials is inconsistent with the nature of feminism and the possibility of re-education must always be explored, as we will try to further highlight below.

Predictions for the future

Although the inauguration of a community like PHYL.IS. is inevitably linked with long-term goals and ambitions, we gradually realised that obsessing with the future is not always helpful. Futurity is something we don’t tend

⁸ Transformative justice has intersectional foundations; it acknowledges that harm, discrimination and abuse of any kind stem from oppression as a systemic mechanism. Consequently, the main aim of transformative justice is to offer protection and simultaneously cultivate healing and accountability at a communal basis, whilst avoiding the creation of new cycles of violence.

to ponder about constantly because therein lies a trap; sometimes, we may find ourselves caught in a fixation on an imaginative figure of the future and neglect what is at hand right now. Autonomous safe spaces do oscillate on various temporalities, but it is very important that comrades feel they can express themselves now rather than concentrating on what will occur in two years (or more). This way, we can examine more attentively on our present needs and purposes.

That being stated, our goal for our community is to keep growing and encompass more people who share our purposes and are seeking a safe space to identify with. Our aim for PHYL.IS. as a safe space and a community is that we continue to exist, reshape and reinvent ourselves in the coming years. We are optimistic and believe that this goal will be accomplished. We believe in the relationships we formed over these years and in the experiences, we gained that changed the way we perceive what feminist and queer resistance really is.

Lest we forget, we want to envision - naively so - university spaces without cops, without abusive professors and re-traumatizing structures. Therein lies a foundational contradiction; how do we keep operating within a university that's systemically authoritative? Do we undeniably accept being part of such an environment? The answer is complex. On one hand, it's simply impossible to disregard the institutional ills of a space that we are part of. Therefore, the need for such a community was born. On the other hand, being in contact with institutions inevitably brings forth a guilt of complicity, even if a community cannot be held accountable for others' faults and misdoings. Our recommendation is simply to not leave it all to them without a struggle. Universities are, first and foremost, ours to mould, not platforms of harassment and exploitation of our knowledge and bodies. That is the reason why we are here; to queer.

We need to add a note regarding the futurity of not only our community but of all communities in the feminist and queer resistance movements. Within our spaces, there is a heavy shadow that, at some time, will need to be addressed, that of the lack of proper ways to deal with incidents of harassment perpetrated by members of a community against members of the same or other communities. As aforementioned, when our community was confronted with this issue, we tried to compile a protocol to ensure that the paths we take to resolve it and guarantee the safety of the survivor, as well as of all members, and we are always eager to discuss further and accept remarks, in order to find ways to ameliorate the process. However, there have been many examples of complaints regarding incidents like these in many feminist and queer spaces that were published online, creating chaos in our spaces. This chaos is the result of our collective delay to open an honest discussion about accountability that transcends the closed environment of a union or a community and expands throughout the whole movement. This creates opportunities for abusers to hide in our supposedly "safe spaces" and to escape being held accountable for their actions. Yet, their actions hurt our communities in

very intricate ways by disempowering our unity, leading many of us to turn away from our movements and filling us with distrust. Because, if we cannot be protected within our very own communities, what kind of safety is the one that defines a “safe” space?

The answer is given in a circular manner; our communities need to be open to discussions regarding our own accountability by a) learning to give as well as accept constructive criticism, b) educating ourselves – on a community basis but also individually – on admitting and transforming our wrong-doings, c) protecting our members by ensuring that our space remains safe for them and d) dealing with members that may or may not be ready to accept the harmful nature of their behaviour. Therein lies a trap magnified by popular culture wars, the “cancelling” culture. We do not adopt the term lightly because in most cases of “celebrity cancelling” it was merely a *trompe l’oeil* employed to distract the audiences from the roots of such problems. When discussing intra-movement incidents, we believe that outright cancelling without exceptions is no solution at all. On the contrary, we need to conduct in depth assemblies and discussions to comprehend how the incident was allowed to take place in a supposedly safe space and then castigate the person(s) responsible. “Punishment” is also a mentality we do not embrace since we struggle to approach abolitionism. As hinted previously, we support exploring ways to (re)educate instead⁹, for the person(s) to comprehend the ills of their ways, if that is possible. “Cancelling” and ostracization may create more problems than expected, since the person(s) responsible in this case are able to simply find another space and repeat their actions. This is why we believe it is worth it to spend as much time as needed on discussions with all members involved, making sure that they take place according to the survivor’s wishes. Needless to say, their wishes must be prioritised in order for any space to be actually “safe”. Therefore, any process that aims to resolve issues of harassment and ensure the safety of the survivor has to leave room for their guidance, specifically in regard to whether the process will remain confidential or public and whether it will include a discussion between them and the perpetrator, with the possibility of the facilitation of a community de-escalation team. In addition, the survivor’s needs will ultimately determine the possible outcomes; if the survivor deems it necessary for their safety, the harmful person must be removed from the community. However, even in this case, members of the community will have to participate in discussions with the perpetrator, to try to make them recognise their wrongdoings, for them to refrain from repeating them to other spaces in the future. To summarise, safe spaces are preserved while being active and healthy only by communication between members, about any issue at all, especially crucial and difficult ones.

At this point, we must note that it’s not only communication between members that is essential but also between communities. This might sound

⁹ Re-education, of course, excludes extreme cases such as allegations of rape, physical assault.

pessimistic or exaggerating, but we believe that our movements are at war, attacked by anti-feminist, homophobic, transphobic, ableist and racist analyses that infiltrate our spaces. All the aforementioned rhetorics are gaining traction as there is an emergence of alt-right politics and hate speech all over Europe. Hence it is more than ever necessary for our communities to demand that all our members are safe and respected within our movements. This therefore means that we need to speak loudly against TERFs (trans-exclusionary radical feminists), homo- and fem- nationalists, and ableists that insist on imposing rules on who will be included in our movements, who we will fight for and who is not “worth” to join our fights for liberation. If we do not demand visibility of those that remain invisible to this day, firstly within our own spaces, how can we fight for our collective visibility on a wider societal level? If our movements keep replicating the power structures used by our oppressors for the sake of assimilation, how can they pave the way to a future where we can actually unite against state violence, classism, racism and patriarchy? These are wider discussions that need to finally open amongst our communities, especially those located in environments like those of conservative states, that leave no options for FLINTA, disabled and immigrant bodies other than to live marginalised, oppressed and stigmatised. Because in these environments, we have no support systems besides the ones we ourselves create.

Conclusion

To conclude, an autonomous feminist/queer safe space is comprised of all aforementioned elements: love, compassion, understanding and politicisation. Love and compassion for each other, understanding our mutual and interrelated oppressions. The politicisation of our fear and anger is what brings us together. When participating in such a community, people may face a lot of situations; both joyful and dire. We discover several things about ourselves, and we may find ourselves in a happy place where we can finally express ourselves contrary to what we’ve been taught. We learn to cooperate with other people, listen to them, care for them. Additionally, we may have to come to terms with rough qualities of ourselves when trying to amalgamate with other people. We need to address that we may be confronted with challenges such as external obstacles (institutions that have to maintain the status quo in favour of themselves) or internal community struggles (possible harassment, as mentioned above).

What we have experienced, though, is that a probable answer would be the junction of feminist and queer analysis. Queering our experience with ways that subvert the expectations, ways that undermine the norms we’ve been running away from, is our everyday purpose. Additionally, queering our experience encompasses queering our spaces. By this we mean those spaces that are inherently built upon the need of safety and visibility, those spaces that tend to be our support systems when everything else makes it too hard for us to survive. In order to make these spaces actually safe, we need to

unlearn what we have been institutionally taught about vulnerability, understand intersectionality and re-establish how each of our different vulnerabilities can be a source of resistance. We need to approach confrontations within our spaces by distancing ourselves from carceral paths and simultaneously enhance our collective demands of respect, inclusion and visibility within our movements. Finally, we need to keep questioning our own personal and collective positionality (and therefore our privileges) and realise that the only way our fights can be enhanced is through the help of our own communities. Hence, for all of us whose identities are inherently threatening to the oppressive structures of the neoliberal state, reconceptualising care, vulnerability and resilience through a collective framework is the ultimate tool of survival, and our communities, those founded upon our collective trauma as well as our common feminist and queer joy, our most important means of protection and source of power.

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