

## Precarious Spaces, Institutional Places



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**Abstract:** This article searches after more nuanced understandings of safe space pedagogies in writing classrooms. Drawing on experiences of teaching a first-year writing course on a campus that had been tagged with white supremacist graffiti, this article uses autoethnography and narrative to rethink the function of place in composition pedagogy and develop feminist tools for teaching. This article suggests that classrooms should not be thought of as singular places, and for that reason a safe space pedagogy cannot be thought of in stable or static terms; instead, this article attempts to articulate a situated and contingent idea of safe space pedagogies.

*Trigger Warning: This discusses racism and racial violence on a college campus as well as sexual assault.*

### Arriving<sup>{1}</sup>

The morning of September 20th, 2016, I walked onto Eastern Michigan University's campus prepared to teach something about *kairos* in my section of first-year writing. These plans changed when a colleague shared a picture she had taken. EMU had been vandalized with racist, white supremacist graffiti on two of its halls (Barnes, "Graffiti Hate Speech").<sup>{2}</sup> After seeing the picture my colleague took of facilities attempting to erase the message, I walked by the site to see a similar sight. Two of my students of color were there, too, crying as they watched facilities power-washing the letters.

I remember my outrage and my heartbreak, and I remember the pull in my heart to go to my students who were clearly in pain. But I also remember thinking that this space, this moment, was theirs, and to intrude would only cause another violence. Going back inside, the questions started of how, and in what contexts, I could appropriately address this violence that had occurred just outside the building my classes were taught in.

I was clearly not alone in this consideration. The whole graduate assistant office in Pray-Harrod was buzzing with conversations of if and how we might address this in our classes. Further, while the faculty scrambled across departments to form a committee to create what would be various diversity-themed events later in the semester, several of the writing faculty joined in with the graduate students in our concerns. My colleagues and I—this gathering of white bodies—discussed whether it was the role of the writing classroom to address this racial violence on our campus. Some aligned themselves along the view that the writing classroom is a space to strictly discuss writing, that we are not teachers of ethics. Others were worried that discussing the events would only retraumatize our students, and so not discussing would allow more opportunities for healing for our students. I, and several others of my colleagues, felt that it was our whiteness that was allowing us to decide whether to address this violence, and that not doing so would only reinforce the privileges afforded us by the same oppressive systems that had been evoked in those hateful messages.

What many of these conversations got hung up on in our flurry of discussion was ideas of safe spaces. Many of the graduate students and faculty—myself included—wanted to see our spaces as safe spaces, which we saw as taking an activist approach in our teaching. Others pushed back and said that in doing so we might be alienating and thereby making our spaces unsafe for students whose views differed from our own. They encouraged risk in the writing classroom as oppositional to the perceived stifling neutrality offered in notions of safe spaces.

In this essay, I would like to argue that the field of rhetoric and composition/writing studies' understanding of safety, risk, and safe spaces is too simplistic. I aim here to develop a composition pedagogy that is situated in a queer,

feminist, antiracist praxis, conditioned by how we arrive in institutional spaces. This pedagogy is both built from previous composition scholarship's metaphors, such as Mary Louise Pratt's *contact zone*, but is also a departure from our disciplinary commonplaces, as I hope to demonstrate. Instead, I draw heavily from the work of Sara Ahmed and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, whose theories offer ways to hold in tension critiques of safe spaces with the relational, contingent, and critical potentialities of safe space pedagogies (Ahmed *Living a Feminist Life* 5; Tsing 20). To do this, I start by highlighting how classroom spaces are infrastructures of mobilities that condition precarity for certain bodies. Then, I move to discussing how we encounter the failures of institutional infrastructures, and I show that current conceptions of safe-space discourses do not acknowledge these material realities. Following this, I discuss new frameworks for unsettling our disciplinary commonplaces before moving to strategies for building safe(r) spaces.

When it comes to discussing safe spaces and pedagogies of precarity, the matter of how we locate safe spaces becomes just as central a question as where. If a safe space is a different kind of space, it requires different geographies than those used to understand the worlds that have failed the persons safe spaces seek to support. That is, I want to suggest that before we can discuss "the *where* of writing" (Reynolds 176), we have to ask how that *where* already scripts possibilities for being, doing, and becoming within that *where*; we need to acknowledge the limitations of "spatial sense" (Reynolds 83) in spaces that have already failed. This is what precarity is: Tsing writes that precarity is "life without the promise of stability," that it is "the condition of being vulnerable to others" (2, 20). Tsing develops her understanding of precarity from studying life in a declining world of failing capitalist infrastructures, arguing that examining precarity allows us to generate knowledge about how systems have failed and how creatures survive. When we attend to precarity, we pay attention to how the places in which we teach are not stable for them and how they are exposed to institutional violence.

Suppose I told you that the man who committed that act of violence was a black man. Does this change our responsibility? Or, perhaps, more pointedly, does this invalidate the pain felt by my students that morning and many days that followed? I ask these questions after a black male suspect was arraigned, prompting, as Slagter reports, the EMU Chief of Police to say his actions were "not motivated by race" and writers like Soave to suggest the act is a "hoax."

To talk about this and safe space pedagogies, we might pause and talk about the place of our classrooms and the ways in which our bodies move and dwell within and through them. Henri Lefebvre offers us a way to begin thinking about classroom spaces differently. He writes,

Consider a house, and a street, for example... One might almost see it as the epitome of immobility, with its concrete and its stark, cold and rigid outlines... Now, a critical analysis would doubtless destroy the appearance of solidity of this house, stripping it, as it were, of its concrete slabs and its thin non-load-bearing walls, which are really glorified screens, and uncovering a very different picture. In the light of this imaginary analysis, our house would emerge as permeated from every direction by streams of energy which run in and out of it by every imaginable route. (92)

Lefebvre's consideration of a material house highlights the ways that spaces we normally conceive of as bounded or static are anything but. Instead, a house—or, indeed, a classroom—is an infrastructure of mobilities. Lefebvre goes on to write, "Its image of immobility would then be replaced by an image of a complex of mobilities, a nexus of in and out conduits" (93).

Through conceiving of classrooms as permeable infrastructural complexes of mobilities, I hope to offer a different perspective on safe space pedagogies than those that background the material place of the classroom or its permeabilities. Tim Ingold writes, "My contention is that lives are led not inside places but through, around, to and from them, from and to places elsewhere" (33). If we shift our perspective of classroom spaces to infrastructures of mobilities, we foreground the paths, places, and histories the bodies bring into our classroom spaces, where our paths entwine. Ingold continues, "[H]uman existence is not fundamentally place-bound... but *place-binding*. It unfolds not in places but along paths... Where inhabitants meet, trails are entwined, as the life of each becomes bound up with the other" (33). A pedagogy of place-binding is one that would require attending to these histories, trails, and trajectories that the bodies in the place experience and the ways in which they entwine.

Suppose I told you that EMU was 40% nonwhite, or that 20% of its student population was black (Eastern Michigan University). Suppose, also, that I told you that EMU is not a destination school and that its student population largely comes out of Detroit and its surrounding communities. Suppose further that two of my students didn't have access to clean drinking water at home in Flint, Michigan. Where we teach, these trails entwine, become a knot, and forms what we call a classroom whether we acknowledge those mobilities or not. The scene of the vandalism where my students cried was entangled in the classroom. The histories of white supremacy that my students have experienced was entangled in that message when they read it, and was, in turn, woven into the knot of classroom.

When places *bind*, we become emplaced. This asks how do many paths become a single knot? One answer to that may be to turn to anthropology or cultural geography's conceptions of place, such as Michel de Certeau's work that offers that *places* are divisions of space that are inhabited by observable social practices that are repeated over time and within easily defined material and spatial parameters (117). If our teaching is to attend to place-*binding*, though, we have to unsettle what those practices are and how the material parameters make possible those practices. Drawing on Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology*, I would argue that *place* needs to be thought of as an orienting device; Ahmed writes, "It is not simply that we act in space; spatial relations between subjects and others are produced through actions, which make some things available to be reached" (52). And these relations are scripted—they exist before we arrive and by how we arrive. We might turn to Ahmed's familiar path and easily travelable precisely because of how frequently it is traveled by—the path demands that the path be repeated for it to be an easy path (16). Put differently, the illusion of immobility of place is a function of a privilege of an assumed and common arrival. Ahmed argues that the orientations we take direct us and that this direction is "produced by acts of relegation: some things are relegated to the background in order to sustain a certain direction; in other words, in order to keep attention on what is faced" (*Queer Phenomenology* 31). That assumed common arrival is an institutional orientation that places demands on students that arrive differently to put in additional work, work in the interest of preserving our institutional illusions. If, as Ahmed suggests, to be oriented is to be able to extend your body in space 'right,' it takes more work or different work to extend differently (57). When the means of entering our classrooms are designed to support certain kinds of bodies more than others, the work of being in place is unevenly distributed.

A pedagogy that emphasizes place-binding must disrupt this by attending to the knotted entangling of different paths converging within spaces. This pedagogy examines how classroom spaces and bodies in them are interdependent upon each other and highlights conditions of precarity for bodies. A precarious pedagogy asks us to see how repetition is a demand, and how demands on our bodies become brick walls that create the illusion of a static place of a classroom. Instead, we see precarity: that our space was never stable. Turning to Ahmed's *On Being Included*, she writes, "The wall is what we come up against: the sedimentation of history into a barrier that is solid and tangible in the present, a barrier to change as well as to the mobility of some" (175). Foregrounding mobility foregrounds the infrastructure that supports that mobility. By focusing on whose mobility is supported and the systems and infrastructures controlling that mobility, it is easier to discern how certain bodies are differently exposed to violence within those systems and infrastructures.

## Encountering

After discussing with my WPA and several of my colleagues what I might do to address the racist graffiti in my class, I gave my students empty, ginger-bread-like outlines of people and provided colored pencils and markers. I asked my students to fill in these outlines with the image of someone who had a vested interest in their success at this university and to write a quote that reminded them of that person.

Students created images of mothers, fathers, grandmothers, ministers, cats, previous teachers, siblings, comic book heroes who inspired them among others. We taped these images to the concrete walls. Despite the political and violent backdrop, the images and quotes did not seem to comment directly on the events, often choosing to write sentiments of hope and well-wishes. My hope had been to inscribe this classroom with a message that was different than what was inscribed throughout the rest of campus or through institutional histories: I had hoped that, at the very least, this one room could be a space that told them that they belonged, that the space was theirs.

Prior to the next class, however, I learned that these avatars had been removed from the room by my department's administrative staff. While I was able to collect them from the English Language and Literature department, the tape had not been removed from the backs of them and they were stuck together. As I tried to separate them, there was significant tearing and discoloration to each of the images. In many ways, this was a major failure in my teaching to not have anticipated this action that my department made, but this became a turning point in my thinking of the permeabilities of classroom spaces.

It was not uncommon in our program to have our students generate material and leave those materials hanging on the walls. I was fortunate to be teaching in one of a handful of rooms in Pray-Harrod that were only used for first-year writing courses, and it was common practice for brainstorming activities, group-work, or document-galleries to be hanging on the walls. This activity had been adapted from something that our WPA had done with my cohort of graduate assistants in one of our training workshops in order to acknowledge the absent presences we each carried, to acknowledge a collectivistic community orientation to pedagogy. He was the one who learned of the removal of the images first, tracked down their location, and made sure they were available to be retrieved.

The removal did not go unnoticed. Before the start of class and before I had a chance to discuss what had

happened, I had to field the questions and looks of anger, confusion, and pain from my students as they were once more reminded that the space was not theirs. This incursion on what we had developed only further demonstrated to them the ways that the university and the racist graffiti met and intersected in this assemblage, or knot, of lifeways.

What I have written here moves between narrative spaces, through histories and presence, through experience and abstraction. Its method blurs the line between autoethnography and storytelling. In this, I take my cue from a careful citation of Melanie Yergeau, whose deeply personal and incredibly poignant work calls attention to the ways that autistic bodies have been erased and denied theories of mind through her construction of her autoethnographic, indeed *autie*-ethnographic, text. Yergeau writes that her essay is, “spiral-like in structure, is lacking a concrete thesis, and is fond of parallel sentence structures,” drawing on disability scholar, activist, and memoirist writing practices of reclaiming narratives from dominant structures. However, she claims that she cannot believe her essay is as fully emancipatory as the scholars she builds from, and instead situates her essay as “a paradox: I am claiming that I have a theory of mind by demonstrating that I lack a theory of mind.” This form of knowledge-production foregrounds the ways dominant practices, theories, and ways of knowing have failed and harmed many of bodies. My intention here is not to coopt her form and its theoretical and personal ties to ways of being and knowing, but rather to write an autoethnographic text that resists the erasing of bodies in institutional spaces. In this, I hope to demonstrate the ways my students and I had to navigate differently and change our understandings of space and how to make social justice interventions in our space.

To call storytelling a method, I pull heavily from Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing. She writes, “To listen to and tell a rush of stories is a *method*. And why not make the strong claim and call it a science, an addition to knowledge?” (Tsing 38). Tsing argues that without the stability of stable infrastructure, precarity creates only fragmented stories that create assemblages and ruptures of knowing and meaning (287). What I have assembled here is an assemblage of stories and their ruptures. In these ways, this essay takes up what I am calling for in enacting a safe space pedagogy attuned to precarity, how we arrive, how we move, and the necessity for new ways of conceiving of pedagogies.

A safe space pedagogy is a kind of attunement to the enmeshing of bodies, histories, and the environs of the place. To do this, we need to not only be conscious of the ways that we are bodied, but the ways we perform our embodiment. This may look like what Julie Lindquist calls “deep acting” (197). Deep acting, for Lindquist, is a mediation of affects within the classroom centered on how the instructor performs their affective responses to their students. She writes, “To allow students to ‘own’ the products of their emotional labor... teachers must, ironically, mediate their production by demonstrating their own willingness to move into deep acting, to risk more, to put more of themselves and their identities into play” (198). This kind of pedagogy needs more than acknowledging the privileges and resources afforded me because of the way that I am bodied and my histories, but to put these resources and privileges to use. Ultimately, a deep acting pedagogy asks instructors to enter with the question *what do my students need from me*.

I want to emphasize that this cannot be an easy call with easy answers, particularly as a white instructor with commitments to antiracist work. This pedagogy must shift our instructor-orientations from many of our disciplinary conversations. We cannot de-center the role of the instructor: we must be in solidarity with our students. Malea Powell writes, “Teaching is a responsibility, not an opportunity for me to show you how cool I am by pretending to waive the authority that the institution grants me” (578). Instead, instructors have to “sweat” with concepts of precarity and safety, and we have to “front up to” the ways our work has depended on what has receded into the background and formed the brick walls of our classes (Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* 132). Ahmed’s idea of “sweaty concepts” are developed out of “a description of a body that is not at home in the world,” and reminds us that “A sweaty concept might come out of a bodily experience that is trying. The task is to stay with the difficulty, to keep exploring and exposing this difficulty” (13). We have to stay with the difficulty when we think about developing ethical pedagogies.

Betty Barrett contends that safe spaces are “an overused but undertheorized metaphor” (1). Indeed, Christine Quinan argues that safe spaces may be “a pedagogical security blanket” (362). Like many of our pedagogic metaphors, safe spaces become emptied out commonplaces. But, Quinan notes, she is not ready to throw away the idea of safe spaces, rather, she argues, it becomes necessary to complicate the commonplace metaphor that is too easily adopted for its abstractness (368).

Catherine Fox provides a thoughtful discussion and critique of common safe space programs. These programs are often implemented by LGBTQ diversity teams or offices who put on training seminars (498). Upon completion of the training, the staff or faculty receives a symbol (a rainbow flag or a pink triangle) that they can place outside of their office to mark the space as a safe space. This, however, Fox observes, relies on assumptions of a “universal gay” experience that does not adequately address the classed and raced privileges operating within a “white male” gay experience (498). This, she insists is a central issue with safe space signs “insofar as the central organizing feature for queer folks is the eradication of homophobia and heterosexism, the term ‘safe space’ continues to operate within normalizing discourses” (500).

Instead, Fox calls for a move toward “safe(r) spaces”, which operate on transformational instead of transactional logics that “*engage safety as a process*” in which we do not produce stable or unified subjects that are considered by some authority “safe” (506). Fox’s critique addresses institutional power and provides a basis that we can enter a conversation about the material places we refer to as safe spaces and a consideration of an object that actively signifies a space as safe. I want to further engage Fox’s safe(r) spaces in order to consider safety as process and give attention to safety as a process of *place-binding*. That is, I want to call attention to how the actants and mobilities of bodies within a place (co)constitute discursive space: that this interactivity is a site through which we can develop and complicate theories of safe spaces.

Rhetoric and composition/writing studies scholarship has a long history of critiques of safety’s implications of comfort and neutrality. Eichhorn, et al. write, “As feminist teachers of writing we want to question those pedagogical models which privilege only an atmosphere of safety or a completely maternal climate” (299). There are gendered implications for safe spaces and gendered language that surrounds the history of the field of rhetoric and composition/writing studies. Being critical of these discourses in this way, then, is imperative if we are to understand the introduction of safe space discourses as a feminist issue.

Eichhorn, et al. raise key questions about safe spaces that operate throughout critiques of safe space discourse. They write, “Can there truly be ‘safe space,’ in or out of the classroom? Should there be? Is there in our desire for a safe space also a refusal to recognize that our different locations... are and have always been unequal?” (300). Is safe space discourse a flattening of difference? In making spaces “safe” are we indeed isolating inequality within individuals rather than acknowledging systemic difference? And, more acutely, can or should these spaces be emplaced within or outside the classroom? Ultimately, Eichhorn, et al. want us to find ways to acknowledge difference that challenges students to engage critically with larger structures.

Jennifer Haley-Brown advocates similarly for, what she calls “risky writing” in first year writing courses. Risk, here, is an oppositional word to safety insofar as it creates stakes and engages with uncertainty. In engaging in risky writing, students are asked to compose in public spaces for unknowable audiences so that they can encounter the tensions in creating knowledge with real stakes. She contrasts this model with safety and comfort in writing spaces, informed by Pratt’s contact zone, while acknowledging that the anonymity afforded by Wikipedia gives a different form of safety, as a way to understand the ways that difference can be productive in class; ultimately, that difference is necessarily unsafe and that instructor’s roles are to find productive ways to engage that difference.

In order to get closer to a productive space to talk about situated safe spaces, I would like to contextualize other critiques of these spaces around concerns of trigger warnings and give attention to operating ideologies. One series of arguments is centered around an idea of “confessional-therapeutic” culture. Courtney Bailey argues that by engaging the obscuring differences between the therapeutic, which assesses normality, and confessional, which makes moral judgements, safe space discourses fall into a neoliberal trap that “conflate[s] what we should do or not do with who we should be or should not be” (85). This sets up a problem, for Bailey, in how discourse and debate are allowed to circulate. Bailey writes, “The neoliberal version of the debate fosters polarization and paralysis by promoting a zero-sum game in which gains for one side automatically mean losses for the other” (85). This, Bailey contends, inhibits students’ abilities to critically engage with issues of systemic oppression: rather, oppression is made personal. Her critique of trigger warnings seems to point to neoliberal tendency to not intervene in structural issues and privatize and pathologize experience within the individual. By using trigger warnings, with this in mind, we isolate oppression within an individual’s experience, rather than empowering that student to engage in deconstruction of oppressive systems.

In further consideration of trigger warnings and their pedagogical application, Rebecca Flintoff and Christopher Bollinger attempt to make solutions surrounding trigger warning debates. They write, “If we warn our students in advance of sensitive content, we risk individuals opting out of engagement... Yet, if we fail to take protective measures against triggering past-trauma reactions, we do not live up to the ethic of care we believe is core to achieving our educational mission” (Flintoff and Bollinger 25). In attempting to negotiate arguments surrounding trigger warnings, they define their ethical humane approach for accommodating students who have experienced trauma.

Flintoff and Bollinger include a conversation on symptoms of PTSD and students with other trauma-related experiences and treatment. They write, “Earlier on, processing the event and moving through daily routine will be more difficult. There will be more confusion and difficulty processing emotions and reasoning. As time passes, survivors transition to an almost normal routine with more stable days” (26). I think we should be dubious of progress narratives that suggest linearity and uniformity of experience. One of their recommendations is to gradually increase levels of intensity as a way of addressing the recovery process students with trauma may be dealing with (29). However, as I’ve already stated, this operates under the assumption that recovery processes are linear. And yet

there are two other assumptions I would like to address: the assumption that the classroom should be the site of resilience building through intensity-exposure, and the assumption they make that trauma is occurring prior to the start of a semester.

During an afternoon in mid-November of 2013, I attended one of my history classes at East Carolina University, where I was completing my undergrad, that was interrupted deeply. We started when my professor was talking about Viking culture and his doubts about the remains that had been found of a female Viking warrior—queue conversation of political correctness, queue sexist anti-feminist rant that many of the students joined in, queue super-sexist comments romanticizing the violences within Viking culture.

This occurred two weeks after I had been sexually assaulted—or as one of my faculty members so graciously termed it, I had been “Laramie’d.”<sup>{3}</sup> The conversation continued—I’m not sure for how long because I experienced an ‘episodic flashback,’ as my therapist would call it later. After, I remember feeling paralyzed—*how can I return after everyone in that place saw me like that, after that place became what it did?*

Sara Ahmed writes “theory can do more the closer it gets to the skin” and that “embodied experience of power provide[s] the basis for knowledge” (*Living a Feminist Life* 10). When knowing is bounded to the skin, the embodied experiences of the violences of power relationships, that knowing can be one that encounters precarity in the *feeling* of the interdependency the body has with the infrastructures that support it and the indeterminacy of the same infrastructure that was not made to sustain that body.

When we call a space a “safe space,” we assume that we can create conditions that sustain safety for each body in that space. When we consider the space as an infrastructure of mobilities, we acknowledge the space as a system that supports some bodies more than others. Put differently, we can be safe in a place, but when we ask of a safe space “who is it safe for?” we see the space is already scripted with relationships of certain bodies to that safety. We can also then see the precarity scripted within those spaces. What I would like to suggest is that if we understand ourselves through this interdependency on the infrastructures that sustain us, then we can see how those infrastructural conditions condition our existence. Our safety is conditioned, indeed, precarious.

Tsing writes, “Unable to rely on a stable structure of community, we are thrown into shifting assemblages, which remake us as well as our others” (20). These shifting assemblages through the ways in which human and nonhuman actors bind with place resist universal understandings of safety that so often permeate safe space discourses and provide safe spaces with easy critique. Instead, however, thinking through shifting assemblages highlights the ways in which we are vulnerable to being acted upon and, equally, how these assemblages create conditions within themselves for conditional resistance.

## Sweating

After my students noticed the avatars had been removed, my teaching changed once again. I gave them paper and provided colored pencils, markers, and paints. I asked them to write a brief reflection on the material place that we shared: what did it provide for them, what could it provide, what couldn’t it? After, I asked them to sketch a dream, budget-less, no-need-for-approval classroom design. Following this, we had a lot of discussion about what it meant to be in a place, in our place, and being out of place.

That night, I read their reflections and looked over their drawings. Some of their drawings were more imaginative than others—setting the classroom on some tropical beach—but some had interventions that could feasibly be done in the room.

Our semester became one of prototyping. It seemed every day had a new configuration in the room. We tried rows, pods, a circle, fish bowls, an inner circle facing an outer circle, tables around the periphery to create a large open middle space, the tables winding in a haptic zig zap, among others. We tried different kinds of music at different points of the class. We brought in plants. We tried several days where we had a mid-class break, or where we would rearrange the room at that point. We tried days with the lights off, with fake candles, with thrift store lamps.

With each change, my students would write and reflect on what the changes *did* for them in that space. After, they would generate new drafts for me of ideal situation rooms, though I started asking them to imagine doing so within the constraints of the material place we had. Their reflections and their drafts would inform future configurations in the classroom. We emphasized temporary changes. I took the materials we introduced out of the room each day. The tables were always rearranged back to their starting formation.

The night of November 1st, 2016, after more white supremacist graffiti had been found on Ford Hall and on Hoyt

Hall, over 200 students marched on the EMU Student Center and performed a sit in. They gathered overnight supplies for the march from the dorm to the Student Center. The chant “Whose house? Our house,” echoed the organizing hashtag #OurHouseEMU that students had been using throughout the semester to demonstrate against the university’s lack of action in addressing these incidents (Barnes, “EMU Students Occupy”).

The student center closed at 1:00am, but students continued to occupy the space. EMU Public Safety told the students to leave and that they were in violation of Michigan state law and student conduct rules. Though numbers began to dwindle, the protest continued. In the end, four students were initially sanctioned for the protest (Barnes, “EMU Students Sanctioned”).

The following day, faculty and students joined in a demonstration against the administration’s actions and inaction on the racist messages. During this demonstration, students of color expressed their fear in attending a university that was unable to provide safety for them, that this academic space was expressly unsafe for them. It was a demonstration that students felt would be ultimately pointless, as one student noted, “it’s the same conversation over and over again... They are not for the students and they’re more invested in athletics, who are terrible, than the students on campus” (Lazovic, “EMU Faculty”).

The original four students still faced disciplinary action, and EMU raised the reward for finding the culprit from \$5,000 to \$10,000 (Lazovic, “4 EMU Students”). In fact, the university issued sanctions to 16 more students, which led to a series of other demonstrations and EMU students carrying a large sign reading “Eastern Michigan University’s president is a Racist” the following semester (Barnes, “Following More Sanctions”).

Perhaps some of our resistances to talking about safe spaces and spaces of precarity is because it means necessarily admitting that our spaces are already scripted with safety for some and admitting that our spaces are *unsafe* for others. Rhetoric and composition/writing studies as a field has attempted to come to grips with this, as I’ve discussed above, but in ways that only reinforce status quo logics. This is how the pedagogy I am calling for here certainly draws from the contact zone, but remains a departure from it as well.

A contact zone, Pratt defines as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other” (36). As such, the work of a contact zone, as Pratt describes is “to work in the knowledge that whatever one said was going to be systematically received in radically heterogeneous ways that we were neither able nor entitled to prescribe” (39). The contact zone, then, emerges from different actions constituted by and indicative of the cultural differences the students bring with them. However, there are still a number of assumptions within the contact zone worth considering.

Cooper offers us ways to complicate the idea of contact zones. A contact zone, Cooper writes, “encourage[s] us to reify a view of students as representatives of ‘cultures’ acting like nation-states in which they’re consciously, fully immersed, whether or not they explicitly inform us of that” (26). Too easily, contact zones create borders of unified identities or experiences. Rather, Cooper argues that identities are not “solid,” but act more as “fluids or gases” (27). Additionally, these states of matter resist boundaries, filling the material places they occupy. We might key in on the central critique that Cooper offers us of *contact* and *zone*. On the matter of *zone*, Cooper writes:

[H]er notion of zone becomes more a neutral matter of the time and place in which classes, discussions, and student encounters with texts occur. This use makes the metaphor of zone sound more abstract, ready to absorb different characteristics in a variety of circumstances, more portably applicable, which makes it attractive as a paradigmatic image intended to analyze a variety of actual classroom conditions. Nevertheless, it strikes me as oddly militaristic. (25)

Cooper’s discussion points to the appeal of such a metaphor, but demonstrates the complexities of taking up such a term. Cooper seems to suggest that this idea of zone in militaristic terms may even change the term *contact* to something closer to *combat*. After all, Cooper points out that “[i]t is unclear exactly what qualifies as contact in a contact zone” (27).

If what people often resist in safe spaces is an idea of *protective neutrality*, a contact zone-based pedagogy puts forward a *combative neutrality* through which cultural difference and critical encounter is the subject of the space without direction, creating illusions and fantasies of inclusivity as they fail to address the structural powers shaping that conversation. The contact zone does not front up to the histories of white supremacist, capitalist, cisheteropatriarchy, but benefits from them. Put differently, ideas of risk and safety that fail to address precarity only reinscribe the same structures of power built into the infrastructures of a classroom that these rhetorical strategies might seek to address.

Bumping may be one way to reimagine contact. Ahmed writes, “Bumping into each other is a sign that we have not resolved our differences. The resolution of difference is the scene of much injustice. Things might be smoother because some have had to adjust to keep up with others” (*Living a Feminist Life* 166). When teachers attend to the ways that students bump up against each other or with the universities that they are a part of, we can see moments of resisting the binding of a singular place to begin the work of developing strategies for mobilizing our precarities.

We do this by centering the voices of those directly impacted by infrastructural precarity and structural violence. This is not the same as a student-centered classroom, precisely because doing this acknowledges the instructor’s complicity in the activity of their classroom: decentering the instructor becomes too easily an illusion of justice, decentering becomes too quickly a means of protecting institutional privilege, decentering becomes too readily a neglecting of accountability. And we are all already implicated, whether we ask what our students need from us or not. The bumpiness of this work is sweaty because it does not end: the instructor becomes someone who most consistently recenters the classroom, and recentering is active work: we recognize a place because the cultural scripts it asks of us are familiar, prescribed, and made material through their repeated use.

## Building

My classroom was not a safe space in the Fall of 2016. I have not included the stories of my teaching during that time as a model for others to take up. Rather, these stories—and teaching during that time—is how I came to see the ways that my classroom space was not bounded, that the place and our bodies in that place coconstituted what it meant to be in that place. In fact, I would suggest that my teaching failed my students in many ways, and I was not able to introduce meaningful and material interventions into the experience of my students in the face of oppressive systems.

I would argue as well that it would be antithetical to view the experiences of teaching I’ve included as a model: my teaching attempted to respond to the shifting assemblages in which we were situated that remade us and our relationship to that place. Indeed, that is why storytelling is necessary in experiences of precarity and failing infrastructures as they ask us to think through assemblages: how disparate meanings assemble, clash with larger narratives, interrupt the systems that fail to support, and condition what we experience (Tsing 159). It is thinking through these assemblages that is necessary for creating interventions within those assemblages, however temporary. We need to create more stories of our precarious spaces, more openings for new meaning in failing systems, more opportunities for our stories to mobilize experiences of violence.

There is no way to navigate or teach in institutional spaces with critical safety, because there is no institutional strategy or support for dismantling institutional structures of power. When the infrastructure in place sustains protecting an institution, supporting frequently othered students frequently means working without an infrastructure, without the luxury of institutional strategy. Ahmed writes, “When we are trying to intervene in the reproduction of power, we have to think differently; we have to think on our feet” (*Living* 93). Thinking on our feet demands a pedagogy that is deeply situated and situational and resists the very idea of the universal or the generalizable.

This is why a safe space pedagogy is a building project, not a fixed pedagogy: to build an infrastructure of different pathways for different bodies. As a feminist praxis, a safe space pedagogy must be a feminist building project that “need[s] to be made out of feminist materials” (Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* 14). Our pedagogy might need to become a project of ruining: to ruin our institution’s illusions of progress or success and instead build from their failures. Ahmed goes on to write, “To build from the ruin; our building might seem ruined; when we build, we ruin. It is lesbian feminist hope: to become a ruin, to ruin by becoming” (232).

We need more stories of our shared precarity to generate knowledge of the way institutional infrastructures fail and harm our bodies and our students, and we need to build feminist toolkits to think on our feet with, to teach with. Drawing further on Ahmed’s *Living a Feminist Life* in which she proposes a Killjoy Survival Kit, in lieu of a specific model of pedagogy, I have started to assemble my feminist teaching tools. When we have feminist materials to build with on our feet, we can build infrastructures meant for different bodies than our institutions were designed for.

### 1. Learning and Teaching

I was told by my first mentor to have two books on my nightstand and read from them every night. I’m reminded of Ahmed’s claim that “To sustain a direction is to support a direction” (*Living* 46): if I am sustained by what I read, I am sustaining a direction. We need to learn and read from the teachers and thinkers that sustain different directions, different futures.



For me this means reading and centering Carmen Kynard, Malea Powell, Jacqueline Jones Royster, Stacey Waite, among many others whose words are continual teachers for me. We should all read *Vernacular Insurrections* and *Teaching Queer* for their commitments to sustaining different directions and futures for composition and literacy pedagogy. These, as well as the voices of Sara Ahmed, Gloria Anzaldúa, Angela Davis, bell hooks, Robin Wall Kimmerer, Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, Julia Serano, and Susan Stryker continue to be instructors as well as challenges to the work of teaching for me. We also need to not only center texts and books, but learn continually from all of the diverse ways we access meaning. We need to learn from others around us invested in dismantling oppressive structures.

## **2. Vulnerability**

I do not mean simply empathy, nor is it, to echo Lindquist, merely a laying to bear of an instructor's political orientations (191). Vulnerability is how we experience precarity, it is our response to institutional infrastructure. When we are vulnerable *with*, we are responding *with*. Vulnerability is both how we mobilize and how we hold ourselves accountable, because vulnerability acknowledges how our precarity is uneven. This means we cannot talk about social justice without doing social justice, we cannot ask what our students need without following through and asking *how* or *what is my role in supporting this*. When policies harm our students, we need to be showing up in those meetings, when they are inevitably enacted we need to find work-arounds or exploitations. When students are already mobilizing to support causes or their own survival, vulnerability demands we show up—perhaps even turn that work into part of the course: are they generating materials for their survival. Can protests, hearings, and community building not generate the kind of rhetorical awareness that we often seek to develop?

## **3. No, Maybe**

No and maybe are powerful tools. They are how we become an imposition on the sustained directions built into our universities, how we manage our labor. How often do we have to tell our colleagues that we don't talk about our students through a deficit-model, and how often do we let that discourse continue? How do we manage problematic discourse in our classrooms? A "no" or a "maybe" can be how we refuse to accept that institutional problems are "resolved." When an institution proposes a diversity course after a racist incident without addressing the structural problems of institutional racism, when we are assigned the work of managing our institution's diversity work, a no or maybe can be how we refuse to erase the university's complicity My first WPA told me once "*Maybe and I might* are powerful because they can either be an olive branch or a stick of dynamite." *I might* can build a nest or dismantle our brick walls.

## **4. A Breath**

We need to acknowledge our limitations and check any impulse to "fix" the problems around us. Assigning ourselves or our students a breath can be an act of recentering. Even in short class-periods, why not try a 5-10 minute break? Pause a discussion. Admit you don't know how to answer or respond to something. On the other hand, why not assign yourself a breath and let your students continue to lead. Many of my worst moments living and working within institutions have resulted from my not having taken a breath—when I felt precarious as a student or an instructor and acted before I took a breath, I have reinforced the harm that was already impacting those around me.

## **5. Needs**

Checking-in with your students is good work and time well-spent in sponsoring empathy. But checking-in alone does not often mobilize. Asking your students how they are should be followed with what do they need—and why not ask that question directly and invite them to participate in the answer. If students need a different way to participate in a class, why not offer it and discuss what it means to participate? If they need a lighter reading load, why not do that and discuss different strategies for managing workloads? If students need better access to food, time to sleep, or resources, why not lead a discussion on how we access these things? Are tensions high? Is a 5-10 minute meditation possible? Perhaps this can become a writing activity when students are asked to collaborate to address their shared concerns, perhaps you can facilitate their writing productive documents for their survival like a to-do list, a plan-of-action, an email to an instructor who refuses to hear their concerns.

In addition to these entries of my own toolkit, I would like to invite any readers to share your tools so that we might build more together and learn from each other here:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1mVLhABU2WmGQMuOd7T-7oSSpIRPZiF4ywiMk7juQeEA/edit?usp=sharing>

## Notes

1. When I originally wrote this article, I drafted it centering Judith Butler's theories surrounding precarity and vulnerability. I want to acknowledge how foundationally she informed my thinking on subjects of teaching as mobilizing vulnerabilities. However, to take my cue from Sara Ahmed's assertion, "Where we find feminism matters; from whom we find feminism matters," (5) I cannot ground my feminism in Butler's work in light of her signing a letter in support of an abuser. While her prompt apology is well taken, it seems inappropriate at this juncture to develop a pedagogy informed by my own experiences as a student, teacher, and survivor in her work. And while I have endeavored here to provide another way of arriving to the sense that we need to acknowledge and mobilize as teachers and bodies inhabiting spaces made to support only certain bodies, I want to call attention to the limitations of this new arrival: To what extent can we actually alter our theoretical foundation in the course of timely revisions? What is and what do we expect to be the lifespan of an academic project, and are growth, change, and process as integral to our research as those may be to our teaching? ([Return to text.](#))
2. The side of King Hall was tagged with the message "KKK" and "Leave" followed by a racial slur. The following night, the same message was found in a stairwell in Wise Hall. ([Return to text.](#))
3. This faculty member was referring to the hate crime against and murder of Matthew Shepard, a 21-year-old, openly gay college student in Laramie, Wyoming in 1998. ([Return to text.](#))

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Return to [Composition Forum 41 table of contents](#).