

# Somewhere SO OVER! the Rainbow: The Danger of Safe-Zones

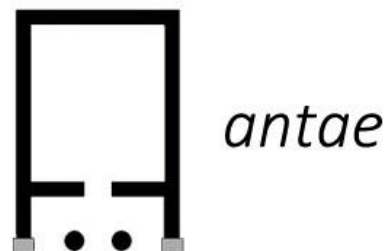
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## Somewhere SO OVER! the Rainbow: The Danger of Safe Zones

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### WWJD?

When I see that acronym, I always think of the myriad other Js that could be substituted for Jesus—his answers being relentlessly predictable—and imagine potential outcomes given the specific individual. In truth, I never gave “what would Jesus do?” much thought until I moved to Kentucky, a place where many students sport rubber bracelets featuring those letters and take their affiliation with Christianity, as well as opposition to LGBT people, quite seriously. As a “J” myself, I answered that question in my first years as a junior faculty member with the response, “create a Safe Zone,” which, at the very least, did not seem un-Christian of me, though many disagree. I have spent a great deal of time in the past seven years contemplating Safe Zones—the national university project in the United States aimed at bettering the lives of LGBT students, faculty, and staff on campus—and thinking about the stickers emblazoned with their rainbow logo that decorate many office doors throughout my campus, and many others across this nation. I also think of Judy Garland—*The Wizard of Oz* “Dorothy” version—when I glimpse them and I’m immediately overcome by that cloyingly saccharine performance and naïve worldview. I like Judy immensely, as I do justice and equality for all, but only when she’s authentically larger-than-life, clearly overmedicated, and impishly brassy in black tights, pumps, short shorts, and a touch too much makeup. When I see her in those braids and that blue gingham dress speaking childishly, I feel I’m beginning to suffocate and that I must choose my words carefully. I respond similarly to the so-called Safe Zone I helped institute and now wish I could drop a house on.

I dream, Dorothy-like, of an elsewhere here, of taking another path that might have brought about more satisfying results. As a uniquely American response to the bigotry LGBT university students face, I also conceive U.S. campuses participating in the Safe Zone program in its many iterations as examples of one approach to combating bigotry that may seem overly optimistic or perhaps downright foolish to people working on similar problems in other countries. Safe Zones, we know, do not actually create an elsewhere capable of sheltering and protecting students from bias, hatred, and/or violence. Those spaces are not there, but here. They are well-intentioned symbolic gestures that likely make anti-discrimination-minded individuals in other parts of the world dubious about the sunny disposition of such a powerless approach to a daunting problem. While I don’t think they have the solution, either, ours must seem somewhat like a cautionary tale for those operating in other models.

Since I'm to blame for many of those rainbow stickers across my campus, I'm embarking on this essay to examine how the elsewhere I once imagined—the “safe zone”—might become a different elsewhere yet. Truthfully, I never really liked those stickers—though I appreciated them as a symbol of resistance in a stiflingly conservative environment. Nevertheless, they always felt too chipper, too self-assuredly optimistic that they could ensure safety—not to mention tolerance and acceptance—by earnestly screaming their intention. They are the figurative clicking together of our ruby reds, hoping people will be magically transported, Dorothy-like, into a magical elsewhere without bigotry, knowing all the while that a great many evil monkeys fly among us yet. In short, I wish to dismantle the safe zone I helped create; I wish to introduce danger once more.

### **If You Build It, They Won't Succumb**

When I came to a mid-sized university in rural western Kentucky—my own “not Kansas”—from the Chicagoland area in 2009, as a new faculty member specializing in gender & sexuality, I encountered extreme anti-LGBT prejudice, even though our campus boasted a small core of queer students dedicated to activism and radicalism. Those students tirelessly fought for acknowledgement and services on campus, despite considerable resistance. I frequently heard about verbal assaults they endured crossing campus or shopping at Wal-Mart. One student recounted being pushed down a flight of stairs, while an openly queer staff member described finding a dead rose and a death threat on his car. I experienced assault in my own front yard, being struck with a soda can launched by a truck full of frat-looking guys. The more we protested, the worse things got. My response was helping launch a Safe Zone program—like those of so many universities across the U.S.—intended to spread education, awareness, and (hopefully) respect.

I recruited faculty and staff members in coordination with a staff member who has since become our university's first LGBT Programming Coordinator. I hosted educational workshops; I fought for policy changes; I defied the ambivalence that characterized so many responses to hatred and bigotry. For a halcyon moment, I believed we were doing great work and improving the campus climate—albeit slowly—for non-cis- and non-hetero students. I didn't do this, however, as a neoliberal crusader believing we would all eventually join hands, sing “Kumbaya”, and magically appreciate one another's differences. Rather, I worked as a cynic dedicated to eradicating the silences that surrounded LGBT issues; as an educator intent upon helping people understand the biological and social realities of gender and sexuality; as a human being convinced I have a right to exist and claim equality for myself. I will expand on these ideas later; for now, suffice it to say that my mission was never disseminating a touchy-feely, multiculturally inflected, celebrate diversity!, message. I wanted my students and colleagues to be relieved of the stress and fear of being attacked; I expected the bigots in our midst to grasp that they would not eradicate us or cast us out; I sought legitimacy and institutional support to reduce hatred,

violence, and exclusionary tactics at the micro- and macro-levels. I imagined an elsewhere of security in one's rights, not some glittery rainbow dreamland.

In retrospect, I made a significant mistake early on in launching the Safe Zone and recruiting members. Because administrators refused to send out an email to all faculty inviting them to join the program, I painstakingly worked my way through the faculty directory and emailed each member individually. The email was a form invitation, explaining the program's mission:

The Safe Zone Project, through education, advocacy, visibility, and skill development, supports faculty, staff, and students to become allies for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students and colleagues. The Project is designed to radically reduce prejudice and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression at Murray State University by creating a safe and affirming campus. The Safe Zone symbol sends a message that the person or unit displaying it has decided to be an active and visible ally, can be trusted to maintain confidentiality, and will respond to the individual with understanding, support, and empathy. A national program, the "safe zone" project works to spread awareness about the importance of diversity appreciation and tolerance for all people.

I can be remarkably naïve sometimes, and it never occurred to me that anyone would respond negatively. I anticipated some recipients taking issue; I just assumed they'd delete the invitation and move on. Almost immediately, however, a long-time adjunct faculty member fired back with threats, demanding that I never contact him again. He screamed offense and made clear that he found me disgusting. Incensed, I foolishly responded, hoping to sway his perspective slightly while explaining that I was conducting official university business. Sadly, things only worsened and we volleyed several times before I finally gave up. When I reported the incident to several of my superiors, I was told that I should have expected such responses and that there was nothing to be done. Several insinuated that I was to blame, even though our governing agencies had already made clear that universities in Kentucky were required to start serving LGBT students in a more visible, intentional way. In addition, we'd already adopted a non-discrimination policy, which included sexual orientation as a category.

I stewed for days over these exchanges and ultimately decided to talk to my fellow coordinator of the Safe Zone. I was deeply frustrated that my friends and administrators did not feel compelled to address the situation. They were sympathetic, unfazed, and surprisingly willing to imply I should have known better. My co-coordinator's response when I named the culprit was to cackle and shrug his shoulders; he was accustomed to hearing complaints about that faculty member. When I passed along feedback from students that this man creates a hostile, homophobic environment, nothing happened. Embarrassingly, I have to admit that I gave up on that particular fight because of the lack of support and my astonishment that no one wanted to get involved, no matter how disgusting they found the situation.

Given another chance, I would have pushed harder. I would not have attempted any appeal to that individual's alleged better nature. I would have filed an official grievance. I might even have forwarded the emails to the university president. I didn't realize then that people were quite so unaccustomed to confronting this kind of bigotry that no matter how it upset them, the fear of potential repercussions paralyzed them. I should have voiced quite loudly how alone and in-danger I felt.

Other forms of resistance to the Safe Zone also cropped up. In the early days, many faculty and staff didn't realize and/or accept that we were an official university entity, so they didn't treat us with even grudging respect or take us seriously. One particularly interesting response came in the form of a full-page advertisement in the student newspaper from the "Christian Faculty Network," which was signed by a group of faculty from across campus. As a hotbed of the evangelicalism which has become prominent in the U.S. over the last several decades, Kentucky boasts a variety of fervor for religious conservatism typified by many groups of this nature—though not of the same religious persuasion—worldwide. One signer, a closeted gay man who has propositioned me and several of my male friends repeatedly, said off the record that he believed the group had been formed to combat the efforts of the Safe Zone participants, who some believed were "taking over the campus". He apparently felt no conflict with his own personal behavior, because he also signed. Of course I would also discover that such a "cover" proves incredibly useful on campus for men like him, proving it's hard to beat hypocrisy when harnessed with discrimination.

Nevertheless, we made change: change for those who were supportive but needed a community and change for those who were almost supportive and needed a little convincing. We also became enmeshed in the university's diversity initiatives, being enlisted to help train recalcitrant faculty and staff against everyone's will, so that they could rubber stamp the "diversity training" section of our re-accreditation efforts and forget about the hostility we experienced and the fear we felt during the process. Ultimately, though, we did not change the minds of the hardliners. In fact, I strongly suspect we spawned even greater entrenchment and hatred. I'm not sure I consider that progress.

## **Safe Clones**

Throughout this early period of the Safe Zone, I thought a lot about Foucault and his assertion that the proliferation of nineteenth-century discourses regarding sex and sexuality both helped create identities and form the frameworks to police them:

Through the various discourses, legal sanctions against minor perversions were multiplied; sexual irregularity was annexed to mental illness; from childhood to old age, a norm of sexual development was defined and all the possible deviations were carefully described; pedagogical

controls and medical treatments were organized; around the least fantasies, moralists, but especially doctors, brandished the whole vocabulary of abomination.<sup>1</sup>

I took seriously his position that to formalize and to name something is to empower it *and* subject it to control. I'm paraphrasing, perhaps even reducing, his concept, here, but I think appropriately so; by creating a Safe Zone we enabled students to feel more welcome and as though they have a voice. At the same time, we also subjected them to heightened vitriol from opponents. Because these changes were taking place locally at the same time that major LGBT rights advances transpired at the national level, we drew energy from the shifts we witnessed. I believe we felt encouraged and supported by mirroring this particular *Zeitgeist* locally and working to change the climate in western Kentucky for LGBT people.

I choose the word “mirroring” here intentionally; along the way many of our LGBT students (and perhaps faculty and staff) became quite invested in becoming “just like everyone else”. As the national rhetoric about LGBT folks focused more and more upon the right to marriage, always stressing the commonality of all people in their desire to find love and marry, I watched many of our students lose their edge. They appeared to make a steady mainstreaming progression toward assimilation with heteronormative, capitalist-driven culture. They were “born this way”, but also just like everybody else. They wanted lives resembling the newly minted ads featuring same-sex couples who didn't seem all that queer and for which companies like JC Penney, J. Crew, and even Campbell's Soup were being congratulated. When I jokingly asked some students why Campbell's hadn't selected a couple of drag queens with a kid all enjoying tomato soup together, I was met with icy, blank stares; clearly that's not what a family looks like and my absurd suggestion left them cold. This shift left me wondering, have we really made progress by securing marriage? Or, have we just killed off our better, most interesting parts in order to assimilate and assume the burden of maintaining and furthering the nuclear family despite all the contrary evidence indicating that the institution is doomed? If we are to escape this trap, I think we must invent new modes of living, as Foucault suggests: “A [homosexual] way of life can be shared among individuals of different age, status, and social activity. It can yield intense relations not resembling those that are institutionalized.”<sup>2</sup>

I mourn the day that my work to empower and to nurture queerness spawned a desire in our LGBT students to resist resistance, to fear and resent our difference. Somehow, sadly, neoliberalism infiltrated our Safe Zone. A program we launched to defend difference and nonconformity became a different cudgel with the same target: forcing people into binaries and conventional bourgeois morality, all under the guise of celebrating—even applauding—so-called diversity. In our zeal to safeguard a space for queerness, we initiated the spread of an alternate intolerance, mostly from within our own ranks. Suddenly the goal was to homogenize in the

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1978), p. 36.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, ‘Friendship as a Way of Life’, in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth, Vol. I*, ed. by Paul Rabinow, trans. by Robert Hurley et al. (London: Penguin Books, 1997), pp. 135-140, p. 138.

worst possible way, essentializing sexual desires and activities and demonizing anyone who balked. We celebrated difference most ferociously while under attack and hateful scrutiny; we found power in our refusal to conform or to perform in prescribed ways. Once we had a toehold in the establishment, though, many in our ranks began proselytizing with the zeal of the converted; if we were going to enjoy enfranchisement, we would endeavor to erase difference, and where it proved indelible, we would chastise and distance ourselves. In order to become an accepted part of the *here* we created, we had to forget the radical potential of the imagined *elsewhere* where we didn't have to conform or assimilate to capture equal standing.

Outside resistance to such an initiative, after all, must be expected. What we didn't anticipate was the conservatism that crept into the minds and actions of LGBT students and many of their allies. Over the course of the years I've been working with this project, I've watched students grow increasingly more rigid in their conception of nonconformity. In terms of gender, for example, these students may identify as fluid, genderqueer, and/or non-binary. They understand the language, though not necessarily its nuances and they have no problem enforcing their rigid ideals when it comes to the people around them. In other areas of their lives they embody a similar conservatism; their primary goal appears to be the relentless pursuit of the unattainable, suffocating heteronormative American dream of monogamy, childrearing, and consumerism.

## **Danger Zone**

I suggest sparring. I advocate antagonism. I court controversy. I helped create a Safe Zone—a figurative elsewhere—to claim a space for difference, for heterogeneity, for nonconformity. I did not create that zone to render dissenters—in- or out-group—mute, nor to force them into some insincere conformity that verges upon fascism. Well, perhaps that's a bit hyperbolic, though many of my experiences suggest that folks who don't approve of the kind of work I do feel that's exactly what's being asked of them. While I don't think we'll ever come to agreement about how to handle these cultural negotiations in which we're all embroiled, I often think we—at least on this university campus, in this town—overcommitted our energies to a kind of liberal moralizing honed to appeal to people's alleged better nature. Without overtly doing so, we asked for permission from our opponents by pleading a case—one we see as foregone conclusion because of its merits—and ultimately leaving a choice at play in the scenario. We ceded our power by permitting the majority to continue to make a decision about the rights and privileges of a minority; many of them continue to believe they are entitled to decide what we get and when we'll get it, if at all. While those circumstances are objectionable enough on their own, they're compounded when the LGBT members of our campus community forfeit their powers or resistance—their untamed queerness—by believing safety means fitting in, homogeneity.

The truth is, none of us are safe when we must ask for permission to exist and claim the rights due to individuals in a democracy—hell, even the basic human rights due to all people—and we continue to be marginalized and slighted by those who recognize the exaggerated nature of the

power differential. As changes transpire at the national level and equality reaches some level of equilibrium for our community, it's becoming more apparent that we're also starting to shift from the era of wondering if changes will ever come. In other words, we've reached a level of legitimacy as a group in the sense that, more and more, we're being recognized and afforded rights and privileges. At the state level, at least in our university system, something similar has transpired and we are protected by the institutions for which we work, and our governing agencies now require that we offer services for LGBT students, affording us some leverage.

For that reason, I contend that we must stop requesting permission to exist and/or to claim our rights; we also shouldn't be suggesting that minds are changing. Hate and discrimination are alive and well in our midst. We need to shift our narrative from one of acceptance, tolerance, and education to one that makes clear that we're no longer speaking in the subjunctive in hopes that we can secure equality and protection under the law. Those protections, at least for those of us in the university system in the Commonwealth of Kentucky, have been secured—thus, we need to stiffen our resolve and make clear that we demand what is rightfully ours, making an argument based on hard facts and legal firmaments and leave emotional appeals behind. We need to use those supports—limited as they may still be—to frame a monologue, not a discussion, about our right to exist and claim space for ourselves as citizens. We have to stop asking, “will you please accept me? I'm just like you,” and start declaring, “I am a citizen and claim equal rights and protections, irrespective of your opinions.” We must do this as a model for those places in the world in earlier phases of this battle; I write this to help them avoid our mistakes if they can.

I never intended the Safe Zone to become a justification for assimilation. If those who assimilated did so out of sincere desire, so be it. For those who opted to acculturate as a move toward progress and fulfillment, I feel sorrow about what has been lost. The Safe Zone started for me as a point of visibility, a chance to exist and demand space without being shunted by the disapproving who believed they could somehow stem the tide. What I didn't fully realize at the time is that very, very few people are ever changed—or even moved slightly—by such appeals. The majority who joined the program and wanted to get involved were already on board. Don't get me wrong: I'm sure we won over a wavering handful. We didn't, however, alter any hard-liners' opinions, but instead likely strengthened their resolve and sense of having the upper hand.

It's time to create a new dynamic; time to stop appealing to “the right side of history” and “the right thing to do”. At this stage that should be obvious to most people and for those who believe otherwise, we must accept that no emotional, ethical, or moralistic appeal will gain any traction. Perhaps our “Safe Zone” experiment with its rainbows and good-natured pleas to accept all people has been our moment in Oz—our dreamlike journey in a magical elsewhere to effect change—and now, like Dorothy, we must awaken and confront the faces peering at us, demanding answers. Reality isn't safe spaces, emerald cities, or even green archvillains; it's an ongoing struggle to claim what's rightfully yours and refusing to lodge that claim in the form of a question any longer. Our pot of gold at the rainbow's end, my friends, isn't that imagined



elsewhere of bigotry annihilated, it's our willingness to dwell in our otherness and insist upon our right to be here whether we look, think, and/or act like you or not.

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