AUSTERITY, DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND INTERSECTIONALITY: REIMAGINING SPACE IN THE ACTIVISM OF SISTERS UNCUT

By

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Abstract

This thesis examines how Sisters Uncut – a British feminist direct-action group which campaigns against cuts to domestic violence services – utilise space to contest austerity, urban privatisation, gendered spatial relations and neoliberal logic of individualism and self-sufficiency. Using fourteen interviews with Sisters Uncut activists and a five-week period of participant observation with a local group in Bristol (UK), I describe how through public protests, occupations and the construction of autonomous spaces, Sisters Uncut temporarily reimagine public and activist spaces as sites where economic and gendered power relations can be transgressed. I frame Sisters Uncut's activism and articulation of austerity – as a gendered, racial and structural form of violence – within Nancy Fraser's (1996) framework of social justice, which seeks to reconcile political claims for economic redistribution with identity-based recognition. Using Henri Lefebvre's (1991) notion of space production, I argue that Sisters Uncut's activism makes visible the contradictions inherent to the ideological public/private binaries which order space and social relations. I find that through discourses of death and a politics of public mourning Sisters Uncut reinvent public spaces as sites of visceral political contestation, alluding to our collective bodily vulnerabilities and responsibilities. I illustrate how Sisters Uncut meetings and occupations are constructed as safe spaces, empowering and self-reflective sites which nevertheless risk reinstating privileged gendered and racial identities. This thesis points to the importance of space in contesting neoliberal trends and building collective feminist identities. I show that spatial forms of resistance, such as public protests, occupations and autonomous sites, are essential in making visible how material spaces order socioeconomic and gendered relations. I argue that bringing them into light allows us to imagine and construct alternative, more egalitarian forms of social organisation.

Declaration of Original Research and the Word Count

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of original research; it contains no materials accepted for any other degree in any other institution and no materials previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgment is made in the form of bibliographical reference.

I further declare that the following word count for this thesis are accurate:

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Signed: Cristina Paya Barge

(Signature appears on the hard copy submitted to the library)

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Introduction

> 'When you're in an occupation you think anything is possible because you've taken over a space you thought you couldn't have. You start hacking away at what you've been told you can do. People entering that space and having a cup of tea and being like, 'oh we can just make our world' I think that has a radical potential.'

This statement comes from an interview I conducted with a 22-year-old Sisters Uncut activist from Bristol (UK) who helped organise a two-week occupation of a public library, which had been sold by the local council to private property developers. The occupation was a protest against gentrification, the privatisation of public services and the lack of social housing and services available for victims of domestic violence. This account is one of many on the significance of space in constructing alternative social visions. In this thesis, I explore how the activism of Sisters Uncut reimagines activist and public spaces as sites where the neoliberal logic of privatisation, austerity and individualism, and its violent structural and gendered consequences, can be challenged.

The significance of public space in Sisters Uncut's activism must be contextualised within the global rise and consolidation of neoliberal hegemony. Since the 1980s, states have increasingly adopted neoliberal agendas based on increased competition through economic deregulation and a 'shrinking' of the state through the privatisation of public services (Ostry et al, 2016). In the UK, Margaret Thatcher adopted neoliberal policies in the 1980s as a way to address what was perceived by Western governments, economists and media commentators as the state's overbearing intervention in the economy, its diminishing authority against trade unions and its excessively generous welfare program (Kus 2006; Clune 2013). Neoliberal policies of retrenchment, privatisation and deregulation were built upon an ideology of individualism which equated the unregulated exchange of capital with the realisation of freedom (Kotz, 2015).

The cultivation of individual freedom in the economy was coupled with the dismantling of organisational worker structures, meaning workers were unable to organise politically, claim worker's rights or form solidarity (Bermúdez, 2012, p.217). This can be understood through what Pierre Bourdieu (1998) described as the essence of neoliberalism: the 'methodological destruction of collectives' – under the guise of freedom and progress, individuals become atomised. Atomisation is described as a mechanism which reduces collective units, such as families and unions, to individual subjects who must maximise their utility (Boykoff, 2011).

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Political-economic individualism detaches individuals, both ideologically and spatially, from social frameworks, making political resistance to economic injustice and collective social responsibility, increasingly difficult.

Neoliberal programmes of structural adjustment have been criticised for increasing economic inequality and transforming social vulnerability into a personal responsibility (Hennessey 2000). The neoliberal agenda has also led to 'responsabilisation', the process whereby citizens are expected to bear the burdens of a diminished welfare state (Schram, 2015, p.71). Following the economic crisis of 2008/9, the British Conservative-Liberal government coalition imposed in 2010 an austerity programme involving drastic cuts to public services – a move which can be framed within the logic of neoliberal structural adjustment programs of the 1980s (Craddock, 2017). Since its victory in 2015, the Conservative government has continued to restructure the welfare state through further reductions on social and public spending (Emejulu and Bassel, 2015). The British government's austerity program has been deemed detrimental by economic observers for its failure to increase economic growth and for its role in drastically increasing economic inequality, one of countless examples which challenge the neoliberal equation of structural adjustment with economic growth. (Ostry et al, p.38).

Following the 2008/9 economic crisis the contradictions of the neoliberal turn have become increasingly apparent in the West, namely through rising levels of socioeconomic inequality, the erosion of public services and precarious employment (Tejerina et al. 2013). Recent social movements have responded to these developments through mass spatial occupations of symbolic public spaces to protest against profit-driven economic and political institutions. From the development of the 15M mobilisations in Spain into the *Indignados* movement, and its Greek (*Aganaktismenoi*), French (*Indignate-vous*) and Portuguese (*Geração à Rasca*) counterparts, to the hundreds of Occupy Wall Street mobilisations across the globe, contemporary social movements contesting global neoliberal processes have been defined by their long-term occupation and reclamation of public space (Bailey et al. 2016; Theocharis et al. 2015). These movements were often organised through social media and once on the ground developed internal communities, techniques of participatory democracy and self-organised workshops and debates addressing contemporary social issues (Tejerina et al. 2013).

Recent academic literature notes the gendered aspects of austerity, showing that British women are disproportionally affected by state-shrinking policies due to their already subordinate socioeconomic and political position as well as their reliance on welfare provisions as primary users, employees and beneficiaries of public services (Annesley, 2014; Craddock, 2017). Intersectional analyses of austerity have gone beyond gendered aspects, noting that people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, the unemployed and the young have also been disproportionally affected by public cuts (O'Hara, 2014; Emejulu, Bassel, 2015). Rebecca Stringer (2014) argues that the disproportionate effect of austerity measures on particular groups demonstrates the intersection between neoliberal restructuring and 'class stratification, gender segregation, ethnic hierarchy, ableism and homophobia' (p.10). Restricted access to domestic violence service can be seen as one intersection between neoliberal restructuring and gender segregation.

In the UK violent crimes against women by domestic perpetrators have increased since 2009 with recent figures showing that on average, male violence claims the lives of two women every week (Walby, 2016). Meanwhile, services to prevent violence against women have been drastically reduced due to austerity policies (Walby and Towers 2016; Ishkanian 2014). Jacqui True (2012) argues that neoliberal economic policies are responsible for making women more vulnerable to gender violence. Since 2010, central government funding of local councils (which finance domestic violence services amongst other public services) has halved and thirty-four domestic violence specialist services have been shut (Crewe, 2016). Claire Annesley (2014) notes that national governments have successively failed to provide sufficient funding for women's refuges, despite recognising the need for women and children to relocate to safety (p.330).

Aside from limiting spatial safety, the gendered, classed and racialised aspects of austerity measures have also led to an intensification of social-spatial segregation in cities (Watt and Minton, 2016). In the last three decades, social housing in the UK has been on the decline (Peck and Ticklell, 2002) and current policy proposals by the Conservative government, such as the 2016 Housing and Planning Act, have been described as 'the end of social housing' (Watt and Minton, 2016). The lack of spaces of safety for victims fleeing violence can also be seen as a factor contributing to the recent rise in intimate violence. It is in this context of shrinking state provision, privatisation of social housing and rising male violence that Sisters Uncut have emerged.

Sisters Uncut is a feminist direct-action group which was founded in 2014 by domestic violence service workers and survivors from East London in response to local funding cuts to specialist domestic violence services and the rise of intimate partner casualties. Sisters Uncut campaign against government cuts to domestic violence services and the lack of social housing for women fleeing violence. As a grassroots movement, Sisters Uncut currently organise through ten local collectives across the UK and operate through a gender policy[1] and non-hierarchal organising[2]. While they coordinate for national campaigns, the groups organise independently and locally. This is important as, although the central government imposes funding cuts, it is up to local councils to decide which local services to finance, a result of the Conservative government's 'Big Society' agenda – which allegedly sought to open up public services, empower local communities and promote volunteering and civic participation (Ishkanian, 2014). The impact of localism agendas, which 'combines rhetoric of devolution of power to local government with significant cuts to local government funding' means that refuges are particularly vulnerable to local funding cuts due to their position as non-statutory services and their lack of immediate local impact – women must often travel across regions to access services (Bowstead, 2015, p.328).

Sisters Uncut is open to 'all women, all those who experience oppression as women, and all those who identify as women for the purpose of political organising'.[3] Their activism entails disruptive protests, occupations of public buildings and theatrical demonstrations (Guest, 2016, p.200). The group promotes intersectionality and focuses specifically on cuts to specialist services which cater, 'for black and ethnic minority women, LGBTQ+ people and women with disabilities'.[4] They also campaign against wider forms of structural oppression and their effects on migrant women and women of colour (Spratt, 2016). Literature on anti-austerity movements in the UK shows that exclusion from local anti-austerity groups means women turn to community-based activism (Craddock, 2017), that despite being disproportionally affected by austerity, minority women struggle to gain political agency in activism (Emejulu and Bassel, 2015), and that while feminist ideology is present in British anti-austerity movements, structural barriers limit women's participation (Maiguashca et al. 2016). As such, Sisters Uncut's activism represents a response to the exclusionary nature of

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[1] Meaning only women, trans and non-binary people are allowed to participate in meetings, protests and occupations. Trans: relating to a person whose sense of personal identity and gender does not correspond with their birth sex. Non-binary: a person who does not exclusively identify as masculine or feminine.
[2] Sisters Uncut: Feministo (2016) http://www.sistersuncut.org/feministo/
[3] Sisters Uncut: FAQs (2016) http://www.sistersuncut.org/faqs/
[4] Sisters Uncut: Feministo (2016) http://www.sistersuncut.org/feministo/

anti-austerity movements as well as to the contemporary political climate. While Sisters Uncut have been widely reported in the media, they only figure in passing in academic literature which notes their role in drawing attention to the gendered aspects of austerity (Craddock, 2017), their innovative tactics (Guest, 2016) and their articulation of intersectional feminism (Evans, 2016).

This thesis begins from the idea that Sisters Uncut seek to reconcile redistributive (public housing and services) and identity-based (specialist domestic violence services) claims, an approach which can be framed within Nancy Fraser's (1996) framework of social justice. Fraser's framework shows how social and economic injustices are deeply entwined. As such, Fraser argues that social justice approaches should combine a politics of redistribution (though egalitarian economic distribution) with identity-based claims (through the recognition of culturally subordinated identities). Through an understanding of spaces as ordered by public/private divisions which rely on gendered and neoliberal rationalities (Harvey 1990; Massey 2005; Springer 2012), I discuss how, through discourses of death and performative, affective and embodied activism (Mauss 1973; Juris 2008; Butler 2004), Sisters Uncut re-define what is admissible in the public sphere by politicising neoliberal austerity policies as a form of bodily harm. In a context of neoliberal self-reliance and spatial segregation, Sisters Uncut allude to our common bodily vulnerability through discourses of death and performances of mourning, disrupting established understandings between physical and structural violence. I argue that Sisters Uncut's redistributive and identity-based activism relies on a process of reclaiming and re-signifying the meanings attached to public and activist spaces (Lefebvre 1991; de Certeau 1984; Sewell 2001). The conceptual idea of space as embedded in power, gendered and economic relations allows us to see how the manipulation of material (public and activist) spaces temporarily subverts such relations by disrupting the ideological assumptions on which they are built.

I begin by framing Sisters Uncut's activism within the history of the 1960s British refuge movement, contemporary shifts in conceptions of the public/private sphere and previous movement's use of theatrical tactics. Chapter one examines Sisters Uncut's discourse of austerity as a form of gendered, racial and structural violence which develops out of an intersectional analysis of the current neoliberal setting (Fraser, 2013). Chapter two explores how through discourses of death and a politics of public mourning, Sisters Uncut transform public spaces into sites of visceral political contestation, alluding to our collective bodily vulnerability and the violent, gendered consequences of austerity. Chapter three delves

further into the significance of space by focusing on the construction of Sisters Uncut meetings and occupations as safe spaces. These spaces are imagined as non-patriarchal and equalising sites, where a collective identity based on intersectional feminist ideals can be pursued. Drawing from Sisters Uncut activist accounts of protests and identity-building, this thesis points to the subversive and political potential of the spatial in making redistribution and identity claims. I examine how Sisters Uncut's spatial resistance illustrates the fluid and changeable nature of the ideological distinctions which order the shifting state/market divide, the neoliberal privatisation of urban space and the gendered assumptions around the public sphere and contentious politics. I then explore how the construction of activist spaces allows for an imagining of alternative forms of social organisation which challenge neoliberal ideologies of individualism and conclude by considering the limitations of translating intersectional theory into praxis.

Methods

My analysis develops primarily out of interviews conducted with fourteen Sisters Uncut activists, a five-week period (April-May 2017) of participant observation of meetings, protests and occupations in Bristol (UK) and document analysis of Sisters Uncut online statements[5]. Alessandro Portelli (2016) describes oral history as a method which 'tells us less about *events* than about their *meaning*' (p.36). Using Portelli's oral-history approach (recording in-depth interviews) allowed me to place emphasis on the significance activists attached to particular actions and spaces. Gloría Cuádraz and Lynet Uttal (1999) describe in-depth interviewing as a method which encourages individuals to explain their interpretations of particular circumstances and to define the processes leading to certain outcomes in their own terms (p.160). Since my analysis focuses on how activists construct and give meaning to spaces, an oral-history approach was appropriate in allowing me to analyse the relationship between individual and collective feelings and interpretations activists associated to particular spaces and how perceptions of space allowed for particular politics to develop, whether in public (protests) or private (meetings and occupations).

As a feminist, gender studies student and activist, I am sympathetic with the Sisters Uncut cause. My identity as a young woman gave me access to the group's activities, allowing me to become an active participant of the community and conduct interviews. Kanuha (2000) describes this ethnographic approach as 'insider research': 'conducting research with communities or identity groups of which one is a member (p.440). While my insider position was beneficial in accessing interviews, it also required an understanding of my positionality as researcher and an awareness of the risks of conflicted loyalties (Mackay, 2011). In accounting for positionality, I followed a feminist standpoint approach, which emphasises the need to reflect on relations of power as obstacles to knowledge-production (Rolin, 2007) and the importance of inquiring the researcher 'in the same critical plane as the overt subject matter' so as to appear 'not as invisible, anonymous voice of authority, but as a real, historical individual with concrete, specific desires and interests' (Harding, 1987, p.9).

Stephen Small (2005) points to the interdependence between the researcher and those being researched in action-oriented studies and the importance of 'reducing the distance between the two' (p.947). The occupation provided me with a way to engage with the community in a

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[5] Sisters Uncut: Feministo (2016) http://www.sistersuncut.org/feministo/

non-obtrusive way. Similarly, participating in meetings and protests was productive in reducing power structures in interviews and allowing me to reflect on my position, not only as researcher, but as a white female activist. I put forward my experiences as a participating subject in the analysis in the hope of making these reflections visible. The activists I interviewed belong primarily to the Bristol Sisters Uncut group with some from London and Brighton. Bristol is often described a desirable city to live in, yet following years of austerity measures, levels of deprivation, inequality and racial segregation have increased. Like many cities in the UK, Bristol is experiencing a housing crisis: homelessness, overcrowding and rents continue to rise and there are only sixty-three beds available for survivors of domestic violence (Smith, 2016). Direct-action activism against austerity cuts has grown as a result with groups such as ACORN[6] and Sisters Uncut. Focusing on Bristol Sisters Uncut provides the opportunity to explore the role of public spaces in activism in a city whose architectural landscape is increasingly privatised.

Cuádraz and Uttal (1999) discuss the tensions of conducting qualitative studies and accounting for an intersectional analysis – how to maintain a race, class and gender sample without imposing such praxis of analysis onto the data. The authors put forward the method of grounded theory: 'collecting data from small, non-random samples identified through purposive sampling' (p.162). While my sample was limited to Sisters Uncut activists, I did not seek out an intersectional sample. Given the prevalence of intersectionality as a politics put forward by Sisters Uncut, this specific study allows for a discussion of intersectionality without using a pre-determined sampling method which accounts for race, class and gender diversity. My sample reflects the demographic of the Bristol group which was mostly white, young, able-bodied, female and middle-class. Direct-action involves public disobedience and can entail criminal activity. Additionally, Sisters Uncut campaign against gender violence meaning interviewees could be expected to have either experienced or known of someone who had experienced violence. As such, this project deals with sensitive topics which require complete anonymity of personal data or information which could be used to identify participants. Before conducting interviews, I assured participants of anonymity, provided the option of refusing to answer any questions and acquired oral consent to record interviews. Interviews were conducted during the library occupation and in public spaces and ranged between thirty to fifty minutes in length. None of the actions discussed in the thesis are illegal, yet as a precaution measure, I have kept all participants anonymous through

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[6] Association of Community Organisations for Reform Now

pseudonyms and have omitted information which could compromise the safety or privacy of participants. I also offered participants the option of receiving a copy of their interview transcription and will be providing the Bristol Sisters Uncut group with a research report on completion of this project.

Literature Review

The movement against domestic violence

Literature on movements against domestic violence notes that grassroots groups and refuges developed out of the Women's Liberation Movement and the activism of the late 1960s and 1970s (Schneider, 1994; Weldon 2002). Britain is seen as the site where the movement first emerged, with the US and European countries following years later (Dobash and Dobash 2003; McMillan 2007). Nineteenth-century British suffrage activists staged protests in courts to legally address domestic violence (Harne and Radford, 2008), focusing on the figure of 'the drunken brute', while mid-twentieth-century activists viewed domestic violence as a result of 'working-class lifestyles' (Engle, 2009, p.25). Following the Women's Liberation Movement in the 1970s such violence was conceptualised by radical feminist activists and scholars as 'male violence'. Emphasising gender over other categories such as class and race, this perspective saw male violence as universal and central to patriarchy and the subordination of women (Engle, p.13).

The British refuge movement developed in the late 1960s and was influenced by radical feminism as well as by socialist-feminist thought and trade union organisation (Dobash and Dobash 1992; Kantola 2006). Socialist feminists questioned the gendered inequalities produced by capitalism, race, class and male political hierarchies, while radical feminists emphasised the need for women-only spaces (Engle, p.186). The socialist feminist concern with structural inequalities was influential in broadening understandings of 'violence': intimate violence was framed as a historical manifestation of male domination, reinforced by institutional and economic capitalist structures (Engle, p.15). Sisters Uncut's conception of austerity as a form of violence can be traced to feminist socialist understandings of structural oppression, in which institutional and economic structures reinforce male violence and the subordination of culturally misrecognised groups.

A lack of state response to public protests led women to set up systems of support for victims of violence, assistance with children and shelter provision (Malos, 2000). In the early 1970s refuges in Britain were located in squatted properties, run by volunteers who sought to organise in non-hierarchical and egalitarian ways (Dobash and Dobash, 1992). Women-only spaces were central to the movement's political agenda: they provided a space of safety for victims and sites where feminist perspectives and political organisation could be developed

through consciousness-raising, a self-empowerment tool used by victims and activists (Schneider, p.992). Sisters Uncut's spatial resistance highlights the importance of spaces of safety for victims of domestic violence and their emphasis on safe spaces and a gender policy, echoes radical feminist perspectives which saw women-only spaces as emancipatory sites. While in Britain activists initially organised public protests, their tactics later developed into organising refuges and service provision (Harne and Radford, 2008), signalling the first shift in the refuge movement's approach to violence – from public protests to service provision and support. The activism of Sisters Uncut echoes early movement practices as they organise through local collectives and operate through consensus decision-making, women-only policies and non-hierarchal organisation[7]. The re-emergence of a public protest approach by Sisters Uncut – disruptive actions, awareness-raising, lobbying local councils and squatting buildings – points to a process of circularity, a return to original tactics in British activism against domestic violence.

In the US the assertion that male violence was universal, despite race and class distinctions, was politically effective, as an essentialised gender category allowed for mobilisation across various sectors of the population. (Engle, 2009). Nevertheless, this approach was limited as it, 'foregrounded the problems of middle-class white women while ignoring the very different experiences of differentially situated women' (p.15). In the US black feminists criticised generic approaches to domestic violence, pointing to the difficulties women of colour encountered when fleeing and reporting violence (hooks 1986; Crenshaw 1991; Connell 1995). This was part of broader feminist critiques by women of colour, who called for an understanding of simultaneous oppressions (patriarchy, class and race) and challenged Western constructions of Third World women (Mohanty 1986; Carby 1996).

Similarly tensions developed over the British movement's construction around white heterosexual women (Hanmer, 2000). Southall Black Sisters, a refuge set up in 1979 for Asian and Afro-Caribbean women, integrated race and ethnicity as important factors to the movement's understandings of domestic violence (Kantola, p.74). Aside from specialised service provision, they campaigned against punitive immigration policies which restricted access to services (Pragna, 1999). Black feminist theory became influential towards the end of the 1980s and has a direct influence on Sisters Uncut's activism which emphasises the

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[7] Sisters Uncut: FAQs (2016) http://www.sistersuncut.org/faqs/

effects of austerity cuts on black, migrant and minority women (Mama 1989, Southall Black Sisters 1990).

By the mid-1980s, domestic violence was a politically legitimate issue in Britain and women's organisations began receiving government funding which entailed the appointment of paid workers and the imposition of hierarchical structures (Harne and Radford, p.172). This produced a shift in the movement – activist practices turned into professionalised service provision (Schneider, p.993). Engle notes that although initial actions against violence were grassroots and focused on self-help efforts, activists soon recognised the need for state support, leading to a shift 'from a radical critique of patriarchy, racism and other forms of inequality to a more therapeutic stance that focused on helping individuals' (p.49). While British refuges maintained more political independence than shelters in the US, they underwent similar patterns of professionalisation (Harne and Radford, 2008). Following the original development in the refuge movement's activism – from public protests to autonomous service provision – the institutionalisation of professionalised refuges and service provision in the 1980s signalled the end of the movement (Mackay, 2008, p.17).

Sisters Uncut's official aim is the restoration of funding to specialist domestic violence services, a re-conceptualisation of the original movement's priority of refuge provision and victim support. The partial retreat of the British government in funding service provision has provided a window for direct-action activism to re-emerge. While institutionalised groups such as Southall Black Sisters can be critical of state measures, they remain within the parameters of service provision. Institutionalised service provision, despite being underfunded, provides the space for a new wave of activism to develop – one which can simultaneously criticise and demand from the state without risking professionalisation. A fundamental part of understanding the refuge movement is its treatment of the public/private divide. Next, I outline conceptions of the public/private dichotomy and their relation to Sisters Uncut's activism.

The shifting nature of the public/private divide

Feminist theory has been central in deconstructing the ideological division between the public (state, market and civil society) and the private (domestic sphere) (McKinnon 1989; Pateman 1989, Rosaldo 1980). Initially feminist critiques of the public/private sphere located the cause of women's oppression in their spatial confinement to the domestic sphere; later analyses focused on gendered ideological divisions which posited women as embodied and

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sexual against men as rational and political. This is a crucial differentiation between space, as a material site of concrete spatial relations and the ideological abstraction of public/private spheres. The public/private geographic imaginary served to enforce women's oppression both ideologically and spatially. Frances Olsen (1983) criticised the state/domestic distinction, arguing that in relegating women's issues to the private sphere, the state failed to deal with issues such as domestic violence. Silvia Federici (1975) challenged the relegation of women to the private sphere by denaturalising domestic chores as a feminine attribute and revaluing housework as productive labour necessary to the functioning of public life. Susan Boyd (1997) notes that the second-wave slogan 'the personal is political' politicised 'private' social relations and brought the sphere of the home, female sexuality and child-rearing to the public sphere. Public and legislative attention towards violence against women, alongside increased participation in the labour force and the emergence of contraception, challenged the state/family distinction. In critiquing the spatial restrictions which processes of privatisation and austerity impose on victims, Sisters Uncut continue the legacy of earlier movements by re-politicising domestic violence as a public issue.

The public/private divide also represents the ideological division between the state (government activity and public property) and the market (economic activity and private property). The assertion in liberal thought that the market thrives best when left unregulated by the state has been widely adopted in Western neoliberal economies (Brodie, 1995, p.52). This assertion suggests a clear divide between the market and the state yet neoliberal reforms, such as restructuring, deregulation and privatisation, require state action. Neoliberalism endorses the expansion of the private sector as the basis for governance; it is in the process of neoliberal state reform that the state/market divide becomes blurred. Boyd notes that under neoliberal logic, the persistence of social and economic inequality is seen as 'natural and beyond the proper scope of state activity' (Olsen, 1983, p.1502). Feminist scholars have pointed to the gendered implications of market deregulation: 'the historically contingent lines between public and private are being redrawn, with the private sphere being expected to assume greater responsibility for things once viewed as public' (Boyd, p.20). The dismantling of welfare systems in Western liberal economies risks pushing the burden of care back into the 'private' sphere: families, communities and third sector organisations. In focusing on the connections between structural and physical violence, the shifting state/market division is central to the activism of Sisters Uncut.

The public sphere also represents the division between the state and civic life. Jürgen Habermas (1974) theorised the concept of the public sphere as an arena in which citizens could, though discussion and debate, influence the state and represent the 'will of the people'. This conception sought to remodel the 18th century bourgeois public sphere and put forward a normative ideal of participatory democracy based on the freedom of all citizens to express their opinions:

> 'By 'the public sphere' we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body' (Habermas, p.49).

Feminist scholars noted the lack of analysis by Habermas on the gendered and exclusionary nature of the public sphere (Landes 1988; Ryan 1992). Nevertheless, Seyla Benhabib (1993) points to strands of feminist theorising inspired by Habermas's social theory for which the public sphere is important in articulating a feminist critique of late welfare-state capitalist democracies (p.109). Nancy Fraser (1992) is a notable contributor to this strand revising Habermas's concept of the public sphere as one which necessitates a reduction of social inequality and attention to social differences. Benhabib (1997) argues that the emergence of identity-based political movements has led to a democratisation of the public sphere, where previously subordinated voices can communicate and pursue political struggles (p.18). The contentious and creative use of public space by Sisters Uncut challenges gendered notions of the public sphere, democratising the public sphere through identity-based claims.

The criminalisation of domestic violence represents the possibilities of contesting public/private ideological divisions. Scholars have also noted the impacts of ideological shifts between the state/market division: from notions of social interdependence and the provision of universal support to vulnerable groups, to individualism and independence (Hodgetts et al, 2014). The structural violence of austerity measures represents an ideological transgression of the British state's obligation to ensure citizen welfare. The public/private divide can be seen as a hegemonic concept which, as described by Stuart Hall (1988), involves a process of consent:

> '[Hegemony] is capable not only of organizing its own base through the construction of alliances between different sectors and social forces, but which has a central features of that process the construction and winning of popular consent to that authority among key sectors of the dominated

classes themselves [...] it must be constantly and ceaselessly renewed, reenacted' (p.53).

Conceiving the ideological public/private divide as hegemonic suggests that, similarly to the state/family divide, the shifting state/market divide can be resisted. The above examples demonstrate that ideological public/private distinctions entail spatial divisions which shift in relation to power relations between groups. The shifting nature of the state/market divide results in a reduction of public spaces and services which increases spatial segregation based on socioeconomic inequality. Sisters Uncut's use of public space challenges gendered spatial divisions as well as the increasing privatisation of space and services in the UK.

Boyd claims that processes of restructuring and privatisation may provide a space for resistance through community and local struggles (p.20). Aside from the gendered aspects of the public/private divide, scholars such as Boyd, Fraser and Benhabib have called for an inclusion of its intersections with race, class, sexual identity and disability. The reduction in specialist services and social housing for domestic violence victims entails various public/private conceptions: privatisation risks dismantling the services and protections which had allowed women to redraw conceptions of violence as a 'private' issue. Sisters Uncut's claims follow the legacy of the 1960s refuge movement in challenging the gendered public/private division by repoliticising domestic violence and its effects on subordinated women. Nevertheless their focus on austerity policies represents primarily, a struggle against the shifting state/market division. The contradictions inherent to a privatised vision of the neoliberal state provides a terrain for local forms of resistance to develop, which utilise public space to contest persisting notions of gendered spheres and the privatisation – in both the economic and social sense – of domestic violence. The significance of particular bodies in public protests is essential to an understanding of movements which seek to disrupt public/private distinctions. Next I discuss the significance of the body and theatrical protests in previous movements to frame the political significance of Sisters Uncut's use of public space.

The sociopolitical significance of the body in activism

Feminism has reconceptualised the female body from a biological form to a politically inscribed entity shaped by histories of control (Ramazanoglu, 1993). Diana Coole (2013) describes feminist body politics as 'the political importance of the body, sexuality, reproduction, and violence—overcoming the public–private distinction and showing how

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power relations shape not only the "public" sphere but also the "private" sphere' (p.162). From challenging the objectification of women's bodies and gender violence, to campaigns for reproductive rights, women's activism reflects the sociopolitical significance of the body in making political claims in public spaces and its potential in challenging unequal gendered relations.

Tim Cresswell's (1994) analysis of the Greenham Common women's peace camp illustrates how a combination of carnivalesque styles of protest and a transgression of gendered and geographical norms in the camp challenged the logic of nuclear diplomacy. According to Cresswell the chaotic, public and bodily congregation of women in the camp stood against the hierarchical ordered airbase, representing a 'transgression of geographical boundaries that establish a dominant cultural and social order' (p.35). In the eyes of outsiders, the everyday physical congregation of women gained political significance by denaturalising the airbase as a space of masculine authority and turning it into a feminist symbol of the peace movement. The choice of direct-action by Sisters Uncut can be understood through this framework, in which the transgression of gendered bodies norms are utilised as political tactics which reimagine the meanings attached to particular bodies and spaces.

Maria Alonso (1988) finds that ideals of gendered bodies play an important factor in the re-inscription of subjectivities by *Serrano* peasants who construct their identity against capitalism. Alonso argues that to understand resistance, we must pay attention to how power is experienced and negotiated outside of formal contexts and its effects on particular bodies and identities. In this view, processes of political resistance can re-inscribe the bodies of women with meanings which contest and transform discursive constructions, 'of both the body personal and the body politic in a historical memory which disputes official representations of the past' (p.13). The essentialist notion of motherhood can be seen as a representation which has been historically imposed upon the female body, associating women with the private sphere – the home or in the case of *Serrano* peasants, the land.

As a result, the enactment of motherhood in the public sphere, exemplified by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, represents a political spectacle in itself. Diana Taylor (2001) discusses how the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo gained visibility through occupying 'the most public space in Argentina', claiming political recognition for their disappeared children and challenging the state's military regime. Performances of motherhood modelled on the Virgin Mary exploited a system of representation which had previously controlled female

visibility (p.102). Through dramatic spectacles, the demonstrations served to 'restore' the 'disappeared' into the public consciousness, making the absence of children visible in public spaces. Sisters Uncut have performed similar actions such as collectively reading the names of victims of domestic violence in public spaces. Such an enactment of remembering seeks to trigger emotional responses and make the relation between structural and intimate violence more tangible to audiences.

The act of mourning is traditionally associated with women who must perform and display their grief towards family or community members. Franziska Brantner (2009) explores the transnational activism of Women in Black, who challenge the ongoing denial of war crimes by states through a performance of public mourning of war victims from the Israel-Palestinian conflict and the Yugoslav wars. Brantner claims that Women in Black subvert the traditional public spectacle by mourning the enemy's victims – 'their black robes and silence make them visible, unavoidable and inescapably political' (p.137). Sara Helman and Tamar Rapoport (1997) show how the Women in Black movement in Israel challenged official national discourses and symbolically disrupted ingrained notions of femininity. In utilising their bodies in the public realm, women 'constitute themselves as autonomous political agents', instilling new meanings on their own bodies and 'reformulating their place in the sociopolitical order' (p.695). The women-only activism of Sisters Uncut and their encounters with public audiences, challenges gendered assumptions of public space and transforms the conception of individual bereavement into a collective form of solidarity.

Writing on AIDS activism in the 1980s, Athena Athanasiou (2005) describes the 'activism of mourning' as 'public and collective formations by which trauma is addressed in all its affective, social, and political or biopolitical implications, intimacies, and limits' (p.42). She argues that ACT UP's public 'die-ins' and AIDS Memorial Quilt, conjured new forms of activism which blurred private/public and affective/political binaries. For Athanasiou, the radical element of 'activism of mourning' lies in its ability to question, '…what bodies are valued, cared for, and mourned, and which ones remain foreclosed, unmourned, and dispossessed, outside and beyond the canon of high humanity' (p.444). Reflecting on ACT UP's affective and performative activism, Douglas Crimp (1989) explains that the movement's slogan – Silence=Death – mobilised direct-action through a militant enunciation of demands which contested assumed facts about the epidemic (p.4). Crimp illustrates the relationship between mourning and activism and the ability of language and the body to unsettle the boundaries of the political. Discourses of death, 'die-ins' and public mourning

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protests are recurrent in Sisters Uncut's activism, and can be understood within the performative politics of public mourning framework which illustrates the political potential of disrupting the assumed boundaries between structural and intimate violence.

Chapter One

This chapter frames Sisters Uncut's activism within Fraser's (1996) framework of social justice which seeks to reconcile a politics of economic redistribution with claims for the recognition of culturally subordinated identities. In denouncing the lack of public funding available for specialist domestic violence services, Sisters Uncut combine redistributive with recognition claims. I argue that such claims result in two distinct yet interrelated forms of activism (internal and external) which rely on processes of reimagining spaces (safe and public spaces). In this chapter I focus primarily on their 'external' activism: theatrical and visceral public protests. I analyse how through theatrical protests and discourses of death, Sisters Uncut equate austerity with physical harm. I show how, in alluding to notions of collective vulnerability and responsibility, these tactics illustrate the embodied nature of structural violence and its disproportionate effects on culturally subordinated identities.

Reconciling Redistributive and Recognition Claims

Sisters Uncut's activism develops out of the disproportionate effects of British austerity policies on specialist domestic violence services and its beneficiaries. In pointing to the interconnection between social and economic inequality, Sisters Uncut combine feminism with struggles for economic justice. Such an alliance can be historically contextualised within the rise of identity politics in the West in the 1960s – in which political movements sought recognition by challenging identity-based oppressions – and within the imposition of austerity policies by the British state in 2010 – which diminished public and welfare provisions. In 'The Politics of Recognition' Charles Taylor (1994) discusses, in the context of nationalism, feminism and multiculturalism, the importance of 'equal recognition' in democratic societies. Taylor argues that all humans are equally worthy of respect and that withholding such recognition can become a form of oppression: 'The projection of an inferior or demeaning image on another can actually distort and oppress, to the extent that the image is internalized' (p.36). Taylor noted that misrecognising 'difference' would result in the universalisation of dominant groups and exclusion of subordinate groups. Taylor's stance responds to social justice movements of the 1960s and 1970s which sought recognition around race, gender, sexuality, or ethnicity. More specifically, Taylor's thesis for recognition sought to reconcile collective and individual rights in the Canadian Québécois context – his

argument for multiculturalism and the recognition of non-Western cultures was based upon a critique of difference-blind liberalism.

Fraser (1996) pointed to the failure in Taylor's analysis to recognise the centrality of distributive injustice in perpetuating the misrecognition of subordinate groups, noting that emphasis on the recognition of 'difference' in identity politics and social justice movements threatened to displace economic claims of distributive justice. While Taylor responded to 1970s social justice movements claiming recognition, Fraser wrote from a socialist-feminist perspective. Fraser (2004) illustrated the historical division of movements through the 'redistribution-recognition' dilemma: struggles for economic justice have traditionally focused on class politics whereas 'identity politics' has been concerned with injustices surrounding gender, race and sexuality.

Fraser asserts that any analysis of oppression must pay attention to the mutually constitutive relation between culture and the political economy. Seeking to deconstruct the 'redistribution-recognition' dilemma, Fraser (1996) constructed a framework of social justice which synthesised a politics of egalitarian redistribution (through democratic and distributive economic restructuring) and a politics of recognition (through deconstruction of cultural subordination). Arguing for the need for social movements to couple social and economic dimensions of justice, Fraser explains the concept of 'bivalent modes of collectivity', socially subordinated categories such as class, race and gender:

> 'Bivalent collectivities, in sum, may suffer both socioeconomic maldistribution and cultural misrecognition in forms where neither of these injustices is an indirect effect of the other, but where both are primary and co-original. In their case, neither the politics of redistribution alone nor the politics of recognition alone will suffice (p.15).

Attention to redistribution and recognition allows for an analysis of the cultural dimensions of seemingly unbiased economic arrangements. Fraser demonstrates the effects of institutionalised patters of maldistribution in welfare state programs which disadvantage groups of people based on ascribed 'differences' (p.32). The reform of the British welfare state provides a framework to analyse how economic redistribution becomes increasingly dependent upon social recognition and the value-laden interpretations of sexuality, gender, poverty and citizenship (p.56). In an increasingly precarious economic climate, Fraser's analysis shows the dialectical nature of social and economic inequalities – a perspective which Taylor's 'politics of difference' fails to account for.

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The current dismantling of specialist domestic violence services – which support black and ethnic minority women, LGBTQ+ people and women with disabilities – echoes Fraser's thesis on how bivalent differentiations entail both economic and cultural injustices. As such, Sisters Uncut's activism fits Fraser's framework of social justice: it makes claims for the redistribution of public resources (public domestic violence services) and demands for the recognition of subordinate groups (to reduce the hierarchies of culturally defined statuses).

Internal and External Activism in Sisters Uncut

Literature of political organising distinguishes between 'community organising' – localised processes of building relationships, empowering individuals and identifying issues – and 'collective action' – public actions and demonstrations seeking changes in the distribution of power (Tilly 1978; Stall and Stoecker 1997). Nevertheless, social movement scholars also note that community organising and collective action are inextricably linked; the development of group consciousness through informal networks is seen as essential in transforming individual members into collective political actors (Morris 1989; Taylor and Whittier 1992). Nancy Naples (2012) argues that women's social networks and their construction of communities have been central in building feminist political movements across race, class and gender. Similarly, Taylor and Whittier (1992) demonstrate how collective identities in lesbian feminist communities encouraged the politicization of daily life alongside political action to challenge dominant systems of oppression. The analytical distinction between community organising and a politics of the public sphere is relevant to Sisters Uncut's activism, yet attention to the spatial characteristics of their actions shows how the two interact.

During my period of participant observation, I was involved in the two forms of activism outlined above, which I will analytically describe as 'internal' and 'external'. On the one side, I was making banners, speaking to media outlets and local residents and attending protests, occupations and court cases – helping spread, in public settings, the (external) political message of Sisters Uncut. On the other side, I was engaged in a constant (internal) process of self-reflection in private Sisters Uncut settings such as meetings and occupations: I learnt to use gender-neutral pronouns, attended workshops on trans allyship, white supremacy and state violence, and recognised that as a praxis, intersectionality is not easily applied in activists settings. This internal/external analytical divide is illustrated through Lilly's experience of being inside one of Sisters Uncut's occupations. The 18-year-old college

student draws a distinction between Sisters Uncut's outward politics and their 'internal' culture:

> 'I originally went into the library occupation because I saw their campaign on the lack of beds available in Bristol for domestic violence victims. I went in because of the message they were trying to spread about cuts but when I was in there the thing that most affected me was the culture that they had about making sure that they were as self-aware as possible: 'how can we better ourselves as people?', 'how can we create a society that is better?'. So when I was in there, that's what I was thinking about, more than I was thinking about the cuts'.

Lilly's comment also illustrates the fluidity of the internal/external boundary: ways of thinking and acting in private activist settings – 'better ourselves' – are seen as essential in building wider social change in public settings – 'create a better society'. Following this fluid understanding, I argue that Sisters Uncut, engage in two, interrelated yet distinct, forms of activism which rely on particular conceptions of space. Redistributive claims, which challenge policies of austerity and the privatisation of public services and housing entails Sisters Uncut's 'external' activism: through direct-action in public spaces they communicate a message of structural violence to the public and the state.

While Sisters Uncut's redistributive claims rely on the recognition of cultural subordination (through intersectional analysis of the effects of austerity measures), I argue that Sisters Uncut's identity-based activism occurs primarily internally through a feminist politics of recognition which entails collective identity-building, self-reflection and empowerment which relies on the construction of safe spaces in the group's meetings and occupations – a reimagining of space which seeks to undermine internal hierarchies and challenge neoliberal and heteropatriarchal logics of individualism and gender normativity. While the distinction between internal/external activism can be linked to the redistribution/recognition distinction, I will show how in Sisters Uncut's spatial resistance, both claims and forms of activism overlap. In this chapter I will focus primarily on Sisters Uncut's 'external' activism, yet as I will show, public protests of mourning and a discourse of death encapsulate both redistribution and identity claims.

Structural Violence

In their campaigns, Sisters Uncut draw a direct relation between intimate and structural violence. Austerity cuts to domestic violence services are described as 'life-threatening': they

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are conceived as a gendered form of violence which equate, but are not limited to, domestic violence casualties:

> 'Sisters Uncut recognises that violence against women is not only perpetrated by intimate partners and family members. It is also perpetrated by a government which enacts state violence against women both in its cuts of the domestic violence support sector and in its oppressive and marginalising housing, immigration and welfare policies which prevent women from living safely'[8]

Johan Galtung (1969) put forward the concept of structural violence as one which, unlike *direct* physical violence, targets individuals *indirectly* through repressive social structures understood as social, political and economic systems which unjustly advantage particular groups according to gender, nationality, class and other categories (p.178). Galtung conceives of inequality and violence as mutually constitutive and argues that when violence is built into social structures, no direct perpetrator can be traced:

> '…it is not strange that attention has been focussed more on personal than on structural violence. Personal violence *shows*. The object of personal violence perceives the violence, usually, and may complain - the object of structural violence may be persuaded not to perceive this at all' (p.173).

Austerity measures are seldom described as acts of violence, yet they often have disproportionate and violence effects on vulnerable groups. Literature documenting the links between neoliberalism, inequality and violence is growing (Auyero 2000; Wade 2003; Harvey 2005). Seeking to illustrate how neoliberalism and violence are intertwined, Simon Springer (2012) quotes an interview with Naomi Klein, where she describes the difference between capitalism and neoliberalism: 'Neoliberalism is really just capitalism in its boorish phase, capitalism on the couch in an undershirt saying, 'what are you going to do, leave me?'' (Klein and Smith, 2008, p.584). Springer uses the middle-aged man analogy to evoke the nature of a political economic system which offers no alternative to recurrent abuse:

> 'To continue to embrace the maligned doctrine of neoliberalism and the malevolence it unleashes is to stay on the course of battery, exploitation and assault, and to *abandon* those most embattled by its exclusions and most scarred by its exceptional violence' (p.139).

Springer's formulation of neoliberalism as 'battery' which targets specific groups echoes Sisters Uncut's activism which posits austerity policies and domestic violence as equally

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[8] Sisters Uncut: Sisters Uncut call rowdy demo outside notorious Holloway Prison (2016) http://www.sistersuncut.org/2016/04/27/press-release-sisters-uncut-call-rowdy-demo-outside-notorious-holloway-prison/

violent. The concept of structural violence allows for a reading of localised experiences of violence as embedded in the global structures of neoliberal societies. Local activist movements which point to the interconnections between global economic shifts and local experiences of struggle hint at the potential of recognising the structural violence of neoliberal policies. Understanding the relationship between violence as a direct physical force, and violence as 'an ongoing, patterned, emplaced and embodied aspect of larger structural systems of inequity in society' (Springer, 2012), is essential for movements seeking to address structural oppression.

Austerity as Structural Violence

Sisters Uncut's conception of austerity cuts as a form of indirect violence represents a divergence from the 1960s refuge movement's and radical feminism's vision of violence as intimate, male and universal to all women. By prioritising a view of structural inequality, Sisters Uncut acknowledge different forms of oppression: 'As intersectional feminists we understand that a woman's individual experience of violence is affected by race, class, disability, sexuality and immigration status'[9]. Sisters Uncut campaign primarily against cuts to specialist domestic violence services yet they advance a broader understanding of violence: 'We stand united with all self-defining women who live under the threat of domestic violence, and those who experience violence in their daily lives'[10]. The shift in how violence is understood can be traced to the influence of intersectional theory in British feminist organising (Evans, 2016) and the disproportionate effects of austerity policies on subordinated groups[11].

Sisters Uncut draw a direct relation between neoliberal ideology and death: 'Austerity cuts are ideological but cuts to domestic violence services are fatal'[12]. Their focus on the embodied nature of structural violence can be framed within Judith Butler's (2011) writing on the centrality of the body in political claims:

> '…for the body to exist politically, it has to assume a social dimension – it is comforted outside itself and towards others in ways that cannot and do not ratify individualism. […] we are necessarily dependent on social relations and institutions that address the basic needs for food, shelter and protection from violence'

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[9] Sisters Uncut: Feministo (2016) http://www.sistersuncut.org/feministo/
[10] Sisters Uncut: Feministo (2016) http://www.sistersuncut.org/feministo/
[11] Illustrated in the closure of domestic violence services supporting African, Caribbean, Asian communities, LGBT+ and disabled people.
[12] Sisters Uncut: Feministo (2016) http://www.sistersuncut.org/feministo/

The allusion of death in relation to austerity directs attention to the failure of the state in ensuring citizen's safety from violence and draws on affective experiences of loss to illuminate our social vulnerability, which implicates our bodies and well as those of others:

> 'The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well. […] The body has its invariably public dimensions' (Butler, 2004, p.26).

Politicising death and mourning disrupts the neoliberal logic of individualism by affirming our collective interdependence – public exposure to the unspoken violence of austerity and its effects on women and minorities, points to our embodied vulnerability as well as our collective complicity, as political subjects, in allowing such violence to occur. Butler's writing on the political, vulnerable and collective nature of the body is useful in framing Sisters Uncut's discourse of austerity as an embodied illustration of state negligence:

> '…the question for a critical and contesting politics has to do with how basic goods are distributed, how life itself is allocated, and how the unequal distribution of the value and grievability of life is instituted by […] systematic forms of exploitation or negligence, which render populations differentially precarious and disposable' (Butler, 2011).

Through a politics of public mourning and bodily discourses of harm, Sisters Uncut protest the reduction of services aimed at vulnerable groups.

Following an announcement by Theresa May[13], of a £20 million funding boost for domestic violence services (Criddle, 2016), Sisters Uncut denounced it as 'a sticking plaster over a haemorrhage'[14] and criticised the system of 'competitive tendering' which local councils utilise to fund services:

> 'Services will be forced to bid for the centralised fund, pitting local services against each other. […] This fund will not reach the smaller, specialist refuge providers who desperately need it – especially culturally specific refuges that provide lifesaving support for women and non-binary people of colour'[15]

Addressing the 'competitive' nature of a funding system guided by neoliberal logic of efficiency, the allusion to flowing blood (haemorrhage) creates an embodied violent image,

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[13] Theresa May is the current Prime minister and leader of the British Conservative Party
[14] Sisters Uncut: UK Day of Action! (2016) http://www.sistersuncut.org/2016/11/14/sisters-uncut-uk-day-of-action/
[15] Sisters Uncut: UK Day of Action! (2016) http://www.sistersuncut.org/2016/11/14/sisters-uncut-uk-day-of-action/

denouncing seemingly progressive policies as inadequate solutions to ongoing structural harm. References to bodily harm and death in relation to austerity constructs a life/death binary which points to the vulnerability of bodies which are denied social care and institutional support. Such discourses seek to disrupt notions of individualism by triggering notions of collective responsibility and moral outrage at the state's negligence of vulnerable groups (Butler, 2011).

Sisters Uncut's conceptualisation of structural violence reconciles redistributive and recognition claims by indicating how austerity cuts disproportionally affect culturally misrecognised groups. In an online statement, Sisters Uncut denounce the lack of funding available for the only LGBTQ+ domestic violence service in the UK, arguing that socioeconomic maldistribution and cultural misrecognition reinforce the relationship between structural and intimate violence:

> 'The economic violence of austerity and cuts is helping make LGBT people more vulnerable to the interpersonal violence of domestic abusers by making it harder for us to escape and live independently. Violence in the home and in our relationships cannot be separated from the violence of the state'[16]

Another online statement, written by Sisters of Frida (a disabled women's group) describes how the systematic removal of social security provision leaves disabled women at greater risk of domestic violence:

> 'Isolation, dependence and vulnerability are exacerbated by austerity. Austerity sets up the conditions where disabled women are 2-3 times more likely to experience domestic violence'[17]

Following the legacy of the Southall Black Sisters refuge, Sisters Uncut highlight the intersections between racism and intimate violence:

> 'Austerity makes the effects of racism – and the vicious rhetoric surrounding cuts to welfare, housing and support – even more acute. Specialist support services for sisters of colour have been decimated, resulting in 66% of women who need help being turned away'[18]

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[16] Sisters Uncut: Austerity is killing LGBTQ+ people; Broken Rainbow facing 'closure' (2015)
http://www.sistersuncut.org/2016/02/06/austerity-is-killing-lgbtq-people-broken-rainbow-facing-closure/
[17] Austerity puts disabled women at greater risk of domestic violence (2015)
http://www.sistersuncut.org/2015/11/26/austerity-puts-disabled-women-at-greater-risk-of-domestic-violence/
[18] Why Sisters Uncut support Black Lives Matter UK #shutdown (2016)
http://www.sistersuncut.org/2016/08/05/why-sisters-uncut-support-black-lives-matter-uk/

Sisters Uncut denounce the difficulties migrant women face accessing support services, arguing that domestic and state violence are closely connected:

> 'State violence replicates the same power dynamics [as domestic violence]: the removal of support services and benefits traps fearful women in desperate situations; prison and immigration detention isolates and physically confines women, keeping them intimidated and rigidly controlled […] Migrant women have to make the choice between a violent household and detention or deportation. Both of these options can be life threatening. […] The absence of support services for migrant women is racist and sexist. It places the government in complicity with perpetrators''[19]

Sisters Uncut utilise domestic violence to emphasise the unequal social structures which underpin not only access to services but also other experiences of gendered and racial violence. Unlike the 1960s refuge movement, the embodied characteristics and the socioeconomic position of victims are foregrounded. Through a structural and intersectional analysis of the effects of neoliberal policies on particular bodies, the 'austerity as violence' discourse illuminates how cultural and economic injustice intersects.

Death and Blood in the Discourse of Sisters Uncut

In 'Precarious Life' Judith Butler (2004) puts forward the notion of collective human vulnerability to theorise our fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility towards each other. Butler describes the political potential of affirming the physical vulnerability of bodies – once our interdependence is acknowledged, our collective responsibility for the physical lives of one another is exposed (p.27). Yet as Butler shows, in public life some bodies are more tied to the national collectivity, meaning some lives are more grievable than others:

> 'It is not just that death is poorly marked, but that is unmarkable. Such a death vanishes, not into explicit discourse, but in the ellipses by which public discourse proceeds' (p.35).

As mentioned in the literature review, the use of death in ACT UP's discourse was effective in unsettling the boundaries of the 'political' and contesting assumed facts about the AIDS epidemic. Sisters Uncut's use of language to translate death and violence into a political public discourse can be framed within Butler's notion of collective responsibility – their claims for redistribution represent a refusal to allow for the effects of structural violence against culturally misrecognised bodies to go unnoticed.

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[19] #NoSisterIsIllegal: Sisters Uncut Week of Action Against Prison and Detention (2016)
http://www.sistersuncut.org/2016/09/12/state-violence-is-domestic-violence-sisters-uncut-week-of-action-against-prison-and-detention/

During my time with Bristol Sisters Uncut, I found myself painting large letters onto sheets, making banners which read: 'Marvin Rees[20], Your Cuts Kill', 'They Cut, We Bleed' and 'Austerity Kills'. For Sisters Uncut activists, the use of death and blood in slogans is more than a 'shock' tactic, it is a way to publicise the loss and violence which is derealised and diffused in the public imaginary. Maria, a 24-year-old film student comments on the need to publicly expose the correlation between austerity measures and death:

> 'People are dying from cuts. It's not a bad thing to get that across, because it's true. Although it's a violent image, sometimes violent images are better at conveying the truth, and this is what is happening'.

Her emphasis on the 'truth' – death as a consequence of political policies – demonstrates an attempt to bridge established distinctions between structural violence and physical harm. In this context, the 'truth' of death in relation to austerity stands against notions of death as a natural, bodily truth. Maria notes that violent language seeks to disrupt the obfuscation of austerity as harmful:

> 'I think people try to hide away from it, but the more we can spread the message that on an individual basis these cuts are really hurting people and that people are dying from these cuts [the better]. It's good because often they seem really wrapped up in policy and far away from people but it's not true'.

Lucy, a 27-year-old activist involved in various social justice movements, echoed the same sentiment by alluding to death as a real and direct consequence of austerity. Here she comments on the significance of death and blood in slogans:

> 'I think they're very powerful. Sometimes that's needed because people don't actually often translate cuts to having that kind of real impact and that actually people do die because of cuts. So I like all that kind of phrasing. I think it's important to actually translate cuts into lives'.

In discussing the use of death in slogans, the need to communicate the 'truth', the 'reality', the 'real' impact of the cuts was recurrent. The slogans illustrate an attempt to transcend the indirect 'nature' of structural violence, to show that like intimate violence, structural violence *shows*; forcing the public to recognise that which they are persuaded not to perceive at all (Galtung, p.173).

Laura, 26-year-old designer, describes the use of death as effective in communicating notions of violence:

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[20] Marvin Rees is British Labour Party politician and current Mayor of Bristol

'For this particular message it is appropriate. It's such a serious issue and I think a lot of the time it is sugar-coated in the way we talk about it in society because it is quite an awkward thing. And actually people do need to understand the reality of what happens'.

The construction of austerity as a cause of death were discussed within the framework of shirking domestic violence services, but also as a result of other forms of economic maldistribution – an increasingly punitive social benefits system, housing insecurity and diminishing public services. The use of death and blood in discourses alludes to our collective vulnerability and responsibility by positioning domestic violence victims and austerity cuts as 'publicly grievable life, an icon for national self-recognition' (Butler, p.34). Attempts to make 'people' see the violent 'truth' of austerity is a moral, as much as a political, call for solidarity (Jasper, 1997), one which relies on an ethical vision of our collective responsibility for the lives of others. Because of its physical nature, domestic violence allows to conjure up understandings of harm, which are useful in encompassing broader notions of structural violence. For Sisters Uncut activists, it is in the state/market shift, in the abandonment of the British state in fulfilling its obligation to ensure the safety of vulnerable citizens that the 'real' violence occurs.

Performative Politics of Public Mourning

From Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and Women in Black, to the activism of ACT UP, the memorialisation of death in public space has proved effective for social movements challenging state discourses. Ritualistic and theatrical performances are unpredictable tactics which communicate non-verbal messages to audiences through 'techniques of the body' (Mauss, 1973; Scott 1990; Kenney 2003). The hyperbolic performance of death is recurrent in Sisters Uncut's activism as it allows for spectacular and emotive renditions of the relation between intimate and structural violence. Scholars of affect suggest that moments of affective encounters and transmissions have the power to shape our understanding of the world through embodied feelings (Sedgwick and Adam 2003; Brennan 2004). The transformation of raw emotional materials into calls for action by political activists relies on the embodied reactions triggered by rhetorical devices, a process which implies 'a visceral, bodily feeling, on a par with vertigo or nausea' (Goodwin and Jasper, 2006, p.620). Discussing the transformative possibilities of affective encounters in activism, Natalie Kouri-Towe notes: 'activism is a project emerging from a refusal of injured life and as such, its affective function is to move others in the circulation of new modes of belonging, new intimacies' (p.32). In triggering emotional disruptions and affective encounters, politics of public mourning alludes

to our shared embodied vulnerabilities and disturbs the neoliberal rhetoric of individualism and self-sufficiency.

Sisters Uncut's first public action was staged on Valentine's Day in 2015. Activists disrupted traffic flows in London's Piccadilly Circus as they laid black flowers by the cupid's statue[21] to commemorate the deaths of domestic violence victims (Howard, 2016). Images from the protest show women carrying flower wreaths and signs which read 'Two Women Murdered Every Week' and '1/3 Women Turned Away from Refuges Due to Lack of Space'. Months later, Sisters Uncut staged a 'die-in' on the red carpet of the *Suffragette* film premiere. Dressed in black boiler suits adorned with the colours of the British Suffragettes (purple and green) activists laid on the red carpet and chanted 'David Cameron take note, Dead women can't vote!' (Marks, 2015). The mediatised premiere event and the theatrical nature of the protest meant that coverage was instantaneous, creating a spectacular 'image event' which disrupted mainstream media and allowed for a social 'critique through spectacle' (DeLuca, 1999, p.22). Following this action, public attention to Sisters Uncut skyrocketed with local groups developing outside of London shortly after. In 2016, another 'die-in' was staged by over a hundred activists outside of London's City Hall on Sadiq Khan's first day as mayor of London. As City Hall workers left the building, they encountered floral tributes and activists collectively reading the names of women who had been murdered by their partners in London since 2013[22]. Such an encounter has transformative possibilities in disrupting quotidian life and transforming public space into a site of affective contestation.

Theatrical protests often rely on evocative images and embodied performances which are linked to emotion (Juris, 2008). Marianna, a 25-year-old Italian activist from the Brighton Sisters Uncut group, performed a die-in on the day in which the government budget was announced which coincided with International Women's Day. She comments on the effects of gory imagery in protests:

> 'I think die-ins, or the 'you cut, we bleed' slogans, covering yourself with blood…I think it's very striking. It's powerful…if I hear the word domestic violence I can imagine it in my head, but then if I actually *see* someone covered in blood then the visual image and the association with domestic violence has a much stronger impact....it psychologically affects you more.

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[21] Shaftesbury Memorial Fountain
[22]Sisters Uncut: Sisters Uncut picket City Hall to demand Sadiq save London's disappearing domestic violence services (2016) http://www.sistersuncut.org/2016/05/09/ress-release-photos-sisters-uncut-picket-city-hall-to-demand-sadiq-save-londons-disappearing-domestic-violence-services/

> Seeing something visual like that just really gets to your core. I don't know why, it just makes all of these abstract protests into something real'.

Marianna's discussion on the psychological effects of imagery – blood and the performance of death – illustrates the power of theatrical protests in triggering emotional and affective responses, communicating the 'real' effects of otherwise dreary topics such as austerity cuts and domestic violence.

On the 28th of November 2015, London Sisters Uncut collectives organised a mass funeral march. Unlike earlier protests which commemorated deaths to domestic violence, this was a symbolic march for the domestic violence services which had been shut by local councils. The march was organised shortly after the government's 2015 Autumn Statement, a five year public spending plan which included reductions to government spending and cuts to the welfare budget (Crawford et al., 2015). The online event described the march as a chance to 'mourn' the services which had been lost to austerity: 'We march in remembrance of all the services that have already been cut as a result of the government's austerity measures, and all those we will lose if funding isn't restored and ring-fenced'[23]. The event was open to women, trans and nonbinary people and drew a direct correlation between the actions of the government and gender violence: 'Sisters Uncut believe that these cuts constitute state violence against women, which reinforces physical violence against women'[24]. Videos and images from the event show women dressed in black clothes and veils, holding roses as they marched to Trafalgar square, one of London's most symbolic public spaces. The march was led by a sign which read 'Cutting Domestic Violence Services Kills Women', alongside a purple and green funeral floral tribute which spelled 'Domestic Violence Services'. Smaller signs in the shape of tombstones documented the services that had been cut: '32 Refuges Killed by Cuts 2010-2014'. Once in Trafalgar square, activists proceeded to dye the symbolic fountain blood-red.

In interviews, activists applauded the London funeral march for its use of imagery. Jenny, a 23-year-old history student and activist, comments on its temporal and spatial significance:

> 'I thought it was a really good statement when they coloured Trafalgar's square fountains red. It was poignant because they did it on a specific day when the budget was being released, it showed that the way the government was handling money was literally killing more women than

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[23] Sisters Uncut Mass Action: Funeral March (2015) https://www.facebook.com/events/1390062737959697/
[24] Ibid.

had already been killed by this issue. Also it was really, really public. It was something people couldn't ignore, something that people would always remember'.

Emphasis on the public nature of the action and the significance of the date points to the importance in drawing public attention to the role of the state in reinforcing structural violence. Kate, a 24-year-old artist comments on the power of violent imagery in drawing public attention:

'When the London sisters dyed the water red I just thought there was something that was really powerful about having imagery like that and for me, if I see images of people protesting, that printed image of people geared up and passionate about what they're doing...it's really interesting to see but I don't connect with it straight away. Whereas if I see something like dying water blood red, instantly I want to know what they're talking about. […] There was something nice and different about the subtlety of the fountain action'.

Sisters Uncut's performative public mourning represents an attempt to disrupt the obscuring of structural violence by constructing the state as an otherwise 'invisible' perpetrator. The ritualistic nature of the funeral performance personified public services by constructing austerity measures and privatisation as a material 'loss' which should trigger collective grief. Public mourning is usually restricted to state funerals, public ceremonies in which individuals of national significance are honoured. Sisters Uncut's symbolic funeral march manipulated such notions, turning the disappearance of public services into a national tragedy. In transforming public spaces into sites of public mourning, Sisters Uncut disrupted public/private distinctions: women become public mourners, active participants in the public realm, using their bodies to politicise the 'personal' consequences of the shifting state/market divide. The use of Trafalgar square as a symbolic public site, subverted the government's discourse of austerity as 'necessary' through a performance of harm. The dyed fountain transformed a symbol of national pride into a gory illustration of the bodily effects of a market-oriented system.

The affective element of public politics of mourning disrupts understandings of what 'belongs' in the public sphere by highlighting our collective vulnerability and interdependency (Butler, 2004). Sisters Uncut's elision of visceral political statements transgressed notions of public deliberation yet it was in triggering emotional responses that activists illustrated how structural, like intimate violence, is embodied. As a tool of protest, the performance of grief conveyed protester's embodied social suffering as a consequence of

state policies (Goodwin and Jasper 2006), situating austerity within a framework of injustice and injury (Gamson et al, 1992, p.32). Sisters Uncut's funeral marches and their recurrent use of death, reconceptualises public spaces as sites of affective political contestation – the enactment of mourning and die-ins allows for creative interactions with passersby wherein alternative meanings of what constitutes violence can be created.

This chapter has framed Sisters Uncut's activism and discourse of structural violence within Fraser's framework of social justice allowing me to distinguish between external (public protests) and internal (community building) activism, whilst showing how public redistributive claims can integrate a politics of recognition. The discussion on structural violence demonstrated its disproportionate impact on culturally subordinated groups and its tendency to be overlooked. I illustrated how Sisters Uncut draw a direct relation between structural and intimate violence and showed how their slogans and politics of public mourning sought to trigger affective encounters and notions of mutual responsibility. In the next chapter I examine how Sisters Uncut's spatial resistance, the occupation and disruption of public space, temporarily challenges gendered and neoliberal public/private assumptions.

Chapter Two

In 2015 Sisters Uncut launched a campaign under the banner: 'How can she leave if she has nowhere to go?'[25] It developed out an account by a domestic violence helpline advisor who had worked in the sector for years, witnessing firsthand the decimation of social housing, refuges and support services. She had watched women being turned away from refuges, choosing between violent partners or the streets – she shamed the government for perpetrating violence against women. The rhetorical question, 'How can she leave if she has nowhere to go?' appears in Sisters Uncut's protests placards and social media. Playing on cultural assumptions which equate the existence of refuges with the ability to flee abuse, the banner retorts to the more commonly posed question surrounding domestic violence: 'Why doesn't she just leave?'

Domestic violence services, refuges and social housing represent spaces of safety for victims. The privatisation of services and social housing produces spatial restrictions which mean further abuse and sometimes death. Henri Lefebvre (1991) describes the social production of alternative spaces as moments of rupture, in which new social relations can be imagined. Resistance to spatial restrictions must be concerned with the construction of alternative forms of organisation to those dictated by political and economic institutions. De Certeau's (1984) notion of 'tactics' is suggestive of how spatial restrictions and relations of power may be temporarily circumvented. Sisters Uncut challenge spatial restrictions by producing new meanings in spaces. Through their 'external' activism – direct-action, occupations and performative protests – Sisters Uncut use the urban environment to make distributive and identity claims, temporarily changing the meanings attached to public spaces. Through their 'internal' activism – the construction of safe spaces and community building – Sisters Uncut create new sites where activists can pursue a politics of recognition which they envisage for society as a whole. Next, I outline Henri Lefebvre's work on space and use it to frame Sisters Uncut's 'external' activism.

Henri Lefebvre on Space

In 'The Production of Space' ([1974]1991), Henri Lefebvre declares that, '(Social) space is a (social) product'. Challenging understandings of space as a material independent reality,

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[25] Sisters Uncut: How can she leave if she has nowhere to go? Housing and domestic violence (2015) http://www.sistersuncut.org/2015/09/15/how-can-she-leave-if-she-has-nowhere-to-go-housing-and-domestic-violence/

which exists 'in itself', Lefebvre posits a theory of space as bound up with social reality. A conception of space as a product of interrelations leads Lefebvre to analyse the exercise of spatial control:

> '…the space produced also serves as a tool of thought and of action; that in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power; yet that, as such, it escapes in part from those who would make use of it. The social and political (state) forces which engendered this space now seek, but fail, to master it completely; the very agency that has forced spatial reality towards a sort of uncontrollable autonomy now strives to run it into the ground, then shackled and enslave it' (p.26).

Lefebvre illustrates how the production of space is bound to dominant social and power relations. Attention to the 'spatial distribution of public and private resources' reflects economic and social hierarchies – social power is symbolised in the appropriation of space. Lefebvre theorised the role of urbanization and globalisation in the accumulation and reproduction of capital in neocapitalist societies (p.159), rationalising the 'consent' of citizens over the commodification of urban space through the Gramscian concept of 'hegemony': the permanent use of indirect violence over society (p.11).

As I will show in this chapter, Sisters Uncut's reproduction of public space, through disruptive protests and occupations, utilises the urban environment to make visible indirect forms of structural violence. For Lefebvre, hegemony is central to capitalism and is located in routinised daily practices or 'everyday life'. 'Everyday life' is seen as the best warrant against revolution, a reference to 'what we take for granted, what seems self-evident and inevitable, irrespective of whether we like it or not' (Kipfer, 2008, p.199). For Lefebvre, the commodification of urban space reflects unequal economic and social differences, the contradictions between the spatial actions of the bourgeoisie and the 'everyday lives' of citizens of the urban space, it is: 'where both richness and poverty of modern life become evident' (p.266).

In these contradictions Lefebvre finds space for contestation – challenging unjust distributions of spatial control has the potential to undermine established relations of power:

> 'Any revolutionary 'project' today, whether utopian or realistic, must, if it is to avoid hopeless banality, make the reappropiation of the body, in association with the reappropiation of space, into a non-negotiable part of its agenda' (p.167).

In 'The right to the City' Lefebvre called for a shift in control over the production of urban space, from the state and capital, to the city's inhabitants, utilising the Commune of 1871 and the May 1968 revolts as exemplary actions which, 'combined revolutionary assertions to power and spatial centrality with a plurality of particular aspirations of segregated groups (workers, students, immigrants)' (Kipfer, 2008).

Michel de Certeau's (1984) 'The Practice of Everyday Life', echoes Lefebvre's thesis on spatial distributions of power, as he differentiates between 'a socioeconomic space, organised by an immemorial struggle between 'the powerful' and 'the poor', and a 'polemological space', a 'utopian space' of possibility (p.16). De Certeau's interest lay in finding 'a space for maneuvers of unequal forces and for utopian points of reference' (p.18). He defined these as 'tactics' or 'the art of the weak': acts of resistance by subordinated groups dependent on dominant spatial structures and the temporal opportunities which they offer. De Certeau's conception of spatial resistance inquires into how strategic uses of space by the 'weak' can manipulate and divert spaces and structures of power (p.30). Agency is conceived as everyday actions which subvert systems of power by turning the constraining orders of places into modes of advantage, 'a subversion from within' (p.32). Spatial resistance offers subordinated groups the chance to seize spatial control and resist structures of power through everyday acts, temporarily challenging spatial segregation and socioeconomic structures.

Neoliberalism and the Commodification of Urban and Public Space

Following Lefebvre's notion that capitalism is premised upon the production of certain kinds of politicised space (1991), urban theorists have examined how the geographical landscape of capitalist development demonstrates systematic social and spatial inequalities, which are gendered, raced and classed and perpetually reproduced through uneven development (Harvey 1982; Massey 1985). Neil Brenner and Nik Theodore (2002) have put forward the concept of 'actually existing neoliberalism', as one which encompasses its more 'subversive' role in 'interacting with pre-existing uses of space, institutional configurations, and constellations of sociopolitical power' (p.14). They describe two dialectically intertwined elements of neoliberal restructuring strategies: 'the (partial) *destruction* of existent institutional arrangements and political compromises through market-oriented reform initiatives; and the (tendential) *creation* of a new infrastructure for market-oriented economic growth, commodification, and the rule of capital' (p.15). The imposition of austerity cuts and its impact on public services in the UK, alongside the privatisation of public space and

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housing can be understood within this framework, as seemingly conflicting projects are dialectally constructed. These processes occur disproportionally at the urban scale, as local government's reduced budgets transform municipalities into competing entrepreneurial projects (Brenner and Theodore, p.21).

In the UK, 'localised' austerity policies have intensified existing socio-spatial inequalities within and between cities (Beatty and Fothergill 2014; McKenzie 2015). In the UK, the marketisation of urban space can be observed through the privatisation of social housing and public space, processes which result in higher property prices which displace local people, enhance private security and atomise communities (Lees 2008; Watt and Minton 2016). The shifting 'public-private' nature of public space was illustrated in discussing a 'die-in' in Brighton. Marianna, 25-year-old Italian activist recounts:

> 'I'd say there were about a hundred people at the demonstration. Everyone thought that it was very successful but there were a few problems with security. They asked us to move because we were doing it on Churchill Square which is owned by private companies. They asked us to move, two or three meters down the pavement so that we would be on public space for the demo'.

The interaction between protesters and security guards demonstrates that privately-owned public spaces are highly controlled and embedded in power relations which confine the possibilities of contentious politics. Yet as noted by Lefebvre (1991) public space is not a completed project but a shifting product, a site of conflict between competing ideologies of 'order' and 'unscripted' citizen interactions. Such an understanding points to the importance of grounding social justice struggles in public space – occupations and protests can challenge neoliberal policies and imagine new forms of social organisation.

Disrupting Public Space

On the 20th of November 2016, Sisters Uncut organised a nation-wide action ahead of the government's Autumn Statement announcement[26]. They coordinated to block bridges in London, Newcastle, Glasgow and Bristol, setting off smoke flares and chanting: 'Twenty million is not enough!' and 'You block our bridges, we'll block yours'. The action was a response to Theresa May's pledge of a £20m funding boost for domestic violence services, which the group likened to 'a sticking plaster on a haemorrhage'. Under the banner 'Theresa May is blocking domestic violence survivors bridges to safety', Sisters Uncut blocked bridges to illustrate the state's role in restricting survivor's access to safety. On the same day,

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[26] The British government's taxation and spending plans for the upcoming year

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over a hundred advertisements on London underground trains were replaced with Sisters Uncut messages which echoed those of the bridge protests.

The use of bridges had a dual effect. Firstly, it used public structures to symbolise that which is not palpable – austerity as a form of structural violence. Blocking bridges as a metaphor for safety allowed for a temporary reclaiming of public space, visualising the spatial distribution of public and private resources and their relation to social hierarchies. Secondly, it disrupted Lefebvre's notion of 'everyday life'. Bridges allow for the flow of routinised daily practices – halting traffic produces a disruption, an ephemeral moment in which political messages can penetrate 'the collective unconscious of functionalised metropolitan daily life' (Prigge, 2008, p.54). Kate, an artist who took part in the bridge action, comments on the potential of creative protests to capture the attention of passersby:

> 'I really enjoyed the bridge blocking action, playing around with what you can do with a crowd. Maybe it's because I work in an art gallery, but that movement of bodies, the way people act together and then how people react to that. They way people see that kind of action; it's a completely different experience from just seeing normal a protest'.

Similarly, hijacking London underground adverts disrupts the banality of the 'everyday' by reclaiming the space of private advertising from public transportation. This action illustrates de Certeau's notion of tactic: activists subverted the power that dominates procedures of consumption 'from within', while maintaining the same spatial organisation, 'they metaphorised the dominant order: they made it function in another register' (p.32). This action can be framed within Naomi Klein's (2005) analysis of 'culture jamming', 'the practice of parodying advertisements and hijacking billboards in order to drastically alter their message' (p.280), a rejection of the marketisation of public space through reclaiming flows of information. Sisters Uncut's action challenged the commodification of public space by reinventing it as a site of contestation. Temporarily, the relentless advertising which envelops 'everyday life' was tactically disrupted and reinvented by the weak.

The significance of the bridge protest being a women-only action was recurrent in interviews. Jenny, a 23-year-old student recounts her experiences:

> 'That was a woman-only action and it was really empowering; we managed to shut down different bridges and got quite a good reception from people. It was brilliant to be in a woman-only space. I think with direct-action it's all about taking action for yourself. When you are an advocate for someone else you are doing it on their behalf, whereas this is empowering women to not just rely on our male leaders or politicians to do it for us'.

Bobby, a 30-year-old musician comments on how outsiders reacted to the woman-only action:

> 'We still haven't got over the mindset of the last century of what women's place is and because these actions are so rare it does elicit a more acute response from people; if it was a mixed group it wouldn't be remembered as much compared to women who are supposed to be docile. It works because when the police see a bunch of women and nonbinary people blocking a bridge they kind of just stand there; they have no idea what to do'

The significance activists attach to a woman-only action highlights the prevalence of gendered assumptions on the public sphere and contentious politics. Internally, the experience of unity elicited feelings of empowerment. The reception from police and the public reflects the relational nature of gendered notions – the public enactment of spatial resistance by women stands against social and cultural assumptions which marginalise women from the public sphere (McKinnon 1989; Pateman 1989). Public enactments of resistance by subordinated groups have the potential to challenge a lack of visibility in social structures (Lahr and Price, 1973). Lefebvre's conceptualisation of space as imbued in social dynamics and power relations allows us to consider how temporary actions can have long lasting impacts on individual conceptions of space, for activists and their audiences. Interacting with public space, Sisters Uncut created moments of opposition to 'everyday life' by illustrating the social, power and economic structures which organise social activity and as a result, suggested alternative possibilities.

Bristol Sisters Uncut Occupy Cheltenham Road Library

Recent urban developments in Bristol follow the trend of other British cities: an expanding private property market, 'private-public' regenerations programs and limited social housing developments (Boddy, 2007). Bristol is experiencing a 'housing crisis' and despite increasing demands for affordable housing, financial reductions in government subsidies, as announced in the government's latest Autumn Statement, means local councils are turning to private property developers to build new homes (Bristol City Council, 2016). This situation illustrates the conflicting nature of neoliberal restructuring, as market-oriented initiatives are presented as solutions to growing social and economic inequality. The two-week occupation of a public library by Bristol Sisters Uncut was a symbolic protest against the local effects of neoliberal restructuring. Cheltenham Road Library was located at the heart of Stokes Croft, a previously deprived area which now prides itself on artistic vibrancy, social enterprises and

co-operatives. Like many gentrified[27] neighbourhoods, Stokes Croft is facing rocketing property prices and pressures from private developers seeking to capitalise on the emerging space[28] (Harris, 2015).

When I first walked to the library occupation, I saw several banners hanging over the building which read: 'How Can She Leave if There is Nowhere to Go', 'Bristol Council Your Cuts Kill', 'Survivors Need Safe Spaces' and 'Save Public Spaces'. Draped with Sisters Uncut banners, the political meanings attached to a previously public space were reconstructed; the spatial structure had become a contestation against urban commodification (Lefebvre, 1991). The building facade became a communicative tool which conveyed morbid and political messages of structural violence and spatial segregation (Sewell, 2001). Cheltenham Road library was closed to the public in February 2017, following a £9 million sale by Bristol City Council to private property developers – the library was set to be demolished and replaced by luxury apartments. According to a newspaper, 'the profits from the sale were to be used to off-set cuts to council budgets from central Government' (Cork, 2017). The library had been an esteemed community site for over a century. It first opened in 1901 and served as a library, an old bindery and community art studio – it was destroyed by bombing in 1941 and reopened again in 1956 (Ayotte and Mukherjee, 2017). During the time in which Bristol Sisters Uncut occupied the library, it became a community safe space for women and non-binary people where daily workshops and events were organised.

I was welcomed into the library by Jade, a 23-year-old vegan feminist anarchist with pink hair. Jade had been occupying the building for five days, alongside three other young feminist anarchist squatters and activists. They had been organising workshops, running social media pages and preparing a formal defence for the upcoming court case which would grant property owners with eviction rights. Jade gave me a tour of the building – behind the modest 1950s architecture of the front façade, hid enormous high ceiling rooms which had retained their original Edwardian style of architecture and glass stained windows. Following the tour, two new arrivals and I were offered tea on the rooftop of the building. Jade told us that they had encountered problems with enforcing Sisters Uncut's gender policy (women,

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[27] The People's Republic of Stokes Croft, for example, is a community group protecting numerous community paces and resisting corporatism in the area.

[28] Cheltenham road is no stranger to political resistance. In 2011 violent riots erupted just minutes up the road, over the opening of new Tesco Express supermarket. A local campaign was put forward by residents which decried the detrimental effects of 'big businesses' on local communities and shops. The 'No Tesco in Stokes Croft' campaign, which was widely supported by residents, applied for a judicial review of the council's panning procedures but the petition was refused (Bowcott, 2011).

trans and nonbinary people only), with having to turn 'cis-men[29]' away and with male activists wanting to take over the space for their own projects. Her face lit up as she told us that they had also received an outpouring of support from the local community as well as an explosion of interest for the self-organised workshops that activists and locals were running in the space. When asked how I had heard about the occupation, I shyly told Jade that I had seen it on social media and booked a last minute flight from Budapest so I could give my support and write about it for my research – she looked at me with disbelief and said: 'That's amazing, welcome!'

Because of the nature of the library as a space in 'transition' the occupation encapsulated various political messages. The material significance of the site illustrated gentrification, the lack of social housing and the erosion of public services and valuable community buildings. This was coupled with the political significance which Sisters Uncut attributed to the building – their campaign highlighted the lack of accommodation, refuges and spaces of safety in the city for victims of domestic violence, noting the disproportionate effects of cuts on services supporting 'disabled, LGBTQIA, black, brown and migrant women'[30]. The occupation tactically used the temporal opportunity of a space in 'transition' (de Certeau, 1984) by turning it into a site of political contestation against the commodification of urban space (Lefebvre, 1991). As a form of spatial agency, the reconstruction of the library for women and nonbinary people encapsulated redistribution and identity claims. Lea, a 28-year-old community worker and activist, commented on the importance of challenging the privatisation of public spaces:

> 'Public space is fundamental to community life. Space generally; we're losing public spaces and there's obviously the whole housing issue which is really bad. So I think action around space is very important to highlight what is happening and what the effects of that are. It feels like this is the way that capitalism is manifesting itself the most right now – because all the spaces are being turned into profit ventures of one kind or another and homes are being made into investments. So it feels like the tool of capitalism taking over all the spaces and we need to fight that very hard'

This account echoes Sisters Uncut's conception of austerity cuts as just one among many manifestations of structural violence. Jenny echoes these feelings, arguing that occupying

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[29] Male assigned male at birth – derives from cisgender defined as those who have a gender identity or perform a gender role society considers appropriate for one's sex

[30] Sisters Uncut: Bristol Sisters take over empty library to demand safe housing, not luxury flats (2017) http://www.sistersuncut.org/2017/03/22/bristol-sisters-take-over-empty-library-to-demand-safe-housing-not-luxury-flats/

space can draw attention to the privatisation of public space and social housing, while highlighting their disproportional effects of particular groups:

> 'It's so poignant because the occupation is taking place on a building which was previously a public resource and now it's going to be luxury flats. We already have a housing crisis in the city, which is disproportionally affecting survivors, women and non-binary people and people of colour. I think it's a really good way of drawing all of those issues together and making a stand. I never really thought we would win [the court trial], I just thought it was a good practical way of highlighting the issues'

Some activists were more optimistic than others on the court case, but the use of the library as a political platform was unanimously seen as a worthwhile endeavour. The library has now been demolished, yet temporarily the space became a symbol of unjust distributions of resources and spatial control.

The privatisation of public space offers activist groups with protests sites already imbued with political meanings. Public libraries are socially constructed and culturally marked as public spaces; they are understood as necessary to community life and the provision for cultural and intellectual development (Huzar, 2014). Since 2010, over 340 public libraries have closed in the UK (Kean, 2016). The closure of public libraries is widely perceived as a result of austerity, an understanding which provided Cheltenham Road library with a pre-established political significance around the intensification of social-spatial segregation in cities. The occupation of a previously public site represents a struggle over socially constructed space – its reappropriation allowed for an active production of new meanings which challenged the domination control of space by economic and political structures.

Bristol Sisters Uncut Create Space

Lefebvre (1996) argues that there are two distinct visions of space: one imagined and produced by power through the hegemonic organisation of urban space and one of 'unscripted' opposition which can materialise temporarily through enactments of spatial resistance. Doreen Massey (2005) follows this perspective calling for the recognition of space as a product of interrelations, a sphere for the possibility of multiplicity in which distinct trajectories can coexist. For Massey, the production of space has the potential of bringing together the imagination of the spatial with the political (p.10). In appropriating space, Sisters Uncut temporarily produced an alternative vision of social and spatial organisation which highlighted the contradictions of neoliberal urbanisation: 'Intensifying contradictions within rapidly accelerating and often uncontrolled urbanization process create all sorts of interstitial

spaces in which liberatory and emancipatory possibilities can flourish' (Harvey, 1996, p.420). The occupation produced a new spatial reality which sought to liberate insiders from the alienating social constrains produced by capital, the state and patriarchy (Goonewardena et al, 2008). The creation of autonomous space materialised resistance through presence, a counter-space in the Lefebvrian sense: 'deviant diverted spaces, though initially subordinate, show distinct evidence of a true productive capacity' (1991, p.383).

The occupation of the library was not just a symbolic action against austerity; it was an active creation of a feminist community. In order to enter the building, arrivals had to call a mobile number upon which someone inside would unlock the door and welcome them in. Initially the number was exchanged internally through private messaging; it was later advertised to the public through social media sites. New arrivals were given updates on the court case and workshops available. I soon took on these responsibilities, enthusiastically welcoming arrivals and positioning myself as another 'sister'. The reclamation of public space by women and nonbinary people created an atmosphere of solidarity and collective resistance which became most palpable following the court case which granted property developers with eviction rights. Outside of the court, activists cried in each other's arms. While they were aware that 'the space of a tactic is the space of the other', it was difficult, following weeks of resistance, to confront the rule of law and acknowledge that we did not have the means to keep the space to ourselves (de Certeau, 1984). Soon after, activists posted messages on social media inviting 'sisters' to resist the eviction. As we returned to the library, dozens of people had taken up the invitation to take up space and as the day went past, more people joined the online call for resistance. De Certeau notes that what the weak 'wins it cannot keep' (p.37). The library was turned into rubble days after the eviction, however, the collective sense of gendered solidarity and resistance which I shared with activists in the last hours of the occupation will certainly stay with me. A Lefebvrian reading of tactics of resistance is appropriate here. Spatial resistance, in the sense of physically occupying and temporarily subverting material space, should also be read as having long-term political effects in its invocation of alternative social and spatial imaginings.

The reappropriation of space, the way in which the library was 'modified to serve the needs and the purposes of a group' (Lefebvre, p.166) highlighted the social organisation of other spaces. During the occupation two lawyers offered legal advice, an older woman who had campaigned against the sale of the library offered contacts for the court case, and others brought homemade food or turned their skills into workshops to teach others. The

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autonomous organisation of the library around feminist ethics had a politically transformative power in making visible the potential of alternative forms of socio-spatial organisation. Following these experiences, I understand that no reading on female empowerment can quite match the experience of watching it being built around a collective space.

In discussing the library occupation with activists, the relationality between space and identity was recurrent. Charlotte, a 25-year-old museum worker explains:

> 'People need to actively create these spaces consciously; occupying makes such a big statement in terms of ownership of space and your identity, and being able to encompass all of those things - it doesn't matter what other people are saying, it's important in terms of who the cuts are affecting the most at the moment'.

Lilly, a student at a local college comments of the significance of particular groups reclaiming space:

> 'I feel that there is a form of activism in the creation of a safe space in itself. To create a space is an act of defiance because you're going against the societal norms; you're breaking away from the moulds. It's hard because some people would say that it's an 'exclusive' space as we're not involving everyone. But if you look at Greenham Common for example, my mum was part of that, it's similar in some ways – just because some people are excluded doesn't necessarily mean it's bad. It's better because the people that are here are included in a way that they didn't necessarily feel outside of this space'.

As mentioned in the literature review, the Greenham Common women's peace camp gained particular significance in its transgression of gender and geographical norms. Similarly, the reclamation of space by certain gendered bodies in the library challenged external perceptions of gender norms and empowered subordinated groups internally through spatial resistance. These external/internal effects are outlined by Lucy, a 27-year-old activist:

> 'A lot of people still think that women aren't capable or powerful and it's a really good way to counter that, you know, we can do this. I'm sure for some people it changes their perception on what particular qualities of genders are. I think it's really important that we all do confrontational things like this because it makes you feel... if you think about all those ingrained things about women being incapable; to do stuff that pushes you out of your comfort zone, it helps you counter those internalised views'

Many of the activists commented on the difficulties of upholding the gender policy at the occupation. Tulip, 22-year-old anarchist squatter and activist recounts:

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> 'After the occupation I had fellow activists say 'oh you lost the library because there were no men inside'. It was inevitable, we were always going to lose it but that's what everyone was thinking: we lost because there were no men. Housing activism is quite a male dominated sphere. Seeing them being left out and resorting to gender-based insults was interesting. It showed me why we need these spaces. Especially having a non-cis men activist space, the autonomous space made more people feel like they could be involved'

These accounts bring forward the 'recognition' element of a protest built around redistributive claims. The production of a woman and nonbinary only space represented, in itself, a radical action, one whose gendered significance transgressed the boundaries of the library.

The importance of workshops, of reconstructing the library as a space of learning and dialogue was also recurrent. Paddy, a 23-year-old student in graphic design explains:

> 'It's not like they've just said 'oh we're here now and that's the end'. They've said, 'we're here now, what can we do in this space?' It's so telling that it's not just about making a nuisance. They've put a lot of thought into it and every workshop has been relevant in some way, really pushing the boundaries in talking about gender and safety. It's hasn't been 'oh we're making a statement'. It's been, 'we're making a statement, but also, does everyone else want to come and learn?'

This educational element can be framed within a diverse history of social struggles, such as anarchism, anti-colonialism and feminism, which have created autonomous spaces as a form of resistance (Federici 2011). The creation of self-organised educational workshops allows for, 'an expanded concept of struggle, one that emphasizes the importance of everyday practices and of contests over meaning in the reproduction and transformation of hegemonic power relations' (Coté et al, 2007, p.5). During the occupation, empty book shelves were restacked with local donations and events included political discussions on white supremacy, gender, violence against women in prisons and border violence. Others focused on political organising such as gendered assumptions of weakness in contentious actions, self-defence, and trans and nonbinary 'allyship'. Other events offered creative forms of learning through film screenings, knitting, music and poetry nights, DIY punk sessions and zine workshops. If externally the library symbolised a public act of dissent against privatisation, internally self-organised workshops produced 'everyday forms of resistance' (Scott, 1985) to external scripts on identity norms and gendered oppression. Lucy, a 27-year-old activist comments on organising a DIY punk workshop:

'I always wanted to be in a band and never had the confidence to do. Then I did the workshop and I loved it so much. To be able to have a space to recreate that for other people, that really meant a lot to me. I think a lot of that was going on, people were able to use the space to do something that meant something to them and that they could share and discuss with other people'

The creation of self-organised workshops produced moments of collective experience and solidarity, a culture of sharing and discussion which stood against neoliberal notions of individualism and autonomy (Springer, 2012).

Affect and Community Building at Cheltenham Road Library

Emotions and affective bonds play a significant role in social movements and activist networks (Gould 2004; Goodwin and Jasper 2006; Juris 2008). Gavin Brown and Jenny Pickerill (2009) note that 'space is emotionally saturated and spatial elements transmit the affects, feelings and emotions that can fuel political activism' (p.28). The construction of activist spaces as sites where solidarity and affective ties can be built is an important aspect of resistance and community building. Many activists brought up notions of community and care. Charlotte draws a direct link between public space and community building:

'The library used to be a public space and sisters made it into a public space again, although temporarily, it was a space where people could go and learn things and have workshops. It's important to have public spaces, otherwise where does the community happen, where does the community exist?'

Caterina, a 24-year-old student and activist from Portugal comments on the significance of the occupation as a place of 'belonging':

'For me it's been…it sounds a bit cheesy but being part of a community of strong people, its meant learning and meeting people who have given me a lot of strength and who have made me feel very welcome in an environment which isn't my home. Part of a fight which isn't necessarily my own because this is not my country but it's made me feel like it's my fight too and that gives you a sense of belonging. To reclaim a place even if it's not your own. To want to fix it, you know?'

Individual acts of solidarity have emotional ramifications. As noted by Juanita Sundberg, 'mutual solidarity built from embodied experiences makes alliances between differently situated actors struggling against unequally geometrics of power more possible' (2007, p.162). Leila, a 28-year-old carer and activist describes a similar sense of community at the occupation:

> 'There's definitely a feeling of being a part of something bigger, absolutely,
> a huge sense of community. As soon as you met someone else in the library
> you just knew straight away that you were nearly the on the same page. It
> definitely means a lot to me because I struggle with mental health and often
> just existing in a society which perpetuates certain ideals is hard. So
> knowing that there were people in that space that just 'got it' straight away
> was really amazing'

Many of the activists I interviewed spoke openly about suffering from mental health problems and on the importance of being able to discuss them at the occupation. Aside from encapsulating political statements and a site of learning, the library became an affective space of mutual support. Tulip, one of the activists squatting the library full-time emphasised the political significance of creating spaces of social interaction:

> 'People always think there needs to be a demand to the council but in the
> occupation we were creating a new network, new communities and that's
> the most revolutionary thing I think. It was a space where you could talk
> and meet new people. Also with an occupation, you think 'Huh, I've just
> taken space, this is something I can just do'. Not everyone thinks about
> taking over empty buildings so when you're a part of it, it allows for a
> different form of solidarity'

The creation of space offered activists a network of mutual care and learning. The constructing of 'communities of care' can be traced to ACT UP and its response to the AIDS crisis, the anarchist tradition of 'mutual aid' and the emphasis of the feminist movement on 'the personal' (Federici, 2011). As a communal site of creativity and learning the library produced moments of collective experience, support and education – forms of everyday resistance which challenged external logics of neoliberal competition. The spatio-temporality of the occupation, the fact that it took *place* in a transitional space at a particular political *moment* of neoliberal urbanisation, encapsulated the contradictions of a market-oriented system and envisioned new forms of solidarity. In investing themselves in the space, activists and visitors recognised the potential of social interdependence as well as the material possibilities of political action: the contestation of gendered notions of the public sphere, the shifting marker/state divide, and the ability to disrupt spatial divisions of power. While the weapons of the weak may only temporarily manipulate spaces (De Certeau, 1984), spatially defined acts of resistance and the solidarities which they create, must be framed within a continual understanding of space in which power is reified, manipulated and contested (Massey, 2004).

This chapter has examined another strand of Sisters Uncut's 'external' activism: the disruption and occupation of public space. Using Lefebvre's notion of space as socially constructed, I examined how spatial resistance reconstructed the meanings attached to public spaces, disrupting 'everyday life' and gendered spatial divisions. I discussed how, in the context of neoliberal urbanisation, the production of space in the library occupation materialised redistributive and identity claims, both internally and externally. I then explored the potential that spatial resistance offers in terms of experience, noting how the production of an affective space, through self-organised education and community building, challenged neoliberal logic of individualism and privatisation. Next I focus on Sisters Uncut's 'internal' activism and the pursuit of recognition through the construction of safe spaces.

Chapter Three

In the previous chapter I framed Sisters Uncut's 'external' activism within Lefebvre's (1991) notion of counter-space. In this chapter I examine Sisters Uncut's 'internal' activism: the construction of safe spaces where a politics of recognition can be pursued. While self-organised workshops and systems of mutual support can be framed as politics of redistribution, inside the library occupation activism revolved primarily around self-empowerment, self-reflection and the challenging social hierarchies. Given the effects of austerity policies on subordinated groups, the recognition of internal power structures is essential to activism combining a politics of redistribution and recognition. Focusing on the internal dynamics of the occupation, I examine the extent to which the library as an imagined, utopian site built on intersectional ideas, allowed for a politics of recognition and a collective identity to develop. While Lefebvre's notion of counter-space remains useful, I turn to Michel Foucault's (1986) 'heterotopia' for a closer focus on the construction of the library through boundaries, which produced an affective space of belonging and exclusion based on gendered and racial identities.

Michel Foucault on Heterotopias

Michel Foucault outlined his concept of heterotopia in a 1967 lecture, where he described heterotopias as material sites, utopian spaces of social alterity which could be found in every society: 'something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted' (p.3). For Foucault, heterotopias are defined by their attention to social organisation and their relation to outside spaces: 'their role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled. This latter type would be the heterotopia, not of illusion, but of compensation' (p.8). Heterotopias are described as having invisible boundaries which control entry to the space, which may be compulsory or reliant on permission: 'heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable' (p.7). Foucault's concept of heterotopias has been both a source of frustration and a useful suggestion towards new ways of thinking about the spatial (Soja 1996; Shane 2005). While some theorists have utilised it to frame 'counter-sites embodying a form of resistance to our increasingly surveyed, segregated and simulated socio-spatial order' (Genocchio,

1995, p.38) others have claimed that heterotopias offer no resolutions, rather they 'disrupt and test our customary notions of ourselves' and 'contest forms of anticipatory utopianism, hold no promise or space of liberation' (Johnson, 2006, p.87).

Unlike Lefebvre's (1996) utopic vision of unitary spatial reappropiation, Foucault describes prisons, asylums and brothels as heterotopias, imperfect spaces built on utopian ideals which reflect and invert disturbing realities. These spaces 'draw us out of ourselves' and disrupt the comfort of the everyday through 'a sort of mixed, joint experience' (Foucault, p.4). Their conflicting nature as real and imagined spaces 'enable one to make sense of where one is, and one's role within that particular space' (Radford et al, 2015). Foucault described libraries as heterotopias, social sites which enable self-realisation through their, 'will to enclose in one place all times, all forms, all tastes' (p.7). Viewing libraries as heterotopias points to the processes of transformation which individuals seek in entering such spaces – the ability to simultaneously experience various places at once without leaving the physical heterotopic space, a site of knowledge which allows for another imagined space, disrupting the intersection of time and space: 'a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages' (p.7).

My intention is not to claim the heterotopia label but rather to rework some aspects of the concept and use them in relation to the library occupation. I use heterotopia as a lens through which to examine the construction of the library as a safe space which reflected and contested external realities through utopic imaginings and gendered boundaries, a space of self-reflection which simultaneously challenged and reinforced external power relations. As an autonomous space of learning, the reconstructed library had heterotopic qualities – the meanings attached to the building as a space in transition were used to illustrate that another imagined social order, both physical and conceptual, was possible. Sisters Uncut's reconstruction of the library as a community space for women and nonbinary people, was simultaneously anachronistic – in its ability to invoke community life and the public provision for cultural and intellectual development (Huzar, 2014) – and utopian – in its projection of an alternative future in which citizens imagine new spatial constructions (Lefebvre, 1991). Lilly's account of re-entering the library as an adult illustrates a 'joint experience' in which time and space were disrupted, producing feelings of nostalgia and self-reflection:

> 'I'd been in this library when I was younger. It was quite nostalgic for me, to have that personal perspective of being here when I was five, reading children's books and now I'm here and look how it's changed. The fact that it is a safe space has been really important; I feel like I've learnt and developed a lot here'

Foucault's understanding of heterotopias as mythic and real spaces, sites which are relationally constituted to the outside and socially constructed around particular boundaries provides a more critical lens, than that offered by Lefebvre, through which to examine the conflicting nature of utopian spatial constructions. I use the heterotopic to examine how the transformation of the library from a physical to an imagined site reflects the contradictions of constructing egalitarian spaces which seek to escape dominant power relations. I argue that it is in illustrating the distance between the utopic possibility and the discomforting reality, in triggering 'a joint experience' in which we reflect on our role in a particular space, that the true potential of spaces of resistance lies.

Constructing Safer Spaces

The term 'safe space' was first utilised in US university campuses in the 1990s in LGBT visibility, safety and education campaigns (Fox, 2007). More recently, safe spaces have become associated with Western Anglophone universities and fierce debates between those who defend safe spaces as sites of tolerance and those who conceive of them as threats to freedom of speech and education (Dunt, 2015). Yet the creation of autonomous spatial communities for marginalised groups can be traced to the activism of ACT UP, lesbian separatist strategies and women's consciousness-raising practices in the Women's Liberation Movement. Such spaces allowed subordinated groups to organise independently by temporarily escaping structural biases as well as psychological and physical violence. Ophélie Véron (2016) describes these spaces as 'havens' for politically like-minded people, a space where they can recreate 'an alternative, self-sufficient entity carved within society's dominant space, yet separated from it' (p.760).

Sisters Uncut organise around a 'Safer Spaces Policy', which aims, 'to create a respectful, compassionate and kind space where people feel able to express their views and ask questions without fear of reprisal or humiliation'[31]. The policy emphasises the importance of challenging internal hierarchies based on privilege, encouraging activists to 'call out supremacy' both inside and 'outside traditional meeting structures'. The policy can be seen as

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[31] Sisters Uncut: Safer Spaces Policy (2016) http://www.sistersuncut.org/saferspaces/

a response to external social practices, a construction, in Focault's heterotopic sense, of a space of compensation: 'as sisters we recognise that there will be times when the group or individuals use their privilege to oppress sisters based on their identity, as this society has raised us to do'.[32]

The first Sisters Uncut meeting I attended in January 2017, began with a collective reading of the group's safer spaces policy, followed by each person saying their name and preferred pronoun[33]. At first the process of collectively reading the policy and referring to other members as 'sisters' struck me as cultish. Nevertheless, it made me cautious about my contributions and the dynamic of discussion was different to other experiences of activism – individuals were given space and time to express themselves and there was a real sense of care in every discussion. In the occupation, all workshops began with a name and pronoun introduction and ended with each participant expressing their thoughts on the workshop. Kate an artist and activist comments on the construction of meetings as safe spaces:

> 'When I started I didn't know what my gender pronoun would be or why we read the statement at the beginning. I came to realise that I had a lot of learning to do. Sisters were very clear about making you understand the importance and the respect it can create'

Kate's experience mirrors mine in terms of understanding that the construction of particular space along predefined social guidelines, can be a form of activism in itself. The construction of safe spaces relies upon self-reflectivity and an awareness of external relations of power, privilege and oppression. Following an understanding of space as socially produced (Massey, 2005), the construction of enclosed spaces of self-reflection and solidarity have the potential to alter spaces and the relations which constitute them. The Sisters Uncut safer spaces policy represents an attempt to bridge problems of exclusion historically found in feminist activism (Mohanty 1986; Collins 2002), exemplified by the construction of the 1960s refuge movement around the needs of white, middle class heterosexual women.

Gender Policy and Spatial Boundaries

Foucault described heterotopic spaces as constructed along visible or invisible boundaries: 'Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. […] To get in one must have a certain permission and make certain gestures' (p.7). The library occupation was constructed around a gender policy, which

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[32] Sisters Uncut: Safer Spaces Policy (2016) http://www.sistersuncut.org/saferspaces/
[33] she/her, he/him, they/them

defined insider-outsider relations, a delimitation which sought to create an alternative reality in this case one where oppressive external gender relations could be circumvented: 'These tactics are part of the necessary work to be done; when the rest of the world is fundamentally unequal, safe spaces temporarily redress the balance'[34] As shown in activist accounts in chapter two, the congregation of certain gendered bodies was essential in fostering community building. Sisters Uncut's gender policy describes meetings as inclusive and supportive spaces for:

> 'all women (trans, intersex and cis), all those who experience oppression as women (including non-binary and gender non-conforming people) and all those who identify as women for the purpose of political organising. Self-definition is at the sole-discretion of that sister'[35]

A change in the group's gender policy was one of the main points of discussion in the first Sisters Uncut meeting I attended. While local groups organise independently, they follow practices and guidelines developed by the original London Sisters Uncut group. The point of discussion was a change of wording in the gender policy by the London group which, in emphasising identification as a woman/sister, Bristol members argued, excluded trans men who also experience gender-based violence or oppression. This instance illustrates the difficulties of accounting for different forms of oppression whilst organising around a collective identity built on margins. Notably, this discussion was put into practice at the Bristol library occupation which was open to 'women, nonbinary and trans people'. Activists repeatedly gave examples of the library occupation as a safe space, often attributed to its gender policy. Tulip, 22-year-old anarchist squatter and activist recounts her first experience of attending a meeting:

> 'It was amazing, I went in and there were no men in the room and I thought 'Oh, I can finally speak for the first time'. I felt very comfortable straight away'.

Discussing safe spaces, Charlotte, a 25-year-old museum worker, described the comfort that having a gender policy created:

> 'The meetings and specially the occupation, just felt really comfortable, probably because there were no men. It's not that I feel uncomfortable around men, but say you were at a bar or something, you're more aware of your surroundings and what's going on. I didn't have that there; it felt like being at home'

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[34] Sisters Uncut: The need for safe spaces (2015) http://www.sistersuncut.org/2015/05/22/solidarity-with-bahar-mustafa-the-need-for-safe-spaces/

[35] Sisters Uncut: FAQs (2016) http://www.sistersuncut.org/faqs/

Sara, a 25-year-old literature student also turned to her experiences of the library to describe safe spaces:

> 'It's feeling safe in expressing your opinions and speaking. Men tend to speak over you and I can find their presence slightly threatening. I'm less inclined to speak or be open so the fact that there weren't men in there was quite useful for me. Going into that space made me realise that I don't feel as comfortable around men as I thought I did'

As these accounts show, safe spaces allow women to recognise and temporarily sidestep traditional gendered power relations. The political significance of these processes is illustrated in the ability for women to 'reclaim individual and collective voices, and develop theoretical understandings and strategies' to challenge patriarchal forms of organisation (Motta et al, 2011). Yet, as noted by Minnie Pratt (1984) the creation of non oppressive spaces around certain identities risks constructing limited notions of 'safety': 'we need to look seriously at what limitations we have placed in this new world on who we feel close to, who we feel comfortable with, who we feel 'safe' with' (p.67). Catherine Fox (2007) calls for a reflection on how LGBT safe spaces are conflated with feelings of comfort and built upon binary constructions of oppressive identities which undermine their complex intersections. Tulip, one of the organisers of the occupation, explains how the gender policy illuminated otherwise unnoticed hierarchies:

> 'I guess when you cutt out cis men you start having a safer space. But then it picks up the pace and because men are gone, you start seeing the ways in which we oppress each other. That's something that people didn't notice before because they were focusing on the blatant misogyny. But then you start seeing the microaggressions and transphobia and all that other stuff'

Jade, the activist who welcomed me into the library discusses her discomfort at imposing the gender policy:

> 'I felt really comfortable at the library but, at least in the beginning, we were judging people on their gender presentation, whether they were cis-men or not, and that was really bad. We quickly decided to stop because it's really trans exclusive and you know, gender is not always presentation. So then we asked people whether they identified with certain groups and if they did then they could come in. We didn't do a very good job of being welcoming to trans and nonbinary people at the start'

These accounts show how for certain individuals, namely white women, the heterotopic boundaries of the library created a sense of comfort based on the gendered nature of the space. Yet as described by some of the organisers, the construction of boundaries also led, at

least initially, to gender policing[36] in which nonconforming bodies were judged on their resemblance to the female norm: the gender characteristics attributed to femininity. Foucault notes that the enactment of heterotopias relies on a critical establishment of the space in which they emerge, they have, 'the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspend, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect' (p.3). Following this notion, the occupation must be understood in relation to exterior relations of power – while the creation of boundaries resolved traditional gendered hierarchies, it also replicated them in reinforcing heteronormative ideals. The equation of safety with the gender policy, and the fact that most respondents were white women, points to the dangers of establishing spaces which normalise privileged gendered and racial norms – an approach which limits spatial 'safety' to those who conform to a homogenous identity. Inevitably, such constructions have repercussions for the communities that are created in such spaces.

Constructing a Collective Identity

Social movement theorists have defined collective identity as a socio-psychological phenomenon in which individuals develop, through shared feelings and understandings on their position in society, characteristics which unite them into a collective whole (Melucci 1996; Taylor and Whittier 1992). The construction of boundaries is seen as an essential part of collective identities, one which must be negotiated internally to situate the group within dominant belief systems (Taylor and Whittier, 1992). Doreen Massey argues that 'we make our space/spatialities in the process of our various identities' (1995, p.285). As such, the library must be viewed as a space where Sisters Uncut's identity was actively produced and contested. As aforementioned, most of the activists in the library and the people I interviewed, were white, middle-class, able-bodied women under the age of thirty. The makeup of the group stands against Sisters Uncut's claim of intersectionality. The concept of 'intersectionality' was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) and evolved out of contributions by black feminists who asserted that gender could not be analysed in exclusion from other identities (Lorde 1984; Collins 1997). The concept was developed as an analytical tool which accounts for multiple identity categories, such as gender, race, sexuality and class, as interactive power dynamics which shape individual experiences of oppression. In an online

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[36] The imposition of normative gender expressions on an individual who is perceived as not adequately performing, through appearance or behaviour, the sex that was assigned to them at birth.

video[37], Sarah, a founding member from East London Sisters Uncut explains that the group was initiated by black and working class women and that their intersecting identities led them to espouse intersectional feminism. In the interview, Sarah discusses the gains they had made through activism in relation to the group's make up:

> 'I want to make it clear that the people involved in the Hackney occupation were working class sisters, black sisters, Muslim sisters, migrant sisters, queer sisters, disabled sisters and trans sisters. They were all side by side and completely instrumental to winning those victories. I can't describe how diverse this space was'

Sarah's account of intersectional unity across race, sexuality and other identity markers relies on the collective 'sister' identifier, a fluid feminist identity, which seeks to rectify past exclusions made under the banner of 'sisterhood'. Nevertheless, like most collective identities, it relies on processes of inclusion and exclusion, and encapsulates different meanings across different spaces. The use of 'sister' as a way of referring to other activists in the occupation and interviews was recurrent, yet while some activist embraced unitary notions of 'sisterhood', others problematised its exclusionary gendered nature. Jenny, a 23-year-old history student, described the 'sister' identity through notions of familial care:

> 'It transcends whether you are born a woman, whatever your biological sex is. It's about how you identify as a person, it's a banner to rally around. The language is about family, and someone you are close to and care about; it denotes what your role is towards your other sisters'

Charlotte, 25-year-old museum worker, described being a 'sister' through the ability to translate personal feelings into collective experiences:

> 'When I first started it was empowering to come together as a group of women and take ownership over what I was feeling on my own. That unity was something which really drew me to sisters'

Conversely, Lucy, the organiser of the DIY punk band workshop, described a change in how she experienced the group's identity:

> 'I feel quite mixed about the sister thing. There was a point when I felt very good about it. I think we were building towards a feeling of unity and then the occupation happened and brought up a lot of issues. Women of colour came to the group and had bad experiences so I don't know. It feels good but at the same time I feel slightly embarrassed about being identified with a group that I know has real problems'

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[37] Sarah Jackson (2016) 'A personal history of East End Sisters Uncut' http://eastendwomensmuseum.org/a-personal-history-of-east-end-sisters-uncut/

Lucy's conflicting feelings on the 'sister' identity demonstrates that collective identities are not stable; they shift through internal debates and are affected by spatial dynamics. While Lucy felt comfortable with the identity in meetings and protests, the library occupation served as a spatial reflection of the group's identity and complicated understandings of the group as intersectional. Tulip is critical of the collective identity:

> 'I feel uncomfortable with the term sister. All throughout feminism 'sisterhood' has been rejected by black feminists for homogenising and being essentialist. And obviously it's really exclusionary for trans and nonbinary people. So I don't like the term sister but we still use it because of the group'.

The exclusionary nature of the group's gendered name was a recurrent concern for the Bristol group and, as I found out later, for the Brighton group too. During the occupation, activists suggested 'Siblings Uncut' as an alternative name and social media messages often addressed 'sisters and siblings'. Pat, a 22-year-old nonbinary person, shares their perspective on the identity:

> 'Initially I didn't want to join because it's called Sisters Uncut. As a nonbinary person I don't really feel like 'sisters' applies to me; it's a very gendered term. We had a discussion in the library where a few trans people in the group were like 'obviously some people don't identify as sisters'. People didn't really understand how it could be weird for us'

The conflicting feelings which the 'sister' identity elicited points to the tensions between espousing a collective identity based on unitary notions of female solidarity whilst trying to accommodate for more complex conceptions of gender as a discursively constituted identity. The difficulties of translating intersectional ideals into practice are illustrated in the group's desire to denaturalise binary and heteronormative notions of 'woman', or 'sister' in this case, whilst constructing a collective feminist identity. The deconstruction of the woman subject can be traced to the theoretical influence of post-structuralism and its rejection of gender as a fixed category. Judith Butler (1990) and other post-structuralist theorists, such as a Donna Haraway (1985) and Rosi Braidotti (1994), have welcomed the 'possibility of complex and generative subject-positions as well as coalitional strategies that neither presuppose nor fix their constituents in their place' (Butler, p.339). Yet as the Sisters Uncut case shows, the implications of constructing an inclusive feminist identity which transcends essentialist constructions are complicated when mobilising primarily on behalf of 'women'. Many respondents shared an awareness and desire to rectify the essentialising and exclusionary

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nature of the 'sister' identity, yet others saw it as a fluid feminist identity through which to make political claims.

Invisible Boundaries of Whiteness

Returning to the heterotopic notion of boundaries, Foucault explains that although heterotopias may seem accessible, their apparent penetrability entails isolating practices. The sites: 'seem to be pure and simple openings, but that generally hide curious exclusions. Everyone can enter into the heterotopic sites, but in fact that is only an illusion' (p.8). Whilst the gender policy in the library represented a visible boundary, I argue that invisible and exclusionary racial boundaries were also created. In examining these I turn to Sara Ahmed's (2007) reflections on the phenomenology of whiteness. Ahmed uses the work of philosophers on phenomenology and race to question the real and material effects of whiteness as a categorical and reifying experience (Husserl 1969; Fanon 1967; Macey 1999). Ahmed describes whiteness as a process with spatial characteristics, 'an ongoing and unfinished history, which orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they 'take up' space' (p.153). The relation between whiteness and the spatial is understood through the concept of habits. Describing whiteness as an unconscious routine, Ahmed describes the relation between spaces and bodies: 'Spaces acquire the 'skin' of the bodies that inhabit them. What is important to note here is that it is not just bodies that are orientated. Spaces also take shape by being orientated around some bodies, more than others' (p.150). In the congregation of white bodies in the library, whiteness came to form, albeit unconsciously, the invisible edges of the space.

For some, the construction of the library as a safe space relied on social practices and a gender policy which elicited feelings of comfort, a space where a familial 'sister' identity could be developed. Feelings of comfort and familiarity, and the ways in which they shaped the library, can be problematised through Ahmed's discussion of whiteness:

> 'To be comfortable is to be so at ease with one's environment that it is hard to distinguish where one's body ends and the world begins. One fits, and by fitting the surfaces of bodies disappears from view. White bodies are comfortable as they inhabit spaces that extend their shape' (p.158).

The pursuit of a familial identity becomes problematic when seemingly intersectional spaces replicate the external modes of organisation which reinforce structural violence: 'The familial' is after all about 'the familiar': this is the world we implicitly know, as a world that is organized in specific ways' (p.155). I interviewed Jess, a 22-year-old British Asian design

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student, on the sunny rooftop of the library. Jess noted the whiteness of the space and its effects on discussions of gender as external to racial identity:

> 'I've noticed that a lot of the women that come here are white. If you are intersectional, like me, you know a different race and female you always think about your race first. So it's been quite interesting to put gender forward; I think this group allows you to explore that, even if you have to leave out your race. But I'm sure it must be frustrating not to discuss your race with your gender for people who are more visibly 'not white''

The ordering of gender above race can be traced to the whiteness of the space – the comfort of discussing gender in a safe space may not be reserved for those whose bodies visibly deviate from the white norm. As noted by Ahmed, 'If whiteness allows bodies to move with comfort through space, and to inhabit the world as if it were home, then those bodies take up more space' (p.195). Interestingly, Jess described the occupation as owning a home:

> 'It's almost like your own house, it's like you can create a space that is completely for you and it's not like public space which is good but never quite feels like your own. […] It's difficult for me to say, because even though I'm half Asian, Asian doesn't really cross my mind. I still have a very kind of, I hate to racialise, but I have white perceptions of ethnic minorities even if I am one myself'

The attribution of comfort illustrates how whiteness becomes invisible for those who inhabit those spaces, and those who learn not to see it through habitual inhabitance (Ahmed, 2004). The invisibility of the racial boundary in the library shows its relationality to the whiteness of the external space, 'If the world is made white, then the body-at-home is one that can inhabit whiteness' (Ahmed, p.153). Ruby, a 23-year-old Afro-American osteopathy student describes entering a Sisters Uncut meeting in London in relation to her experiences of other spaces:

> 'In terms of my education, the jobs and the places that I go to, there aren't a lot of women of colour. When I was walking to the meeting I thought 'I'm probably about to walk into a room full of white women'. It wasn't exactly that, there were maybe ten women of colour and fifty white women. You know people say, 'race isn't real'. Okay you can say that, but if you were the only one that looked like you in a room full of people, in a community of people, then granted you would start to notice. So I had that perspective going to the meeting and I walked in and I thought 'Huh, I'm not surprised''

Ruby's account illustrates the exclusionary and discomforting nature of whiteness, both inside and outside of meetings. Following this assumption, I examine my feelings of comfort and belonging through Foucault's discussion of the mirror as a heterotopic site:

'In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent' (p.4)

Inside the library I felt myself completely at ease; I shared collective feelings of comfort, of being 'at home'. As a white woman, this space was constructed for me. I belonged to this gendered space in a way which I didn't feel in mixed activist groups – it allowed me to reflect on the discomfort I experience in the outside. Yet the library functioned as a joint experience – in interviewing nonbinary people and attending a workshop on white supremacy, I began to reflect on how my comfort relied on the exclusion of others:

'Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am' (Foucault, p.4)

The library functioned as a heterotopic mirror in the sense that the experience of occupying that 'utopian' space enabled me to see its connection with all other spaces and their oppressive nature, while also making me reflect on my position in the construction of an inadequate contestation of the spaces which we inhabit.

Disrupting Boundaries

Following the library occupation, Bristol Sisters Uncut organised a workshop in a community centre entitled: 'White Allyship Learning: Challenging Our White Supremacy'. It was attended by half a dozen of activists many of which had been involved in the occupation. All were white with the exception of one woman of colour. The workshop lasted two hours and consisted of self-reflective activities, reading statements by people of colour and discussions around the validity of white people conducting such a workshop. The workshop was extremely tense and uncomfortable; the habitual and affective comfort of whiteness was noticed through its loss. As noted by Ahmed discomfort, 'allows things to move by bringing what is in the background, what gets over-looked as furniture, back to life' (p.163), a process which echoes Foucault's heterotopic mirror effect. The woman of colour shared her discomfort. She described how her position in that room encapsulated her past experiences: growing up in a white world, wishing to be white, resenting those who were white. Feelings of discomfort were collectively produced; they disrupted the invisible racial boundary in the same way that comfort had created it at the library.

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This experience as well as that of interviewing nonbinary people and women of colour, made me reflect on the disjuncture between organising around intersectional ideals and constructing a space which provided comfort for privileged gendered and racial identities. While the 'sister' identity is premised on intersectional ideals, in the case of the library, it constructed a spatial collectivity based on feelings of comfort and habitual whiteness. Judith Butler has described materialisation as 'the effect of boundary, fixity and surface' (1993, p.9) – the production of feelings of comfort can be said to materialise in the congregation of certain bodies which create affective connections and distinctions between the inside and outside of particular spaces. In this sense, discomforting feelings have the potential to displace established spatial and social boundaries. If emotions are seen as socially organised and constitutive of identities and their boundaries (Jasper, 1997), then discomfort, as a shared emotion, is central to the construction of both intersectional identities and the spaces which constitute them.

Conversations regarding the whiteness of the group were not new. During the occupation, a 'Sisters of Colour Caucus Meeting' was organised in which organisers 'stepped out' of the space for a day so that women and nonbinary people of colour could congregate independently. The social media event read:

> 'Bristol Sisters Uncut recognises that as a group they are currently a very white space and as such may not feel safe for sisters of colour. […] Under racist and sexist austerity, BME[38] specialist services are amongst the first to get hit. Sisters want to fight back, and the best way to do that is to have women and nonbinary people of colour lead the way'

While the activists I interviewed recognised the importance of caucuses and initiatives around whiteness, they remained sceptical on their effectiveness in changing the makeup of the group. The fact that the Bristol group was set up by white middle class women was seen as a major barrier to the group's diversity – a change in the group's organisation was seen as a possible solution. Charlotte, a 25-year-old museum worker, explains:

> 'We can continue to unlearn our prejudices but I think the group needs to be led by somebody that isn't us. If we're not meant to be a white middle class group then what are we all doing here? Let's just stop doing this and let somebody else occupy the space that we're occupying! I think the workshops and the conversations need to happen – they change the way people think, act and feel but it's not going to change the demographics of the group. It's such a bigger longer process than that. Or a really quick one of let's stop what we're doing and let someone else do it'

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[38] British Black and Minority Ethnic

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Sally, a 24-year-old administrator and one of the founders of the Bristol group, echoes Charlotte's concerns around the whiteness of the group, putting forward a radical change in organisation as a feasible solution:

> 'Ultimately, has that message of intersectionality had an effect on who has felt included? The makeup of the group now proves that it hasn't. We've talked about all kinds of things, maybe all the members that have been most involved should just step back and let other people step forward. Personally I would love it if the women of colour caucus said 'yeah we'll take it from here and let you know'. I think that would be the most effective way to deal with some of the issues'

The dichotomous choice between remaining a white group and allowing a different group of people take over sidesteps the work of decentering whiteness. The suggestion of reshuffling group organisers as a 'quick' alternative reduces the potential of the 'bigger longer process' of engaging in uncomfortable conversations, which the incorporation of intersectionality, as a subversive critique of oppression, allows for. Placing the burden on people of colour to challenge unjust systems of oppression undermines the potential for white activists to feel discomfort and reflect on their role in the creation of intersectional spaces. Such a process may require collective experiences of discomfort, experiences which for people of colour are often not optional. Ahmed notes that the phenomenology of whiteness serves as an ongoing critique rather than a source of solutions:

> 'If we want to know how things can be different too quickly, then we might not hear anything at all. The desire for resistance is not the same as the desire for good practice. And yet, both desires can involve a defence against hearing about racism as an ongoing and unfinished history that we have yet to describe fully' (2007, p.165).

Imagining the constitution of the Bristol group as made up of women of colour gravitates towards an understanding of intersectionality as racial diversity, rather than as an ongoing application of a theoretical critique of structural oppression. Foucault's notion of heterotopic spaces helps illustrate how the construction of space around gendered and racial boundaries is inextricably related to the production of social and affective relations which, in turn, shape and contest notions of collectivity and identity. The tensions expressed in activists accounts, between feeling at ease in the library and resenting its exclusionary nature, illustrates the usefulness of the heterotopic in highlighting the complex relations between how activists spaces are imagined and constructed through utopian notions of unity, and the realities of the physical and social boundaries which are enacted. Moreover, while the self-identified gendered boundary represents its heterotopic alternative vision of social relations, its

invisible racial boundary represents its relational nature to external spaces; its illusionary openness based on intersectional ideals, 'exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned' (Foucault, p.8).

As noted by Ahmed, collective identities are often premised on 'discourses of feeling-in-common' which work 'by transforming others into objects of our feeling, or by appropriating the feelings of others' (2007, p.34). For most respondents, the library's gender policy produced feelings of safety and comfort which mediated the individual and the collective through gendered solidarity based on self-reflectivity and learning. Yet the creation of a comfortable and familial space built around socio-spatial and affective boundaries also served to reinforce privileged gendered and racial identities. If boundaries materialise in social interaction (Butler, 1993), an intersectional praxis should create an affective space open to feelings of discomfort, in which habitual practices are disrupted and contested rather than 'fixed' through 'quick' solutions.

The occupation of the library allowed for the construction of a collective identity yet one which fell short of the utopic, intersectional ideals it sought to espouse. It is perhaps in viewing the library through the more sceptical interpretation of heterotopias, one which offers 'no resolution or consolation but disrupt and tests our customary notions of ourselves' (Johnson, p.87) and which locates agency in the contention rather than the reinforcement of comfort, that a more genuine politics of recognition may be achieved. Such a perspective is critical, particularly when the relationship between Sisters Uncut's 'internal' and 'external' activism is seen as dialectically constructed. The extent to which spatial resistance, in the form of 'external' public protests, allows for a reconciliation of redistribution and recognition will depend on the politics that Sisters Uncut develop internally. The limitations described in this chapter draw attention to how boundaries are constructed in activist spaces – a limited framework of 'internal' recognition risks undermining the contemporary relevance, as well as the potential, of politicising the intersections between cultural and economic injustice.

Conclusion

This thesis has explored how Sisters Uncut reimagine public and activist spaces as sites where the neoliberal logic of privatisation, austerity and individualism, and its role in perpetuating structural and intimate violence on subordinated groups can be contested. Given the neoliberal intensification of social and economic precarity (Fraser, 2013) and its gendered dimensions, there is an urgent need for social justice and feminist movements to encompass the intersections between economic and cultural injustice. The objective of this research is to improve understanding of how claims for redistribution and recognition can be combined and pursued through processes of spatial production, affective mobilisation and intersectional practices.

Using Nancy Fraser's (1996) framework of social justice, I illustrate how Sisters Uncut combine redistributive and identity claims by emphasising the way austerity, particularly cuts to specialist domestic violence services, disproportionally affect subordinated groups. I argue that Sisters Uncut's reconciliatory claims result in two distinct yet interrelated forms of activism. In chapter one I examined Sisters Uncut's 'external' activism, arguing that discourses of death and politics of public mourning transformed public spaces into sites of affective contestation to government-imposed austerity. I examined how in drawing together notions of intimate violence with austerity Sisters Uncut illustrate the ways economic injustice and cultural subordination converge, politicising austerity cuts as a form of structural violence which has harmful bodily consequences.

In chapter two I explored Sisters Uncut's 'external' activism further, framing the disruption of public space and the occupation of Cheltenham Road library within Lefebvre's (1991) notion of space production and De Certeau's (1984) formulation of tactics. I described how, in temporarily reinventing the meanings attached to public spaces, Sisters Uncut created moments of opposition to 'everyday life' and challenged assumptions of space as ordered through gendered and neoliberal public/private ideological divisions. I framed the library occupation as a counter-site which materialised the contradictions of neoliberal urbanisation and constructed alternative modes of organisation through a collective vision of resistance, solidarity and community building.

In chapter three, I turned to Sisters Uncut's 'internal' activism: the ways Sisters Uncut groups construct meetings and occupations as safe spaces, sites built upon intersectional (Crenshaw, 1991) ideas where a politics of recognition and a collective 'sister' identity is pursued. Foucault's (1986) notion of heterotopias allowed me to examine the library as a utopic space of 'compensation' to exterior gendered power relations, constructed around visible and invisible boundaries which excluded certain identities. I showed how these boundaries produced, for some, a 'comfortable' space where affective relations and a collective 'sister' identity were developed. I then complicated the construction of the library by showing how the whiteness of the space hindered the development of the group's intersectional claims. Using Ahmed's (2007) writing on whiteness and affect, I put forward the notion of collective discomfort as a productive heterotopic reflection, one which entails the self-reflective practices needed to build an intersectional space.

Analysis of Sisters Uncut's activism illustrates how Fraser's framework of social justice may be applied to social movements. The analytical external/internal activism distinction made in this thesis points to their interrelation, suggesting that movements seeking to reconcile redistribution and recognition claims must engage in both public activism – which communicates the intersections between economic and cultural injustice – and community building – which attends to internal power differentials through the recognition of cultural subordination. My analysis of Sisters Uncut's spatial resistance, through understandings of space as imbued in social and power relations, demonstrates the significance of space 'production' in redistributive and recognition activism. As the increasing inequalities of neoliberalism are materialised in space, spatial resistance becomes particularly difficult. In the British context, where the privatisation of social services and urban space is exacerbating the spatial segregation of marginalised groups, the recognition of public space as a site of contestation and resistance is essential. The restrictions which victims of domestic violence face, following the closure of specialist refuges and the privatisation of social housing, represents just one intersection between redistributive and cultural injustice and the spatial.

The creative manipulation of public spaces is able to highlight those intersections along with the contradictions inherent to a neoliberal economic approach. Given the partial retreat of the British state in ensuring the welfare of its citizens and the atomisation of individuals resulting from the privatisation of public space and individualism, the production of autonomous collective spaces where activists can develop mutual solidarity and pursue a politics of resistance is crucial. I have shown how the occupation of the library as a space in 'transition'

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represented an attempt to reconcile redistribution and recognition claims, making visible the material consequences of structural violence and neoliberal urbanisation whilst reconstructing a space around gendered solidarity and collective experiences.

While Lefebvre's notion of space production was useful in highlighting the potential of spatial mobilisation, the application of Foucault's heterotopic lens to the library problematised utopic understandings of resistance by pointing to the distance between utopian imaginings and material realities. The usefulness of the library as an imaginary spatial field which allowed for a temporary uncoupling from traditional gendered relations and for the creation of collective solidarity should not be undermined. Nevertheless if the Lefebvrian production of space is to be taken as a worthwhile endeavour, the contradictions of the library as an inclusive, intersectional space should be considered. As I have shown, processes of community building and identity formation in the library were deeply related to the construction of the space itself: one which was produced around social guidelines and affective relations. Tensions between building an intersectional politics of inclusivity and the reinstating of privileged gendered and racial identities shows the difficulties of translating intersectional theory into activist practices.

These tensions often developed out of affective ties, between the assumption of what the group's identity *was* and the benefits of such understandings – a space primarily for white women in which to organise against gender oppression – and what it was *meant* to be – a space where oppressed identities could feel welcomed and cultural subordination could be transcended. The application of Foucault's heterotopic lens and Ahmed's notion of whiteness illustrated how imagined spaces of resistance remain tied to exterior relations and structures of power. My analysis on the internal dynamics of the occupation, and of the library as a site which elicited 'a joint experience' which triggered reflections on our position in certain spaces, sees the notion of collective discomfort and the disruption of habitual notions of whiteness as a necessary practice in addressing internal problems of recognition. Rather than creating comforting resolutions, activist spaces should contest anticipatory forms of liberation, examine the distance between utopian possibilities and existing realities, and reflect on new ways through which to untangle established relations of power. Activist claims of intersectionality should not be decoupled from, or used as a premise to displace, internal critiques and practices which emphasise race as a central aspect of oppression, a central tenet to a feminist politics of recognition and redistribution. In order to create 'diverse' activists spaces, the habitual nature of whiteness must be inverted through affective processes of

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collective discomfort – it is only then that the invisible boundaries which people of colour experience in white spaces may be bridged, so that new affective ties, based on collective recognition, can be created.

The internal tensions and dynamics of the library represent a microcosm of contemporary intersectional feminist organising and its conundrums. Similarly, the library occupation can be framed within broader citizen struggles against the proliferation of neoliberal processes. The British government has been at the forefront of pushing the neoliberal project on a global scale. Since the neoliberal turn in 1980s, political-economic neoliberal practices have been incorporated transnationally, signalling a move towards global neoliberalism (Litonjua, 2008). While British austerity has been nationally imposed, countries such as Greece and Spain have seen neoliberal policies imposed upon them by international bodies, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), under the banner of 'structural readjustment programs'. The UK has served as an experimental site for austerity; a project which has been deemed a social and economic failure, with particularly gendered, raced and classed consequences. As such, local contestations of British economic policies, politics and ideology should be of interest to those beyond the isles.

In drawing together intimate and structural violence, Sisters Uncut's performative and affective protests put forward a public message of collective vulnerability which positions the state as a violent perpetrator. Such a critique decries the British state's political and economic policies but also the violent consequences of a market-driven economy – it serves as a warning to citizens of states which are politically guided towards the intensification of neoliberal ideology and practice. Despite its small temporal and material scale, the library occupation is part of broader movements against processes of neoliberal urbanisation and restructuring, such as *Indignados* in Spain and Occupy Wall Street in the US, which articulate, albeit temporarily, formless processes of structural violence. Bringing them to light allows for their consideration and the possibility of imagining alternative modes of social organisation. Local forms of spatial resistance represent nodal points of power within broader global processes. The local production of space and collectivities can shine a light on unequal spatial power relations and open up political reimagining.

Time and location constraints limited my participant observation and the number of interviews undertook, meaning I primarily focused on one Sisters Uncut group in Bristol. As a group which developed its politics and practices from a different localised movement (the

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East London Sisters Uncut group), tensions which were attributed to the Bristol group's inception (such as the fact the fact that the group was mostly white middle class women) could have been analysed through a comparative study of various groups across the UK. Such a study could also examine how localised issues take precedence and are incorporated into the group's politics – a Brighton activist noted that they focused on homelessness due to its prevalence in the city. Similarly, a comparative approach could further analyse the contestation of the 'sister' identity, identifying how different spaces and demographics affect its construction. Moreover, this thesis is limited in illustrating the broader effects of the group's activism such as policy changes, public perceptions around austerity and impacts on services and refuges. Recent developments, such as Theresa May's funding boost for domestic violence services, a re-opening of a domestic violence community service in Doncaster[39] and the growing numbers of Sisters Uncut activists and groups, suggests the group's sociopolitical consequences are worth exploring.

Like other recent movements which have utilised space to contest unjust political and economic policies and institutions, such as Occupy Wall Street, Sisters Uncut use social media to mobilise activists, organise protests and disseminate information. The role of online platforms as an alternative space of activism represents another possible line of inquiry. As I write this, I am watching an online live stream showing North London Sisters Uncut activists occupy the empty visitor's centre of Holloway prison[40]. Live videos transcend the spatial reach of occupations and can recruit bodies for resistance instantaneously. Indeed, social media was central to the organisation of the Bristol library occupation in terms of organising, disseminating information and gathering online and physical support. From its ability to promote collective identities across online communities, to its reach across spatial and temporal boundaries, the role of online platforms in organising and sustaining spatial resistance in the activism of Sisters Uncut deserves further attention.

This thesis has dealt with a number of binaries: from the ways redistribution and recognition claims may be reconciled through public protests and community building, to the relational dynamic between local and global neoliberal processes, to the relations between structural

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[39] Sisters Uncut (2016) 'This is how we know we can win' http://www.sistersuncut.org/2016/08/02/this-is-how-we-know-we-can-win/

[40] Holloway prison was the largest women's prison in Europe until it was suddenly closed in 2016. The prison is known for holding historical figures such as the Suffragettes and became a site of debate last year when one its inmates Sarah Reed died under suspicious circumstances. North London Sisters have occupied the site as a protest against state violence, gentrification and the lack of social housing and services for domestic violence victims.

and intimate violence. In putting forward a dynamic conception of space as socially and affectively produced, as embedded within social and economic power structures, I have shown how public space can be temporarily seized and used to subvert the logic which organises such binaries. Once we recognise that discursive public/private distinctions – notions of public and private space, the shifting state/market divide and the gendered public/private sphere – are inherently spatial and order relations of power and identities, the political nature and possibilities which different conceptions of space offers are difficult to ignore. The production of space does not instantly change ideological binaries, but it can at least illustrate their malleability and contradictions. Spatial resistance temporarily disrupts the relations of power upon which such distinctions are built, triggering a process of reframing through new spatial and social imaginings. Given the gendered consequences of the shifting state/market divide, the case for feminist spatial resistance is apparent. Yet such projects should remain attentive to the fluid boundaries between real and imagined spaces. After all, the changes which social justice movements produce through the construction of new spatial imaginings will be inextricably linked to the kinds of identities which develop in such spaces.

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