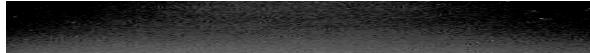


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ON THE RACIAL POLITICS OF  
COMFORT, SAFETY & EXCLUSION  
IN SO-CALLED AUSTRALIA  
WINTER 2018

# From the occupied territory of so-called Australia. Stolen land, never ceded.



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There are many different angles and nuances in thinking about and confronting racism, colonialism and white supremacy, that one brown person trying to distil a few of the ideas that they're grappling with should not be considered comprehensive. The series of thoughts put forward here, represent no more than what currently seems like the most useful contribution I could make to anti-racist practice within anarchist/ radical spaces. It is not a final statement. The line between pointless, inward, navel-gazing and interventions that help shape future practice is hard to gauge.

As a person of colour who has spent 15 plus years around anarchist spaces in Sydney and Australia, I have long since accepted that enacting these politics here mean that I will be spending my time in a mostly white scene. Amongst all the gradations in my thinking around race over the years, this recognition – of the whiteness of anarchism in Australia – has shifted from a blunt, and mostly useless, criticism to a source of investigation. This zine is an attempt to articulate the current trajectory this has taken.

Send whispers, plots, propositions, disagreements, outrage, etc to:  
[nocomfortzines@gmail.com](mailto:nocomfortzines@gmail.com)

# CONTENTS

## Eight suggestions about race, comfort and safety

A series of discussion points aimed towards anarchists in Australia, around how we position ourselves in terms of radical anti-racist practice in this racist, colonial country. These points revolve around issues of safety and comfort and how manifestations of these in our scenes, but also in broader society, tend towards being a re-assertion of the norms of whiteness/ white supremacy.

These points are written by one brown person, still attached to the revolutionary politics of anarchism (with an increasing tendency towards insurrecto and nihilist positions). They aren't the entire picture. There are flaws and contradictions in what i have laid out here. That's why i'm calling them discussion points - they're open to criticism and challenge. They aren't the entirety of what I have to say about white-supremacy, colonialism and anti-racism - they are just some thoughts i've been trying to pull together that seemed relevant to particular experiences around anarcho/ radical spaces over the last few years.

One difficult aspect of writing this has been feeling how, in terms of race politics, stepping away from the anarchist scene back towards the mainstream, it is increasingly possible to find a growing volume of non-white voices proclaiming against the multi-faceted nature of racism, white supremacy and colonialism in this country. Pulling apart the overt and structural forms, as well as the ephemeral, cultural and behavioural forms, in varied styles that contain anger, sadness, humour and nuance. Yet in radical spaces, discussion and practice around these issues seems (mostly) stagnant. Of course, this simply reflects the whiteness of this scene.

## An explanation

A summary of events that occurred in Sydney in 2016 and early 2017, that had me stepping away from involvement in anarchist politics and spaces in this city and that set my thoughts on a trajectory that ultimately led to producing this zine.

## A reprint

A reprint of an older article I co-wrote with a friend in response to an incident at a fundraiser in Sydney in 2015, raising issues about racialised comfort.

# 1.

In seeking to find sites of conflict against multitude forms of systemic dominance, spaces of comfort and nourishment where we can gather ourselves to continue struggling – whether in the most mundane moments of everyday, liberal capitalism, or in the more exceptional upsurges of social unrest – are crucial to our being. I start with that, because I don't want what follows to be mis-read as a demand that we must reject safety or comfort *always* – only ever, constantly, seeking sites of antagonism. However, this will be an attempt at asking some questions and making some points around how comfort and safety serve as pacifying, reactionary forces in the context of the white, colonial state of Australia, where social struggle tends to be well-confined.



**(a)** Those of us who aren't indigenous struggle in solidarity with Aboriginal sovereignty and self-determination, not to wash away the guilt of past wrongs, but because the realisation of these things is the surest way to overturn the existence of colonial, white supremacy and capitalism\*. But even as those outcomes might be our preferred ones, they won't be comfortable ones. We initially experience this discomfort as we recognise that anti-colonial struggles aren't homogenous, that Aboriginal activists and radicals will sometimes have contradictory ideas on how to move forward, that non-indigenous participation won't always be welcome with open arms. Anti-colonial resistance, and the struggle for Aboriginal sovereignty and self-determination must necessarily be uncomfortable for us, and their (hoped for) realisation would likely be so, for many of us. Let's be good with the idea of discomfort.

\* Of course, indigenous resistance against ongoing colonisation, genocide and displacement exists primarily on its own terms and as the immediate struggle of Aboriginal people for their very physical and cultural survival. But it's not just that a revolutionary, anti-capitalist vision is obliged to take anti-colonial struggle into account, it is that anti-colonial struggle would provide the surest direction towards toppling the economic and cultural hegemony of capitalism in this continent.

**(b)** In a society established on the back of violent, white domination and colonisation, appeals to safety and comfort are most likely to be a regression to a reactionary, normality defined by whiteness\*. It is important to recognise the implications of how this dynamic extends into radical spaces. In a milieu that is overwhelmingly white, an unintentional, but nonetheless very real, racialised affinity bias permeates. This is reflected in what forms of speaking and behaving are preferred and affirmed as being correct, what traumas and vulnerabilities are given space, and how seriously different fears and discomfort are treated.

\* As a recent example think #africangangs

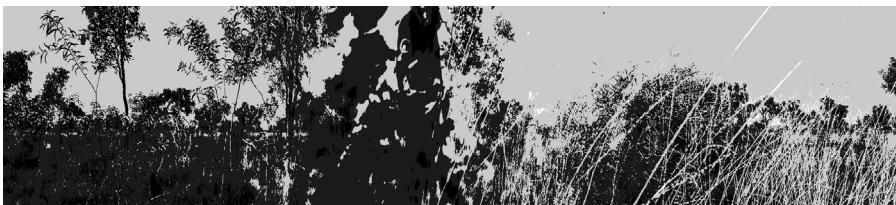
# 3.

**(a)** A politics of attempting to expand 'safer space' can only be a dead end while it plays out within the confines of liberal, capitalist democracy. The institutionalisation of safer-spaces—at universities, at workplaces—is no victory. While these policies may reflect the existence of certain struggles against oppression, their incorporation into top-down bureaucratised structures has rendered them obsolete if we are interested in building collective strength in struggle. Instead, we have been co-opted into experiencing inconvenience or discomfort as a personal slight that requires an appeal to a higher authority. If that authority is not immediately present, social media fills the gap. And while social media will give the impression of being supported, rarely does online outrage transfer into a practice of collective resistance.

**(b)** Before this institutionalisation of safer space became a mainstream thing, anarchist and radical spaces were already practising a codification of these forms. While we may have idealistically hoped that this would help inform a collective, radical culture, it has in fact more certainly established a reactionary, nervous disposition within much of our milieu. That safer spaces became a practice of keeping that which is uncomfortable *out*, could only take conservative forms in such a white scene within a white supremacist, colonial country. Although there has seemingly been some degree of a rhetorical shift away from safer spaces, with some people now talking broadly of 'dangerous spaces', in practice the reactionary residue of safer spaces culture persists. Reactionary because the reflex response does tend towards excluding the undesirable, a process that can closely resemble the racist boundaries of the white, colonial society around us.

**(a)** We are caught in a bind where the multiplicity of experiences that surround us equate to different expectations of what constitutes 'safety'. There can be no singular, objective ideal of safety, yet when we delve into accounting for subjective experiences we find that conceptions of comfort – and of danger – will contradict each other, if not come into direct conflict. This is unresolvable. Instead of acknowledging this and reconstituting the entire framework, what has tended to occur is a regression to the mean – a mean where white expectations of safety and comfort tend to be prioritised

**(b)** People of colour living in this white, colonial society have developed different survival tactics, different ways of engaging with the world around us emotionally, psychologically and physically than a white person. Having to constantly adapt to cultural expectations so that we aren't always on the outside\*, as opposed to being adapted to, means we have developed forms of resilience and strength (as well as fragility), that are not immediately recognisable. We should not dilute these by asking for our experience to be incorporated into versions of 'safety' that reflect white, liberalism.



**Darkness Outside**

# 5.

The 'anti-racist' campaigns and activism that predominantly appeal to nice, white people need to be inspected closely for whether they ultimately replicate forms of liberal, charity instead of direct solidarity. The line might be murky and this criticism seem harsh in a country where resistance is sparse and where it can seem hard to know what to do. But the flow on effect of being onboard with liberal, anti-racist campaigns\* is that our scenes increasingly come to enshrine an idea that anti-racism is about 'good, white people' helping those brown people *over there*. This creates the problem where engaging with issues of race/ racism is considered to exist on a separate terrain to the mostly white, radical spaces that we inhabit. If the places of comfort, safety and nourishment are racially distinct (white) from the sites of engagement, maybe that's not good enough. One of the great privileges of whiteness is to pick and choose the terrain, and on what terms, racism will be engaged with.

\* Here, I might draw on some examples from pro-refugee campaigns but... there's not enough space or time.

**(a)** So often the white people in our midst who are the most devout in proclaiming their allegiance to anti-racist causes, who loudly call out racism everywhere else (even when the person of colour at their side is uninterested in having that confrontation in that particular moment), are the very same who recoil when confronted with their own complicity in perpetuating white standards of safety and comfort. This recoil is the typical manifestation of white fragility, the end of the conversation because a white person now gets upset, or even angry, at realising that their comfort won't always be able to be accommodated if white supremacy is to be dismantled. To put this more strongly: it is not only that white comfort won't be accommodated when issues of race are evidently at play, but that all the mannerisms and affects that produce this underlying canvas of white supremacy must be called into question even in moments where race/ racism isn't obviously a defining feature.

**(b)** The intention here isn't to put forward a case that individual white people need to 'work on themselves' to undo their complicity. Although it is beautiful in individual instances to witness a white person desperately cling to their innocence while facing the wrath of a person of colour cutting through their bullshit, it is important to recognise that what they're clinging to is a safety that is predicated on all the little gestures, words and actions, the forms of politeness and 'tolerance' that are upheld broadly across society, and in all scenes and milieus. This won't be undone by an individual 'working on themselves' or by attempting to impossibly expand safety to include everyone's experience. Instead, it will necessarily involve breaking down and undermining the accepted norms of whiteness (and liberalism) and we must start by supporting each other in learning new capacities to experience differences (danger even?) that are profoundly uncomfortable.

# 7.

**(a)** Racial politics simmers and seethes all around us, and while it is not possible to suggest that whiteness is toppling as a basis of power, in at least the major cities of this country there are visible shifts on certain streets. Blackness, brownness, people of colour, assert themselves, in numbers, in spaces that weren't previously 'theirs' (certainly not when I was growing up). Making race purely a numbers game – demographics is for technocrats, representation is for liberals and union officials – isn't my intention\*. I am not interested in the anarchist scene or spaces attempting to resolve this by attempting to 'recruit' more people of colour. Attempting to recruit in this way is pure condescension. However, I am claiming that what shifts there have been in the city around us, have not in the slightest way bled into our spaces and that this should be taken as indicative how these spaces perpetuate whiteness as the expected way of being.

\* Although, I do think that one way to potentially make individual white people grapple with racial discomfort is to simply surround and outnumber\* them in spaces they had previously experienced as white. But this is purely about making one, two or a small group of white people uncomfortable. It isn't viable as a strategy that could overturn the entrenched power structures of whiteness and colonialism.

**(b)** 'Danger' is simply, far too often, that which is unknowable. White liberalism seeks to make the unknowable knowable, and therefore comfortable, by assimilating difference into a worldview that materialises difference as consumable identity traits that individuals can choose to buy into. This is superficial and means that difference which cannot be co-opted into a palatable, consumable product is further assigned the position of the dangerous, dark other. White people practising radical anti-racist solidarity need to reject this by dropping the arrogant pretence that they can ever 'know' or 'understand' and welcome the profound discomfort of not being able to understand. Anarchist or radical spaces (that are mostly white) should do away with the idea that they can ever account for the myriad, often ephemeral, forms through which white supremacy and hegemony manifest and recognise that the aim can no longer be to extend safety so that it covers all experiences. What we (but white people especially) must prepare for, is a welcoming of danger, discomfort and the unknowable.

While we can support each other and be caring and soft about the various traumas we might have had inflicted upon us, it is possible that our support can be something more than merely a valorisation of fragility which conditions us to burrow deeper in the search for an imagined, enclosed space that remains untouched by the dangers of the outside. Such a distinction between a 'safe' interior and the unknowable threat at the border remains the basis of so much explicit racism in this country. It might be a better option that, instead of replicating this dynamic, we seek support that takes the form of pushing ourselves to hold forth in the midst of our discomforts and fears, knowing that our crews and accomplices will be at our side, and seeing what knew possibilities these encounters might bring. The most basic premise that underpins all this is that there is no neat separation between a 'safe' interior and the danger outside.



**Darkness Outside**

# EVICTIONS

While the thread of ideas that I have attempted to articulate in the previous section has a basis in discussions, incidents, conversations and controversies that have played out over a number of years (including the reprinted article that follows), it was specifically a series of occurrences within a period of time from late 2016 to early 2017 from which these began to crystallise in a more certain way. At this time, I had just returned from travelling for a few months in Turtle Island and moved into a large squatted warehouse (I'll refer to it as RMTCA) in a part of Sydney that was fairly central in terms of proximity to anarcho-crew. Although I had been involved in various social centre and space projects over the years in Sydney, this was the first time that I had been involved *and* lived in such a space. Although, there might be a few different lessons for people to learn from the 6 months that RMTCA existed, I'm just going to refer to a couple of things that are relevant to issues raised in this zine.

As with any social centre project like this, moments will arise where particular people will be asked to leave an event or not to attend at all, based on actions they have perpetrated. During those 6 months, I was personally involved in evicting people six times, and asking people not to attend twice – a total of eight. Out of those eight, five times the person on the receiving end of being made to leave (on occasion an amount of physicality was required – once I copped a smack in the mouth for my trouble) or told not to come, was brown or black – and nearly all male. This does not include the one time that I was asked to not attend an event at the space.

Next, I'll say that on each individual occasion (including my own) where an eviction or exclusion occurred it was justified – even looking back now, I feel ok saying that, in the moment, it seemed the correct thing to do. However, well over a year later, the sum total of my involvement has left me feeling ashamed. The numbers alone do it. In such a white scene, in a space that was overwhelmingly white – despite the best 'intentions' of those who lived there (and I was the only non-white person) or were involved – that I could so directly contribute to such an outcome of racial purification is fucking embarrassing. A space where every dumbass, white, traveller punk who was passing through town would be able to just assume their welcome. And apart from the few times that I've raised it in one-on-one conversations with people, I don't think any of those white anarcho-los have even considered what all this means for me, for them, for this scene. And eventually the next space project will appear and nothing will shift unless an entirely different approach to 'safety' that de-centres white comfort is formulated.

# /EXCLUSIONS

Within the period that I was living in RMTCA, I was also involved in two conversations with different brown friends that have stuck with me and given some direction to my thoughts around these issues. Although these were longer conversations that had their own specific context and were important for multiple reasons, I'm just going to refer to two lines that I believe are quite incisive and confronting. At some point during the first conversation, one of the two people that I was chatting with said, "this scene has a problem with brown men". The second conversation happened about two months later in RMTCA when three of us were chatting about people being asked to not be in the space and amongst a few things, one friend said that "this scene coddles to the safety of white women".

If I removed any reference to gender and just kept the race element (ie, "this scene has a problem with brown people" and "this scene coddles to the safety of white people") these comments would probably result in much head-nodding agreement. But the difficulty that is introduced with gender being included – and I haven't entirely worked out what I feel about its use here – does open the possibility of interesting, nuanced conversations around safety.

The point here isn't to emphasise some irredeemable opposition between the subject of white woman and that of black man that can only exist as conflict. There are too many complexities, interconnections and subjective experiences at play that make such polar binaries useless. However, it does reflect a well-articulated historical strategy of the racist, patriarchal, capitalist, coloniser to use the rhetoric of 'protecting' the innocence of white women as justification for the ongoing surveillance, disciplining, exploitation, expulsion and murder of brown/ black bodies and the theft of their land/ resources. These justifications served to reinforce both: systems of racism and of patriarchy. Liberalism has never done enough to completely break from this logic. Anarchists should have nothing to do with it.

I'm not going to finish with any strong line here, I'm mostly just going to let this drift off unsatisfyingly. Because there is no useful finality to be achieved in untangling the validity of these two statements or to what extent they are wrapped up in each other. Mostly I was just giving some background to where this zine came from. The most useful takeaway here is to re-emphasise how the push and pull of safety/ danger is rooted in multiple structural oppressions that play out as variable individual experience. And from this to recognise that 'safety', as a strategy for anarchists in a colonial, white supremacist country, will be fundamentally flawed until those structural pillars of racism begin to topple.

# DISCOMFORT, NON-VIOLENCE & RACE

## Context for this post.

At a recent fundraiser in Sydney, an Aboriginal man heavily involved in indigenous struggle and performing at the fundraiser, was attacked by another man from the crowd. The attacker was ejected from the venue, however there were numerous issues with how this occurred. A couple of particular things that were said on the night have given reason to think a bit more critically about the meaning of anti-racist solidarity and the organisation of spaces/events such as fundraisers. What we want to think about here are two aspects of the racial politics that emerged during the response to the attack, but that give an insight into broader problems in anti-racist solidarity: that there is a racialised politics to space and comfort, and that this is connected to a fetishized conception of non-violent direct action (NVDA).

## Comfort and safety.

In our efforts to make spaces in which people feel safer and more comfortable we need to constantly ask ourselves to what degree do we succeed in challenging and transforming hierarchical social relations, and to what degree do we fail at this? More specifically, we need to constantly question why it is that certain bodies and people get to feel most comfortable, and how do they get to be comfortable. It makes sense that we would desire spaces of safety and comfort and indeed, a significant amount of political organising and language has been framed in such terms. For example, safer spaces are often framed as aiming at the eradication of dangerous forms of behaviour from the spaces and worlds we create. Or at least, given that this is in itself actually impossible, safer spaces are characterised as a measure to better prepare us for dealing with the shit that animates our lives. In this sense safer spaces are not about the eradication of conflict, but the better organisation of it.

However, while we can see why comfort appears to be a desirable response to a conflicted world, it is also necessary to question how comfort works. We think that there is a politics to comfort that can be framed in terms of who gets to be comfortable, when and how. When we think about comfort and safety, we ought to think about on whose terms is comfort established? What are the racialised norms that underpin our understandings of comfort? And what happens when these norms become unsettled and challenged? We also think, and this comes

back to the incident at the fundraiser, that when norms become unsettled and when those who have felt most entitled to comfort feel themselves out of place, that the desire for comfort can be a reactionary impulse. It is reactionary because it emerges as a result of having to experience a discomfort that could previously be taken for granted specifically because the individual is, in this case, white. In this way, the spaces we create and the modes of comfort that characterise them are not removed from the social conditions from which they are produced. As a result, if our impulse in the moment of discomfort is to do anything to re-establish the existing mode of comfort, then we risk complicity with reproducing the subtle but no less felt politics of racialised comfort.

## Non-violence and the traumatised 'other'.

The incident at the fundraiser was an everyday example of what can happen when assumptions about comfort become destabilised, and also gives reason to return to a broader criticism of NVDA politics. This is the criticism that highlights NVDA as typically a liberal, middle-class and white (despite the obligatory and very problematic references to Gandhi) ideology with significant racial implications. To call it these things isn't to say that working-class or non-white folk would never adhere to its principles or that it is not tactically advantageous in given scenarios, but that its overall framework tends to be portrayed as the without question morally advanced and mature political choice. This tends to go hand-in-hand with a colonialist vision of the traumatised, irrational other unable to justify their choice and forms of struggle with the necessary liberal-democratic rhetoric. As Gertrude and Fuschia wrote way back in 2006 in response to some of the left's outrage at the anti-police violence that occurred at a G20 summit in Melbourne:

"A false dichotomy is set up between the role of the "disciplined", politically mature protestor and the inarticulate other. The other is positioned as a person or a group too worn out by oppression to resist tactically. This other is protested for, or on behalf of, but we must never indulge in their tactics."

Proponents of NVDA may accept that an oppressed group in a distant place may turn to violent resistance as a desperate response to their condition, but never want it to come too close to the comfort of spaces that they inhabit. The events on Friday – in the calls for 'non-violence' and the crowds' focus on the

anger of the person who was attacked rather than the white attacker – revealed the ways in which, when something unsettling occurs amidst our spaces, the desire to return as quickly as possible to a level of comfort can lead to reactionary decisions. On this occasion it was a series of reactionary decisions that failed to account for the racial politics in the scenario that was unfolding. Non-white bodies present in white-claimed spaces – even ‘progressive’ spaces – are regularly a cause of discomfort to the extent of possibly being seen as dangerous intruders, a perception that can very much lead to that person’s safety being thrown into jeopardy. This specifically happened at the fundraiser. It also happens generally at street demos where situations involving police are regularly defined by a white experience of the state which cannot account for the specific anger or anxiety of a non-white person facing-off the police.

## **Anti-racist solidarity.**

We don’t think this is simply an abstract argument with no relevance to the practice of anti-colonial, anti-racist solidarity. What occurred at the fundraiser on Friday exposed the latent assumptions about what ‘proper’ behaviour is in radical scenes – and that extends from these smaller moments to the larger campaigns that white activists choose to participate in as proof of their anti-racist practice. It also relates to short-sighted understandings of solidarity, specifically when solidarity is conflated with or reduced to sympathy. The idea that solidarity can be expressed in a phrase from a white person such as ‘I hate being white’ and ‘I wish I was black’ – as occurred on Friday – indicates how shallow (indeed racist) the idea of solidarity can become. These words express a disavowal of any need for a critical consideration of how we might meaningfully participate in challenging and organising against racism. Instead, this phrase attempts to establish equivalence between a person of colour’s experience of racism and a white person’s desire to have the person of colour recognise their emotional distress at feeling awkward about being white. Instead of having any interest in why a black person might be telling them that they couldn’t possibly understand where they were coming from in terms of their life experience, there is a request to hear white guilt, and in doing so placate the situation and return it a condition of comfort in which questions of race can continue to be ignored.

The solidarity we need to build requires a certain distance from an expectation of comfort. Not because of some guilt-based 'giving up' of privilege – guilt-based politics never lead anywhere useful and privilege doesn't work like that in any case – but because outside our expectations of comfort are where bonds of common struggle are forged, and where we might learn to undermine the hierarchies of solidarity that so often occur in leftist attempts at anti-racist solidarity. Whether it is about asylum seekers, indigenous solidarity and sovereignty or West Papuan independence, white activist campaigns that involve solidarity with non-white folk in struggle nearly always involve a pigeon-holing and recuperation of the racial politics involved. Even with the best intentions, this recuperation nearly always involves the re-framing of struggle into forms that are comfortable and typical of white-activist scenes in Australia, while also often positioning the white activist acting in solidarity as the key component of the struggle. To repeat, all this is underpinned by the racist implication that more oppressed groups are too 'traumatised' to choose 'mature' forms of political response or struggle. They need to be pointed in the right direction by white activists. This recuperation should be recognised even where symbolic non-white voices are used to give credence to the role of such activism. Is this all too far from the moment that occurred at the fundraiser? Nah. What we saw there was all these assumptions and forms of behaviour playing out in a totally unique situation, where hopefully it became obvious to people just how problematic some of these types of 'anti-racism' are. And if it wasn't obvious, well that's why we're writing this now.

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**Darkness Outside**



**Darkness Outside**

