

Ethnic Minorities Deserve Safe Spaces Without White People

Last week *The Ryersonian* reported on an incident that involved two first-year journalism students who were turned away from an event organized by Racialized Students' Collective because they are white. Since then there has been a lot of commentary on the piece and a lot of debate -- a lot of the criticism is valid.

There are two sides to the story: 1) the media has a right to attend public events and report on matters that are in the public interest. The student media needs to cover initiatives that are happening on campus so that we draw attention to them and in turn create awareness (The *Ryersonian* reported that one student said he was covering the meeting for an assignment). 2) Marginalized groups have a right to claim spaces in the public realm where they can share stories about the discrimination they have faced without judgment and intrusion from anyone else.

I am a person of colour and a journalist and so there are two conflicting voices inside my head. But in this case one voice, that of a person of colour, is louder and my conscience does not allow me to be impartial. I have to take a side.

The organizers of the event, the Racialized Students' Collective, should have done a better job of labelling this event as a safe space on the Ryerson Students' Union online calendar. They should label safe spaces clearly and maybe even host events that educate the public on what they mean. Doing so will help the public and the media have a better understanding of the purpose and value of these spaces.

However, the point to note is not that two white students were asked to leave the event, but rather that this was a safe space and that we as a newsroom, as a campus and as a society are not as knowledgeable as we should be about what these spaces mean.

It's not just important, but it's essential, for marginalized groups to have safe spaces on campus to engage with people who understand what they go through. Though this group is funded by Ryerson's student union, it works to serve a particular group and a particular purpose. Many students at Ryerson have encountered racism in their life that is impossible to forget and many are exposed to discrimination on a daily basis. This group and these sort of events allow people of colour to lay bare their experiences and to collectively combat this societal ailment. These spaces are rare places in the world not controlled by individuals who have power, who have privilege.

These spaces, which are forums where minority groups are protected from mainstream stereotypes and marginalization, are crucial to resistance of oppression and we, as a school and as a society, need to respect them.

Earlier in the week a newsroom colleague and I went to an ad-hoc committee meeting on sexual assault policy. When we arrived we were told it was a safe space, and that we would not be able to report on anything that would be discussed in the meeting.

We understood the value of these sorts of events, where people can share their common struggles. Our understanding let us attend and contribute to the conversation, even if we couldn't report about it.

We understood the people there had a right to privacy. They had a right to collectively work through the challenges society had imposed on them. They had a right to claim parts of the campus, parts of the world, for a few hours in hopes of creating broader social change.

The two students who tried to enter the RSC meeting said that they were embarrassed when they were asked to leave and that the group was being counterproductive in sectioning themselves off. Similarly, some of the comments on the piece written about these students speaks to the idea that excluding certain people from these events, this dialogue, is encouraging racial tension. Their embarrassment isn't as important as the other issues involved here.

Segregation was imposed on people of colour by people of privilege, not the other way around. The very fact that individuals organizing to help each other get through social barriers and injustices are being attacked and questioned for their peaceful assembly is proof that they were right to exclude those students.

Racialized people experience systemic discrimination on a daily basis, on many levels, and in ways that white people may never encounter. The whole point of these safe spaces is to remove that power dynamic. That's partly what makes them spaces for healing.

The presence of any kind of privilege puts unnecessary pressure on the people of colour to defend any anger or frustrations they have, to fear the outcome of sharing their stories. The attendees are trying to move forward by supporting each other and they should not have to defend themselves, they should not fear the consequences of raising their voices.

Instead of focusing on why those students were asked to leave, we should be thinking about the history of oppression that makes these kinds of groups and these kinds of places so very important. We should be focusing on how to be aware and respectful of the rights of both the press and marginalized groups. We have to find a way to coexist peacefully.

The West has a history of oppressing people of colour: from Africans who were enslaved and brought to the New World, to native people whose land was stolen by Europeans. This kind of oppression is still witnessed today, in the way the black community is treated in the United States, in the state of African nations trying to recover from the collapse of the previous colonial rule, and in the continuing struggles of indigenous peoples.

White people may experience occasional and unacceptable prejudice, but not racism. They do not experience the systemic racism that makes it hard for them to find jobs, housing, health

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