

Spring 2017

# Tourism and the Vrankrijk as a Safe(r) Space

Megan Adams  
*SIT Study Abroad*

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Tourism and the Vrankrijk as a Safe(r) Space  
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School of International Service

Europe, Netherlands, Amsterdam  
Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for  
The Netherlands: International perspectives on sexuality & gender,  
SIT Study Abroad, Spring 2017



Student Name: Megan Adams

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Title of ISP: Tourism and the Vrankrijk as a Safe(r) Space

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Program and Term: Netherlands International Perspectives on Sexuality & Gender S17

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### Abstract

This is a practicum-based study on the impact of tourism on the creation and maintenance of a safe(r) space at the Vrankrijk. The Vrankrijk is a former squat and current volunteer-run community center and café, which hosts WTF Wednesday, a weekly safe(r) queer night of a voku dinner and performances. This research explores the current definitions of safe space as applied to the Vrankrijk. The study's main focus is the impact of tourism on the Vrankrijk as a safe(r) space.

The study finds its roots in four experiential interviews with members of the community including a visiting band member whose group performed on WTF Wednesday and three regular bar and voku volunteers. Interview subjects spoke about their experiences with tourism at the Vrankrijk with consistent emphasis on the lack of impact they typically feel due to the safe(r) space building policies in place such as a strict door policy. The study finds that the Vrankrijk fosters a safe(r) space through a strict door policy which largely mitigates the negative implications of tourism. Additionally, interview subjects detailed the positive and negative attitudes they felt toward tourists who sometimes do enter the space. As a practicum based ISP, this research involves hands on volunteer work in the kitchen and cleaning the space on Wednesdays at the Vrankrijk.

This research is important for anyone studying safe spaces or queer identity within the Dutch context.

**Key Terms:** *Vrankrijk, Safe space, tourism, homonormativity and neoliberalism, queer studies*

### Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the help of a great many people. First and foremost, thank you to Bear Silver, my advisor, connection to the community, and super fun person to hang out with on Wednesday nights. Thank you to Garjan Sterk and Yvette Kopjin for initiating contact with Bear, for encouraging my project from its beginning stages, and finding a way to make the structure of the project work for me.

Thank you to my friends at SIT for your visits to the Vrankrijk on Wednesday nights. Thank you to Eduard for teaching me Dutch language and culture and being a constant source of organization and consistency throughout the semester. Thank you to Sabine Bastiaans for keeping my life afloat and for answering my endless questions. Thank you to my host family: Monique, Richard, Sterre and Zara for being the best part of this semester and welcoming me not just into your home but also into your family. Thank you to my own family for being who you are and to my father and sister, Colleen for editing my paper for my famous too-chunky sentences and repeated words.

Thank you to Erika for welcoming me at the first Vrankrijk meeting and for being patient as I found my way around the kitchen. Thank you, Milton for teaching me how to chop. Finally, thank you to all of the WTF Queers, especially the Voku volunteers, for welcoming me into your community, sharing your stories, chopping alongside me, and becoming friends.

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## **Introduction to Content**

Prior to arriving in Amsterdam to study gender and sexuality, I was excited to reach what I saw as a mecca of acceptance and liberal attitudes toward everything from soft drugs to sex and sexuality. Through media portrayal, word of mouth, and my own biases, I expected Amsterdam to be an idyllic place where people could be themselves freely without fear. Upon arrival and situating myself in the Dutch context through coursework and experience, I have come to realize that this is unfortunately, not true. As “progressive” as Dutch society is, there is a unique infringement of safe(r) spaces by tourists craving an immersive experience while visiting. In reflecting on this idea, I came to the realization that my own proclivity to engage could have impacted safe(r) spaces in a way I did not intend. However, I am not alone in this specific brand of tourism that seeks out “liberal” spaces and attitudes, which has raised questions for me on the impact of this search on local communities.

Although more tolerant, the reality is that this liberal mecca does not exist. There are a limited number of important communities working to create safe(r) spaces within the reality of Amsterdam, one of which is the Vrankrijk a former squat and current venue for DIY organization. Built in 1875 as a carpentry workshop, the Vrankrijk then saw a lifetime of other purposes before being abandoned in 1975 (Cramb, 2001). In 1983, the building became a squat and was eventually purchased by its squatters in 1992 and is still open today to visitors for different themed nights, including the subject of my research, WTF Wednesday (Sollmann, 2017).

Every Wednesday at the Vrankrijk, a community of volunteers host “WTF Wednesday”, a night for queer identifying people to eat vegan food and enjoy a variety of

performances from spoken word to experimental DJs to post-punk bands. On these evenings, the Vrankrijk is committed to fostering a space in which people can be their authentic selves and have a good time. On the Vrankrijk website, WTF Wednesday is described as such: “every Wednesday brings a new theme and performance celebrating visible queer cultural diversity. WTF Wednesday creates safe queer space with a mixture of visual and performance artists, musicians, and local drag kings and queens. Each week brings a variety of entertainment including films, live bands, performance” (Vrankrijk, 2017).

I developed my research question based on my exploration of this “liberal” seeking tourism as well as a realization for the need for the creation of safer(r) spaces within the Dutch context. I present my findings based on personal volunteer experience in the community as well as interview data with community members. The question this paper aims to answer is: what impact does liberal experience seeking tourism, specifically outsiders entering this safe(r) space for a brief amount of time, have on the mission and community of the Vrankrijk?

In the context of this question and the research, there are two key definitions crucial to understanding, the first of which is a safe(r) space, a designated physical, emotional, and verbal space intended to allow for the physical/mental/emotional safety of those whose identities are not protected or accepted within the greater world. Equally important for a full understanding of the projects goals and findings is the definition of a tourist as a person outside of the established community who enters the community for short-term exposure or entertainment value.

Using the question of the impact of tourism on the fostering of a safe(r) space at the Vrankrijk as the guide for my research, the main goal of my work was to gain an understanding of this impact in a Dutch context. Furthermore, I was drawn to this topic and found it valuable because the number of these spaces is limited and there was great potential to provide the community and other researchers with further information on the subject. In addition to answering my research question, my primary goal was to take steps as a researcher to maintain an awareness of my positionality and to hold the maintenance of the Vrankrijk as a safe(r) space in the highest regard, above all other aspects of my research process and success.

This paper begins with a review of the existing literature on safe spaces and liberal experience seeking tourism, the two subjects that meld together to form my research focus. Additionally, I outline the methodology of my research, describing my role as a volunteer at the Vrankrijk, the rationale for my interviews and my recruitment process, and finally reflecting on the steps taken to acknowledge my positionality as a researcher within the context of a safe(r) space and to conduct research that is ethical. I then outline my interviews with members of the WTF Queer community, present and analyze common themes in these discourses, and reflect on both my findings, my role as a volunteer, WTF Wednesday as an organization and tourism's impact on its role as a safe(r) space. Finally, I conclude with an acknowledgment of the limitations of my research and suggestions for further work based on my findings and experience.

## **Literature Review**

This project, as exemplified by the research question, finds its roots in the two major concepts of safe spaces and liberal experience seeking tourism. This literature review aims to situate both within the Dutch context and provide rationale for the current study within the existing literature.

### **A. Safe Spaces**

The term safe space originates from the late twentieth century women's movement in which "safety began to mean distance from men and patriarchal thought and was used to describe 'consciousness raising' groups" and was a "means rather than an end" (Harris, 2015). Within this context, "a safe space was not free of internal disagreement but did mean a devotion to a common political project" and "those who attempted to undermine the movement—consciously or unconsciously—would be kept outside" (Harris, 2015).

Over time, the term "safe space" has seen a shift and has come to, among different communities, hold a number of vastly different definitions. Across campuses, "the presence of [safe space symbols] is an indicator that gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex people can feel safe in such sites" (Rosenfeld and Noterman, 2014, p. 1346). This definition has been mobilized, for example, on HBCUs Howard University and Spelman College's respective campuses as the schools work to "acknowledge that the LGBT community is significant and exists and fostering safe space support" despite "religious tradition and doctrines and conservative administrations" (Coleman, 2016, p. 1). Across campus counseling offices and professors doors alike, these symbols indicate a safe space for both physical safety and verbal communication.

At the same time, debates surrounding safe spaces on campus focus less on the creation of physical space for inclusion but more for the use of content warnings by professors for sensitive content in the classroom setting or the avoidance of certain harmful topics. Many argue that this is an act of censorship while others argue that it is basic human decency to extend safety to college students (Hanhardt, 2016, p. 121). For the purpose of this study, the term safe space takes on the definition often utilized in “feminist, queer, and civil rights movements” in which a safe space is “associated with keeping marginalized groups free from violence and harassment,” both physical, verbal, and otherwise (Rosenfeld and Noterman, 2014, p. 1348). Carried over from the roots of the phrase, this definition also “encourages a certain license to seek and act freely, form a collective strength, and generate strategies for resistance” (Rosenfeld and Noterman, 2014, p. 1346).

In a majority of safe space literature, the focus remains interestingly on the safe space as an abstract construct, something metaphorical or imaginary. With such black and white theoretical boundaries, there is little room in the majority of existing literature to explore the idea of safe space as a paradox when “safe spaces should be understood not through static and acontextual notions of ‘safe’ and ‘unsafe,’ but rather through the relational work of being unsafe” (Rosenfeld and Noterman, 2014, p. 1358). In order to better understand the definition of a “safe” space, scholars of the topic must begin to “address the imaginary in terms of what we call into play as relevant, necessary and possible,” rather than continuing to simply review these definitions but by building safe spaces and exploring the intricacies of the value they hold in the lives of real people who move within and outside of these spaces (Stengel and Weems, 503).

By defining safe space through the creation of safe space, rather than theorization of safe space alone, the definition begins to account for the mentioned paradoxes such as the fact that there is no such thing as a totally safe space. This is true for example as “cultivating them includes foregrounding social differences and binaries” (Rosenfeld and Noterman, 2014, p. 1360). The defining of safe space through experience also calls into question “assumptions regarding what safe spaces are, how we know that they are safe, who and what they are safe for, and what they are safe from” (Stengel and Weems, 506).

Even within spaces meant to be safe, there is always some degree of variability and interpretation. There is often the lingering possibility that even those the space is intended for do not feel safe which stems from the fact that “no space can ever truly be placed in the binary of safe-unsafe.” As a result, it must simply work toward being safer (Stengel and Weems, 511). Additionally, safe space is meant to create a “necessary, positive condition” and a “safe haven” of sorts (Stengel, 536). In taking on such an important but hefty mission, it is crucial to “problematize safe space as taken for granted” and build a discourse that focuses on the active building of spaces that are safer for the targeted community, in the case of this paper, the queer community (Stengel, 524).

In the single accessible published study on the creation of safe space in a performance or art space, “safe space is considered a space of messy negotiations that allow individual and group actions of representation to occur, as well as opportunities for ‘utopian performatives’” (Hunter, 5). In this context, the space is not simply labeled as “safe” for the queer community and then considered as such, as is seen often through “safe space symbolism.” The performance space rather, works to consistently create a space, physical, emotional, and artistic, in which the participating and visiting and community

are able to feel safe from violence whether it be physical, verbal, emotional or otherwise. Within this space, “safe space,” is defined based on the collective needs and definition of safety among members of the community as defined by the community (Hunter, 8).

### **Safe Space in the Dutch Context**

More specific to the Dutch context, there is a limited amount of scholarly literature available on the subject. As such, the framing literature for my research is not as relevant as possible as it focuses on creating safe spaces within schools but is useful in that it exists within a Dutch framework. Cornelia Roux’s “Safe Spaces: Human Rights Education in Diverse Contexts” delves into the value of safe spaces in schools, specifically for students at an all-girls school in the Netherlands, the continuous development of which she was personally involved. Roux eloquently and academically expresses the importance of “radical caring” within schools and argues that there is a link between safe spaces and happy, healthy children (Roux, 2012). However, while Roux’s work is useful in arguing the need for work among activists and others alike to create spaces that are safer, especially in that it exists in the Dutch context, it is specific to a single case study and highlights a lack of further scholarship on safe spaces in the Netherlands.

From the existing scholarship, the current study finds its definition of safe(r) space as a designated physical, emotional, and verbal space intended to allow for the physical/mental/emotional safety of those whose identities are not protected or accepted within the greater world. The definition focuses on the areas of safety but simultaneously purposefully vague in order to allow for the differing conditions of safety in varying

circumstances. For queer night on Wednesdays, the Vrankrijk most specifically intends to provide a space in which queer people can embrace their identities without fear of judgment or repercussion. In addition, the defined term is safe(r) space rather than safe space in order to account for the paradox that is an objectively safe space while simultaneously giving a name to the state we strive toward in creating a space meant to be and feel safe.

### **B. Liberal-Experience Seeking Tourism**

In addition to safe spaces, this research is also rooted in liberal experience seeking tourism and its impact on the creation and maintenance of a safe space at the Vrankrijk.

In the realm of liberal experience seeking tourism, this project finds its academic roots in a work entitled “Sex, tourism and sex tourism: fulfilling similar needs?” by Chris Ryan and Rachel Kinder. Their article explores the sex and sexuality-based tourism industry, including ideas of how to protect those working and living in these communities as well as what drives people to visit these locations. Additionally, the article begins to explore ideas of the commodification of real lives in these tourist situations, noting that tourism that seeks out liberal ideas toward sex can be harmful when those involved in the tourism industry, willing or unwilling, are commoditized (Ryan and Kinder, 1996).

Most work surrounding this liberal experience seeking tourism has been developed through a framework of deconstructing neoliberalism. Under neoliberalism, the LGBT group identity has undergone different periods and “around 1970, neoliberalism once again changed the material relations underlying sexual identity formation” (Drucker, 2016, 222). Under this homonormative dominant “same-sex

regime,” LGBTQ identities continued to spread with people carving out space for themselves by “warping” or adapting to fit into a new idea of “gay normality” (Drucker, 2016, 224). In the modern period, this normalization takes the form of gender conformity and homonormativity, leading to a growth of a privileged lesbian and gay middle class, the formation of normative families founded on marriage, and most notably, an “exclusion of transgender and sexually marginalized queers” (Mepschen, 2017).

### **Liberal-Experience Seeking Tourism In the Dutch Context**

Under Homonationalism, “the new class subjectivity constructs the gay subject as a queer liberal one, invested in consumption and property ownership, and intimate, stable sexual relationships, relying on archaic formation of public and private divides” (Puar, 2017, 337). As an inherently capitalist institution, the tourism industry leads into this creation of the LGBTQ community as both a group to be marketed to and a product to be consumed. Within the Dutch context, this “commodification of sexuality for economic gain which creates a specific, normative version of lesbian and gay visibility,” is rampant with the tourism industry advertising gay canal cruises, sex clubs and shops, and the ultimate LGBT-friendly experience (Drucker, 2016, 220). However, there is no current research on the impact this homonationalist, normative, and liberal experience seeking tourism has on the communities being commodified or left out of the normative equation.

### **C. Current Study**

The basis for the current study stems from a gap in the literature, most specifically the unbridged gap between the study of neoliberal liberal experience seeking tourism and the study on the safe(r) spaces this tourism has the potential to impact. Within the Dutch

context, there is limited scholarship on either individual subject such as the gaping hole of potential for research on the importance of creating safe(r) spaces or the lack of safe(r) spaces in the Netherlands, aside from a select few. With limited scholarship on either subject in the Dutch context, there is also no existing literature on the connection between the two despite the Netherlands being a central hub for this type of tourism.

While this study cannot bridge this gap alone, one of the central goals of the project is to utilize the Vrankrijk as a case study of a safe(r) space in the Dutch context. In doing so with personal experiences of community members as evidence, the project aims to describe the impact of this neoliberal homonormative brand of tourism on the creation of a safe(r) space at Vrankrijk to potentially be used as a model for future research and to begin the scholarly conversation on the lack of safe(r) spaces in the Netherlands as well as the impact of tourism on these spaces.

## **Methodology**

My methodology is multifaceted in that my project was practicum based and involved both a volunteer component and interview-based research. The Vrankrijk is a DIY community and is run on volunteer contribution.

### **A. Volunteer Work**

I was introduced to the community when my advisor, Bear, brought me to a monthly volunteer meeting on February 22 where for two hours, we discussed upcoming performances, vokus, and community efforts as well as particular rules and regulations

the group wanted to enforce. I later attended another four-hour meeting on March 28 to discuss the same for April and May.

At the first meeting, it was determined that because of my limited Visa as a student that I would not be able to work the door or the bar but that I could be helpful with “chopping” or preparing the vegan meal sold for five euros at the voku before each show and by cleaning such as through collecting empty bottles or cleaning toilets and spills. Following these meetings, I volunteered each Wednesday from March 22 through May 3 for a total of 70 hours, beginning around 3:00 PM and staying until between 12:00 AM and 2:00 AM each night. Each week, I logged my hours and checked in with Bear about my status on meeting my required 18-30 hours of volunteer work. After my 20 hours were met on March 29, I continued to volunteer as I found that the Vrankrijk volunteer team was an exciting, friendly community to engage with and I truly enjoyed my time there within the safe(r) space. I volunteered for a total of 70 hours, as demonstrated by my volunteer schedule, displayed in Table I.

<b>DATE</b>	<b>TASKS</b>	<b>HOURS WORKED</b>	<b>TOTAL HOURS</b>
<b>February 22</b>	Volunteer Meeting	7:00-9:00 PM	2
<b>March 22</b>	Voku & Cleaning	4:00-10:00 PM	6
<b>March 28</b>	Volunteer Meeting	7:00-11:00 PM	4
<b>March 29</b>	Voku & Cleaning	3:30-1:30 AM	10
<b>April 5</b>	Voku & Cleaning	3:30-1:30 AM	10
<b>April 12</b>	Voku & Cleaning	3:30-12:30 AM	9
<b>April 19</b>	Voku & Cleaning	3:00-1:00 AM	10
<b>April 26</b>	Voku & Cleaning	3:30-12:30 AM	9
<b>May 3</b>	Voku & Cleaning	3:30-12:30 AM	10
<b>TOTAL HOURS</b>			<b>70</b>

**Table I: Volunteer Hours**

During my time volunteering, I helped with the preparation of meals such as vegan spring rolls and mushroom tarts, plated the meals and exchanged plates with visitors for meal tickets, lead the preparation of a dessert, cleaned the kitchen and all items used in the preparation of the meal, and collected empty bottles for recycling during the performances, all alongside other volunteers.

Craig Claiborne once said, “Cooking is at once child’s play and adult joy. And cooking done with care is an act of love,” a statement I felt the truth of with each meal. As I stuffed and hand rolled spring rolls, carefully chopped onions with tears every time, and fried individual tortillas for dessert, I put my heart into the meals meant to feed the community. Coming from a large family, nothing says love, comfort, and safety like food so for me, it was fitting that my volunteer participation took the shape of cooking and serving meals. As I did this, I also felt the other community volunteers doing the same. The kitchen was consistently filled with vibrant conversation from checking in on each other’s days to discussing politics in each of our respective countries. Even in the tensest moments, those leading up to 7 PM when the voku began and we were unsure of whether it would be ready on time or enough to feed everyone, there was consistently a sense of connectedness and pride in the food we made to nourish staples of the community and visitors alike. If the way to a person’s heart is through their stomach, which I truly believe, the way into a community is in the kitchen.<sup>1</sup>

## **B. Interviewee Recruitment**

My advisor, Bear Silver, connected me to the Vrankrijk community. I announced my role and goals as a researcher at the first volunteer meeting I attended and during my

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<sup>1</sup> See Image I in Appendix for photograph of example voku meal

time volunteering in the kitchen. With connections made through my volunteer work, I was able to conduct a series of four interviews with members of the Vrankrijk community including WTF Wednesday volunteers a visiting band member whose group performed at the Vrankrijk.

Three of my interviewees were individuals who also volunteered with voku prep and who agreed to interviews after a few weeks of consistent volunteering. Additionally, I recruited Bibi, a band member, via Facebook Messenger after I saw her post on the Vrankrijk page leaving a review and mentioning her participation at the Vrankrijk. Bear put me into contact with each of the individuals either directly via personal introduction or indirectly through an introduction to the space and online page.

### **C. Experiential Interviews**

Each interview was semi-structured based on a pre-written interview guide including: How long have you been coming to the Vrankrijk? Describe for me your experience as a community member here. Would you associate the phrase safe(r) space with the Vrankrijk? Why? What elements of the Vrankrijk contribute to it being a safe(r) space? What challenges exist for the Vrankrijk as a safe(r) space? What is your attitude toward new people who enter this space in search of the liberal idealism the Amsterdam tourism industry sells? In what ways do you feel welcoming of those who wish to enter this space? In what ways do you feel closed off or neutral? What impact do you feel tourism has on the creation of a safe(r) space within the Vrankrijk?

With these questions serving as a loose guide for a conversation on the impact of tourism on the creation of a safe(r) space at the Vrankrijk. I interviewed Bibi individually

via Skype, due to her being located in Poland, in an hour-long session from a quiet Wi-Fi café. I interviewed Taylor, Maxwell, and Patrice; all community members of the Vrankrijk and voku volunteers in a group interview on a Wednesday night at the Vrankrijk following the preparation and cleanup of the meal. I made this decision firstly because the volunteers at the Vrankrijk are incredibly busy people, for many of them Wednesday is their “free” night and they were there committing their time to volunteering so the two hour window of time when the kitchen is quiet between the voku and the show was most convenient for them. I made this decision secondly because I feel as though volunteering and preparing a meal alongside each other as a team was an excellent way to build a trusting, comfortable relationship with the interviewees. Thirdly, I chose to interview the voku volunteers in a group interview because it is in fact a community. While each individual was able to answer the questions one by one, a conversation and sharing of opinions also built, creating trust and lively responses.

The interviews were centrally focused on the experiences of the interviewee with the conversation moving purposefully in the direction they carried the conversation while simultaneously maintaining a defined focus on the purpose of the interview, the research question. I chose to structure my interviews around the more specific focus the research question provides, the experiences of individuals within the community with tourism’s impact on the creation of a safe(r) space. The rationale behind this decision, rather than delving deeper into more personal aspects such as the identities of the individuals within the community, was to maintain the safe(r) space environment, as outlined further in the ethics and positionality section.

#### **D. Ethics and Positionality**

In addition to providing me with a sense of community in Amsterdam, my volunteer work at the Vrankrijk was also immensely helpful in connecting me to my interviewees, all members of the WTF Wednesday Vrankrijk community who frequent the queer night often if not always. Through my volunteer work, I developed a sense of trust with my interviewees. I was also able to give back to the community rather than simply ask questions and leave without considering my own positionality of then someone who enters the community with a self-motivated purpose, becoming the sort of tourist I am researching. Through my volunteer work, before jumping into interview-based research I was able to both observe and gain an understanding of the research environment as well as establish among the community that I was committed to the maintenance of the Vrankrijk as a safe(r) space.

Additionally, as mentioned, the scope of my interview questions was limited to personal experiences with tourism rather than a larger investigation into the Vrankrijk's role as a safe(r) space and its impact on community member's individual lives. This stems from the need to maintain an ethical position as a researcher. Since a safe(r) space is a delicate one, I made the conscious effort to avoid prying into more personal identity related issues. As a safe(r) space, the Vrankrijk is meant to be a physical and emotional space in which people can relax and be themselves without fear or question. As a researcher, it may have been helpful to delve into personal identities and the importance of a safe space(r) for those specific reasons. However, the research's scope is focused more narrowly on the impact of tourism on the safe(r) space so I made the decision, based on positionality to not delve into more sensitive background information. I found

that it would be more harmful to delve into personal issues and a questioning of identity within a space that is meant to be safe than helpful to the context of the research.

Similarly, my research also involves only four interviewees rather than my intended ten. In searching for interviewees, I was often met by visible discomfort at the mention of my research or the prospect of an interview. The reality of research fatigue became instantly clear. Rather than push to levels of discomfort within a safe(r) space, I chose to only interview people who were totally comfortable at the level of enthusiasm. While this led to fewer interviews creating minor issues with validity, it also creates a more ethical project through an acknowledgment of positionality and the maintenance of a safe(r) space.

Regarding ethics and positionality, the most important aspect of my research, even above finding more results, was maintaining the environment of a safe(r) space at the Vrankrijk for my interviewees and the community as a whole. I was transparent about my research intentions, announcing my role as a researcher and asking for permission to enter the space in this role when at the initial volunteer meeting and continually identifying myself and my research goals during each kitchen shift and conversation with a new member of the community.

However, there are also certain aspects of my own positionality that need to be acknowledged, the first of which is the fact that I myself entered the Vrankrijk as an outsider to the community, volunteering on queer night despite being a very femme presenting woman in a heteronormative relationship. I acknowledged this throughout the research process by firstly keeping in mind my background and training in Identity, Race, Gender, and Culture and through this program, Gender and Sexuality. I also

acknowledged this by maintaining an open dialogue with members of the community about this and the fact that I myself could fall into the category of tourist that this project studies. I hope to have avoided this by volunteering consistently, even beyond the completion of my required hours.

Finally, the research conducted is IRB approved. Data used for analysis comes not from casual conversations during my time at the Vrankrijk and is limited strictly to recorded, consensual interviews. Each of these interviews was recorded and destroyed at the end of the ISP Period as noted in the consent form and verbal consent agreement read and agreed to by participants, and names have been changed for anonymity in order to maintain the privacy and safety of interviewees. Throughout the interviews and the entire research process, measures were taken to maintain ethical boundaries and to acknowledge positionality of myself as a researcher, especially within the more delicate arena of a safe(r) space.

### **Vrankrijk as a Safe Space: 3 Pillars of Policy**

In order to place the interviews and experiences of individuals within the community within the greater context of a deepened understanding of WTF Wednesday at the Vrankrijk, I have noted the three pillars of Vrankrijk policy that mark the community's consistent commitment to the creation of a safe(r) space which at the Vrankrijk often takes the shape of a space in which people can relax without fear of a need to defend, answer questions about, or feel stares regarding their identity such as through gender performance or sexuality. These policies, which I describe in greater

detail the way they contribute to a safe(r) space are: gender neutral bathrooms, open eroticism, and removal from the space.

### **A. Gender Neutral Bathrooms**

The first of these policies is the gender-neutral bathrooms. There are two bathrooms but both are open to use for anyone with no markups or indication of categorization. Through this intentional inclusion, the Vrankrijk offers a space in which community members and visitors do not have to categorize themselves and are free to move through public space freely. While it seems simple, in places such as North Carolina where people, specifically young students, are forced to use the bathroom that matches their gender assigned at birth, using the bathroom becomes a stressful and potentially dangerous experience. At the Vrankrijk, this stress of forcing someone to identify with the gender binary of either male or female, when using the bathroom is removed.

### **B. Open Eroticism**

Additionally, WTF Wednesday has a policy of open eroticism, meaning people should feel free to experience their sexuality in the ways they feel comfortable whether this is through public displays of affection with another person or dressing in a way they find erotic and empowering. At the second volunteer meeting I attended, based on an experience the previous week, it was decided by the group that so long as another person on shift is successfully manning the bar, it is okay for a bar tender to become physically involved with another person during their shift. This decision was made on the basis that

maintaining a safe, open space for expression of gender, sexuality, or other forms of personality is more important than any sort of capitalistic gain the bar creates. While this is one instance, it encapsulates well the focus of the Vrankrijk as an anti-capitalist pro-self-expression and eroticism environment.

### **C. Removal from the Space**

One of the most crucial aspects of WTF Wednesday and Vrankrijk policy is the ability of people to speak up and take action when they feel uncomfortable. There are both external and internal measures in place to remove those who threaten the delicate balance of the evening as a safe space. At the door, visitors must go through different doors with two sets of people at each. While there, the door volunteer can have conversations with visitors to help them get a feel for whether queer night is for them and if they can add to the energy of the safe(r) space. The importance of the door is discussed in further detail in the analysis of the interviews with community members who expressed the door as key to the maintenance of a safe(r) space.

Internally, bartenders, who are all volunteers, are able to refuse to serve anyone who is causing problems for them or the space. Additionally, when a person feels threatened such as through unwanted contact, staring, or even bad vibes throughout the night, they are able to go to the beheerder and ask to have the person removed. This policy may seem extreme to some but is crucial to maintaining an environment in which members of the community feel safe and are able to enjoy their time. There are also measures in place for the safety and inclusion of offenders who disrupt the space. While they are removed, the ban is not permanent in that they are given the opportunity to attend a Vrankrijk meeting

to gain an understanding of why they were removed and to apologize and reflect in order to have the ban lifted.

In the context of tourism, those removed will most likely not attend the meeting but those whose tourism is voyeuristic in nature are typically sifted out at the door or throughout the night. For those who are seeking a safe space to express themselves and relax in, these policies help protect their experience as well.

### **Policy Reflection**

These three major efforts are not the only aspects of WTF Wednesday at the Vrankrijk that contribute to its role as a safe(r) space for the queer community. For example, the providing of a five-euro meal and the presentation of new and exciting performances each week, and simply providing a place to dance and unwind are all great acts of care. However, I have found that these three main pillars summarize well the efforts the community to create this space dedicated to open queerness without the fear of repercussion that exists out in the greater world.

As discussed previously, no space can truly be safe as there is no “binary of safe-unsafe,” the Vrankrijk WTF Wednesday organizers do their best to make Wednesday evenings at the Vrankrijk as safe as possible for the queer community they serve (Stengel and Weems, 511). As one of very few within the Dutch context, the Vrankrijk can serve as a model for creating safe queer space elsewhere, beginning with these three pillars. With this context of the Vrankrijk as a safe(r) space, an idea agreed upon by each interviewee, my interviews provide insight as experiential case studies into the impact that tourism has on the efforts of the Vrankrijk community to create and maintain a safe space.

## Interviews with WTF Queer Community Members

### A. Bibi

Bibi is from and currently living in Poland. She attended WTF Wednesday at the Vrankrijk only once but in the unique position of a visiting performer. Bibi referred to herself as a “tourist of sorts,” acknowledging that she was not a core member of the Vrankrijk but repeatedly noted the enjoyable time she had at the Vrankrijk, noting that she would “certainly apply the label of safe(r) space to the Vrankrijk” and that she felt she could “truly be herself there” as a person and a performer. Bibi also repeatedly noted that the Vrankrijk was important to her because there is simply nothing like it in her home country of Poland, something she accredited to the liberalism of Amsterdam as well as the purposefulness of the community itself in its mission to create a safe space. Finally, Bibi noted that she was “surprised to find [she] was performing on Queer Night despite [her] queer identity,” noting that she feels that at home and within the community as a whole, her bisexual identity is often erased. For Bibi, the Vrankrijk provided a space where she felt fully included as a member of the Queer community, something she longs for despite common erasure. I interviewed Bibi via Skype as she is in Poland.

### B. Patrice\*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> \*Names have been changed in order to maintain the anonymity of research participants

Patrice is an American expat living in Amsterdam with her cats. She is a trans identifying woman and is a colorful staple of the Queer community in Amsterdam. She has worked at many queer spaces across Amsterdam but finds that “the Vrankrijk is special in that it really aims to be a safe space.” She volunteers most Wednesdays, either behind the bar or in the kitchen, organizing or chopping for the voku. Regarding tourism within the Vrankrijk, though she sees a balance of good and bad types of tourism, she notes, “above all else, I don’t want to feel like I’m being consumed in the city I live in.” I interviewed Patrice in the Voku kitchen after meal prep ended in a group format.

### **C. Maxwell\***

Maxwell is a bright personality and another staple of the Vrankrijk community who says “the Vrankrijk made space for me to be myself and come in here and do my thing.” He has just recently become a beheerder on the Vrankrijk books and you can usually find him organizing or chopping for the voku before moving directly into a bar shift. Maxwell notes the importance of the maintenance of the Vrankrijk as a safe, queer space, mentioning, “it’s important that the rules for entrance are more strict coming from the higher levels, the organizers, with room for entrance for non-queer allies at the lower levels where people are coming through the door, we just want people who are accepting and excited about queer night, not just who tolerate it.” I interviewed Maxwell in the Voku kitchen after meal prep ended in a group format.

**D. Taylor\***

Taylor volunteers in the kitchen or at the bar each Wednesday after working at a food organization in Amsterdam. Taylor is an excellent cook, always worried about whether there is enough food to go around<sup>3</sup> for everyone who attends the voku. In regards to tourism, Taylor states primarily “we want all kinds of people here and want people to feel welcome.” Taylor also makes the best vegan chocolate cake. I interviewed Taylor in the Voku kitchen after meal prep ended in a group format.

**Findings and Analysis****Common Themes in Discourse****A. Positive Experiences with Tourism**

Of the three main themes within the interview discourse, the first is the number of positive experiences with and acceptance of tourists within the WTF Wednesday space. Primarily, Taylor noted that *“of course there are tourists who are looking for a safe place and we want to provide that not just for ourselves but for them as well.”* Taylor’s statement reflects the idea that the Vrankrijk is not an exclusive club meant to serve only its core community. While it is meant to be a safe(r) space, the safety is found through monitoring within the night, not by strictly limiting the group to longtime regulars. Through the inclusion of tourists, not of the liberal seeking but of the safe space seeking nature, they create room for growth, inclusion, and further safety for expression rather than simply comfort.

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Similarly, Patrice stated, *“we want to attract a place for queer people but want to broaden people’s experiences as well.”* A common theme throughout interview discourse as well as volunteer meetings was that WTF Wednesday at the Vrankrijk is not an exclusive space to *all* tourists but rather those whose tourism is voyeuristic in nature as discussed further in the following section. Maxwell described that WTF Wednesday is fully open to *“all kinds of people so long as the central focus of the night is the creation of a safe space for queer people.”* Within a safe(r) space, including the Vrankrijk, visitors should not put the burden on those within the space to educate them but those exploring their own queer identity should feel comfortable to express their own identity within the space. As exemplified by the Vrankrijk and its policies, a safe(r) space is not a group of people with the same identities, experiences, and opinions but rather, a space in which those whose identities are not protected or accepted in the greater world are able to come together to express themselves openly in their own respective ways so long as that expression remains respectful of and safe for others (Stengel, 2010).

This inclusion is incredibly powerful in the building and fostering of a community and safe(r) space as described by Bibi who stated, *“I often find my bisexuality being erased so it was a nice surprise to find out my band was playing on Queer Night. Just that alone made me feel accepted in the space in a way I am usually not. And when I got there, I felt so safe to be myself. The Vrankrijk is like nothing we have at home in Poland. It’s a community.”* Bibi’s experience exemplifies the strong impact the availability of the Vrankrijk as a safe(r) space to those, seeking one or not, truly has. In the role of performer and visitor alike, within the intentionally safe(r) space of the Vrankrijk, which she was included in, she was able to explore her identity and question why she was

surprised to be included in a queer night, her feelings about the erasure of her bisexual identity even within the queer community outside of the space (birasure), and to feel welcome to express herself during her performance.

Overall, each of the interviewees felt generally accepting and welcoming toward tourists seeking a safe(r) space for themselves at the Vrankrijk with an understanding of a safe(r) space as somewhere that does not exclude for the sake of excluding. However, this same acceptance understandably did not apply to tourists who are voyeuristic in nature.

### **B. Negative Experiences with Tourism**

In dealing with tourists seeking a sexually liberal experience as a tourist attraction rather than a safe(r) space for personal reasons, the overall tone was one of negativity and violation. When asked about experiences with those looking for the liberal experience advertised by the tourist industry in Amsterdam, Maxwell defined this as *“lust tourism”* nothing that he *“feel[s] it sometimes but not usually within this space”* but that when he does *“it is certainly painful, a violation of the safe space we’re trying to create.”*

Although it is important to include those seeking a safe(r) space, when tourism frames the WTF Wednesday queer community as something to be consumed, the safety of the space is at risk. It is unacceptable for tourists to turn the free self-expression and eroticism the Vrankrijk promotes into something to be purchased and consumed for the sake of tourism alone as purposefully constructed under neoliberal capitalism (Puar, 2013).

According to Patrice, *“it’s usually looks from outside the door or window that make you feel like a product being consumed, once in a while but not often they have made me to feel like I’m being consumed in the city I live in and it doesn’t feel good.”* She went on to mention *“this sort of tourism is voyeuristic.”* This sort of liberal-seeking tourism stems

from the neoliberal homonormative–dominant discourse we see across the world and especially within Amsterdam in the Dutch context. Under the current Dutch context, the queer community is framed as something to be both marketed to and consumed with a new sense of normality that leaves trans and other non-normative queer people on the margins (Mepschen, 2017). In the case of Patrice feeling consumed in her own city, this stems from the fact that she has been advertised as something to be consumed as a member of the queer community under Dutch tourism while simultaneously being seen as non-normative member of this community. At the Vrankrijk, as an anti-capitalist anti-neoliberal space, measures are taken to avoid this attention but of course, as expressed through the personal experiences of both Patrice and Maxwell, it cannot erase the existence of this tourism and its impact entirely.

The negative discourse surrounding tourists among interview subjects is one of disapproval for those who come to see queer people, their identities, and their expression of those identities as something to be consumed. When you turn a person into the subject of capitalist consumption, you stand in direct violation of the goals of a safe(r) space by robbing a person and community of their ability to relax and simply be without the stress of consumption faced elsewhere outside of the space. However, each of the interviewees also expressed that they find this to be an uncommon experience for a number of reasons such as location as noted by Patrice who said *“it helps that we’re on the block that we’re on. If we were a little farther over toward Dam Square or into the Red Light District, things would be different.”* The most common theme throughout the interviews is the importance of the door and the measures in place there to ensure the safety of the space.

### **C. Importance of the Door**

A common theme across interviews was the idea, as summarized well by Patrice that *“tourists have very little effect because they’re screened at the door along with anyone else that gives the energy that they won’t mesh well with the energy that exists here, that we’re trying to create.”* One of the keys to the Vrankrijk functioning as a safe(r) space is the system set up at the door in which visitors must go through two sets of people before entering, one who takes your money and one who greets you, asking questions and welcoming you in. As noted by Maxwell, *“the door is really important because that’s where you do the sifting and if you ask the right questions, they’ll sort themselves out.”* At the door, it is mentioned to every person that it is queer night and *“we don’t want answers like I’m okay with that or anything uncomfortable like that. If you aren’t enthusiastic, we’ll ask some more questions. People usually decide for themselves that it isn’t for them.”*

Maxwell’s sentiments were echoed by Taylor, noting that *“you just need to ask the right questions and they’ll go running if they’re not cool with a safe space.”* For all of those interviewed as well as reflected through general policy discussed at volunteer meetings, it is not the job of the door person to turn away any non-queer appearing person. This differs for example from another queer space in Amsterdam, De Trut, a club with a strict “no heterosexual” policy where those engaging in heterosexual contact are removed. Members of the Vrankrijk acknowledge that this may be too close to gender policing or an act of birasure and that they are not here to say who can and cannot have a good time so long as they are not causing harm or disrupting the safe(r) space for members of the queer community.

However, it is also crucial that those who do not fit the energy and purpose of the safe(r) space are weeded out through polite conversation. “*That’s inherent to safe spaces,*” according to Patrice, “*someone at the door who decides ‘is this okay or not?’*” This safety is maintained by first giving those who appear uncomfortable or whose presence feels voyeuristic in nature the option to remove themselves from the environment when they realize they will not contribute to the purpose of the space. For those who do not, they can be turned away at the door in favor of the space with a simple “this doesn’t seem like the night for you” or if let in, can be removed later at any sign of disruption to the space. This idea of who can enter and who cannot dates back to the earliest definition of safe space, in which a safe space “was not free of internal disagreement” but “those who attempted to undermine the movement—consciously or unconsciously—would be kept outside” (Harris, 2015).

As expressed by interviewees and through my own experience as a volunteer, it is clear that the door policy maintains an environment that is crucial to the safe space and maintains a level of inclusion, allowing visitors to speak for themselves first but allowing members of the community to do what they feel is necessary to maintain the safety of the space for the greater community, especially when red flags of voyeuristic tourism arise. Through the door policy, the WTF Wednesday community at the Vrankrijk is able to create not just an emotional and mental but also physical space in which people can feel safer, as defined through the framework of feminist and queer activist communities (Rosenfeld and Noterman, 2014, p. 1348).

## **Conclusion**

### **A. Summary of Findings and Analysis**

In summary, large in part to the extremely effective door policy, the Vrankrijk does not allow tourism to impact its safe(r) space environment. When tourists do enter the space, they are allowed to do so because they fit the energy of the evening and are often seeking a safe queer space themselves. In these situations, the Vrankrijk expands its safe(r) space to envelope those seeking this space for themselves, creating an arguably even safe(r) space by not excluding those who need it. Finally, in the situations where “voyeuristic” or “lust” tourism as described by interviewees or tourism under neoliberal capitalism as described in the literature does occur, it is hurtful for community members to feel but it usually exists outside of the windows when it does rarely appear which is a testament to the Vrankrijk’s success as a safe(r) space through the policy pillars and the use of the door as a literal physical barrier protecting the safety within (Puar, 2013). While, as demonstrated by the literature, neoliberal tourism that is voyeuristic in nature is certainly a problem, it has no home at the Vrankrijk.

### **B. Personal Reflections**

As a volunteer, I was able to witness firsthand the building of this safe(r) space as well as contribute to it by working to maintain the policy pillars and by serving food, keeping the space clean and welcoming to those who sought it out, and by speaking up whenever a person or situation felt disruptive to the safe(r) space goals of the events. The Vrankrijk is a crucial institution within the Dutch context as it is one of few safe(r) spaces in the Netherlands. Other institutions include the Hangout, with a target audience of young queer people and De Trut, a club space with a strict no heterosexual policy.

However, each of these raise a continued need for safe space such as one where gender policing does not have the possibility of arising like at De Trut or one that extends beyond a certain age group. Through my work here, I was able to recognize the value and role that the Vrankrijk plays as a safe(r) space as well as the need to call for more of these spaces within the Dutch context and beyond.

Additionally, as a volunteer, I was able to supplement my interviews with firsthand experience within WTF Wednesday at the Vrankrijk as a safe(r) space and tourism's impact on it. Above all else, the Vrankrijk builds safety through its team of volunteers who dedicate their time and resources to the space and community. From the open communication about expectations of safety at volunteer meetings to the organizing of exciting and varying queer events to the preparation of an affordable, nourishing meal with great care, the team of volunteers builds a space that is safe(r) with great intention from the ground up. Of course, like other safe(r) spaces, issues arise but in each incident I witnessed or heard of from my interviewees, action was taken swiftly to restore the space to its "as safe as possible in this moment" status.

In conclusion, I am deeply grateful to the Vrankrijk for their inclusion of myself in their efforts and beyond myself, for all they do, as a team of volunteers to serve the greater queer community in search of a place where they can feel safer than in the greater context of the Netherlands and beyond.

### **C. Limitations of Research**

This project was conducted in the short period of three weeks during a three-and-a-half-month long study abroad semester as a required program element. Interviewees were

chosen based on proximity within the Vrankrijk community. Interviews are also limited to only four participants out of the need for the maintenance of the Vrankrijk as a safe(r) space at an ethical level. However, while reaching a higher level of ethical quality, the lack of additional participants decreases validity, as the study is representative of the experiences of only four individuals and my own observations within the community.

Due to a lack of time and out of respect for the safe(r) space, the research does not include interviewees personal experiences within the Vrankrijk as a safe(r) space outside of the impact of tourism. Due to a lack of connection and ability to identify, the project lacks the perspective of those who visit the Vrankrijk for “tourist” purposes, either voyeuristic or safe space seeking in nature. While Bibi is representative of a visitor to the community, she also became an active participant within community life through her performance. The project would have benefited from an understanding of *why* people choose to visit the Vrankrijk for these reasons.

#### **D. Recommendations for Future Research**

In the future, this research could be elaborated on in a number of important ways. Firstly, it is my hope that my own research leads to further research on the lack of safe(r) spaces within the Dutch context, exploring why this is and what can be done to improve the situation.

Secondly, while included only as a subtopic within my research, it would be helpful to see research on liberal-seeking tourism across Amsterdam such as in the ways it is advertised and what tourists are seen consuming.

Finally, within the Vrankrijk, while I was unable to do so due to a limited amount of time, it would be interesting to see more research on the Vrankrijk as a safe(r) space through an exploration of personal stories of community members and the impact of having a safe(r) space to go to has on them. In the context of this research, I would suggest that the researcher contact the Vrankrijk at the beginning of the semester and begin volunteering as early as possible to account for the ethics of building relationships built on trust and mutual benefits before entering more personal territory.

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## Appendix



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***Interview Guide and Verbal Consent Script***

You are invited to take part in an interview about your experiences at the Vrankrijk and your thoughts on what help and hinder its role as a safe(r) space with a specific focus on tourists entering the space. This interview will take no longer than 2 hours.

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this survey. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. If you choose to be in the study you can withdraw at any time.

Results from this study will be used solely for this academic project. Your responses will be kept strictly confidential, and data will be stored in secure computer files and devices. All identifying material will be kept strictly private, and will be destroyed at the end of this study, 7 May 2017.

Any report of this research that is made available to the public will not include your name or any other individual information by which you could be identified.

If you have questions or want a copy or summary of this study's results, you can contact the researcher at the email address above. If you have any questions, you may contact SIT Academic Director, Garjan Sterk ([garjan.sterk@sit.edu](mailto:garjan.sterk@sit.edu)).

- Do you have any questions about the above information?
- Do you consent to participation in this study?
- How long have you been frequenting the Vrankrijk?
- Can you describe for me your experience as a community member here?
- Would you apply the label "safer space" to this space/community?
- What is your attitude toward new people who enter this space in search of liberal values?
- In what ways do you feel welcoming, neutral, or closed off to those who wish to enter this space?
- What is your experience with tourism at the Vrankrijk?

IMAGE I: VEGAN TACOS PREPARED IN VRANRIJK KITCHEN FOR VOKU

