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'Holding on' in a crisis: theorising campus sexual violence activism within precarious labour relations

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Abstract

A 'rape crisis' has been identified in universities in the Anglophone North, and responses usually take the form of institutional discipline and governance despite well-established assessments of the failings of both carceral and procedural approaches. In these responses, institutional reputation and risk management overdetermines, elevates and captures particular types of white feminist activism. This article theorises these dynamics, using precarity as a lens on the relations within which campus sexual violence is addressed. I trace the material connections between sexual violence and precarious labour, and the intersecting narratives of crisis focused on both issues in contemporary higher education, which reflect 'genres of crisis' in the wider politico-cultural sphere. In this context, persistent attachments to discipline and governance within the campus sexual violence movement can be theorised at least partly as a political flight from vulnerability, a 'holding on' to whatever one can find, that is ripe for exploitation by liability-focused institutional agendas. Such procedural enactments of security are possible because bureaucracy is the institutional 'water in which we swim', which creates a strong impetus to reduce politics to paperwork relations. This is especially manifest in risk-averse and compliance-driven 'safeguarding' modalities, securitarian regimes that serve mainly to interpellate the dangerous Other and safeguard the institution. I argue for the cultivation of more susceptible relations which are difficult to achieve within disembodied bureaucratic codes and which require a retreat from both narratives of crisis and procedural attempts at calm.

Keywords

carceral feminism, neoliberalism, precarity, sexual violence, universities

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Introduction: the ‘campus rape crisis’

There is a serious, persistent problem with sexual violence at universities in the Anglophone North. US data suggests that 20 per cent of college women experience completed or attempted sexual assault (Bondestam and Lundqvist, 2020: 404, 412), and 41 per cent of sexual assaults in Canada in 2014 were reported by students (Khan et al., 2019). Fifty-one per cent of students in Australia experienced sexual harassment in 2016, 26 per cent in a university setting (Gebicki et al., 2017). Surveying a self-selecting sample of 1839 current and former students, the UK National Union of Students (2018) found that 41 per cent had been subject to sexualised behaviour from staff. In the USA, this is represented as a ‘campus rape crisis’, although rape may be more prevalent amongst college-aged non-students (Gruber, 2020: 158; see also: Doyle, 2015: 8; Brodsky, 2021: 229).¹ UK studies have also contributed to a ‘diet of crisis headlines’ (Berlant, 2011: 147) served up by the media, with data misrepresented in some cases (Phipps, 2020b: 236).

Responses to the problem have largely been punitive, despite the lack of evidence that carceral models deliver better outcomes for survivors (Gruber, 2020: 151, 153; see also: Doyle, 2015; Coker, 2016; Fuchs, 2021; Shannon, 2021; Hush, 2022). In such responses, institutional drives for reputation and risk management (Phipps, 2020b) have tended to overdetermine, elevate and capture particular types of feminist activism. Many campus activists, especially students, are critics of carceral feminism and work within alternative paradigms such as transformative justice (see for example: Coker, 2016; Hong, 2018; Méndez, 2020). However, institutions have preferred to collaborate with groups and individuals proposing solutions more palatable to them (Colpitts, 2022: 158), and campus activists have also been de-radicalised via reliance on institutional structures and resources, incorporation into ‘task forces’ and state-controlled funding (Shepp et al., 2023: 7–8, 12).

For instance, Coker (2016: 150) writes that in the USA, feminist activists have placed ‘intense pressure’ on universities to import ‘crime logic’ into the resolution of campus sexual assault complaints (see also: Collins, 2016: 367; Gruber, 2020: 169; Shepp et al., 2023: 10–11). This has produced a steady ‘carceral creep’ (Kim, cited in Méndez, 2020: 86) in the manner of implementing Title IX regulations (Doyle, 2015; Coker, 2016; Collins, 2016; Shepp et al., 2023) which is celebrated by some feminists (Collins, 2016: 367).² Cowan and Munro (2021) have identified a similar ‘criminal justice drift’ in the UK and elsewhere (see also Hush, 2022 on the Australian context), and some activists outside the USA have advocated for Title IX-type frameworks in their own countries (see for example: Lebitse, 2018; Reynolds, 2019).

Alongside and sometimes working against more educational initiatives such as consent training and bystander intervention, some activists have demanded ‘zero tolerance’ frameworks that culminate in expulsion of students and dismissal of staff (see for example: National Union of Students, 2011; Ending Sexual Violence and Harassment in Third-Level Education, 2019; Fuchs, 2021; Young and Wiley, 2021: 292).³ A small number of US universities have implemented campus-specific ‘sex offender registries’ (Tewksbury, 2013), and some activists have suggested that these

be used to ensure that faculty who commit sexual misconduct cannot get jobs elsewhere (Young and Wiley, 2021: 291). As Shepp et al. (2023: 12) argue, such demands move away from broader feminist projects of systems change towards individualised advocacy within institutionally defined processes of discipline and complaint. From such a carceral feminist perspective, they write, ‘institutions are held responsible insofar as they succeed in holding individuals responsible and sanctioning their behavior’ (Shepp et al., 2023: 11).

Activists and advocacy groups in higher education have also sought, and assisted with the development of, various governance⁴ solutions. These include sexual misconduct policies and case management pathways, and codes of conduct with sanctions attached.⁵ The individualistic focus of such governance instruments, and the tendency to treat the institution as benign, fits with the shift from collective action to personal grievance in the neoliberal workplace (Bhattacharyya, 2018: 29). There have also been activist demands for regulation of universities by higher authorities such as government bodies and professional associations, to ensure universities are developing and implementing the right policies and procedures around sexual violence.⁶

Although such governance interventions cannot necessarily be described as ‘carceral’ and it is too simplistic to identify the university with the carceral state (Ahmed, 2022), the university is state affiliated as part of the many agencies and authorities involved in the regimes and practices of modern, distributed governmentality (see for example: Del Gobbo, 2021: 595). Alongside the role of academic disciplines in the epistemes of governance, universities are sites where its techniques are fashioned, through conferences, consultancies, policy engagement and other forms of research ‘impact’ (Phipps and McDonnell, 2022: 515). Economically and politically, universities are central to flows of dispossession and accumulation; they are also deeply embedded in state capitalist and colonial exploitation and violence, including post-9/11 border and counter-terrorism regimes (Phipps and McDonnell, 2022: 514). This context, as well as the broader intertwining of campus disciplinary processes with carceral feminism (Shepp et al., 2023: 5), may make it a short step from institutional governance to more reactionary agendas.

Campus sexual violence activism also traverses choppy political currents. Carceral feminism dovetails with the contemporary authoritarian populism focused on expelling, and disposing of, dangerous Others (Phillips and Chagnon, 2018: 51; del Gobbo, 2021: 606). This same populism forgets its concern for women’s safety when powerful white men are the perpetrators, positioning these men as victims and accountability as violence (Phipps, 2020a: 66; Brodsky, 2021: 14). Reflecting these incongruities, as Doyle (2017) writes, the media paints campuses either as ‘hunting grounds’ where students will inevitably be raped or as places ‘overrun by mobs of hysterical feminists wielding false/overblown accusations’. In academia, critiques of carceral feminism and neoliberal governance are usefully employed by feminist scholars engaged in developing more transformative frameworks around sexual violence (see for example: Coker, 2016; Hong, 2018; Méndez, 2020) but have also been mobilised by harassers and abusers to defend themselves. For instance, Ahmed (2022) writes that such critiques have been used to define student survivors who use complaints processes as vindictive, punishing or even prudish, by faculty accused of sexual misconduct (and their allies).⁷

The failings of carceral feminism, the misogyny, classism and racism of institutional procedures and the ‘non-performativity’ of policy are by now very well understood (Ahmed, 2012; Sundaram and Jackson, 2020: x). Although it is not difficult to understand why university administrators prioritise these approaches to sexual violence, it is less clear why some campus activists continue to put their faith in institutional apparatuses and, in Gruber’s words, ‘assume that a rights-denying campus disciplinary system would be wholly different from the racist criminal system they regularly protest’ (2020: 166). This article centres on that question and approaches it theoretically, using the lens of precarity – now endemic in universities in the Global North – to shed some light on contemporary campus dynamics. It begins by tracing the material relationships between precarious labour relations and sexual violence, then explores precarity as a narrative of crisis, which may intersect with the crisis narrative around sexual violence. These material and discursive dynamics are theorised as one possible context for persistent political attachments to discipline and governance by some activists, which intersect with and are exploited by institutional agendas. This is manifest in securitarian regimes (Butler, 2015: 8), which interpellate the dangerous Other and safeguard the institution.

Sexual violence and precarious labour

In general terms, the Global North university is a place of relative advantage: on a steeply raked playing field, staff and students are hanging on towards the top. However, this position is fractured by institutional hierarchies that map broadly onto social inequalities, and increasingly express themselves as differential distributions of precarity. This reflects the more general contemporary division of occupations into elites and precariats, and the extension into public sectors throughout the Global North of the US corporate model in which a salaried job often comes mid-career (Standing, 2011: 67, 84). In late capitalism, precarity operates as a form of regulation which creates compliance, can weaken the potential for collective organisation (Lorey, 2015: 13) and extends securitarian forms of power (Butler, 2015: 6–7).⁸

Neoliberal universities are deeply complicit and entrenched in the rationalities and practices of privatisation, outsourcing, downsizing and casualisation, and although academic workers may not be part of the precariat as traditionally defined, early career researchers, adjunct lecturers, PhD students and some professional services⁹ colleagues are seen as part of this class, or at least as falling towards it from the salariat (Standing, 2011: 17, 32; Wark, 2019: 93). Whitley (2020) reports that approximately 75 percent of US faculty are now employed off the tenure track. In the UK, one-third of academic staff are on fixed-term contracts and 14 per cent are paid hourly (University and College Union, 2023). In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, universities in the UK, USA and other countries attempted to precaritise their whole workforces with mass redundancies and depreciations of terms and conditions (Whitley, 2020). Furthermore, the work of the neoliberal university (including sexual violence activism) is enabled by an ultra-precarious, classed and racialised community of cleaners, caterers and maintenance staff.

The institutional cultures of universities, perhaps uniquely, can be seen as marked by a mixture of the diffuse anxiety and self-governance produced by precarity (Lorey, 2015: 13) and more exclusive forms of privilege and entitlement that result from both archaic pecking orders and neoliberal power/value relations. Staff labour and students learn within a complex mixture of feudal hierarchies – with Vice Chancellors, Presidents and Provosts as ‘petty sovereigns’ (Butler, [2004] 2020: 74) at the top – and power/value relations based on competitive metrics and systems of performance management (Phipps, 2020b: 233–235). Academics are encouraged to be entrepreneurs and the most successful may start to resemble brands, creating new forms of power and reflecting old ones (Graeber, 2015: 90; Phipps, 2020b: 234). As a structure, the university supports the management of whole populations through what Wark (2019: 89) calls processes of ‘opportunity hoarding’ via access to elite credentials. As a workplace, it plays a central role in cutting down structurally disadvantaged people who do manage to acquire elite credentials, through toxic work environments (Wark, 2019: 89).

Such environments are rife with discrimination and harassment, which is often gendered and sexual and disproportionately experienced by those in more precarious positions, most of them women (Whitley, 2020). The nexus of precarity and hierarchy is ripe to be exploited, to perpetrate harm and avoid accountability, within what Thorkelson terms the assortment of ‘improper pressures’ (2016: 477) that characterises the contemporary academic workplace. When complaints are made, it is evident that some are valued, while others are not (Whitley, 2020; Young and Wiley, 2021: 279). Sexual violence, then, is key to the process by which the gendered antagonism between precariat and salariat (Standing, 2011) is played out to benefit the institution through generating high levels of stress and compliance and deterring resistance (Whitley, 2020; Page, 2022). Although the instability of institutional power has recently been manifest in industrial action throughout the Global North, it is clear that precarious labour relations (re)produce the material conditions for sexual violence, setting up marginalised people (most of them women) to be sexually abused.

Intersecting narratives of crisis

The mutually reinforcing relationship between sexual violence and precarious labour relations may be amplified by the operation of ‘precarity’ as a narrative. As Butler (2015: 6–7) argues, precarity is both a material process and a discourse, which produces precaritised subjects and instantiates ‘insecurity’ as their central preoccupation. For Berlant, this is largely a preoccupation of the bourgeois subject, part of a broader dynamic in which ordinary conditions of proletarian life ‘bec[o]me crises when they hit the bourgeoisies’ (in Puar, 2012: 166). Such a narrative of crisis around precarity is prevalent in universities, primarily focused on women (Thorkelson, 2016: 476, 483). This ‘crisis discourse’ (Butler, 2015: 7) can also be invoked by those not materially precarious, along broader political lines, for instance in France by securely employed academics as a ‘generalized indictment’ of the profession (Thorkelson, 2016: 475, 484).

The social movements that have emerged since the 2010s which have focused on precarity (or what Berlant calls ‘precarious politics’ (in Puar, 2012: 166)) can also

render the power relations of precarity as an identity (Butler, in Puar, 2012: 169). This is demonstrated in Molé's research in Italy: when precarity is politicised, she argues, one's employment contract can become an 'interpretive framework for one's interiority' (2010: 43; see also: Millar, 2017: 1). In Italy, the utterance 'I am a precarious one' (*Sono un(a) precario/a*) refers to an employment status and an identity category that 'implicitly indexes psychological doubt and uncertainty, a subject fraught with acute anxiety and nagging hypervigilance' (Molé, 2010: 38). This tethering of impermanent labour to 'social alienation and deep affective undoing' is materialised in campaigns that encourage workers to identify as threatened and vulnerable and make it possible 'for citizens to imagine and fear work loss as social death' (Molé, 2010: 43–44).

The university, perhaps uniquely, houses a population of precaritised workers who may previously have had elite status (Standing, 2011: 22; Thorkelson, 2016: 483, 485). The contemporary PhD can be seen as an elite locus for what Standing (2011: 120) calls the 'precarity trap' that exists in the gap between young people's aspirations and the selling of qualifications which now have no guarantees. This dynamic, in which promised security is deliberately withheld as neoliberal capitalism mobilises instability in the interests of profit (Berlant, 2011: 263), creates anger and disappointment that entitlements once expected are not forthcoming (Molé, 2010: 41, 43; Thorkelson, 2016: 476; Millar, 2017: 6, 7). Thorkelson (2016: 483) argues that the political category of precarity can function as a mode of 'elite disappointment' in universities. In this political category, precaritised academic workers and professionals in creative industries are 'lumped in' (Millar, 2017: 3, 6) with workers in menial and service jobs, concealing the fact that for the latter (as well as for many workers in the Global South) precariousness has long been a way of life, and producing the precariat as a 'predominantly affective class' (Berlant, 2011: 145, 262, 267; see also: Puar, 2012: 169).

The crisis narrative around precarity, which engenders strong links between precarious labour and precarious life (Butler, [2004] 2020; Millar, 2017: 5), co-exists on the contemporary campus with what Doyle (2015: 8) describes as the sense of being in a 'conflict zone' due to the crisis narrative around sexual assault. These intersecting narratives of crisis, perhaps more advanced and intertwined in universities than elsewhere, also reflect what Millar (2017: 2) calls 'a global paradigm in which the drive to guarantee security has usurped all other social concerns'. The international context resonates with traumatic events such as financial crash and recession, 'migrant crisis', the resurgence of the far right, the COVID-19 pandemic, climate-driven natural disasters and devastating armed conflicts. Although many Global North citizens are cushioned from the worst effects of these, they have been subjected to decades of privatisation and rolling back of welfare and other social support (Standing, 2011: 70–71), which creates a sense that 'the traditional infrastructures for reproducing life—at work, in intimacy, politically—are crumbling at a threatening pace' (Berlant, 2011: 22). For Berlant (2011: 26–29) the historical present is marked by 'genres of crisis' in which trauma is the primary affective register and there is a sense that 'ordinary life' has been shattered. Such genres of crisis tend to grant power to external authorities to deal with 'threats' (Berlant, 2011: 26; Lorey, 2015:

16): at the nation state level, this produces extensions of state power which manufacture consent and create a sense of stability via protection (Butler, [2004] 2020: 80, 86, 90).

Repudiating vulnerability: politics as paperwork relations

At the level of the institution, intersecting narratives of crisis infusing a more general ‘crisis-shaped subjectivity’ (Berlant, 2011: 85) could at least partially explain appeals to the systems that produce and support sexual violence, for protection from it. As shown in the introduction to this article, persistent political attachments to institutional systems are apparent (though not universal) within the campus sexual violence movement in the USA and other countries such as Canada, Australia and the UK. There are many possible reasons for this: intellectual critiques of carceral feminism do not necessarily eliminate what Rojas (2016) calls the cops in our hearts; survivors’ punitive fantasies are natural and normal (Ackhurst et al., 2022); and punishment is often thought to have an ‘expressive’ function (del Gobbo, 2021: 606, 623) which shows we ‘really care’ (Méndez, 2020: 91). Further to this, though, and as Millar (2017: 2) comments, precarity is an inducement to hold on to things. ‘It is well worth asking’, she writes, ‘what are we holding onto?’ (Millar, 2017: 2). In society in general, this might be the ideal of safe and secure work (Lorey, 2015), the heteronormative bourgeois ‘good life’ (Berlant, 2011) or the machinery of the state. In the campus sexual violence movement, it may be the institution itself.

The idea of ‘holding on’ might help make sense of why attachments to institutional systems endure despite well-established critiques of carceral feminism and the knowledge that institutional governance processes are often the master’s tools (Phipps and McDonnell, 2022, drawing on Lorde, [1984] 2007: 103–106). As Bondestam and Lundqvist (2020: 406–407) argue, there is a preponderance of evidence that universities lack effective case management structures and procedures, but little to confirm that putting them in place will be helpful. Ahmed (2012) has shown how policies can be *non-performative* (in other words, having them becomes an end in itself) and are often developed merely to polish the institution’s image (see also: Page et al., 2019: 1317). If procedures and policies are used, it tends to be inconsistently (Bondestam and Lundqvist, 2020: 408; Ahmed, 2021: 82), and can also benefit the institution through expanding its administrative size and power (Halley, 2015: 116).

Nevertheless, discipline, policy and process enact the university as ‘broken’ rather than functioning exactly as designed, which could be theorised as a mode of reassurance through procedure. It is also relevant here that, as Halley (2015: 109) argues, the campus sexual violence movement often tends to express ‘the priorities and visions of white middle-class women’ and that research in this area is usually based on samples in which white, cisgender women are over-represented (Colpitts, 2022: 153). As Ahmed (2012: 35, 39–40) writes, white women tend to conform to the institutional shape: this may create an impulse, when something goes wrong, to bring the institution *back into shape around us* through connection with the apparatus rather than dismantling the apparatus itself (cf. Doyle, 2017).

Procedural enactments of security are also possible because, as Graeber (2015: xii) puts it, bureaucracy is now the ‘water in which we swim’ to the extent that it is even seen as a way to manage structural violence. Moreover, when bureaucracy fails to deliver, we tend to demand more ‘transparency’ as though the rules themselves are neutral and by holding on tighter, all will be well (Graeber, 2015: 153). For Doyle (2015: 45), this ‘bureaucratic progression’ in US universities, in which ‘the world called for is one of more and better procedures’, has come to represent justice (see also: Brodsky, 2021). We might also call it a reduction of politics to paperwork relations. Dealing with harm within this institutional milieu creates the possibility that procedure can become *the work* rather than a means to an end, resulting in refined and detailed processes and policies, implemented through consultant-designed trainings that undergird growing university drives for compliance (Méndez, 2020: 88; Fuchs, 2021: 53) and do little else. At best, this is a standstill that treats the institution as benign; at worst, and as I argue later in this article, it can produce new forms of panopticism that construct both docile and disposable subjects.

Butler ([2004] 2020: 60, cited in Puar, 2012: 169) and others have theorised the link between feeling precarious and securitised rhetorics and practices, via the impetus to become invulnerable to negate the feelings that precarity begets (see also: Molé, 2010; Lorey, 2015: 101). This search for security in insecurity has been identified in extreme dynamics such as militarised nationalism and bordering (Butler, in Puar, 2012: 169), but may also take the form of regulating the conduct of conduct (Foucault, 1982: 220–221), converting politics into paperwork relations to make calm out of chaos. Moreover, this intersects with the properties of political whiteness and especially the fear of vulnerability identified by di Angelo (2011) and others as part of the ‘white fragility’ that both reflects and enacts supremacist power (see also: Phipps, 2020a). This fear is more easily recognised in white nationalist politics in which even equality – denoting lost entitlement – is seen as victimisation; however, it can also be observed in mainstream white feminist desires for control, which are often realised via state intervention (Phipps, 2020a: 76–81).

This means that mainstream white feminist politics can find itself caught in a pincer movement between interpersonal and institutional violence in which vulnerability is repudiated through calls for protection by what Vergès terms ‘the male, rapist State’ (2020: 35). The state is in turn the vehicle for a will to power exercised through punishment and regulation (Phipps, 2020a: 76–81). This could also be true of the university, although the drive to cling to institutional procedures may be less an enactment of power and more an act of ‘holding on’ by activists amid precarity, crisis and pain. A web of regulation has been spun to tackle sexual violence in Global North universities, in which many activists have been involved. Their involvement, however, could be theorised at least in part as an understandable attempt to create a more predictable, and therefore safer and less precarious, world (cf. Graeber, 2015: 156–157).

Trauma, crisis and gaining security through procedure

The aforementioned web of regulation is spun by the institution around an endangered (read: white) female student who embodies precarity in the sense of being ‘perpetually

threatened by the outside' (Butler, 2015: 7). In the UK, the protection of this figure is increasingly materialised through 'safeguarding' protocols: this is an English legal term that usually applies to minors and adults with care and support needs, which has been extended into university policy frameworks (Bull and Rye, 2018). The intent of such frameworks is to pre-empt harm, traced and anticipated through rubrics of risk; a key method is setting out prescribed and proscribed behaviours, with sanctions attached. This modality echoes Title IX regulations in the USA, the prevention arm of which requires universities in receipt of federal funding to implement complex risk management frameworks (Collins, 2016: 375). In such safeguarding-type modalities, risk is controlled through controlling the environment: safety is located in the right procedures, which in turn produce the right behaviours (Halley, 2015: 116; Bekker and Possergh, 2021).

Such compliance-driven frameworks (Halley, 2015: 116) rest on an idea of safety as a stable category that can be procedurally achieved, rather than a shifting social relation. They have powerful affective connotations: writing about music education, Piper et al. (2013: 210, 218) argue that safeguarding protocols tend to (re)position the learning environment as a threatening one, and to imbue relationships with anxiety, jeopardy and fear. In universities, they may also conceal the sexual milieu of the campus (Doyle, 2019: 157), repudiating vulnerability through disembodied and alienated bureaucratic codes.

In both the USA and the UK, feminist activists have been involved in developing these bureaucratic modalities. As Halley writes, Title IX has created a US 'campus sexual assault establishment' (2015: 103, 116) run by governance feminists. In 2019, a report on the safeguarding programme of the UK government's Office for Students noted that much of the work had been driven by activists (Advance HE, 2019: 65).¹⁰ Perhaps pragmatically, some activists have also adopted safeguarding-type language in their campaigns, most recently focused on male faculty feared to be indulging in inappropriate behaviour for the purpose of 'grooming' their students (see for example: National Union of Students, 2018; Young and Wiley, 2021; Blake, 2022).¹¹

In UK law, grooming pertains to the intention by an adult to commit sexual offences upon a victim under the age of sixteen and is a key focus of safeguarding policy (Bull and Page, 2021: 1059). In US and UK higher education, it has been used to describe patterns of boundary-blurring behaviour by a person in a position of power, which is not always sexual, does not necessarily contravene policies and which victims may not be aware of but which can be experienced as distressing and can facilitate sexual abuse (Bull and Page, 2021: 1057, 1063). While broader safeguarding discourse tends to proscribe some behaviours as inherently risky while others are prescribed as inherently safe (Piper et al., 2013: 210), 'grooming' in this context can include any behaviour identified as such either by victims or by others (Bull and Page, 2021: 1069),¹² although lists of 'red-flag' behaviours have also been produced.¹³

As Bull and Page (2021: 1059, 1063–1064) write, the term 'grooming' is used by activists to capture behaviour occurring over time, and has been used by survivors to describe their own experiences. The extension of terms such as grooming and safeguarding into the protection of young adults also signals that the complex gendered power relations of the university affect the possibility for consent (National Union of Students, 2018: 14; Page et al., 2019: 1312; Bull and Page, 2021: 1057). There is a risk, however, that

terms such as ‘grooming’ can slip into imputations of false consciousness and facile understandings of power (see: Sikka, 2023). Sometimes this happens when language and concepts are crudely appropriated by institutions and their agents: for instance, a 2022 report by consultancy firm Howlett Brown (2022: 40) stated that ‘a student can never truly consent to a personal relationship [with a tutor] due to the power structures within a student and tutor relationship’. This echoes longer-standing logics in the USA in which universities have disregarded consent in blanket bans on staff–student relationships (Srinivasan, 2021: 136).

In the USA, Srinivasan writes, such bans originally met pushback from feminists who argued that the denial of women’s consent ‘inverted the rapist’s logic of “no means yes” into the moralising logic “yes means no”’ (2021: 136). US opposition has waned in the past two decades, however, and in the UK such bans have recently been welcomed by activists in the name of safeguarding students (see for example: Dockrill and Harvey, 2020; Blake, 2022). Demands to ban staff–student relationships diverge from the focus on student self-management through affirmative consent in their relationships with one another, disseminated under slogans such as ‘consent is sexy’ by activists in the USA, UK, Australia, Canada and New Zealand (Beres, 2018; Nash, 2019: 200). Although student–staff relationships do present additional power dynamics to negotiate, the contrast between these two imagined student subjects – one responsibilised and one infantilised – is telling.

At the level of the institution and its agents, the latter reflects the contemporary positioning of students as consumers in the Anglophone North (Gupta et al., 2023), the depersonalisation of staff–student relations as staff are reformulated as service providers and the resultant liability of universities. When deployed by consultancies engaged to help organisations manage risk, the idea that students *cannot* consent to relationships with staff is designed to ward off litigation (Srinivasan, 2021: 136). Furthermore, some of the activities that bans discourage, such as staff–student socialising (Blake, 2022), could benefit institutions by impeding staff–student solidarity at a time of widespread industrial dispute.

As Srinivasan (2021: 137, 148, 153) writes, the idea that students cannot consent is easy to dismiss and precludes discussion of the pedagogical ethics and responsibilities that are really at stake, which are also erased by the imposition of top-down staff–student relationship bans. Activist support for such bans might be put down to our instincts that even ‘genuinely wanted’ sex between university teachers and students is ‘not unproblematic’ (Srinivasan, 2021: 138). Although to ban staff–student relationships is conceivably to use a hammer to crack a nut, it may be seen as a nut that should be cracked with any tool at hand.¹⁴ Bans on staff–student relationships, however, are just one part of the whole: and in understanding activist support for safeguarding protocols in general, it is perhaps helpful to situate sexual violence in the context of precarity and intersecting narratives of crisis already set out in this article. The widespread reality of campus sexual trauma, together with the crisis narrative around sexual violence, is imbricated with the precarious labour relations (and crisis narrative around the same) that also produce demands for protection alongside intensive strategies of risk management (Lorey, 2015: 16).

This nexus of materialities and structures of feeling seems a heady mix ripe for exploitation by institutional agendas such as safeguarding. Safeguarding protocols offer the institution and its procedures as something to hold on to, a guarantee that if the right rules are followed, safety will ensue. Furthermore, to be safeguarded is not just to be protected and cared for but to be *kept safe on dangerous terrain*, to pre-empt harm that is both feared and foreseen. This institutional offer of invulnerability amidst peril evokes the dangerous terrain of both sexual violence and precarious labour. A procedural sanctuary is attractive considering the dynamics of white feminism described earlier and the relationship between trauma and the need for control (Phipps, 2020a: 77–78), and is a boon in precarious times in which security is our dearest wish (Millar, 2017: 2).

Safeguarding as a securitarian regime

Constructions of women as needing to be ‘safeguarded’ can reinforce the patriarchal roles that produce sexual assault (del Gobbo, 2021: 614), fail to make space for agency and resistance (Godden-Rasul, 2017: 17) and draw on paternalistic and racialised notions of ‘women’s protection’ that are a pretext for state and community violence (Cockbain and Tufail, 2020; Phipps, 2020a). The emphasis on sexualisation (as distinct from sexism) by both institutions and activists internationally (see for example: Gebicki et al., 2017: 160; Khan et al., 2019: 101) also travels uncomfortably close to authoritarian populist rhetoric that converges upon the innocent *white, middle-class, heterosexual* girl who needs protecting from the Others (Phipps and Young, 2015: 468). This is realised most starkly in the USA, where the endangered female student has become a cultural emblem in the fight to secure the campus from outsiders who might see it as their ‘hunting ground’ (Doyle, 2015: 44).

The metaphor of the ‘hunting ground’ educes theorisations of safeguarding as a form of bordering (Cockbain and Tufail, 2020), which is deeply implicated in the coloniality of gender (Lugones, 2008) through interpellating racialised and other marginalised groups as sources of threat (Vergès, 2020: 16). Although this is not explicit in initiatives around campus sexual violence, the history of the term ‘grooming’ in England involves a racialisation of child sexual exploitation that draws upon and feeds narratives about Muslim men as a danger to white girls. The ‘Muslim grooming gangs’ trope has become a staple of far-right propaganda, legitimated by some feminists (Cockbain and Tufail, 2020: 9, 13). This trope has not yet infiltrated the UK campus, but Islamophobic narratives have done so in the form of the counterterrorism initiative Prevent, another safeguarding intervention that, as McGovern (2017) argues, ‘extend[s] to young adulthood an infantilising model of securitised child protection’. Prevent and similar racialised safeguarding initiatives in schools (for instance, the Gangs Matrix) are founded in relationships of surveillance that can result in pathologisation at best and exclusion and criminalisation at worst (Johnston and Akay, 2022).

At these extremes, safeguarding modalities can be seen as ‘securitarian regimes’ (Butler, 2015: 8) that are internal to the institution but which echo broader currents in policy and practice in which populations are ‘defended’ against threats through police and state control, ultimately fortifying authoritarian power (Butler, 2015: 7). Drawing

on Lorey's (2015) theorisation of modern sovereignty as constituted by a dynamic between precarity and protection, Butler writes that while we are construed as threatened by illness, 'contagions of sexual panic', criminality and 'possible invasions of many kinds', power takes the form of 'subjugation by and through [the] need' to be protected (2015: 8). In the university, this may play out through procedure more often than police (although as Méndez (2020: 98) writes, on US campuses safety has become synonymous with increasing police surveillance alongside institutional discipline). Furthermore, activist involvement in – or exploitation by – securitarian safeguarding regimes means that, also echoing dynamics on the broader political stage, this work can be done in the name of feminism (cf. Nash, 2019: 212).

Securitarian regimes make some people more secure by 'striating the precarity of those marked as "other"' (Lorey, 2015: 20; see also: Butler, 2015: 8; Vergès, 2020: 9, 35). Although campus-based safeguarding around sexual violence is not equivalent to explicitly racialised programmes such as Prevent, Méndez (2020: 85) notes that US university responses to sexual violence have tended to 'overly assume' Black, Latinx and Indigenous men as sexual aggressors, as well as queer, nonbinary and trans people (see also: Halley, 2015: 107; Hong, 2018: 25; Srinivasan, 2021: 156–157). An analysis of incidents reported to Colgate University, New York, found that while Black students comprised 4.2 per cent of the student body, they were half of those accused of sexual assault and 40 per cent of those put through formal disciplinary processes (Levine and Meiners, 2020: 28; see also: Srinivasan, 2021: 145–146). In women's sport, safeguarding agendas, increasingly implemented via 'female eligibility policies', have led to outcomes which exclude trans and other marginalised women, women of colour especially (Bekker and Posbergh, 2021).¹⁵

This is not to say that sexual violence activists support such outcomes, or to deny that many activists experience tensions around the potential implications of their work (Phipps and McDonnell, 2022; Shepp et al., 2023: 12). However, it does reflect how carceral and governance forms of feminism can help generate reactionary results in the service of gendered security (Phillips and Chagnon, 2018; Méndez, 2020; Phipps, 2020a), especially within narratives of crisis where safety takes precedence (over, say, liberation or transformation).

Moreover, given the unremitting issues with sexual assault on campus, it is not clear whether anything is being safeguarded other than the institution. Against the 'background hum' of threatened litigation and media exposure (Doyle, 2015: 17, 28), safeguarding initiatives seem universally designed to limit institutional liability (Doyle, 2015; Page et al., 2019: 1320; Méndez, 2020: 88; Young and Wiley, 2021: 282; Page, 2022; Whitley, 2022). This is a displacement of harm (Whitley, 2022: 362) in which the university safeguards itself through the milieu of efforts to tackle sexual violence. It also reflects broader dynamics of contemporary neoliberal governance which balance 'a maximum of precarization' with 'a minimum of safeguarding', just enough to prevent insurrection (Lorey, 2015: 64). Securitarian regimes, enacted within an uptick in surveillance practices on campuses (Strayhorn, 2021: 603) and the self-governing fear induced by precarity (Lorey, 2015: 80), enable universities to manage potential liabilities and police and expel Others when necessary, while at the same time reinforcing institutional power (Doyle, 2015: 28).

Conclusion: towards more susceptible relations

Sexual violence is not a failure of governance: it is fundamental to how our institutions work, which is also increasingly dependent on precarity as a tool of domination (Lorey, 2015: 14). A circuit has been activated here: while precarious labour relations set women and other marginalised people up to be sexually abused, sexual violence feeds institutional processes of labour exploitation by way of fear, discomfort and trauma. Then, policies and procedures designed to address sexual violence interpellate Others as sexual threats, further precaritising marginalised groups while safeguarding the institution and building its authority. In this way, sexual violence and precarious labour relations mutually reinforce each other and what Lorey (2015: 101) and others have described as the exercise of governance through insecurity.

A recent report by the UK University and College Union (Addington et al., 2021) recommended tackling precarity to tackle sexual violence. A more deliberate intertwining of these two struggles is clearly necessary, and it would be beneficial for campaigns to focus not only on the intersecting oppressions at play but also on the institutional circuits of power and control that exploit them, as described in this article. At its best, anti-precarity activism combats the false promises of security that strengthen authority (Butler, 2015: 9), an 'exodus within [rather than from] power relations' (Lorey, 2015: 95). Such an exodus might also be well-advised for sexual violence activism, to combat the false promises of safeguarding that cleave us to the institutional apparatus. Work beyond safeguarding-type frameworks is already being done in frameworks such as bystander intervention (Fuchs, 2021: 54) and transformative justice (Méndez, 2020). However, it is necessary to go deeper.

Butler ([2004] 2020: 38, 41, 44, 46–49) writes that precarity can denote labour insecurity and/or the ontological state of embodied precariousness that we all share as living things. Any form of violence can be a brutal reminder of the latter but it may be necessary to tarry here (Butler, [2004] 2020: 46–47), to avoid institutional replication of violent dynamics in which vulnerability is escaped through 'individualistic private protection' (Lorey, 2015: 75) often given at others' expense (Butler, [2004] 2020: 47; see also: Nash, 2019: 213). This suggests that even while agitating against sexual violence, a deeper shared vulnerability must be embraced or at the very least not willed away (see: Butler, [2004] 2020: 11, 46). Embracing vulnerability is different to enacting victimhood (Butler, 2015: 9), which is the preferred register of white feminism, and which tends to demand a securitarian response (Phipps, 2020a, 2020b). Securitarian regimes such as safeguarding, which at best bureaucratises behaviour and at worst enact a racialised, hetero- and cis-normative border, seem very much like an attempt to will vulnerability away.


Embracing vulnerability demands that we nurture a more general relationality and susceptibility in everyday interactions and build connections that refuse both the consternation of crisis and the alienation of procedural calm. Safeguarding protocols, especially when implemented in crisis-ridden contexts, cannot produce the connected communities in which genuine accountability and support can occur (Méndez, 2020: 99). Furthermore, if, as Rose (2021: 171) writes, sexual violence itself can be understood as a flight from

vulnerability on the part of the perpetrator, more susceptible relations might eventually help to prevent, rather than merely pre-empt, abuse (see also: Méndez, 2020: 98). It might not be possible to move fully away from paperwork relations and into more susceptible ones in the neoliberal university, with its synthesis of insecurity, fear and control through promises of invulnerability within disembodied bureaucratic codes. Nonetheless, if it is possible to create safer spaces within the institution, this is our road.

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Notes

1. Likewise, in Canada rates of sexual assault are similar between students and non-students of a similar age (Khan et al., 2019: 16).
2. Title IX was enacted in 1972 and mandates that all schools and educational institutions receiving federal funding treat all students and employees fairly and equally regardless of their sex. Its application to sexual assault, however, was made explicit in the 2011 'Dear Colleague Letter' from the Department of Education, which provided detailed guidance for universities' prevention of and response to campus sexual violence (Coker, 2016: 149).
3. It is important to disclose my own involvement in the political movement against campus sexual violence in the UK: I assisted the National Union of Students (NUS) with the 2011 report *Hidden Marks*, subsequently co-authored a 2014 NUS report on 'lad culture' and worked closely with Universities UK, previously known as the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals of the Universities of the United Kingdom, from 2015 to 2018 (before withdrawing from this relationship during the pensions strikes of 2018; see: Phipps and McDonnell, 2022). I write this article as a 'critical friend' to the movement, and hope it is read in that spirit.
4. In this article, I use governance to mean the 'conduct of conduct' (Foucault, 1982: 220–221) rather than to refer to institutional governing bodies and statutes.
5. For example, comprehensive policies and case management pathways have been recommended in reports by: the UK National Union of Students (2011, 2018); the Equally Safe project in Scotland (Donaldson et al., 2018), which was conducted by feminist academics with the support of the Scottish government; Ending Sexual Violence and Harassment in Third-Level Education (2019) in Ireland, which is a coalition of women's rights organisations; the Australian Human Rights Commission in collaboration with End Rape on Campus; the Hunting Ground Australia Project; the Australian Human Rights Centre at the University of New South Wales; and the Australian National Union of Students; the Canadian Women's Foundation (2016); Possibility Seeds, which is a Canadian policy development firm, in consultation with groups such as the Canadian Association of University Teachers, Canadian students' unions and rape crisis centres and the campaign Students for Consent Culture (Khan et al., 2019); and the Ending Violence Association of British

- Columbia (2016). Codes of conduct have also been mentioned in many of these documents (Ending Violence Association of British Columbia, 2016; Donaldson et al., 2018; National Union of Students, 2018; Ending Sexual Violence and Harassment in Third-Level Education, 2019; Khan et al., 2019), as well as by groups such as the American Association of University Professors (2014) and the US National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine (2018) in a report authored by feminist academics.
6. The American Association of University Women (2022) has supported the Hold Accountable and Lend Transparency on Campus Sexual Violence Act which would, amongst other things, increase penalties on institutions who do not comply with Title IX. The report by Possibility Seeds and others (Khan et al., 2019) recommends the implementation of oversight mechanisms with Indigenous, provincial, territorial and/or federal governments. The Canadian Women's Foundation (2016) report recommends mechanisms for holding universities accountable 'if they do not adequately address campus violence, survivor needs, and any systemic prevalence of rape culture norms'. In 2018, the UK National Union of Students recommended oversight by the government's Office for Students, of both data-gathering and investigations (National Union of Students, 2018). In 2023, the Office for Students proposed a new ongoing condition of registration for university status which would require universities to tackle harassment and sexual misconduct, with a potential penalty of losing university status (Office for Students, 2023).
 7. 'Force', Ahmed (2022) writes, 'can then be framed as originating with the complaint The figure of the complainant is treated as a symptom of a more generalized structure of violence, whether institutional, managerial, neoliberal or carceral. When complaints against academics are made, they can pass themselves off very quickly as the ones being forced, being forced out or being forced into compliance by a disciplinary regime'.
 8. As Butler writes, such forms of power establish the need for security 'as the ultimate political ideal' (2015: 6–7). This helps to amass power within state and corporate institutions as it generates demands for policing, surveillance and particular forms of investment, demands which tend to replace resistance and critique.
 9. 'Professional services' refers to administrative staff such as programme coordinators, student support workers, finance workers and others.
 10. It is important to disclose that I was one of these activists, through a project funded by this safeguarding programme conducted with Vanita Sundaram, Tiffany Page and Erin Shannon (this project was focused on intersectional approaches to bystander and disclosure training rather than procedural frameworks).
 11. A recent example of this is the Change.org petition 'We Will Not Tolerate Faculty That Grooms [sic.] Our Students', started in response to the sexual abuse of a Roosevelt University student by a music professor and signed by over 2000 people (see: <https://www.change.org/p/we-will-not-tolerate-faculty-that-grooms-our-students>).
 12. In 2018, Cambridge University received 173 reports of sexual misconduct during the first nine months of implementing a new anonymous reporting system. Only two of these reports were of staff–student sexual misconduct: however, activists argued that this figure was not trustworthy since students often did not recognise when they were being groomed (Chapman, 2018).
 13. For instance, the US-based website *Stop Faculty Predators* (<http://www.stopfacultypredators.org>) lists a number of behaviours defined as predatory which, in addition to more sexualised ones, include routinely drinking with students, turning professional discussions into personal ones, speaking disparagingly of other faculty in front of students and meeting students off campus.

14. It should also be noted that there is no clear line between activists and institutions: some activists have found themselves becoming institutional consultants, with all the compromises that entails (see for example: Phipps and McDonnell, 2022).
15. As Doyle (2017) writes, such outcomes are produced not only by dynamics of othering but also by the 'collective disavowal' of the campus as a sexual space which is apparent in safeguarding-type frameworks, as this intensifies the sexualisation of Othered individuals and groups.

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