



Scholar and Student Wellness while Confronting Violence and Ignorance: Can we Trust our Institutions when we are Targeted?

LUC S. COUSINEAU
Dalhousie University, Canada

RYAN HOPKINS
Carleton University, Canada

AMY MACK
University of Lethbridge, Canada

ABSTRACT *As critical scholars of the Far-Right in Canada our work exposes us to acts of violence (both direct and indirect) every day. We are all deeply affected. From different fields (Leisure Studies, Sociology, Anthropology) and different institutions, we have had remarkably similar experiences. As students, we received little or no support to offset the personal impacts of our research programs and had to seek out (or create) our own support networks. As untenured, precarious, and student members of academic research communities, we question whether institutions will stand behind us when we are (inevitably) threatened, or whether we too will need to become victims of violence on campus before we see supportive change. This paper's narratives highlight voids of support, and it proposes possibilities for change to sustain critical social justice research.*

KEYWORDS researcher safety; far-right extremism; institutional support; precariousness; mental health; neoliberal university; gender-based violence; digital security; academic vulnerability

Introduction

My body was kind of dehumanised and magnified, so I became a meme myself. And that was obviously in misogynist terms. ... And, you know, that effect is not just to intimidate and frighten the researcher; but also to silence the researcher... So, in that sense, it kind of succeeded. (Pearson et al., 2023, p. 46)

Correspondence Address: Luc S. Cousineau, School of Health & Human Performance, Dalhousie University, Halifax, NS, B3H 4R2; email: Luc.Cousineau@dal.ca

ISSN: 1911-4788



The above quotation from Pearson et al.'s (2023) report on extremism researcher security, safety, and resilience is but one example of the direct physical and emotional impacts on researchers who choose to research online extremism and terrorism (Vaughan, 2024b). This researcher was targeted because of their critical research about 4Chan communities and the misogynistic, far-right, extremist content catalogued there, and while they were not physically harmed the outcomes of this harassment were emotional trauma and a withdrawal from the public-facing elements of their knowledge mobilization, reducing its reach. This type of negative impact on researchers is not isolated to those who study violent extremism and terrorism. In our current climate of polarization and concerted push-back against equity, researchers in other fields, like gender studies, are also vulnerable. On June 28, 2023, a former University of Waterloo graduate student entered a gender studies classroom and carried out a knife attack on the professor, injuring students in the process. The professor and two students were sent to hospital (CBC News, 2023a); the perpetrator has pleaded guilty to four assault related charges (attempted murder, aggravated assault, and assault with a weapon) and was sentenced to 11 years in prison in March 2025 (Bueckert, 2025; CBC News, 2023b; Shetty, 2024).¹

At the time of this attack, Luc (first author) was a member of the University of Waterloo community and was teaching on campus in a different building. News of the attack came slowly and confusingly to students and faculty, mostly through unofficial social media channels (Luc heard via twitter), with failures of the campus emergency warning systems and administration to effectively notify those on campus of the potential danger. The close to home violence that an attack on a critical social justice scholar at a Canadian institution highlighted for us was that as feminist-aligned, critical scholars of the far-right and its proponents, we are among the potential targets for those radicalized into violent misogyny, male supremacism, and other far-right terrorism – and not just the kind carried out with a knife.

As this paper was composed, edited, and reviewed, there was a notable (re)surge(nce) of far-right and populist politics worldwide. Since we originally authored this work, Donald Trump has been re-elected, assumed office, and accelerated the USA toward far-right (br)oligarchy that includes a total halt to all federal EDI work and an official policy change requiring the U.S. government to define gender “as [biological] sex at birth” (Baio, 2025, para. 1). Along with these political moves there is a corresponding rise in violence against marginalized and vulnerable community members,² and in some cases

¹ Terrorism-related charges were considered in this attack, but were ultimately not included in the sentencing because, according to Justice Frances Brennan, “his actions were not ideologically motivated” (Bueckert, 2025, para. 4).

² At the time of this submission in July, 2025, Canadian media coverage of the United States is dominated by the ongoing and increasing capture and detainment (and extrajudicial deportation) of individuals in the U.S. by members of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) who

the academics who work with or study marginalized groups or are critical of the right. The trend toward increasing violence (of action, words, rhetoric, and ideology), especially on university campuses, necessitates a greater analysis of our understanding of violence and its various manifestations relative to students and academics. This analysis must include what our institutions are doing (or not doing) to help protect researchers. Instances of violence perpetrated on scholars can be both physical (e.g., the stabbing at University of Waterloo) or symbolic attacks (e.g., persistent death threats) (Samuels, 2016; Scholars at Risk Network, 2024a), and persistent influence campaigns at North American universities threaten to steer student consciousness toward right-wing extremism (Patrick & Haye, 2023).

On our respective Canadian campuses, we watched as our departments and universities convened task forces, working groups and town halls to respond to the violence at the University of Waterloo. Some removed room numbers from online course listings and others removed course descriptions from public view as attempts to reduce the possibility that someone outside the classroom would find a feminist and enact violence. We appreciate these attempts at change. Even if symbolic, they are acknowledgements that institutions can be doing more to help keep members of their communities safe – and they should. However, while these actions can be viewed as responsive and positive, they reflect a narrow understanding of the types of violence that academics may experience as educators and researchers who take up critical (especially feminist) work, and particularly for those of us who may land in the crosshairs of reactionary anti-feminist and extremist movements.

We opened with the story of a researcher silenced by digital violence and an act of egregious violence against a professor on a Canadian campus, not to gratuitously revisit these acts, but to frame the ongoing risks to critical scholars with the experiences of others. We hope to offer some pathways to mitigating these risks, paying special attention to graduate students and precarious academics as they are often at the forefront of this work. This paper is an attempt to show what is behind the curtain when researching far-right spaces and highlight some of the dangers and traumas that come with this type of academic inquiry. We identify moments of failure – of care, security, support, and vulnerability – and provide ideas about what might be done differently.

A Reflexive Approach to Understanding the Lived Experiences in Far-Right Research

Our approach to engaging the traumas and dangers of critical research on reactionaries relies on our own experiences as students and precarious academics conducting research on the far right and associated groups. Our

conceal their identities, acting as a (not so secret) secret police in service of nationalistic and fascist government policy (Goodman, 2025; Jimenez, n.d.).

individual disciplines of leisure studies, sociology, and anthropology each have long histories of researchers building on personal experience as data to theorize a better future. In leisure studies, authors like Johnson (2009) and Parry (2014) have used contexts of personal experience to reinforce robust research findings and to foster imaginaries of hope for social justice. In sociology, researchers value the role that they themselves play in the production and co-production of knowledges and recognise that researchers' social positioning is one key to identifying and understanding experiences of every life (Butz & Besio, 2009). Similarly, in anthropology researchers take up this tradition of the co-production of knowledge in service of the communities they care for, and at times do so with risk to their wellbeing and safety (Goldstein, 2014; Lamphere, 2018). Following the work of Geelhoed et al. (2024), we place our lived experiences at the centre of our analysis to contribute to current discussions of how one studies the far-right. Our training across disciplines in reflexive research practice encourages us to consider how our bodies and beings are inextricably tied to the research experience (Hine, 2017; Turner, 2000). Indeed, it is our bodies and *wellbeing* that take centre stage in this piece.

Those who currently study the far right and associated groups are the beneficiaries of previous work exploring researcher safety and methodological process. This body of work examines the relationship between researcher and researched, as well as how markers of identity are implicated in our research journeys but lacks substantive recommendations on researcher safety. Pearson et al.'s (2023) report on researcher security, safety, and resilience, as well as Conway (2021) have discussed absent guidelines and the lack of robust, commonly known practices to keep researchers safe in online extremism and terrorism research. Not knowing about or having these guidelines and knowledge bases has implications for the methodological interventions chosen by scholars and the ways they proactively protect themselves (or not). Kathleen Blee's (2017) work on White Nationalism also discusses these challenges relative to data by addressing the difficulties of accessing a seemingly preferred "internalist" data from contentious subjects compared to safer but less personified publicly accessible "externalist" data (pp. 120-121). While this preference for internalist data reflects in part the difficulty in building the necessary rapport with people to gather first-hand data objects, it can also act as a lens through which we can see the lack of consideration for researcher safety. To collect internalist data requires a type of researcher exposure that necessarily renders the researcher vulnerable to attack.

These vulnerabilities and risks are often amplified for scholars who are visibly marginalized along racial, gender, and religious lines. In their work, Gelashvili and Gagnon (2024) focus on how these markers of identity impact researchers and research safety in their discussion about the difficulties that women have when researching the far-right, which include safeguarding their emotional and physical safety (see Segers et al., 2024). Massanari (2018) notes that possibilities of violence are exacerbated by social media-based movements

rooted in misogyny and racism – an assertion that has only become more prescient in the years since its publication.

While we are deeply indebted to the research in our fields and in far-right studies, we find that much of it focuses on the relationship between the researcher and interlocutor, and how this relationship impacts our ability to access data (de Coning, 2023; Pasiaka, 2019; Teitelbaum, 2019). Here, we wish to build on emerging work (e.g., Pearson et al., 2023) to expand conversations beyond the researcher-researched relationship and place the roles and responsibilities of institutions at the forefront.³ What follows are the three authors' stories of their lived experiences as they engaged with their dissertation, post-doc, or precarious early-career work focusing on different far-right and extremist movements. In these stories we see patterns of failure that evince structural issues at the institutional level, that trickle down through supervisors, and land on the shoulders of students and other precarious academics. This leaves them more vulnerable to targeting and less likely to receive the types of support they need.

It is important to note that we do not intend to cast individual supervisors, colleagues, or administrators as “at fault” in our situations; individuals cannot overcome issues we see as systemic. However, we aim to raise critical awareness of issues that are fundamental to student and early career scholar growth – especially those doing work on the far-right.

Precariousness, Student-hood, and their Discontents

Although it is tempting to point fingers and single out offenders when discussing risk and harm, this would be unproductive as well as ignorant of the broader realities of the institution of the university under neoliberalism. University systems around the world have been slowly enveloped by the behemoth of neoliberal capitalism, increasingly exchanging rigor for metrics and quality for quantity (Canaan & Shumar, 2008; Jordan & Christie, 2017). Like in every other setting changed under the crushing weight of capital growth and “progress,” those subordinated within the university system are most grievously impacted. Criticisms of the exploitation of graduate students date back several decades (see Nelson & Bérubé, 1994), and contemporary criticisms note little change in the intervening years (Bérubé, 2017; Birmingham, 2017). Precariously employed scholars, such as pre-tenure and adjunct or contract faculty, are also victimized by the neoliberal university (Fountain, 2005). Supports for these precarious and subordinate groups are perpetually lacking. Areas researchers have engaged with when discussing “exploitive” issues graduate students face include, lack of funding, lack of institutional support, lack of agency, and lack of representation in decision-

³ The authors acknowledge Audrey Gagnon's (University of Ottawa) and Tamta Gelashvili's (University of Oslo) public scholarship on institutional supports.

making (Cohen & Baruch, 2022). Situated as under-classes within institutions, members of these subordinated groups are often left questioning whether the university will be there to support them when they need it. We each have occupied different spaces in this spectrum of precarious subordinates.

Within this system, a mentality of self-exploitation has emerged (Brienza, 2016), wherein precarious researchers overwork themselves in hopes that their labour will lead to permanent positions and the security of tenure. Graduate students preparing for the academic job market likewise internalize this rhetoric of overwork in hopes of avoiding the adjunct/sessional nightmare. It is this internalized self-exploitation and the fear of lasting precarity that places precarious scholars of the far-right in a double bind. Not only do we experience the harm of the neoliberal institution as it seeks to extract every ounce of productivity from us (Brown, 2023), but we also find ourselves deeply embedded in research programs fraught with risk, discomfort and danger. Yet, if we resist these processes, we risk further insecurity in the years following our doctoral programs. Further, we are told that our research is timely, innovative, and has impact beyond the academy. As graduate students and precarious faculty, our work is lauded by the departments, faculties, and institutions that we represent. Yet, despite the ways in which our research is useful to our institutions, we are not afforded the same support as our permanent full-time colleagues.

To illustrate the potential impacts of poor support for Canadian students and precarious researchers when things go wrong, we can explore the case of Russel Ogden. Ogden was a master's student at Simon Fraser University (SFU) in 1994 studying assisted suicide. After conducting his interview-based research he was subpoenaed to Vancouver's Coroner's Court and compelled to break his promise to participants of "absolute confidentiality." Ogden refused to comply and was charged with contempt of court, sparking a multi-year legal battle, that while it ended with a full apology from SFU and a commitment to protect student researchers going forward, also saw the university abandon the student and change its policies "in a way that precluded researchers guaranteeing confidentiality to research participants in the future" (SFU, n.d., para. 1). The final resolution of the case, which included the reimbursement of Ogden's \$9,000 in legal fees (about \$20,000 adjusted for inflation) (para. 6), came only after a protracted legal process, defaming statements from university senior administration about Ogden, concerted advocacy from university faculty, and an independent internal review that found the university severely lacking in its approach and response in the case.

Ogden's case is just one significant recorded example of how the neoliberal academic approach is antithetical to the best interests of researchers (especially graduate students) engaged in research akin to ours. That failure to support researchers and students in these ways presents a tangible risk to researchers, teachers, and students for which the university bears some responsibility (Fenge et al., 2019). Universities are entrusted with the duty to shield their researchers from potential harm, an obligation that is not fully met in part due

to this hierarchical system of support. The following sections detail unmitigated risks that each of the authors were exposed to during their dissertation research and how, in each case, the support we needed from institutions and their representatives failed us.

Our Stories

In Uncharted Water: How Institutional Procedures Shape Who Receives Care

As we noted previously, risk can come in several forms, including physical, legal, and even financial. For many, the risk to their emotional wellbeing is ever present. This was the case for Amy, whose work on anti-feminist and misogynistic social media practices of the Canadian far-right saw her consuming thousands of posts drenched in unconcealed and unrestrained hatred for women in general, but particularly for white feminists who advocated for racial justice.

Descriptions of the sort of sexual violence these women “deserved” were common. In 2021, Amy hit a wall when the news broke of a shooting in Atlanta, Georgia, that seemed to be driven by gender-based grievances. As hours passed, she remained at her computer, numb and unthinking. It wasn’t until her partner asked her if she wanted anything for lunch that she realized the depth of her disassociation. Through work with her therapist, she came to understand that this was but one example of how her engagements in long-term and immersive fieldwork – the hallmark of her discipline of anthropology (McGranahan, 2018) – had left her emotionally bruised at best and traumatized at worst. Later, in her final supervisory committee meeting at the end of her degree, she was asked if she had felt supported by the university. She responded that no, she had not. While it was a frustrating question to receive at the end of psychologically distressing project, it brought about another more meaningful set of questions: What would support look like? And importantly, what structures are necessary to make that support possible?

We would like to consider how Amy’s fieldwork experiences could have been avoided or mitigated if the institution embedded care for the researcher into their formal policies and procedures. Risks to research wellbeing, which in Amy’s case were emotional and psychological but for others may be physical, are not only left unmitigated by our institutions but are at times *the result* of institutional policies and procedures. Take, for example, the role of the university’s ethics review board. Historically, the review board’s primary task was ensuring the safety and wellbeing of research subjects and participants. This is evinced by questions related to risk, discomfort, informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality. While participant safety is of paramount importance, the framing implies a relationship of care between the researcher and participant for the purpose of protecting the institution from

legal action. In Amy's experience, this one-way street of care was reiterated in her graduate training, which emphasized the power the researcher had when writing about her interlocutors and the harm she could cause them during the research and writing process. At no point during formal institutional checks and balances like the ethics review process was the safety, security, or wellbeing of the researcher considered, nor was the growing power of antagonistic interlocutors.

The lack of consideration for researcher wellbeing has prompted calls for research ethics guidelines that respond to the specific dangers of studying the far-right and other forms of violent extremism (Conway, 2021). Institutes and research centres have begun to generate best practices for researchers,⁴ but these have not yet made their way into the ethics application process. We argue that *formal* procedures shape the experiences of early career and precarious researchers as they determine who is legally entitled to care. While at times the ethics application procedure can be tedious and frustrating, it is an opportunity to think through the research process. These procedures serve as opportunities to reflect on the realities of research, prompt contingency planning, and importantly, clearly delineate responsibility in writing. However, without questions related to the safety and wellbeing of researchers, these conversations are often left unprompted, unconsidered, and un-done.

In the absence of formal mechanisms that trigger discussions or actions around researcher wellbeing, safety, and security, early career scholars are left with informal and inconsistent access to care and support. For example, if one's supervisor is a subject matter expert, they may be more attuned to the pitfalls and dangers of the student's proposed research. Similarly, if a student is involved with a related research centre, they may have access to mentors who can assist them in planning their fieldwork to avoid unnecessary risk to their physical and emotional wellbeing. For many graduate students, however, this is not the case.

In the years since her doctoral fieldwork, Amy has built herself a network of critical far-right scholars, many of whom questioned whether she truly needed to submerge herself in her data in pursuit of ethnographic richness, or if better boundaries could have been drawn without sacrificing rich data. She found she was not the only scholar to have made similar choices and regretted them. Stories circulated through her network about trans students and researchers facing physical assault at far-right rallies against trans rights, of graduate students sobbing in their offices after watching footage of far-right violence including hate crimes and terrorist attacks. Notably, each of these projects had received ethics approval from their institutions.

⁴ See the work of VOX-POL for an aggregate of such resources: <https://voxpath.eu/researcher-welfare-1-privacy/>

Going Down with the Ship while the Captains take the Lifeboats: Abandoned by the Institution

Initially planning to conduct master's research on Norse neo-paganism in Ontario, Canada, Ryan was asked to join a research project on anti-immigrant far-right extremism. He was excited about this opportunity because it would leverage his existing expertise on Norse pagan/far-right linkages. Ryan was tasked with monitoring and collecting data on neo-Nazi content. This consisted primarily of reading racist online forums and watching video content published by members of neo-Nazi groups that called for the extermination of immigrant groups who were perceived as being threats to [White] Canadian society.⁵

It took several months for Ryan to realize his lack of training or preparation for the type of content he was reading or watching. Naïve to the implications of consuming this type of content, Ryan exposed himself to various risks, such as surveillance by malicious actors. Unsurprisingly, his devices began showing him advertisements for Nazi paraphernalia, and his social media algorithms often pointed him toward antisemitic or Islamophobic content. He spent months consuming sensitive and potentially dangerous content without realizing the importance of using protective measures like virtual private networks (VPNs) or separate devices. The delayed realization of these vulnerabilities occurred after receiving hate mail for the first time, and discovering YouTube videos made about a publication by his research group. In this YouTube video, he was named, his image shown, and his academic abilities questioned. The comments section was full of derogatory comments and statements. This triggered discussion within his research group, and when students inquired about protective measures, they were informed that the university did not provide VPN software to students conducting risky research, nor did it provide students with legal resources and protection. Their recommended solution was to remove recognition of their work from this and other projects. Ryan's university stated clearly that only research leads (full-time faculty) would be protected in case of lawsuits or other legal actions.

All this information came too late. Ryan was already on the far-right's radar. With no preparation, no training, no mental health resources, and no protections, Ryan was now potentially in the line of fire of the fragmented far-right media machine. His potential targeting also raised serious questions about his academic preparation, the competence of research supervisors, and the university in allowing this research to proceed. Why were essential security techniques and safety protocols not disclosed earlier in the research process? Why were graduate students not provided with proper training on safely conducting digital research on such a sensitive topic?

⁵ We use the capital "White" as here it refers to the cultural identity of whiteness that underpins White supremacy and other forms of cultural violence based on race. For further reading on this issue of continued discussion see *The Diversity Style Guide* (2016); Painter (2020); and Thùy Nguyễn & Pendleton (2020).

The most important question, however, is how the university could approve of graduate students as non-anonymous research partners, whose identifying information was displayed openly on project websites, without an obligation to provide legal and personal support for those students (who are also employees). This is especially concerning as recent trends show that far-right advocates often use litigation as a tactic to silence their critics by filing defamation lawsuits (The Associated Press, 2017; Blueprint for Free Speech, 2023; Messenger & Laurry, 2023). Ryan, who was left in a perilous position and without support in devising mitigation strategies, has adapted his research approach and his focus on personal safety. He continues his work, although to protect himself he has largely distanced himself from university-sponsored research.

Empathising with Pirates

The study of leisure is generally focused on the positive outcomes of leisure participation. Enmeshed in the study of actions and activities with a positive bias, it is rare (with some notable exceptions) to reach into “darker” territory for inquiry. As in other fields, when leisure researchers investigate its darker recesses, we tend to study “them,” the nebulous other that impacts our lives. This othering is true of all critical study of the far-right, as it provides an important line of separation between the researcher and the people they study. But what happens when you can “fit right in” with the “other?”

Luc had never asked himself this question when he began to study men’s rights spaces and the manosphere. Interested in the ways that gender and power are manifest in social relationships, these communities steeped in male supremacy and uneven relationships seemed distant and foreign but were such an ever-present part of his online media that they became a logical research focus. Having followed the approach of othering research subjects he found problematic (Hall, 1997; Said, 2019), he was confronted with the implications of his own positionality when a trusted advisor noted offhandedly that he might not appear out of place in a real-life gathering of men’s rights activists. While the comment was meant to highlight how this might allow for a kind of access unobtainable to many of his colleagues, Luc’s understanding was altogether different. Rather than see this as a nod to the importance of positionally in researching these groups, the words of his mentor began a journey of fear.

Rightfully or not, this fear was couched in the idea that Luc was susceptible to becoming what he studied – that by being “like them” superficially he was in constant danger of being recruited to their cause. The manifestations of this fear were both research paralysis and a personal crisis that endangered his mental health and his marriage. While crisis is not altogether uncommon for those pursuing PhDs in critical social sciences, in cases like this the possible negative outcomes range from strained social relations to taking on mantles of radicalized violence (e.g., violent misogyny). To say that we as researchers are

somehow immune to this type of ideological influence is naïve, and we have ample evidence of formerly collectivist and left-leaning media personalities turning to the right (Chavez, 2016; Jeffrey, 2000; Klein, 2023).

In Luc's case, both the university and the research supervisor failed to acknowledge the impacts this type of research might have on those who have a "closeness" to the research subjects. Ethnographers have long encountered situations where they may feel affinity, closeness, or have been implicated with those they research (Pilbeam et al., 2023). While this can be risky (Johnson, 2009), the othering done in critical social science, especially when that critical eye is turned to men's rights or other radicalized groups, allows us a safe (if illusory) distance. The presumption of difference from those we research tends to erase similarity and this erasure from within the process can allow affinity with participant ideological positions to exist, and blossom, uninterrogated.

Luc did not, thankfully, move toward adopting the ideologies of the groups he studied. His considerable personal labour in stifling feelings of affinity was complemented by the help of a knowledgeable therapist and a network of colleagues who were (voluntarily) exposing themselves to similar online content (including the other authors of this manuscript). These support people and networks, built without the help or support of the institutions that dictated his success and profited from his scholarly production, were essential to his health and wellbeing.

Unpacking Narratives

The narratives shared in this paper help us to illustrate where we, as three novice scholars engaged with risky research, feel (or felt) under-supported by our institutions. We relied (naïvely or otherwise) on those institutions and their representatives (our supervisors) to keep us safe as we entered unfamiliar waters. These institutions, which benefit immensely from the labours and outputs of students and precarious faculty, failed to provide even the most basic supports as we became academics at potential risk. Each of our PhD granting institutions is a contributing and supporting member of the Scholars at Risk Network (Scholars at Risk Network, 2024b), which even if their participation is predominantly passive, acknowledges the fact that the research some academics engage in can put them at risk. We draw a connection here between the scholars most commonly supported by the network – scholars who are imprisoned or silenced or are direct targets of the increasing attacks on higher education by state-sponsored agents – and those like Ryan or Amy who are the targets or prospective targets of coordinated attacks by non-state agents. We believe that all researchers deserve better, and it is largely because of our own organizing and network building outside of our universities that we are each in the position to author this paper.

Research shows that the constant reading and viewing of hate and extremism online takes a toll on the mental health of academics and journalists (Martineau, 2019). Some have reported experiencing PTSD-like symptoms both during and after their research, and the negotiation of the complex emotional and professional pressures of this work are being discussed in earnest (Cousineau, 2024; Sibley, 2024; Vaughan, 2024a). Whether due to supervisors who are unprepared to provide the required support, systems that are under-equipped, or lack of familiarity, students who navigate these types of environments are often left to grapple with challenges independently. While resources like university counselling services are available to students, they may be less sought out due to being overprescribed, and most are under-equipped to address the unique types of traumas and difficulties in this research (Dufour, 2020). They are not available to precarious faculty (or, often, postdocs) and these practitioners may or may not be covered by insurance plans.

Current understandings of risk associate the term with an active time and place within a researcher's work. This approach assumes that risk is a static feature that will disappear once the data has been collected, and the research has concluded (Massanari, 2018). Without the proper support systems, graduate students – or supervisors of graduate students – researching far-right ideologies and their advocates may remain unaware that this cognitive burden extends beyond the data-collection stages. The emotional impacts of revisiting collected data and situational recollections are significant concerns, as they may all (re)traumatize researchers (Drozdowski & Dominey-Howes, 2015; Ehlers et al., 2004; van der Merwe & Hunt, 2019). Students engaging with this type of research must be prepared to mitigate the trauma and cognitive toll of engaging with research subjects who promote harmful ideologies. Accordingly, this necessitates a re-evaluation of the support and understanding needed for such research and particularly highlights the crucial role of supervisors in providing training and raising awareness about these specific mental health concerns.

Mental health is an important component of graduate studies and is often overlooked until it is too late (LaBelle et al., 2024). There are critical dangers in narrowly defining concepts of harm and violence that students experience in the pursuit of knowledge. This is particularly true concerning the harm and violence Amy endured during her research, which went unrecognized by supervisors and the committee. We ask universities to consider whether supervisors of graduate students doing this research are adequately trained and prepared to provide the unique mental health support required for this type of research, and to fund that preparation. Luc and Amy's experiences stress the vital role of supervisors in proactively checking in with their students and initiating or promoting mental health support (LaBelle et al., 2024). While some may suggest that the responsibility for mental health falls onto the individual, supervisors have an ethical responsibility as representatives of the

university, and as humans serving as mentors, to be knowledgeable and always maintain the safety and best interests of the student.

These comments are not meant to serve as indictments of our own supervisors. Rather, this critique points to significant systemic problems that reward production over careful consideration, speed over the care for others, and the bottom line before health. The answer to the question of why universities are not providing the mental health and training supports their students and researchers need is simple: the state of the neo-liberal academic-industrial complex does not allow it – it does not work with the bottom line (Juergensmeyer et al., 2019; Nocella et al., 2010). But the risks extend far beyond researcher mental health, and we are monitored by those we watch.

Far-right communities are known to conduct their own forms of surveillance, monitoring researchers and journalists who are reporting or conducting studies on their groups (Massanari, 2018). This is a form of extended risk that researchers in critical studies must remain aware of and take measures to protect themselves from at all levels. Doing digital research allows researchers to anonymize or obfuscate themselves and carry out their research with a lower risk of surveillance (Brunton & Nissenbaum, 2015; Crosset et al., 2019), but only if they know about and adopt safe practices. Obfuscation and anonymization are common practices among non-academic researchers and activists, which are practiced and written about by academics. This makes a lack of knowledge in this area by supervisors and departments all the more egregious.

To complicate things further, following the distribution of research findings researchers are made vulnerable by the direct connections created between them and their critical work. Conway (2021) notes that researchers – especially those publicly identifiable as belonging to marginalized or vulnerable categories – are more likely to become targets of extreme right online harassment as they publish their work. The harassment often involves direct threats and the spreading of false, private or misleading information, with the intention to damage the reputation and career of these scholars. Conway (2021) emphasized that if this form of harassment can be damaging to established, tenured scholars, it poses even greater risks to those in more precarious professional situations such as untenured faculty, adjuncts, and graduate students (p. 370). The obfuscation afforded by careful methodological practices, even if done well, is therefore unreliable.

As we explored earlier with the Russel Ogden case and in Ryan’s narrative, lacking structural support can lead to direct threats and conspicuous voids. The exclusion of research associates and student research assistants from legal protection and representation by the university (something which is increasingly less available to full-time university faculty as well) highlights hierarchical systems of class and access privilege. This lean-in to individualistic and neoliberal institutional structures, where resources and supports flow to the most “productive” and “meritorious” among us, as well as those with institutional authority, means that the development and

implementation of protocols that might help to protect researchers alongside participants, or researcher/supervisor training on negative outcomes that may only impact a few members of the community, are unlikely to be funded (Brunila, 2016; Rosa, 2022). Researchers at all levels, but especially young, student, or precarious researchers are left to fend for themselves in the face of potential physical, socio-emotional, or legal violence.

Ensuring that researchers are equipped with the necessary tools and knowledge to protect themselves online during their data collection is crucial for safeguarding them. Although the COVID-19 pandemic prompted universities to adopt more accessible digital security measures for faculty and students – such as providing VPNs and increasing awareness of digital data protection – the measures are framed as data security and protecting university interests rather than measures that can provide safety and security in research practice (Arogbodo, 2022; Smalls & Wilson, 2021). The unacknowledged consequence is that while research data and universities might be more secure, researchers are not. Critical researchers of extremism, supremacy, sexual health, political engagements, gun violence, 2SLGBTQIA+ issues, and other subjects remain open targets for increasingly radical harassment, and in the case of some like Luc’s colleague at the University of Waterloo, physical violence (Smalls & Wilson, 2021). As such, universities have a duty to protect students (and others) by mitigating their chances of being caught in the “alt-right gaze” (Massanari, 2018). It is essential for universities to provide researchers, including graduate students, with clear access to information and resources about mitigating online harms. Proper training depends on making these tools and supports available.

The practice of supporting and being supported by fellow graduate students and early career or precarious researchers is a common thread that allowed each of us to complete our graduate work and keep going. Those doing critical study of the far-right seek solidarity among peers who share similar research experiences. To formalize this process and provide a place for those in Canada interested in critical examination of the far-right, we created the Canadian Institute for Far-Right Studies (CIFRS) in 2022. CIFRS (www.CIFRS.org) is a registered non-profit with a mission to do critical research on the far-right in Canada and develop informational and interventionist material to help government, educators and citizens recognize, confront and push back against a seemingly relentless tide of far-right information and rhetorics in Canada. The organization also has a mandate to help support students and precarious academics who lack support networks as they engage with their important research, and provides solidarity, understanding, cooperation, and resources to those engaged with this research – especially when their institutions are *unwilling* to do so.

Institutional unwillingness, whether through wilful neglect, ignorance, or choosing money over people, is a choice: one we were affected by and find unconscionable. Threats toward students or researchers, crises of mental health, and unmonitored pathways toward radicalization as permissible acts

within institutions reflect poorly on institutional commitments to socially just practices.

Conclusion

To conclude this piece, we suggest alternative approaches to research, ethics, and care. These, we argue, can create a space that better supports precarious researchers and takes seriously the sorts of violence that we might encounter. As noted in our reflections, the responsibility of self-care often falls on the student's shoulders, but supervisors should also bear this burden. It is our experience that many students taking up the study of extremism and far-right violence are not supervised by experts in these contentious research areas. Instead, we are guided by scholars who have disciplinary or theoretical expertise that is helpful for our thinking, but not necessarily in managing the emotional or psychological load. What we propose here is the need for training aimed at supervisors, committee members, and department heads to ensure that students are supported regardless of their mentors' field of study. Further, we note that this type of training would likely benefit those outside of critical far-right and extremism studies as in the era of reactionary, anti-university politics and movements, many other areas of research are made vulnerable to violent action and harassment.

The concept of student-led support networks emerges as a vital component in positively influencing the wellbeing of researchers who are engaged in traumatic research. These networks form to provide a venue for students (and other researchers) to exchange valuable techniques and resources, filling the gaps of institutional neglect. By prioritizing community building and peer support, students not only find validation for their experiences but also gain practical strategies for navigating the emotional challenges inherent in research on the far-right. However, while students are commendably forming these communities on their own, institutions must step up to provide comprehensive support systems that ensure the safety and wellbeing of their researchers. These should address both the physical and emotional risks associated with researching the far-right. This can be done, in part, through financial and infrastructural support of scholar-support networks. The current approach to the distribution of resources for students by universities is antithetical to the best interest of researchers and graduate students engaged in research akin to ours. The failure to support students and precarious researchers doing research essential to social justice goals and institutional research missions presents a perceptible risk to researchers, teachers, and students.

We can summarise our recommendations in the following points:

1. We recommend that universities formalize protocols that prioritize the safety and wellbeing of researchers and incorporate these into existing ethics, risk, and research safety processes. This would include policies

that require the articulation of researcher safety measures in research projects.

2. We recommend that institutions re-evaluate the support structures and trainings provided for those who engage with potentially contentious fields of research, as well as those who support that research.
3. We recommend that universities provide graduate students, new researchers, and existing researchers interested in contentious research areas with comprehensive training and skill development on digital safety, including topics such as VPN use, anonymization and obfuscation techniques, and other methods to reduce the risk of attracting attention from the groups they study.
4. We recommend that universities establish formal support and referral agreements with scholar-support organizations that can provide real-time, content specific supports and networking for researchers of contentious areas under potential threat.

As with all large social issues, there are no simple solutions to the issues we discuss in this paper. The combination of individual and systemic factors, at the institutional level and within the larger social landscape, combined with the economic realities of the rapidly neo-liberalizing academy in Canada and elsewhere means that we require consistent pressure to make change. However, if we believe that these issues are significant and that change is essential to our wellbeing, social justice, and anti-fascism, then it is work we must do.

References

- Arogbodo, M. (2022). *Impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on online security behavior within the UK educational industry*. <https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/h5qgk>
- The Associated Press. (2017, October 28). *ACLU wins appeal in "white supremacist" defamation lawsuit*. AP News. <https://apnews.com/general-news-00f449e32e754143981014b4210e0ded>
- Baio, A. (2025, January 22). *Trump executive order: What will the "two sexes" policy change for LGBTQ+*. The Independent. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/trump-lgbtq-executive-order-sexes-b2684396.html>
- Bérubé, M. (2017, March 7). *Tenure-track responsibility and adjunct exploitation*. *Academe Blog*. <https://academeblog.org/2017/03/06/tenure-track-responsibility-and-adjunct-exploitation/>
- Birmingham, K. (2017, February 12). "The great shame of our profession": How the humanities survive on exploitation. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-great-shame-of-our-profession/>
- Blee, K. M. (2017). *Understanding racist activism: Theory, methods, and research*. Routledge.
- Blueprint for Free Speech. (2023, June 28). *German far right using SLAPPs to shut down criticism, new study indicates*. <https://www.blueprintforfreespeech.net/en/news/german-far-right-uses-slapps-to-shut-down-criticism-new-study-indicates>
- Brienza, C. (2016). Degrees of (self-)exploitation: Learning to labour in the neoliberal university. *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 29(1), 92-111. <https://doi.org/10.1111/johs.12119>
- Brown, T. (Ed.). (2023). *Graduate students at work: Exploited scholars of neoliberal higher ed*. University Press of Kansas.
- Brunila, K. (2016). The ambivalences of becoming a professor in neoliberal academia. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 22(5), 386-394. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800415620213>

- Brunton, F., & Nissenbaum, H. (2015). *Obfuscation: A user's guide for privacy and protest*. MIT Press.
- Bueckert, K. (2025, March 17). *Ex-University of Waterloo student sentenced to 11 years in prison for classroom stabbings*. CBC News. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/kitchener-waterloo/university-waterloo-classroom-stabbing-attack-sentencing-hate-crime-1.7442612>
- Butz, D., & Besio, K. (2009). Autoethnography. *Geography Compass*, 3(5), 1660-1674. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8198.2009.00279.x>
- Canaan, J. E., & Shumar, W. (Eds.). (2008). *Structure and agency in the neoliberal university*. Routledge.
- CBC News. (2023a, September 8). *Accused in University of Waterloo stabbings now also faces terrorism charges*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/kitchener-waterloo/university-of-waterloo-stabbings-1.6960701>
- CBC News. (2023b, June 28). *Stabbings at University of Waterloo send 3 to hospital, 1 person in custody*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/kitchener-waterloo/university-waterloo-stabbings-1.6891832>
- Chavez, D. (2016, August 18). *Kurt Metzger controversy continues, but Inside Amy Schumer isn't canceled*. The AV Club. <https://www.avclub.com/updated-kurt-metzger-controversy-continues-but-inside-1798251054>
- Cohen, A., & Baruch, Y. (2022). Abuse and exploitation of doctoral students: A conceptual model for traversing a long and winding road to academia. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 180(2), 505-522. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-021-04905-1>
- Conway, M. (2021). Online extremism and terrorism research ethics: Researcher safety, informed consent, and the need for tailored guidelines. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 33(2), 367-380. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2021.1880235>
- Cousineau, L. S. (2024). Navigating a feminist ethics of care, ethnographic methods, and academic activism in researching men's rights and the far right: A researcher's struggles. In A. Vaughan, J. Braune, M. Tinsley & A. Mondon (Eds.). *The ethics of researching the far right* (pp. 252-264). Manchester University Press.
- Crosset, V., Tanner, S., & Campana, A. (2019). Researching far right groups on Twitter: Methodological challenges 2.0. *New Media & Society*, 21(4), 939-961. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818817306>
- de Coning, A. (2023). Seven theses on critical empathy: A methodological framework for "unsavory" populations. *Qualitative Research*, 23(2), 217-233. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941211019563>
- The Diversity Style Guide. (2016, April 12). *White, white*. <https://www.diversitystyleguide.com/glossary/white-white/>
- Drozdowski, D., & Dominey-Howes, D. (2015). Research and trauma: Understanding the impact of traumatic content and places on the researcher. *Emotion, Space and Society*, 17, 17-21. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2015.09.001>
- Dufour, G. (2020). Current challenges in student mental health and counselling provision: How practice-based research can help demonstrate effectiveness. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 20(4), 565-570. <https://doi.org/10.1002/capr.12310>
- Ehlers, A., Hackmann, A., & Michael, T. (2004). Intrusive re-experiencing in post-traumatic stress disorder: Phenomenology, theory, and therapy. *Memory*, 12(4), 403-415. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09658210444000025>
- Fenge, L. A., Oakley, L., Taylor, B., & Beer, S. (2019). The impact of sensitive research on the researcher: Preparedness and positionality. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406919893161>
- Fountain, W. (2005). *Academic sharecroppers: Exploitation of adjunct faculty and the higher education system*. AuthorHouse.
- Geelhoed, F., Busher, J., Massé, L. E. J. S., & De Peleccijn, L. (2024). In the discomfort zone: Emotional labour and reflexivity in field research on extremism. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2024.2361954>
- Gelashvili, T., & Gagnon, A. (2024). One of the boys: On researching the far right as a woman. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2024.2361953>

- Goldstein, D. M. (2014). Laying the body on the line: Activist anthropology and the deportation of the undocumented. *American Anthropologist*, 116(4), 839-842. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.12155>
- Goodman, A. (2025, July 2). "Arrest Now, Ask Questions Later": ICE Agents Arrest and Jail U.S. Citizen Andrea Velez. Democracy Now! Retrieved October 8, 2025, from https://www.democracynow.org/2025/7/2/ice_abductions_masked_men_andrea_vezel
- Hall, S. (1997). The spectacle of the "other." In S. Hall (Ed.), *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices* (pp. 223-290). Sage.
- Hine, C. (2017). From virtual ethnography to the embedded, embodied, everyday internet. In L. Hjorth, H. A. Horst, A. Galloway, & G. Bell (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to digital ethnography* (pp. 21-28). Routledge.
- Jeffrey, B. (2000). *Hard right turn: The new face of neo-conservatism in Canada*. HarperCollins.
- Jimenez, K. (n.d.). ICE deported teenagers and children in immigration raids. Here are their stories. USA TODAY. Retrieved October 8, 2025, from <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2025/07/27/ice-student-deportations-trump-school-communities/84190533007/>
- Johnson, C. W. (2009). Writing ourselves at risk: Using self-narrative in working for social justice. *Leisure Sciences*, 31(5), 483-489. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400903199815>
- Jordan, A. M., & Christie, S. M. (2017). The graduate student experience in the neoliberal academy. *Anuac*, 6(1), 69-75. <https://doi.org/10.7340/anuac2239-625X-2984>
- Juergensmeyer, E., Nocella, A. J., & Seis, M. (Eds.). (2019). *Neoliberalism and academic repression: The fall of academic freedom in the era of Trump*. Brill.
- Klein, N. (2023). *Doppelganger: A trip into the mirror world*. Knopf Canada.
- LaBelle, S., White, A., & Forman, E. R. (2024). Graduate students' privacy boundaries in communicating about mental health with their advisors. *Communication Education*, 73(2), 143-167. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03634523.2023.2281325>
- Lamphere, L. (2018). The transformation of ethnography: From Malinowski's Tent to the practice of collaborative/activist anthropology. *Human Organization*, 77(1), 64-76.
- Martineau, P. (2019, May 2). The existential crisis plaguing online extremism researchers. *Wired*. <https://www.wired.com/story/existential-crisis-plaguing-online-extremism-researchers/>
- Massanari, A. L. (2018). Rethinking research ethics, power, and the risk of visibility in the era of the "alt-right" gaze. *Social Media + Society*, 4(2), 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118768302>
- McGranahan, C. (2018). Ethnography beyond method: The importance of an ethnographic sensibility. *Sites: A Journal of Social Anthropology and Cultural Studies*, 15(1). <https://doi.org/10.11157/sites-id373>
- Messenger, A., & Laurry, K. (2023, January 11). *Karens and klans: The recent flurry of libel cases involving allegations of racism*. American Bar Association. https://www.americanbar.org/groups/communications_law/publications/communications_lawyer/2023-winter/karens-and-klans-recent-flurry-libel-cases-involving-allegations-racism/
- Nelson, C., & Bérubé, M. (1994, March 23). Graduate education is losing its moral base. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/graduate-education-is-losing-its-moral-base/>
- Nocella, A. J., Best, S., & McLaren, P. (2010). *Academic repression: Reflections from the academic-industrial complex*. AK Press.
- Painter, N. I. (2020, July 22). Why "White" should be capitalized, too. *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/07/22/why-white-should-be-capitalized/>
- Parry, D. C. (2014). My transformative desires: Enacting feminist social justice leisure research. *Leisure Sciences*, 36(4), 349-364. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400.2014.916976>
- Pasieka, A. (2019). Anthropology of the far right: What if we like the "unlikeable" others? *Anthropology Today*, 35(1), 3-6. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8322.12480>
- Patrick, J., & Haye, T. (2023). Far-right incursions on Canadian postsecondary campuses 2012-2022: A qualitative content analysis. *Canadian Journal for New Scholars in Education*, 14(2), 86-95.
- Pearson, E., Whittaker, J., Baaken, T., Zeiger, S., Atamuradova, F., & Conway, M. (2023). *Online extremism and terrorism researchers' security, safety, and resilience: Findings from the*

- field. VOX-Pol. <https://voxpath.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Online-Extremism-and-Terrorism-Researchers-Security-Safety-Resilience.pdf>
- Pilbeam, C., Greenhalgh, T., & Potter, C. M. (2023). Ethnographic closeness: Methodological reflections on the interplay of engagement and detachment in immersive ethnographic research. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 29(4), 820-839. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.14007>
- Rosa, R. (2022). The trouble with “work-life balance” in neoliberal academia: A systematic and critical review. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 31(1), 55-73. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09589236.2021.1933926>
- Said, E. W. (2019). *Orientalism*. Penguin Classics.
- Samuels, G. (2016, December 28). “All I want for Christmas is white genocide”: Professor receives death threats after mocking supremacists. The Independent. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/history-professor-twitter-storm-white-genocide-death-threats-george-ciccariello-maher-a7497301.html>
- Scholars at Risk Network. (2024a). *About*. <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/about/>
- Scholars at Risk Network. (2024b). *Membership directory*. <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/membership-directory/>
- Segers, I. B., Gelashvili, T., & Gagnon, A. (2024). Intersectionality and care ethics in researching the far right. *Feminist Media Studies*, 24(5), 1219-1224. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2023.2280884>
- Shetty, A. (2024, October 22). *Ex-student attacked University of Waterloo gender-studies class to “instil fear,” sentencing hearing told*. CBC News. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/kitchener-waterloo/villalba-aleman-waterloo-sentencing-1.7360163>
- Sibley, A. (2024). How do you respond when you feel under threat? A reflective exploration into my experience with the far right online. In A. Vaughan, J. Braune, M. Tinsley, & A. Mondon (Eds.), *The ethics of researching the far right* (pp. 207-217). Manchester University Press.
- Simon Fraser University. (n.d.). *Russel Ogden v. SFU: The Russel Ogden case*. <https://www.sfu.ca/~palys/OgdenPge.htm>
- Smalls, D., & Wilson, G. (2021). Ten quick tips for staying safe online. *PLOS Computational Biology*, 17(3), e1008563. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pcbi.1008563>
- Teitelbaum, B. R. (2019). Collaborating with the radical right: Scholar-informant solidarity and the case for an immoral anthropology. *Current Anthropology*, 60(3), 414-435. <https://doi.org/10.1086/703199>
- Thúy Nguyễn, A., & Pendleton, M. (2020, March 23). *Recognizing race in language: Why we capitalize “Black” and “White.”* Center for the Study of Social Policy. <https://cssp.org/recognizing-race-in-language-why-we-capitalize-black-and-white/>
- Turner, A. (2000). Embodied ethnography: Doing culture. *Social Anthropology*, 8(1), 51-60.
- van der Merwe, A., & Hunt, X. (2019). Secondary trauma among trauma researchers: Lessons from the field. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 11(1), 10-18. <https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0000414>
- Vaughan, A. (2024a). Negotiating contradiction in success and safety: A consideration of environmental constraints on risk management. In A. Vaughan, J. Braune, M. Tinsley, & A. Mondon (Eds.), *The ethics of researching the far right* (pp. 228-239). Manchester University Press.
- Vaughan, A. (2024b). Success and harm when researching the far right: Researcher safety as epistemic exclusion. *Journal of Illiberalism Studies*, 4(1), 77-86. <https://doi.org/10.53483/XCOY3570>