



Guest Editors' Introduction

From Antagonism to Care: Reimagining Academic Freedom and Justice in Higher Education

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Introduction

Institutions of higher education serve as critical hubs for the development of new ideas, perspectives, and innovations. Within these academic spaces, uncharted areas of knowledge provide opportunities for curiosity to thrive and for rigorous inquiry to enhance understanding. Faculty and students engage in research, which is driven by a commitment to expanding knowledge, promoting understanding, fostering trust, and, for some, advancing issues of social and political justice. However, these same institutions of higher education have increasingly become sites where some individuals and groups perceive this critical work as a threat and may engage in targeted attacks. Such situations raise noteworthy questions: what drives these antagonistic reactions?; how can we effectively disseminate knowledge about them?; and what actions can we take to address them?

On June 28, 2023, the University of Waterloo experienced hate-motivated violence when a university community member assaulted two students and a professor during a Gender Studies Philosophy class in the Hagey Hall building. This violent incident catalyzed a deeper reflection on antagonism within academia and prompted increased efforts to address such hostility, both within the University of Waterloo and across the broader academic community. The University of Waterloo initiated and funded the 2023-2024 speaker series, *Antagonism and Intimidation in Academia*. The series culminated in an

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international, interdisciplinary conference, “From Targeting in Academia to Promoting Trust and Understanding,” held on June 27-28, 2024. Suzan Ilcan served as the Lead Organizer of the 2023-2024 Series and 2024 Conference. The papers included in this special issue of *Studies in Social Justice* originally stem from the draft papers presented at this conference.

In our call for papers, we understood the need to recognize how antagonism in the academy works on the ground. In other words, how it can target well-trained faculty members and students and erode their research work or related activities; how it can undermine academic freedom, that is, from a human rights standpoint, “the human right to acquire, develop, transmit, apply, and engage with a diversity of knowledge and ideas through research, teaching, learning, and discourse” (Scholars at Risk [SAR], 2024, p. 8). Additionally, how it can connect to political or religious interference in research and teaching and articulate issues of social injustice and social justice. This special issue comprises papers that discuss various aspects of antagonism and intimidation in academia, including the role of censorship, unimpeded corporate interests, gender and sexuality relations, race and ethnicity matters, exclusionary politics and power dynamics, and institutional practices and relations in higher education. It also offers strategies for creating constructive and germane dialogue and effective tools for community and social justice engagement, and for enhancing safe environments for critical thinking, openness, and solidarity-building. Several contributions discuss approaches that involve engagement in meaningful debate with opposing, and even highly controversial, standpoints. Alongside these key concerns, some papers emphasize the concept of trust, which is explored for its significance in higher education institutions and related societal contexts. Overall, the collection of papers highlights the need to develop or enhance socially just practices and frameworks that can generate spaces of care and inclusion, foster academic freedom as a kind of social responsibility to promote democratic values (see Darian-Smith, 2025), and rebuild trust – both within the academy and with various communities.

Academic Work under Attack

University scholars across many disciplines increasingly face antagonistic or hostility-based reactions toward their work, particularly those engaged in social justice scholarship primarily in humanities, social sciences, law and legal studies, as well as in other fields such as medicine and sciences. Such scholarship addresses, for example, discrimination based on gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and religion. It also speaks to research on vulnerable and precarious individuals and groups; on science, evolution, and technology; on health and medicine issues; and on environment and climate change matters (e.g., Blizard, 2016; Branford et al., 2019; Cassidy et al., 2024; Eslen-Ziya & Giorgi, 2022; Eslen-Ziya et al., 2024; Pendergrast et al., 2021). Specifically, acts of antagonism often aim at silencing researchers and discrediting certain

scholarly perspectives through punitive measures such as cyberbullying, disruptions of public lectures, personal threats, censorship, dismissals, exclusion, harassment, and even physical violence. These acts can stem from individuals, organized groups, specific societal sectors, and institutional and governing forces. For example, in Nicaragua, the government targeted academic dissenters who condemned or protested against the government, which resulted in the arrest of university professors and students (SAR, 2024). University scholars are targeted in many other ways that involve issues concerning their research work, gender, and ethnic identities. For example, Grundy (2017) advances that black academics studying race continue to endure antagonistic reactions, which the author has also personally experienced. Similarly, Torjesen (2021) discusses how a Swedish Covid-19 researcher ultimately resigned from their position after being on the receiving end of harsh attacks on social media. In the field of academic medicine, Vargas et al. (2020) highlight various forms of harassment (heterosexist, racialized sexual, and gender policing) that underscore medicine, which, they argue, are linked to a traditional male dominated workforce, a culture tolerant of misbehaviours, and hierarchies of privilege and power. Such conditions can make academic medicine susceptible to various forms of harassment. In other academic fields, Christensen and Evans-Murray (2021) discuss “gaslighting” as a form of bullying in nursing, while Casad et al. (2021) highlight persistent gender disparities in STEM fields. These and other related examples raise many challenges to academic freedom.

The Erosion of Academic Freedom

Discussions about threats to and the corrosion of “academic freedom” – understood here as informed speech compelled to peer review at numerous levels and subject to refutations, and “contributing over time to a body of knowledge established and sustained with checks and balances” (Dreiling & García-Caro, 2022, p. 6) – are not novel. They have been visible since at least the 1960s in many universities around the world. State and higher education authorities often use a variety of disciplinary actions to reprimand, prevent, and constrain the exercise of academic freedom and other protected rights of scholars. In recent years, the conditions and circumstances undermining academic freedom have intensified (Darian-Smith, 2025) and increasing numbers of scholars have lost their academic positions through, for example, dismissals, suspensions, and denial of contract renewals. For example, in the United States, many scholars and university staff members were forced out of their positions because their teaching, scholarship, or jobs focused on detested topics; in these situations, those holding adjunct professor positions are at particular risk due to their precarious positions. While actors external to the university (such as alumni, community or media associates, donors, elected officials) may sometimes put pressure on universities to punish scholars (SAR,

2024), there are also broader conditions and circumstances that contribute to the undermining of academic freedom.

With rising anti-democracy and far-right politics, and movements towards authoritarianism we are seeing a global weakening in academic freedom that marks the 21st century as historically distinctive (Darian-Smith, 2025; Douglass, 2021; Dubrovsky & Kaczmarska, 2021; Scott, 2019). This situation is evident across the Americas, Africa, Asia, Europe, Middle East and among purportedly prominent democracies such as the United States (Darian-Smith, 2025). For example, in 2024, the assault on higher education around the world reached an unparalleled scale. Based on a report, *Free to Think*, published by Scholars at Risk (a New York based non-profit organization), there were “391 attacks on scholars, students, and institutions in 51 countries and territories, from July 1, 2023, to June 30, 2024” (SAR, 2024, p. 3). These attacks in higher education include “intentional acts resulting in wrongful death, physical harm, loss of liberty, limitation on academic travel, loss of professional or academic standing, or the destruction, damage, closure, or seizure of higher education institutions, facilities, or equipment” (p. 12). They also include deliberate, antagonistic acts of coercion, intimidation, or threats of harm that destabilize academic freedom, educational functions, and institutional autonomy. During this time, the most prominent attacks involved “threats to scholars’ lives and academic work due to armed conflict, including in Israel and Gaza, or in retaliation for the teaching of disfavored topics or for political opinions expressed on social media” (p. 11). More generally, attacks occur in authoritarian contexts, such as Afghanistan, China, Hungary, Iran, Russia, and Turkey as well as in liberal democracies, such as Australia, Canada, France, Germany, the United States, and the United Kingdom. For example, in Iran, as of May 2024, more than 700 students had been “arrested, attacked, or beaten for participating in demonstrations at universities related to the anti-government ‘Women, Life, Freedom’ movement that began in September 2022” (p. 24). In France, on April 29, 2024, upon the request by the French Prime Minister Gabriel Attal, police dragged student protesters who had set up a pro-Palestine and Gaza solidarity encampment at Sorbonne University from campus. In India, two universities (Jawaharlal Nehru University [JNU] and South Asian University [SAU]) announced new policies restricting student expression. JNU barred students from protesting near academic buildings and SAU barred students from protesting on campus entirely (SAR, 2024).

In many ways, antagonistic acts against academic freedom are influenced by far-right groups (Eslen-Ziya et al., 2024; Ravecca et al., 2024), anti-protest laws, anti-democratic coalitions, severe anti-immigration policies, neoliberal initiatives, and other conditions and circumstances (e.g., Dreiling & García-Caro, 2022; Giroux, 2018; Özdemir et al., 2019; Scott, 2019). Within these broader contexts, there are mounting verbal and physical threats and harassment targeting faculty members (e.g., Darakchi & Valkovicova, 2025; Oksanen et al., 2022) and increasing assaults on equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) initiatives (Dailey, 2023; SAR, 2024). For example, state lawmakers in

the United States engaged in a rigorous attack against diversity, equity, and inclusion (SAR, 2024), which in turn undermines academic freedom, university autonomy and governance, and institutional commitments to social justice and equitable and inclusive representation. There is also a rising bureaucratization and standardization of university research ethics processes (e.g., Alvesson & Stephens, 2025; Caeymaex et al., 2023); a growing propensity to prioritise student satisfaction over academic freedom (Goodwin, 2022); and escalating university discourses and practices that are antagonistic to certain alternative viewpoints, voices, and beliefs (e.g., Dreiling & García-Caro, 2022; Ravecca et al., 2024). Moreover, there are global policing efforts that aim to suppress critical thought and undermine university autonomy and faculty-led governance (Darian-Smith, 2025).

Within these broader contexts, we see internal challenges within higher education institutions that are giving rise to new tensions and social justice concerns. For example, De Welde and Stepnick (2015) examine systemic issues, such as those involving intense competition for grants, diminished research autonomy, and the decline of full-time faculty positions. While some positive developments may emerge alongside of internal challenges (such as interdisciplinary research, increased diversity, pedagogical forms of innovation), the negative consequences disproportionately impact those in precarious positions, such as women, minorities, and untenured faculty. In this regard, Tight (2023) explores the persistent culture of academic bullying, and identifies the social injustices that are prevalent, including patterns of exclusion, obstruction, and professional undermining among faculty. This author emphasizes that academia's evaluative and competitive practices foster tensions over teaching assignments, promotions, research funding, and even office space. While bullying behaviour is often top-down, with some situations involving senior faculty exerting influence or authority over junior faculty or students, Tight (2023) also highlights occasions when students have been known to target specific faculty, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds. On a larger scale, students underscore a unique role in higher education, not only because they have been known to voice their concerns on various human rights and social justice issues on many university campuses, but also because they are "learners who carry skills of critical inquiry and expression into the wider public space" (SAR, 2024, p. 13).

University faculty members, including precarious and early-career academics, and students, including minoritized groups, who are teaching and learning in politically sensitive fields can also face heightened incidences of antagonistic behaviour from various individuals and groups. These may include doxing, graffiti, and vandalism, which can further erode one's sense of well-being and trust and undermine the assurance of inclusive teaching, learning, or interchange (Dreiling & García-Caro, 2022). In terms of issues facing some minoritized educators, Gatwiri et al. (2020), for example, analyze the experiences of minoritized educators who, through a decolonial framework, challenge dominant narratives in their classroom teaching. They

also point out that student evaluations of teaching are not neutral tools but can inadvertently and disproportionately harm minoritized educators. Likewise, Heffernan (2023) highlights that abusive comments appearing on student evaluations can have a negative impact on the career progression of marginalized academics. While some researchers underscore the urgent need for universities to critically assess their internal governing and assessment arrangements, there are other organizations, such as Scholars at Risk, that call on states, higher education communities, and civil society to do more to protect academic freedom. The latter include refusing violence and coercion intended to constrain inquiry and expression; safeguarding threatened scholars, students, and higher education institutions; and refuting illiberal policies and practices that restrict intellectual discourse, research, and teaching (SAR, 2024).

Increasing Political Interference in Higher Education

Within higher education institutions, increasing acceptance of political or religious interference is occurring across the globe. Such interference can take the form of supporting manipulative funding practices, the legal persecution of scholars, and the systemic restructuring of academic governance (e.g., Dreiling & García-Caro, 2022; Scott, 2019). For example, Hungary, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States have witnessed severe incursions into academic autonomy, which contribute to a disturbing international development of increasing vulnerability among scholars and academic institutions. In the UK context, for example, concerns have been raised about the impact of certain ideas and frameworks, such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF), that encourages academics to prioritise policy-relevant and funded research over free intellectual enquiry (Goodwin, 2022). These and other similar trends are occurring in other countries and creating precarious and “hostile environments” within university settings (Goodwin, 2022, p. 1).

In the United States, over the past few years, there have been interrogational and antagonistic practices, reminiscent of the 1940s and 1950s McCarthyite House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC), that are targeting universities and colleges as well as public libraries and schools. These practices involve the censoring of academic scholarship (e.g., Dailey, 2023; Darian-Smith, 2025) and introduction of legislation against university autonomy and academic freedom, such as in the Republican-led states of Florida and Texas (Darian-Smith, 2025). They also include the banning of books, such as those dealing with critical race theory, critical theory, critical thinking, feminist thought, and various other cultural products that are deemed “subversive” (Darakchi, 2024; Dreiling & García-Caro, 2022). In particular, the bans on teaching critical race theory or Florida’s *Stop WOKE Act* signed into law in April 2022 are antagonistic acts that aim to control education about racism, prejudice, and US history; they contravene the right of faculty to teach the results of their or their colleagues’ research to students. Undoubtedly, these

and other similar acts result in severe encroachments on academic freedom, such as the freedom to conduct research, access and disseminate information, design curriculum and teaching, and participate in university-led governance (Darian-Smith, 2025; Dreiling & García-Caro, 2022; Eslen-Ziya et al., 2024).

The second Trump administration has demonstrated unprecedented federal intervention in academic affairs, which involve targeting universities perceived as harboring pro-Palestinian sentiments. Since early 2025, the US administration has frozen billions of dollars in federal funding to prestigious institutions – including over \$1 billion to Cornell University, nearly \$800 million to Northwestern University, and future grants to Harvard University (see e.g., CBC, 2025; Waldenberg et al., 2025). Columbia University has faced severe threats of funding cuts, compelling it to place departments under receivership and revise disciplinary procedures due to allegations of antisemitism. The Trump administration's actions extended to detaining several international students, such as Columbia's Mahmoud Khalil, Tufts' Rümeyşa Öztürk, and Cornell's Momodou Taal, without formal criminal charges. In this regard, academic freedom is not just a matter of opinion or an individual's right to free speech; it relies on cooperation and trust and is integral for "maintaining an informed and democratic society" (Dreiling & García-Caro, 2022, p. 3). Eve Darian-Smith (2025) calls for a reframing of academic freedom "as a social responsibility to wider societies, underscoring that attacks on scholars are not just a matter of concern for those working and learning within the academy" (p. 601). For this author, there needs to be new thinking about academic freedom in terms of "collective social responsibility" (p. 601), which offers a more generalizable notion of academic freedom understandable to non-academic audiences.

Turkey provides a noteworthy example of the fierce assault on academic freedom and higher education that compelled some students and scholars to flee the country. President Recep Erdoğan (2014-present) has disassembled Turkey's higher education sector over the past several years (Darian-Smith, 2025; Doğan & Selenica, 2022). The "Academics for Peace" case exemplifies the erosion of academic freedom. In January 2016, it issued a petition titled "We Will Not be a Party to this Crime," signed by over 2,200 academics from Turkish and international universities. The petition criticized the Turkish state's gross human rights violations in the Kurdish region and called for the government to resume peace negotiations (e.g., Baser et al., 2017; Human Rights Watch, 2016). President Erdoğan's brutal reaction triggered widespread reprisals, including disciplinary and criminal investigations accusing the signatories of "propagandizing for a terrorist organization" (SAR-Network, 2019, n.p.). The government's crackdown was extensive: hundreds of academics were dismissed, barred from future employment, prosecuted, had their passports revoked, and were publicly vilified (e.g., Doğan & Selenica, 2022; Gambetti, 2022; Özdemir et al., 2019). Although Turkey's Constitutional Court eventually ruled in 2019 that these convictions violated the right to free expression, most of the dismissed academics were never

reinstated, with the latter highlighting the long-lasting impact of such purges on academic autonomy. Government interference has also been evident in other traditional university processes, such as the appointment of a government-affiliated rector at Boğaziçi University in 2021, which bypassed the university's internal democratic practices. Under such severe authoritarian conditions, this situation sparked sustained protests from students and faculty advocating for academic autonomy, and these are continuing to this day. Zeynep Gambetti, a professor of political theory at Boğaziçi University from 2000-2019, states that we must:

Rethink the role of intellectuals in dark times. The ivory tower has collapsed. We can no longer claim to be outside the political field ... Given the material and structural conditions of post-truth, constituting a new regime of truth, one that is inclusive and collective, calls for the labor of communing. (Gambetti, 2022, p. 186)

Hungary presents one of the most systematically executed dismantling of academic freedom within the European Union. In 2015, under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, the so-called Syrian refugee crisis offered Orbán and his party (Fidesz) the opportunity to display the policy implications of his national Christian agenda. This agenda did not permit any refugees to apply for permanent resettlement and argued that introducing Muslims into Hungary would be incompatible with Hungary's Christian identity (e.g., Bocskor 2018). At this time, the government introduced a controversial history curriculum that placed greater emphasis on nationalist themes and Hungary's Christian heritage. In the area of faculty hiring, administrative changes have allowed the Fidesz loyalists to occupy executive positions (Weinstein & Blanchard, 2023), which create various levels of social and religious forms of discrimination. In 2019, Orbán's government forced the Central European University (CEU) – founded by George Soros – to relocate most of its operations from Budapest to Vienna after new legislation made it impossible for the university to grant U.S.-accredited degrees in Hungary (see Corbett & Gordon, 2018). At the same time, the Hungarian government transferred control of many public universities to state-aligned foundations, with the latter effectively eroding their institutional independence. Furthermore, Hungary's Constitutional Court upheld the 2019 transfer of major research institutes from the Hungarian Academy of Sciences to the newly established Eötvös Loránd Research Network – an entity partially controlled by the government, which in turn aimed to centralize research within the confines of the government. Additionally, targeted attacks on gender and sexuality have been running parallel to anti-immigrant rhetoric as an overture to attacks on academic freedom and recognized curricula (Dreiling & García-Caro, 2022; Weinstein & Blanchard, 2023).

The cases above, and other similar ones, reflect not only a weakening in academic freedom but also a disturbing global pattern: increasing vulnerability of academic institutions, scholars, and students to political intervention. By supporting anti-democracy and far-right politics, including support for rights

abuses, legal persecution, threats of deportation, dismissals, and substantial curricular and institutional restructuring (e.g., Baser et al., 2017; Darian-Smith, 2025; De Welde & Stepnick, 2015; Dreiling & García-Caro, 2022; Eslen-Ziya et al., 2024; Gatwiri et al., 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2016; Scott, 2019; Weinstein & Blanchard, 2023), political authorities around the world have demonstrated a growing willingness to sacrifice independent scholarship when it conflicts with highly conservative or partisan agendas. According to Darian-Smith (2025), far-right leaders have become intolerant of rising public dissention and political demonstrations. They are “keen to prevent universities from becoming sites of political activism that challenge national policies and practices and question their authority to govern” (p. 601).

The Work of the Contributors

Academic Freedom, Hate Speech, Institutional Barriers and Precarious Experiences

Set against the background of the many issues discussed above, the papers in this special issue address a diversity of social justice challenges that relate to the growing tensions underscoring academia as well as the responses aiming to foster trust and understanding. This special issue demonstrates that antagonism and intimidation in academia can take many forms. These can range from overt attacks on academic freedom to more subtle but equally damaging dynamics such as unfair academic processes and procedures, forms of social exclusion, hate speech, bullying, and the weaponization of free speech. This special issue explores these and other similar tensions by focussing on the intersection of political interference, digital hostility, intellectual censorship, and institutional processes that undermine the integrity of scientific inquiry. These and other social justice challenges not only speak to the academy but also address wider concerns around threats to community-building, social movements, and democracy.

Several contributors engage with the contested terrain of academic freedom, revealing how social and political forces, including state-based initiatives, attempt to influence what can be said, researched, and taught within universities. Their insights shed light on broader struggles over knowledge production and social injustices in the face of growing conflict and polarization, systemic racism, legitimization of hate speech, targeted harassment, mistrust of vulnerable groups, and coercive power relations. Moreover, the rise of digital platforms has intensified these challenges by amplifying antagonistic rhetoric that often undercuts academic freedom and academic integrity.

In this special issue, Jeff Noonan critically analyzes how academic freedom is increasingly weaponized by opposing political sides and seeks to clarify its meaning, scope, and value amid contentious campus protests and political

pressures. Differentiating academic freedom from constitutional free speech, Noonan frames the former as an institutional right grounded in evidence-based inquiry and collegial governance. According to Noonan, academic freedom exists in both broad and narrow forms: broadly, it serves as a foundational principle supporting universities as spaces for free inquiry; narrowly, it represents a specific right conferred upon faculty through collective agreements. A central contribution of Noonan's analysis is his assertion that academic freedom inherently entails responsibilities not required of free speech. While citizens exercising free speech may make unsupported claims, academics must base their positions on reasoned arguments and evidence. He emphasizes that universities should not be vessels for partisan ideologies but remain spaces of open-ended, critical engagement and support for issues of social justice. Academic freedom, then, protects diverse viewpoints across the political spectrum while demanding intellectual rigor and responsibility from those exercising it. In this regard, Noonan positions the 2024 Gaza war campus protests and encampments as legitimate expressions of academic freedom, when examined through the lens of the university's core purpose: to serve as a space for inquiry, rational argumentation, and socially relevant critique. Although students do not formally hold academic freedom under the narrow definition, Noonan contends that their social justice activism aligns with the broader principle when it engages with "politically organized but academically relevant" issues. His paper presents a framework that addresses and assesses threats from corporate influence, government interference, and campus politics alike. In an era of growing polarization, Noonan offers a principled defense of the university as a space wherein, echoing Habermas (1996, p. 306), "the unforced force of the better argument" should prevail.

Houman Mehrabian complements this discussion by shifting the focus to the instrumentalization of free speech to amplify and legitimize hate speech. This author offers a critical examination of the rhetorical and structural mechanisms that enable hate speech to thrive under the guise of free speech absolutism. By interrogating the idealized "marketplace of ideas," analyzing strategies that amplify hate and exposing the role of digital technology in normalizing insensitive communication, the author argues that contemporary discourse has become desensitized to the harms of hate speech. Mehrabian challenges the assumption that an unregulated "marketplace of ideas" will inevitably lead to truth and tolerance. On the contrary, taken to its absolutist extreme, this model can be as repressive as the censorship it claims to oppose. The constant pressure to participate in public discourses, and the tolerance for all speech – including hate speech – creates an environment that discourages genuine dialogue and critical thought. The Internet, he argues, bypasses traditional safeguards, enabling the rapid spread of both harmful and benign ideas. Social media platforms, optimized for speed and gratification, foster habits of hurried consumption and shallow engagement, undermining issues of social justice and thoughtful communication practices. In this regard, Mehrabian positions academic practices – extensive research, critical reading, and well-argued

writing – as essential counterpoints to the unrestrained flow of information in technological communities. Academic institutions are thus positioned as strongholds for developing and advocating thoughtful measures against the unchecked market of free expression, which can foster issues of social justice. The paper emphasizes the importance of social justice scholarship in identifying and dismantling the systemic conditions that foster hate, arguing that such work is often met with hostility precisely because it demands reflection and accountability. Ultimately, Mehrabian contends that resisting the culture of unregulated expression is not censorship, but a defense of conditions necessary for genuine intellectual engagement and societal well-being. The paper concludes that academic and social justice interventions are more relevant than ever in an era where digital technology amplifies both the dangers and the reach of hate speech.

Other contributors in this special issue explore how institutional policies and research ethics guidelines, while intended to protect vulnerable groups, often create barriers for researchers. They call for more flexible, relational, and community-centered approaches to research ethics and governance that support both participants and researchers in more dynamic and caring ways. It is important for universities to cultivate transparent and supportive institutional cultures and socially just environments where scholars feel valued and protected. Such institutional environments include ensuring robust mechanisms to address harassment, safeguarding academic freedom while distinguishing it from the misuse of free speech, and fostering institutional leadership that prioritizes inclusivity and support for vulnerable scholars.

Erika Borrelli and Tanya Basok examine how rigid application of national ethical guidelines and standards enforced by institutional research ethics boards (REBs) can impede social justice research, especially among precarious groups like temporary migrant farmworkers in Canada. While REBs aim to protect vulnerable populations, their strict adherence to standardized, biomedical ethics often clashes with the realities of social science fieldwork, thereby obstructing research aimed at promoting social justice. They argue that REBs, by relying on abstract reasoning and neglecting the complexity, contextuality, and relationality of ethical decision-making in the field, create obstacles to meaningful, on-the-ground ethical engagement with vulnerable populations. Borrelli and Basok identify three major tensions: traditional recruitment protocols that fail to recognize broad social and community contexts in which migrant farmworkers are embedded can be impractical or unsafe for those with precarious legal status; standardized, one-time consent forms do not reflect the iterative and negotiated nature of trust-building required in these communities, and, by adopting a narrow view of harm and (re)traumatization, REBs ignore the potential benefits that participants can gain from having their experiences acknowledged by an empathetic listener or shared with a broader audience. Overall, the paper advocates for a paradigm shift from normative, rule-based ethics to a relational approach, inspired by feminist relational ethics. Borrelli and Basok propose relational ethics as a

model for community-based research with vulnerable populations. This approach recognizes that ethical research is inherently situated within complex networks of relationships, requiring ongoing negotiation and dialogue among researchers, participants, community members, and REBs. The authors demonstrate how REBs create institutional barriers for social justice scholarship, limiting researchers' academic freedom by restricting their ability to design studies that not only comply with general ethical standards but also allow them to exercise ethical judgment in the field. Similarly, they argue that without adopting research approaches that prioritize relationships based on trust, standardized practices will continue to obstruct researchers in generating both knowledge and justice. This paper underscores how institutional barriers not only impede fieldwork but can also diminish the emancipatory potential of social justice research.

Other social justice concerns are also raised by contributors who draw attention to the precarity and vulnerability of scholars working in politically charged environments. These contributors highlight how institutional structures can sometimes fail to protect academics from political pressures, leaving them vulnerable to public scrutiny, socio-political attacks, and even distrust from within their own institutions. Much scholarship emphasizes the emotional and professional toll of conducting research in environments marked by hostility, surveillance, and institutional neglect. Researchers investigating politically sensitive topics, such as those focusing on gender, race, hostile university environments, rising anti-democracy, and right-wing extremism (e.g., American Association of University Professors, 2023; Anderson, 2023; Corbett & Gordon, 2018; Darian-Smith, 2025; Kuhar, 2017), may face targeted harassment, both online and within institutional settings. Indeed, some contributors in this special issue collectively critique the neoliberal university's failure to provide care, safety, and support for scholars engaging in politically and socially sensitive and social justice work.

Luc Cousineau, Amy Mack, and Ryan Hopkins examine the lived experiences of precarious and early-career academics, particularly those studying extremist movements. They highlight the lack of institutional protections for scholars facing harassment. The authors, drawing from their own experiences and broader scholarship, argue that universities often fail to protect or meaningfully support scholars at the margins, especially graduate students, post-doctoral fellows, and adjunct professors. The latter are the most vulnerable within the academic hierarchy and can be threatened or attacked because of their research topics. The paper demonstrates how precarious academics are doubly burdened: they are both exploited by neoliberal university systems (pressured to overwork and self-exploit for the hope of stable employment) and exposed to heightened risk and trauma due to the controversial nature of their research. The authors also stress that these risks are exacerbated for researchers with marginalized identities (e.g., women, racialized, LGBTQ+), who are more likely to become targets of coordinated campaigns of intimidation and violence. As the institutional reaction to such

hostility is often inadequate, scholars often rely on informal peer networks or their own coping strategies rather than robust, systemic support. The paper contributes to the discussions on academic freedom in the context of hierarchies of care within academic institutions. The authors argue that permanent, tenured faculty are more likely to receive support and protection, while precarious academics and students are left vulnerable. This hierarchy is perpetuated by neoliberal logics that prioritize productivity, metrics, and institutional reputation over genuine care for the well-being of all community members. The paper foregrounds the voices and experiences of precarious scholars, emphasizing the intersection of academic precarity, research subject matter, and institutional neglect. The paper calls for a reimagining of institutional responsibility, urging universities to move beyond symbolic measures and provide substantive, equitable, and socially just support for all scholars.

Practicing Care: Feminist Solidarities and Pedagogies of Repair

In response to pervasive antagonisms and institutional forms of neglect, some contributors examine the importance of collective strategies of resistance. They propose ways to build collective power and challenge exclusionary structures and social injustices by positioning solidarity as a key strategy for navigating contemporary academic and social challenges. Creating safe spaces within academia is another key response to hostility. Safe spaces allow scholars, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, to share experiences, seek mentorship, and develop strategies for resilience. Feminist collectives, interdisciplinary research groups, and faculty support networks offer vital platforms for discussing social justice issues and for building solidarity and mutual aid. These spaces not only provide emotional support but also encourage intellectual collaboration, with the latter enabling scholars to challenge systemic injustices and push back against hostile academic environments in constructive and collective ways.

Shana MacDonald and Kate Bradley center their discussion on their experience of responding to anti-feminist antagonism with feminist solidarity as a coalitional practice. They detail the various forms of antagonism faced by feminist scholars, including overt hostility (public discrediting, threats, hate speech) and more subtle forms (minimization, erasure, lack of recognition). The authors argue that in response to this increasing antagonism within academic environments, feminist scholars can build intentional, caring communities of practice. These communities provide “provisional solidarities” that sustain both individuals and collective activism as they can counter the isolating effects of misogyny, patriarchal structures, and neoliberal co-optation of feminist discourse. Drawing on their experiences with the Feminist Think Tank (FTT) at the University of Waterloo, the authors describe regular meetings that use consciousness-raising, consensus-building, and creative

research-creation practices to foster solidarity, support, and resilience among members facing microaggressions, discrediting, and even threats of violence. In this regard, the paper critiques the neoliberal co-optation of feminist solidarity into individualized and consumable forms. Solidarity, they argue, should be messy, direct, and resistant to neoliberal branding. Such solidarity should comprise collective care, resource sharing, and the transformation of difference into creative power. Ultimately, the paper provides practical guideposts and theoretical insights for sustaining feminist activism and research in the face of increasing antagonism within and beyond the academy. Through the example of FTT, the authors offer concrete practices for building feminist communities of practice that others can adapt.

Daphne Winland's contribution further expands the discussion by turning to pedagogy, proposing the university classroom as a vital site for "repair" in the face of conflict and polarization. Winland reimagines the classroom as a space for constructive debate, where students are exposed to diverse intellectual and experiential perspectives, encouraging critical engagement with contested concepts such as free speech and academic expression. Like Noonan, Winland also distinguishes academic freedom (which is subject to peer review, evidence, and scholarly norms) from free speech (the right to express even ignorant or false ideas). Yet, she expands on this distinction by discussing it in relation to her pedagogical practices in the classroom context. For Winland, this distinction is foundational for setting classroom norms and pedagogical practices that prioritize critical, evidence-based engagement over unregulated expression. The author shares classroom exercises and approaches for teaching difficult topics such as nationalism, populism, and conspiracy theories to foster critical thinking and constructive debate as well as going beyond condemnation. Winland also explores the concept and practice of "repair" in university settings, particularly in the context of political conflict, trauma, and threats to academic freedom. In the paper, "repair" refers to practices and frameworks that aim to restore and reconstitute relationships, institutions, and communities affected by conflict, trauma, or social injustices. The author argues that academic spaces, despite increasing polarization and surveillance, remain crucial sites for fostering dialogue, critical thinking, and the ethics of repair. The author offers the university classroom as one of the few remaining spaces where repair can be taught, modeled, and enacted through dialogue, debate, and mutual listening, even amid fractious external and internal pressures. The paper provides concrete strategies for fostering repair and critical engagement in the classroom; it emphasizes the important role of educators in modeling and facilitating these processes.

Brave Spaces, Lateral Kindness: Rethinking Power in the Academy

This special issue concludes with reflective dispatches from Arig Al-Shaibah and Douglas Gosse who advocate for trust-building initiatives and institutional

reforms that align with universities' stated commitments to equity and inclusion. Trust-building is also essential in navigating power imbalances and issues of social injustices between senior and junior faculty, and in preventing toxic workplace cultures that discourage open inquiry and collaboration.

Arig Al-Shaibah delves into the complex dynamics of intergroup distrust, particularly among racialized senior equity leaders who must navigate tensions between institutional obligations and community affiliations, often facing scrutiny from both sides. This author centers their analysis on the persistence of subtle, often unconscious, racial and other biases that foster miscommunication and distrust between groups. The dispatch discusses the complex "insider-outsider" status of senior equity leaders, who are often racialized or otherwise minoritized and overrepresented in Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) roles but underrepresented in broader senior administration. These leaders face distrust both from senior administrative colleagues (who may see them as too closely aligned with marginalized groups) and from marginalized communities (who may see them as too close to institutional power). This dual distrust complicates their ability to lead effectively and advance systemic change. A key argument is that universities rely too heavily on compliance-based, legislative, and policy interventions to address bias and discrimination. Instead, Al-Shaibah advocates for greater use of educational and dialogic tools (such as structured dialogue and intergroup competency training) to build trust, prevent bias-motivated behaviors, and foster more constructive engagement across differences. The author calls for an integrated approach that combines an "ethic of justice" (procedural fairness and integrity) with an "ethic of care" (relational empathy and humility). This approach, the author argues, is necessary to create "brave spaces" that protect rights and freedoms while ensuring psychological safety for all members of the university community. This dispatch advances moving beyond adversarial or compliance-based approaches; it emphasizes the need for skill-building in dialogue and intergroup relations, and ethically integrated approaches to building trust and advancing EDI.

Douglas Gosse widens the scope by exploring how power-seeking behaviors, institutional hierarchies, and bullying cultures within universities exacerbate these divisions, affecting both marginalized and conscientious scholars alike. Drawing on his roles as a research centre founder, chair, and associate dean, Gosse offers a personal and critical examination of leadership experiences within Canadian higher education. The author argues that academia often mirrors broader societal issues of manipulation, self-interest, and power-seeking. Bullying in academia is often covert, including silencing, gossip, character assassination, and exclusion from opportunities, which can derail careers and perpetuate inequities and social injustices. The author describes the culture of academia as highly competitive and punishing, with pressure to conform, avoid conflict, and endure silencing, especially for junior and untenured faculty. This environment, the author advances, leads to burnout, stifles innovation, and discourages truth-telling or advocacy for social

justice. In such an environment, speaking up often carries professional and financial risks. Gosse advocates for a shift from competition to kindness, drawing on concepts like “lateral kindness” (borrowed from Indigenous frameworks) and “pastoral leadership,” which emphasizes empathy, patience, and empowerment. The author provides practical strategies for fostering inclusive and supportive environments, such as using cooperative learning and consensus-building in meetings, setting explicit behavioral expectations for civility and participation, modeling respectful disagreement and gratitude, and celebrating positive behaviors and contributions publicly. By sharing concrete methods for promoting kindness and collaboration, Gosse moves beyond critique to offer actionable solutions, such as lateral kindness practices and the importance of equity-focused conversations.

Conclusion

By weaving together critical analysis and practical interventions, this special issue highlights not only the social justice challenges of academia but also the possibilities of academia as a site of resistance, care, and transformative action. The contributors collectively argue for the urgent need to move beyond institutional inertia, to advocate for new models of solidarity, ethical engagement, and inclusive dialogue. In an increasingly polarized world, safeguarding academic freedom requires not only protecting scholars from external threats but also rethinking academic cultures to foster trust, transparency, and a commitment to a socially just environment. Ultimately, addressing hostility in academia requires a multi-faceted approach that can serve as a basis for strengthening equitable and inclusive engagements and initiatives within and beyond campus settings. Trust-building, creating safe spaces, and fostering community engagement can help to mitigate antagonisms and bolster academia’s core values of intellectual freedom, ethical responsibility, and collective progress.

We believe there is much value in drawing on the concepts and frameworks of the work of the contributors in this special issue, in attending to the work of scholars calling for the “new geopolitics of higher education” (Moscovitz & Sabzalieva, 2023, p. 149), and supporting the reframing of academic freedom as social responsibility to foster inclusive democratic societies (Darian-Smith, 2025). Educational institutions, non-profit groups, and community and social justice organizations can play a critical role in augmenting the connective relations between and across communities of learning. Such relations can address wider collective issues that focus on labour conditions, gender and sexuality concerns, ethnic and race matters, anti-science rhetoric, spaces of care and inclusion, and the growing democratic struggles many students, teachers, scholars, advocates, activists, and community-members are facing worldwide.

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