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The Academic Precariat: Understanding Life and Labour in the Neoliberal Academy

From the Political to the Personal: Precarity in Academia and the Precarious Academic

> '"BME academics are always under more scrutiny", Naomi tells me, "And then you have to prove yourself further if you're also a woman". One of the most common themes in [the fieldwork] is this idea of a persistent atmosphere of suspicion; if you're not the "expected body" in academia/university then you're constantly met with doubt and distrust. Participants tell me that they're always having to prove themselves, nothing is ever good enough, and you never fully 'belong'. It's made me think a lot about precarity and the multiple forms it comes in'
>
> – Extract, Sarah's fieldnotes, 2015[1]

Inequality continues to characterise academia, and scholarship on the 'neoliberal university' is plentiful, both in analysis (Ingleby 2021, Tight 2019, Dougherty and Natow 2019) and in the study of strategies to resist and redress problems of bureaucratisation, metricisation, and managerialism that neoliberal policies bring (del Cerro Santamaría 2019, Maisuria and Cole 2018, Giroux 2010). Thus far, the focus has been on documenting and describing programmes of casualisation (e.g., the rise of zero-hours contracts). These issues remain vital in universities across the world and, therefore, to all disciplines of study that go on at universities as well as higher education globally. In the UK context, furthermore, the issue of academic precarity has become intertwined with an ongoing economic crisis that has continued since 2008, an ongoing era of neoliberal-inspired economics including austerity regimes, and a wave of contention that has included several waves of strike action by staff at Universities, not to mention student occupations and other forms of organized industrial and political action. Although attention has long been paid to the increasing bureaucratisation and neoliberalisation of the university, it is only relatively recently, and alongside a wider political movement against economic austerity, that the concept of 'precarity' took firm hold in the discussion. Nevertheless, the concept remains largely the preserve of conversations about employment and work.

In this Special Issue we draw attention to a more holistic interpretation and analysis of academic precarity. We focus on the ways precarity is felt and experienced in working life, and also how the condition of precarity shapes academic spaces and modes of knowledge production. We explore the affective push and pull of precarity, and the significance of precarity in comprehending academic (social) relations – including departmental communities, authorship collaborations, and unions. Finally, we explore what a focus on care in the academic context can bring to the problem of precarity. We consider how centring care in the workplace can reframe and elucidate the multiple intersecting ways precarity is experienced in academia, as well as its long-term effects.

What we seek to accomplish in this special issue is threefold:

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[1] This ethnography is drawn from Sarah's long-term fieldwork with academics working in Sociology departments in the UK. The ESRC-funded research investigated the relationship between writing practices and cultures and the production of legitimate knowledge and power within sociology. Sarah spent a year meeting regularly with participants, discussing writing, works in progress, co-author relationships and – especially relevant here – working conditions in academia, inequalities of the sector, and the distribution and use of power in academia. The participants were positioned across career stages and the life course, and include heads of department, professors, fixed-term early career scholars, academics who edit journals, emeritus staff, and junior academics in their first permanent post.

i)   to question the ongoing usefulness of terms such as 'neoliberal university' and 'precarity' – what specificity do these now hold, and what is their future?

ii)   to comprehend the effects of precarity, neoliberalism, and casualisation beyond issues of workload, pay, and job (in)security – how does precarity shape the role of the contemporary academic as an intellectual or expert, how does precarity affect the ways knowledge is produced, legitimised and engaged with?

iii)   how can we understand precarity and neoliberalism in ways which are both more specific and intersectional but also speak more clearly to the affective and social experience of living with/in precarity?

Within this special issue we present a range of papers which respond to these questions across diverse contexts, experiences, and geographies. The reflections and arguments within these papers directly take up our central aim in this Special Issue to bring sharper focus to the numerous conversations about precarity which proliferate the neoliberal academy, whilst also seeking to comprehend that too-common phrase with greater specificity and nuance.

(Re)framing Precarity: Seeking Conceptual Security

Following the growth of the gig economy, zero-hours contracts, and rising levels of long-term job insecurity, increased attention has been paid to the concept of precarity (Brook, 2015) both within academia (Rao et al, 2021; Vatansever, 2020; Perez and Montoya, 2018) and in the wider labour market and social sphere (Belfiore, 2021; Lizar and Sanchez, 2019; Standing, 2014). In the academic/university-as-workplace context, scholarship largely coheres around three key problems of precarity: its normalisation within academia (Schwaller, 2019); its connection to neoliberal policies and ideals within the university (Rogler, 2019; Burton, 2021); and the effects of precarity and casualisation on the careers of academics (Courtois and O'Keefe, 2015), especially those at the early career stage (Loveday, 2018) or coming from a working-class background (Warnock, 2016). Gradually developing from these conversations is both a renewed interest in locating and tightening the definitional parameters of 'precarity' as a concept (Millar, 2017; Neilson and Rossiter, 2008) as well as growing consideration of precarity as a state of being, and the affective experience of being precarious or living with precarity (McCormack and Salmenniemi, 2016; Veldstra, 2020). The significance of the 'affective relational dimension' of precarity is noted by Ivancheva et al who contend that 'A risk to the security of one's care and love relations is as real as a threat to one's wage relations, and equally serious in its consequences' (Ivancheva et al, 2019: 450). Sitting alongside the disruption to one's connection to love and care are the ways precarity can interrupt a coherent sense of self. Thorkelson writes of the dissonance between the privileged or elite academic and a precarious underclass, commenting that 'those who, through their educational capital, career opportunities, and access to aspirational belonging in a "guild" or profession, are actual or potential university faculty' (Thorkelson, 2016: 483) were often reluctant to describe themselves as precarious because of the cognitive dissonance involved.

Our analytic aim is to move the discussion of precarity from one centred on employment practices, institutional decisions, and career progression to a more holistic perspective on precarity as both a set of structures which (re)produce inequalities but also as a pervasive and dominating culture or atmosphere. The recognition of the existence and interplay of these facets of precarity is vital to comprehending the ways it works within the academic workplace and higher education. The Great British Class Survey (2015) introduced a 'new' social category/class, 'the precariat', defined as 'economically the poorest class' (Savage et al, 2013: 243) but also lacking in either 'highbrow' or 'emerging' cultural capital (243). Their use of the term 'precariat' chimes with Guy Standing's (2011) scholarship wherein he this asserts this group are 'defined by unstable labor arrangements, lack of identity, and erosion of rights' (Standing, 2018: np). These interpretations of precarity and 'the

precariat' certainly speak to some aspects of casualisation and precarity within academia and the university workplace – not least the instability of both employment and professional or occupational identity. However, they insufficiently describe or analyse the messy dualities through which precarious academics experience their professional identity and workplace, and the contradictions of self which follow. Kathleen Millar points to how 'today's constant invoking of the term precarity might say less about the novelty of this condition than it does about hegemonic concerns over security and the attachment to privileges once held by certain populations' (Millar, 2017: 7). Certainly, these difficult ambiguities – the ways in which one can concurrently be, or vacillate around being, stable and marginal, central and peripheral – resist easy definition within the current schema of structural academic hierarchies or an academic 'class system'. As such, it is necessary to reaffirm what we mean when we talk about 'precarity' and, equally, to pay close(r) attention to the lived experiences, emotional bearings, and psychic injuries of precarious working conditions.

Discussions of precarity frequently pivot upon, and intersect with, critiques and condemnations of neoliberalism and the managerial university (Shore, 2008; Schwaller, 2019; Touhouliotis, 2018; Pérez and Montoya, 2018). Whilst we, as editors, acknowledge the clear relationship between neoliberal ideology in the university and the preponderance of ever-more casualised working conditions, we also use this special issue to open conversation as to what precisely we mean when we use these terms and to what extent the maladies of the contemporary university are predicated solely upon the neoliberal turn. For instance, the individualist culture within academia arguably owes as much to conceptions and histories of 'the intellectual' as a hero lone scholar as it does to neoliberalism's hyper-focus on the individual and the academic bent towards ruthless competition was already being satirised in the in 1950s by authors such as Kingsley Amis (*Lucky Jim*, 1954) and Mary McCarthy (*The Groves of Academe*, 1952). The phrase 'neoliberal university' has become such a prolific and commonplace term – often casually employed to mean 'things I don't like' (Burton, 2021) - that it risks losing its specificity. The contributions of this special issue are a moment in (re)turning towards a sharper focus on neoliberalism which then enables a more thorough, representative, and holistic examination of the multiplicities of precarity.

Precarity, too is a concept remarkably broad in its base. Yet – as already noted – analyses of the phenomenon in the academic context are more often confined to the idea of a fractionally and temporarily-employed academic worker who moves from one unstable job to the next and, connectedly, the presence of a type of academic work which is itself casualised and afforded less value within the university. Within this context precarity and casualisation are primarily practical problems of the workplace and the symptom of neoliberal employment practices. In conceptualising and making this special issue we follow the lead of Kınıkoğlu and Can (2021) who note how they 'approach precarity in academia as a heterogenous phenomenon' (2020: 4). Indeed, Kınıkoğlu and Can (2021) argue that different forms of precarity have a hierarchy in and of themselves – a theme picked up on by scholars such as Peacock (2016) who notes the significance of traditional intellectual hierarchies over neoliberal values in the ubiquity of temporary contracts and Vatansever and Köleman (2020) who discuss precarity in terms of 'exile' and 'margins'. Given Millar's identification that 'how precarity is defined is not only an analytical but also a political question' (Millar, 2017: 2) we suggest that 'precarity' now needs to be fleshed out as more than the state of being on a temporary or casual contract. A key aim of this Special Issue is in describing and conceiving of precarity beyond its common understanding as a technical condition of employment status. We argue, instead, for a richer comprehension of precarity as a social and cultural 'condition of being' which shapes academics' selfhood, relations within the academy, disciplinary mores, and paradigms of value and legitimacy in knowledge making and knowledge claims. The political core of precarity is important in recognising the relationship between 'feeling precarious' as an academic and experiencing other forms of social inequality such as gender (Ivancheva et al, 2019), race (Arday and Mirza, 2018), social class (Reay, 2009) and disability (Burke and Byrne, 2020). Therefore, rather than understanding precarity as the preserve of those on insecure employment contracts, we suggest drawing sustained links between precarity as 'contract type' and precarity as stemming from wider social inequalities. Both forms are cut across with experiences of the academy as 'care-less' (Lynch, 2010), hostile, and a sense of unbelonging (Burton, 2021; Breeze, 2018).

This approach makes the ambiguities of precarity visible - in particular the ways one can concomitantly straddle both a 'powerful' centre and 'powerless' periphery. Writing about homeless youth in London, Emma Jackson coins the phrase 'fixed in mobility' (2015) to describe a situation in which one finds oneself stuck in a cycle of constant moves and changes, both physical and psychic. It is to this form of paradox we turn when seeking more secure conceptual grounding for analyses of the 'academic precariat': to what extent is precarity an 'in/out' situation? In what ways might precarity usefully illuminate and theorise broader experiences within the academy rather than simply those on the 'bottom rung'? And to what degree is precarity an always ongoing situation – even with the arrival of the much-wanted 'permanent' job, is it possible to move emotionally outside of precarious living? Moreover, how might we better know the overarching or broader relationships of power within academia and the university through a more vivid, detailed, and nuanced focus on precarity? What we offer in this special issue is an intersectional methodology for precarity such as this opens comprehension of precarity as both a lifestyle of, and perennial mood within, the academy.

A 'care-less' academy: marginality, precarity, and an ethics of care

Central to our motivation as editors is a desire to foreground issues of care, kindness, and solidarity within the range of discussions of precarity. To what extent is there room for 'care' within the neoliberal academy and how might we then frame anti-casualisation and anti-inequality conversations through an ethics or paradigm of care? Moreover, what might be the unintended harmful consequences of this – who does the work of care in university or academic spaces, and to what degree is this labour valued or rewarded? The violence of neoliberal audit culture, metricisation, and managerialism is frequently analysed; Rosalind Gill, for instance, writes of 'the envy, the rage, the nastiness, the bullying, the bad behaviour, the competitiveness, the mean-spiritedness, the colleagues who dump on others' (Gill, 2018: 10) and makes a plea to 'turn down the heat' (Gill, 2009: 222) of the neoliberal kitchen. But, when 'audit culture is a culture of boasting' (Billig, 2013: 24) and 'there are good economic reasons not to be modest' (Billig, 2013: 24) where might we find qualities of generosity, love, care, warmth, and joy in the contemporary university – and how might a turn towards the importance of these reshape the ways we talk about, and experience, precarity?

There has recently been a focus on ideas of 'academic kindness' (Burton, 2021) and how this practice may facilitate the (re)introduction of caring practices and spaces to academic relationships. Arguably, though, the concept of 'academic kindness' does not originate in an abundance of generous and thoughtful acts or legion examples of caring relationships, but rather in the strongly evidenced assertion that academic spaces are characterized by unequal power relations, bullying, toxicity, and egocentric selfishness. In the UK context, a recent University and College Union (UCU) report by Nicola Rollock (2019) presented evidence that black women academics face systemic racism and bullying throughout their careers. The 1752 Group – a research and lobbying organisation focused on sexual misconduct in higher education – have undertaken work which shows UK academia has a serious sexual harassment and sexual violence problem, including an increased in universities using non-disclosure agreements to manage and silence both staff and students who report sexual harassment (Weale and Batty, 2016). The environment is equally toxic in relation to social class: research demonstrates that working-class students and staff are continually made to feel out of place or unwelcome within university spaces and cultures (Hoskins, 2010; Reay et al, 2009; Reay, 2017;). It is vital to understand these experiences of carelessness and violence as part of the 'academic precariat' in that such oppressive actions and atmospheres continually push certain scholars (women, people of colour, disabled and working-class people) to the margins of academia, both professionally and intellectually. It is necessary, then, to comprehend precarity as part of the wider power relations within the university and academia and in doing so this special issue is primarily concerned with the relationships between the personal, professional, intimate, and bureaucratic. Indeed, as Vatansever and Kölemen assert 'as a precarious academic you are pretty much faced with all those aspects of precarity that are essentially hostile to decent human life' (Vatansever and Kölemen, 2020: 7). With that in mind, we explore how greater legitimisation of personhood, compassion, and humanity within

(neoliberal) academic spaces may shed light on the potential communitarian and non-hierarchical power relations needed to resist and reform precariousness in academia.

This orientation to the human and the personal in an analysis of precarity is key to comprehending often-noted feelings of displacement, marginality, and alienation across experiences of contract type, institutional racism, sexism, ableism and classism, and the intellectual inequalities of making and legitimating knowledge. Critiques have long been made of a proliferation of neoliberal ideals and metrics which makes itself felt in a 'disciplinary hierarchy' (Santos, 2014: 24) where some forms of knowledge are seen as more valuable, authoritative, and worthwhile than others. Unsurprisingly, these hierarchies map on to already-present forms of inequality and marginalisation: the hierarchy has been noted to exclude feminism (Hemmings, 2011; Meagher, 2012), gender and queer studies (Santos, 2014); race, ethnicity, and non-Western philosophies (Bhambra, 2014); and working-class scholars, especially women (Hoskins, 2010). As Santos lays out, 'when it comes to finding a seat at the already-established table, the number of places is restrictive, selective, and highly-precarious' (2014: 17). Often, these exclusions and forms of carelessness are understated – what Nirmal Puwar calls 'the look' (2004: 8), a subtle act indicating that you are not the 'somatic norm' of academia and are therefore peripheral, unfitting, and even unwelcome. Furthermore, as Katherine Sang's research shows, it is also possible to be marginalised and precarious within 'marginal' communities, with Sang arguing that 'ethnic minority women academics feel marginalised as women in the Academy, and further marginalised as black academics within academic feminism' (2018: 199). Underscoring the significance of the personal and the human within these professional and institutional inequalities is the role of precariousness in eliciting academics' complicity in maintaining an unequal power distribution. Sara Ahmed's formative work on happiness as affect allows us to conceptualise precarity both as a tool of the oppressor and as a motor of compliance. Ahmed argues that an orientation towards 'happiness' is a social expectation and that we all bear the 'duty' of being or approximating happiness, 'passing as happy – in order to keep things in the right place' (Ahmed, 2010; 59). Affects and atmospheres of precarity can therefore be understood as a cause of unhappiness, where drawing attention to one's own or another's marginality or precarity is a disruption of 'the good mood'. Equally, in the context of Billig's assertion that it makes professional good sense for academics to 'proclaim their achievements vigorously' (2013: 13) it arguably does not make good professional sense to continually articulate one's exclusion – both because a not insignificant level of academic credibility rests on fitting with elite values, but also because it vocally and visibly sets you apart from the institutions of academia. As Ahmed asserts:

> It is not just that feelings are "in tension" but that the tension is located somewhere: in being felt by some bodies, it is attributed as caused by another body, who thus comes to be felt as apart from the group, as getting in the way of its organic enjoyment and solidarity (2010: 67).

To draw attention to precarity, especially one's own, is to highlight a problem and work against the 'duty' of upholding the happy mood. Precarious academics of all stripes are encouraged into silence through fear of their precarity being weaponised against them in an institutional sleight of hand whereby the person who recognises or draws attention to the problem is then refigured as the locus of the problem itself and attention is pulled away from the identified inequality or injustice. As the practical and affective foundation of the problem, expelling the one who draws attention to the problem means expelling the problem.

Exploring Spaces of Academic Labour and Precarious Living: From Concept to Praxis

The corridors, offices, and doorways of the university present complicated and fraught terrain for precarious scholars. These spaces exist as sites of promise and optimism – offering the hope of a career in academia where the training provided by our doctoral research comes to fruition – but also of potential failure, where competition, cruelty, and betrayal are customary, and resources are scarce. Precarious and established scholars navigate a workplace where expressions such as 'publish or perish' are unexceptional and – moreover – where allowing some of us to perish is an acceptable

outcome from an institutional perspective (Gill, 2018; Billig, 2013). This discomforting atmosphere is underscored by the necessity of establishing 'productive' relationships with fellow academics. Whilst academia and intellectual labour has conventionally been understood as a solitary occupation – the lone scholar toiling through the night on their manuscript, the fetishization of the single-authored book, the solo figure at the pulpit presenting a keynote lecture – in reality, networks and connections are essential in supporting scholars to establish their research, to publish, and to win coveted external research council funding. For precarious and casualised scholars these relationships take on even greater consequence, being imperative to surviving the hardships of heavy workloads and low pay, and in navigating uncertain and unpredictable futures. Accordingly, in this Special Issue we are especially concerned with academic labour and spaces as sites of aggression – spaces that are deliberately unwelcoming, where moods of severity and insensitivity pervade, and boundary-making and enforcing is paramount. Significantly, the articles which comprise this Special Issue directly speak to academics' candid acceptance of such aggressive tendencies and the managerial and institutional celebration of this hostility as a mechanism by which to ensure that only 'the best' may endure and prosper.

In conceptualising and producing this Special Issue we, as editors, were keen to pay particular attention to ideas of status, boundaries, and gatekeeping – not only as regards a classic 'inside/outside' bifurcation, but in the more ambiguous and elusive ways in which academics and academic spaces may be both power*ful* and power*less*. What does it feel like, for instance, to be on the periphery of academic power but kept at arms' length - an 'outsider' within the structure, as Oliver and Morris (2022) write in this issue? Relatedly, as editors, we undertook this labour in the context of varying forms of precarity and privilege ourselves and found it necessary to return to reflections on these both as regards our relationships with authors but also – importantly – with each other. For us, this special issue responds to a growing sense in the academy that a "call to do better is a call for systemic change" (Crawford and Windsor 2021: 3), and that 'kindness as a radical act is not just "being nice" to one another; it is the core of articulating, recognising, and valuing the complexity and beauty of the human condition, and putting this into practice in order to dismantle harmful systems of oppression and subjugation' (Burton and Turbine, 2019). Those harmful systems are sometimes clearly delineated but often not: precarity, oppression and subjugation occur through formal and informal hierarchies and networks that may be overt or covert. The opportunity to share, support and uphold diverse and complex experiences of precarity is the first step not just to do better and to 'be nice', but to articulate a vision for the kind of wholesale systemic change argued for by Crawford and Windsor (2021).

Across the eight articles in this special issue, the authors conceptualize and explore precarity in a variety of ways and in different contexts. The research findings herein strengthen current calls to action on precarity. Most specifically, they make the case for regenerative relationships between academics, their employers, and each other – such that can (re)build transparency and accountability and improve working practices and spaces across the sector. The articles demonstrate higher education facing a challenge across its labour force, but especially from academics who are, or have been working on precarious contracts, and who are marginalized in other ways including gendered, racialized and classed inequalities – which are often reflected in pay and conditions. But, this challenge to the academy is a positive one and oriented constructively: the insistent demand from each of these articles is the importance of being open to change – the hope which resides in transforming the structures, practices, and assumptions which condemn the academic precariat to insecurity and exploitation – 'fixed in mobility' as Jackson says (2015), but going nowhere. The constructive criticism in this special issue is grounded, across the articles presented here, in values of transparency, fairness, equality, democratic practice, collaboration and inclusion. In other words, while the research in this special issue speaks clearly to the struggles and hardship faced by many academics, the findings are oriented towards making progress. As editors, we hope that this issue will support our industry as we reach for justice, equality and improvement in the academy.

In Arday's study, '"More to prove and more to lose"– Race, Racism and Precarious Employment in Higher Education', he undertakes a thematic analysis of in-depth qualitative data with eighteen

academic staff in the UK, supported by the theoretical framework of Critical Race Theory (CRT), and places these into a broader context in the UK especially, with implications internationally. The research investigates the impact of the "gig economy" and precarious employment in higher education and especially on how uncertain, non-standard employment impacts staff of colour.Arday explores how job precarity coincides with wider systemic racism in the exploitation, and dehumanisation, of people including academic staff in higher education. The fieldwork Arday brings together with surveys, interviews and focus groups provides a complex and compelling methodology. Arday's analysis argues for institutional reform and policy change that can support those most impacted by precarious contracts and, in so doing, will strengthen academic institutions and improve research, teaching and productivity. The extent, and deleterious impact, of precarious employment, the article argues, should be considered a failure of higher education as an industry. Based on the research, the article contends that universities should consider the abolition of precarious employment or, at least, to reform practices and processes around precarious employment that establish it as an exceptional and intrinsically problematic way to employ staff.

Precarious employment is further challenged by Spina, Smithers, Harris, and Mewburn, in their article, 'Back to Zero? Precarious employment in academia amongst 'older' early career researchers, a life-course approach'. They explain h the metaphor of an academic 'pipeline' from PhD, through the early career researcher (ECR) stage to professorship is false, not least because academic careers have multiple entry and exit points. Using a life-course approach, the authors illuminate how hegemonic discursive frames of what constitutes an academic career serve to marginalize those in precarious employment. The article employs a thematic analysis approach to interviews with nineteen precariously employed academics in Australia. The findings indicate many challenging truths for academics and for higher education as an industry, including the identification of the trap by which, for many, having a PhD can be an impediment to careers outside of the academy, but equally that many precarious academics are continually pushed out of considering themselves as academics or progressing an academic career. Among precarious academics, the article also draws attention to a general assumption that precarious contracts are a 'stepping stone' in an academic's early career. They explain how many find themselves in the precariat for the long term, and others find work in precarious employment at later stages in their life course. The findings challenge assumption in higher education about the role precarious contracts play in the industry. The article advises that researchers and employers must pay renewed attention to understanding how academic employment functions, and the form that precarious employment takes in actuality, rather than in the assumptions and familiar discourses about academic careers.

Kerr's contribution, 'Career development or career delay? Postdoctoral fellowships and the de-professionalizing of academic work in South African Universities' underscores the necessity of being wary regarding simplistic notions of an 'academic pipeline' or career progression. Internationally, and in national contexts, Kerr argues that the academy is 'deprofessionalizing' roles in higher education, in particular the teaching, research, and associated work of scholars who have recently received doctorates. As Kerr argues, the deprofessionalization of academic work is frequently presented and legitimized by using a language of professional development for early career researchers. In this study, which coheres around a textual analysis of university websites in South Africa, Kerr examines the ways in which the language of the academy can reforge postdoctoral fellowships so that they are not roles of employment in the university but, rather, are presented as opportunities for career development and (precarious) transition to future employment. The ironic twist, as the findings of this article indicate, is that the promise of employment in the future effectively enables postdoctoral researchers to be taken *out* of employment. Kerr, furthermore, places the linguistic practices of deprofessionalization into a broader context, including changes to funding structures that include the retreat of the state as a research funder, the auditing of racial transformation in South Africa, and income tax rules that do not apply to postdoctoral fellows given that their particular role in the institution does not afford them the status of employee. Kerr explains the damaging effect of deprofessionalization in the academy, an issue that is clearly relevant in South Africa, and has broader implications for academia in an international context.

Page's article, 'Sexual misconduct in UK higher education and the precarity of institutional knowledge' presents an epistemological study of the widely publicized sexual misconduct case against Kevin O'Gorman, who was convicted on charges related to the sexual assault of male students in 2019. The study examines the nature of knowledge, and the role knowledge plays, in academic and neoliberal cultures of precarity. Page explores the relationship, in sexual misconduct cases, between institutional knowledge (and institutional surprise), culpability, and institutional action (or lack thereof). The analysis presents a critique of the ways in which institutional responses to sexual misconduct acknowledge the precarity and vulnerability of (in this case) students, but do not necessarily result in care or protection for those students. On the contrary, as the article notes, institutional mechanisms for responding to sexual violence are rarely undertaken by staff who are trained or even knowledgeable about the issues at hand. Furthermore, the individuals and institutional bodies that make decisions are situated in complex epistemological conditions of wilful and strategic ignorance. Ignorance, this research finds, encloses sexual violence within strictly bounded epistemological limits defined by institutional risk and reputational damage. Knowledge, the research finds, should instead be at the centre of institutional plans, structures, and responses to sexual violence: specifically, the knowledge of sexual misconduct and its harms, and the ways that students are made precarious and vulnerable in institutions where sexual misconduct continues to occur.

Risk and institutional strategies for managing it are examined by Myers in his article, 'Racism, zero-hours contracts and complicity in Higher Education'. Myers's study of zero-hours contracts in the UK, on which cademics from black and other minority ethnic backgrounds are disproportionately likely to be employed, explores how racism is a feature of academic strategies for managing risk. The study shows how participants tended to perceive that injustice in the academy was created and maintained by individuals, and collective groups of individuals, who were specifically *not* university policy-makers in senior management. In other words, while Myers identifies a tendency in wider research to blame precarity and its "detrimental impacts" on a nebulous class of senior managers, the empirical data in this study indicate that at an individual and departmental level in universities, persistent individual and collective racist behaviours maintain a status quo in which white groups maintain dominance. The article examines the experiences of academics who face racism in their everyday working conditions and in the words, actions, workloading practices, and hiring practices of their universities. The article examines the extent to which white individuals and collectives in academia respond to precarity by protecting white interests. Furthermore, the study points out that it is relatively easy to condemn institutional racism at universities but harder, for many, to recognize "an inconvenient truth that universities are quite likely therefore to be full of individuals who are themselves racists", as well as full of collectives of white individuals who are complicit in racism.

The focus on the everyday complicity of academics in creating precarious conditions and lives is taken up by Oliver and Morris in their contribution, 'Resisting the "academic circle jerk": Precarity and friendship at academic conferences in UK Higher Education'. In this complex qualitative study that enmeshes interviews with auto-ethnography, Oliver and Morris study inequality in academia through a focus on academic conferences. They conceptualise the academic conference as a realm of powerful networks where those with power, and who are able to move into and among networks of power, feel comfortable; while being on the other hand, a hostile environment for "precarious and excluded scholars". Oliver and Morris identify that academic conferences host two kinds of professional networks. These are, firstly, the networking of powerful, established, and secure (or tenured) academics; and secondly, the networking of precarious and excluded academics who experience academic conferences as both a place to perform "academic entrepreneurship" (Mountford 2014) and a place from which they are deliberately pushed out. The authors use their data to explore the ways in which "elitist networks of citation and collaboration", which are to a great extent developed at conferences, embed precarity. The authors develop a series of detailed critiques of academic conferences ranging from practical issues of access to conferences to the concept of neoliberal universities as bodies that suppress the capacity to create inclusive spaces (Phipps 2017: 357). They explore the ways in which conferences serve to delimit and entrench the divisions between academic insiders and outsiders. The study develops as its key argument a conceptual and practical demand for

friendship as a political act that can undermine power relationships and build trust in academic conferences.

Connected forms of care and care-giving is centre stage in Villar-Aguilés and Obiol-Francés' article, 'Academic Career, Gender and Neoliberal University in Spain: The silent precariousness between publishing and care-giving'. The authors argue that an increase in the number of women at universities as staff and as students has not uprooted gender inequality in academia. Villar-Aguilés and Obiol-Francés use their case study in Spain to explore how neoliberal inspired policies at universities discriminate against women because they overlook the burden of care-giving, the labour of which is taken up disproportionately by women. The authors critique the academy as "androcentric" (Nuño and Álvarez 2017) and systemically averse to recognizing, let alone responding to, the care needs and care work done by staff members. The authors' detailed explanation of a neoliberal turn in academia across the world develops a clear and concise critical framework on systemic sexism in the university system, despite the insistence of universities that formal equality has been achieved. Crucially, the authors identify the importance of informal relationships and masculinized power networks to career progression and analyze how these profoundly favour men in their career trajectories whilst excluding women. Villar-Aguilés and Obiol-Francés also call attention to what they call the "excellence hegemonic frame" that establishes and reinforces a hierarchical, rather that equitable, relationship in academia and, furthermore, which entrenches divisions between research and teaching that "perpetuate gendered inequalities" (Burke 2021). The mixed, qualitative and quantitative analysis of the study provides an empirical base for the authors' claims that a new model of science itself is "urgently needed" – one which better reflects academics' needs - as well as evidencing their call for a democratisation of academic life including a fairer sharing of care work inside, and external to, the academy.

In "'Academic Brexodus': Brexit and the dynamics of mobility and immobility among the precarious research workforce", authors Aline Courtois and Marie Sautier use the Brexit process – that is, the exit of the UK from EU membership – as the historical context for a qualitative study of precarious academics in the UK and Switzerland. By studying academic precarity during a moment of political, economic, and social instability, Courtois and Sautier employ a concept of probationary citizenship and non-citizenship (Le Feuvre, Bataille and Sautier 2020, O'Keefe and Courtois 2019) to explore the precarity of migrants on the one hand, and the simultaneous and intersecting experiences of academic who are "excluded from full academic membership" by precarious working conditions. Courtois and Sautier's critique of the framing that mobility is natural – or even a perk of precarity – for early career academics also provides keen analysis of the ways fragile employment and vulnerabilities to changes in legal status put precarious academics in a form of probationary academic citizenship. The interviews with academics portray working conditions in which academics who are precarious must navigate hidden hierarchies of power, centrality, and periphery. Courtois and Sautier also offer an important empirical study of the emerging effects of Brexit on the academy, and not least on the shrinking of "already scarce prospects" in the UK, and the fracturing of "internationalised academic spaces" in the UK along "ethno-national and contractual lines". Courtois and Sautier conclude that, accordingly, precarity produces a continuum of vulnerability that coincides with race, national origin, and geographic mobility.

Moving (out of) Precarity: Where do We Go From Here?

The articles in this special issue demonstrate precarity as a splintered, contradictory, frustrating experience, which is both concretely felt and ephemerally perceived. The ways precarity acts and works through the intricacies of institutional systems and personal relationships is complex – and it is this very complexity, and indeed, the 'unknowability' of these interwoven structures, politics, and social mores that produces vulnerability as part of the state of precarious living and working. Furthermore, not only are these relationships complex in the more recent neoliberal contexts in which they have arisen over the last two decades, but they are also bound up in enduring and persistent social and cultural inequalities of race, sex, gender, class, language, and nationality. The intersection of these forms of power, privilege, and oppression across the structural, the epistemological, the

bodily, and the mundane is what makes precarity, and experiences of it, more than a simple technicality of contract or employment status. Instead, they shape personhood, social relations, knowledge production, disciplinary legitimacy, and myriad life decisions and options outside of our lives within the academy.

The research and the articles in this special issue contribute something of a chronological approach to precarity, not just as something that the academy faces today, but as something rooted in histories of inequality and exploitation. Ye and which continues to move, change and develop with the times. As Spina, et al., point out, precarity is narrated by the academy and by academic managers mostly as a temporary condition in the early career of academics. Kerr's research in South Africa depicts the same, and shows ways that precarity can be sold as a sort of triage approach to more or less linear academic transitions to permanent employment, life stability and research excellence. Precarity, according to these dominant narratives, is somewhere between a necessity and an opportunity, and a temporary status for early career academics as they establish themselves in research and teaching.

On the contrary, as all the articles of this issue explore, precarity re-establishes and reinforces enduring relationships of inequality and exploitation, not least the racialized inequalities that put, as Arday finds, a disproportionate and unfair number of scholars of colour into an academic equivalent of the 'gig economy'. Precarity provides an economic rationale to mask what Myers explains individual and shared complicity, namely among white academics, in racist employment practices. Similarly, Villar-Aguilés and Obiol-Francés explain and explore how precarity reinscribes the structural sexism in academic employment and perpetuate gendered equalities that privilege men and disadvantage women.

The articles of this issue offer a chronological approach to precarity that also, helpfully, explain how precarity is not merely a tendency to hire staff on certain types of contracts. The articles go further than just critiquing precarity. They define precarity as part of a wider academic practice of maintaining and exploiting inequalities in higher education. They undertake an analysis of how precarity, vulnerability, deprofessionalization and so forth exploit and entrench these historical inequalities. Individual academics can benefit from this exploitation, and so can institutions and individuals in management positions. Those who are already marginalized tend to be most clearly exploited. Precarity is a practice of exploiting inequalities and so precarity, as a practice, moves with the times, to exploit new opportunities. Courtois and Sautier, for instance, explain how academic precarity has shifted alongside new inequalities of belonging and citizenship as the UK has left the EU in the political process and period of change commonly known as Brexit. Page explored the adaptation of precarity to knowledge and ignorance during sexual misconduct cases. The articles in this collection also suggest precarity itself as a concept which is mobile and malleable – one which shifts according to historical and political context, geography, and ideology.

With this in mind, is precarity a term useful to continue using? What is the analytic bite of 'precarity' if its terms and conditions continually shift? How can we discuss exclusion, elitism, and oppression across systems, structures, concepts, values, and cultures in the academy in ways that are accessible and grounded but also mindful of the ways these are experienced as affects, moods, and feelings? To this end, we present this collection of articles, and the narrative they form, as a step towards this 'better', more human, academy. As editors, we encouraged authors in their incisive, thorough, and holistic studies of precarity in the academy and focused our roles on nurturing ideas and fostering a space conducive to writing and exploration. Notably, much of this special issue was written and produced during the height of the global Covid-19 pandemic, which itself hardened and sharpened states of precarity and casualisation in the academic labour market – as well as numerous others, of course. This is felt in the final articles which show not only intellectual courage and criticality but also speak to the complex experiences of precarious academics, the intertwining relationships between personal and work lives, the snatched moments of writing amid a frenetic move to online teaching, the delays, the stoppages, the (literal) acts of translation, and the ambivalence of 'success'. But, more than even this, they are testimonials to how undertaking academic labour with a focus on community,

sharing, and intellectual joyfulness supports us all, across all our multiple and divergent experiences of 'being precarious' or 'living precariously', in envisioning change, gathering knowledge and building collective power.

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