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## **Truth, Masculinity and the Anti-Elitist Backlash against the University in the Age of Trump**

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In the past few decades, political correctness – oh, what a terrible term – has transformed our institutions of higher education from ones that fostered spirited debate to a place of extreme censorship, where students are silenced for the smallest of things. You say a word somewhat differently, and all of a sudden you're criticised – sometimes viciously. We will end the political correctness and foster free and respectful dialogue (Donald Trump, campaign speech, reported in Morgan 2016)

The global rise of 'neo-populism' (Krämer 2014), including the election of the right-wing Republican candidate Donald Trump to the US presidency, has been accompanied by a notable backlash and resistance to what has been categorised as governing/dominating 'elites', including the perceived intellectual elites teaching and researching in HE academic institutions (Clarke and Newman 2017). As the quotation from Trump above indicates, right-wing discourses of 'resistance' to university elites are often framed as the encouragement of 'free speech' ('spirited debate') as opposed to a perceived climate of censorship on campus in the name of 'political correctness' (Phipps, 2017).

In this paper I examine some of the arguments put forward by proponents and detractors in these debates, utilising some examples from empirical data from a study of online student newspaper posts in 2016 and 2017 from campuses in the US and the UK. In doing so I will

be arguing that two aligned but distinct discourses – *‘Real World Anti-Elitist’* and the *‘Ivory Tower Rationalist’*, seem to underpin such positions, and that these discourses are highly - yet differently - gendered, classed and ‘raced’. I will finish by also briefly discussing an alternative discourse that I’ve labelled here as *‘Contextual Progressive’*, which underpins some of the key arguments in favour of practices labelled by detractors as ‘silencing’ free debate. Importantly for educators, these discourses are can be linked to distinct epistemological and ontological conceptions of the nature and purpose of academic knowledge, conceptions of ‘truth’ and ultimately the nature and purpose of the university itself.

### **Right-Wing Populism and the Anti-Elitist ‘Cultural Backlash’**

A resurgent wave of right-wing populism has been notable in many countries in the global North in recent years, seen clearly in events such as the Brexit referendum in the UK (Clarke and Newman 2017), and the victory of Donald Trump in the 2016 US Presidential elections. The Trump campaign, like other recent populist movements, has utilised explicitly nativist (i.e. favouring those born in, or otherwise seen as ‘native’ to a country, in preference to those deemed as migrating to it), racist and xenophobic discourses to gain support, alongside an explicit anti-establishment ethos that has sparked what the media describes as a ‘civil war’ within his own party (Siddiqi 2017).

One common argument is that this international wave of populist sentiment has been fuelled by the reaction of ‘working people’ who have felt ‘left behind’ by political and cultural elites. The elites are argued in turn to have ignored the decline in economic prosperity of the masses of ‘ordinary people’ as a result of forces such as deindustrialisation and globalisation (Elliott

2016; Pacewicz 2016). However, as Hustvedt (2017) notes, ‘the problem with this story of distraught labourers rising up against abusive, global, corporate power is not that it is wholly false, but rather that it is insufficient to explain the rise of Trump’ (62) and other recent forms of populist resurgence. She cites a working paper by Inglehart and Norris (2016) whose preliminary research finds two distinct arguments put forward for the rise in populist votes in 31 national elections across the globe – the aforementioned ‘economic insecurity’ thesis, and the ‘cultural backlash’ thesis, with the latter holding more evidence in its support. This cultural backlash is identified as a sense of fear and rage felt by those with historically privileged statuses in relation to ‘race’, gender, and sexuality who feel such advantages slipping away, indeed that, to use an oft-used cliché, the ‘pendulum has swung too far the other way’ and they are now victimised by identities that would once have secured privilege (Hustvedt 2016).

As the quotation at the beginning of the paper suggests, the radical right attack on political and cultural elites certainly includes the ‘intellectual elites’ on university grounds. It needs to be stressed that whilst there seems to be a specific resurgence of such views in the last few years, such discourses are not new but have a long-established origin – for example, as Tobolowsky and Reynolds (2017) recently reviewed, anti-intellectual critical representations of HE have been popularly made throughout the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries in fictional formats. Rigney (1991) notes that a central feature of anti-elitism is ‘a mistrust of claims to superior knowledge or wisdom on the part of an educated elite’ (441). Ironically in the context of the claims made by the right against the ‘censorship’ practices of students and academics, a strand of this anti-intellectualism involves a form of ‘anti-rationalism’: a resistance and refutation of challenges to the right’s beliefs by academically rigorous empirical enquiry and the intellectual ‘pursuit of truth’.

Clarke and Newman (2017) note the difficult symmetry between such resistance and academic left critiques of ‘depoliticised’ technocratic rationalism. They highlight the much-quoted response of UK Conservative politician Michael Gove (a ‘Leave’ campaigner in the Brexit referendum) to economists’ predictions of the dire consequences of a Leave outcome: ‘I think people in this country have had enough of experts’. These arguments reify the notion of ‘common sense’ ‘gut’ feeling over rationalist research, and they are often accompanied in many right populist quarters by a strand of criticism that refutes expert research and opinion by calling into question its objectivity. For example Nigel Farage, the then leader of the right wing populist UK Independence Party (UKIP), stated that many independent experts who argued that the UK should remain in the EU ‘were actually in the pay of the government or the EU’ and thus biased (Deacon, 2016).

Again this line of attack by the radical right echoes academic left critiques of the supposed ‘objectivity’ of academic research. For example, the ideals of dispassionate, neutral, ‘rational’ enquiry that are traditionally valued in the academy have long been identified and critiqued by feminists as masculinized (as well as highly classed and ‘racialised’) discourses (Hekman 1990). Such discourses, if unchallenged, can work to legitimate forms of knowledge that perpetuate and exacerbate existing forms of social and economic inequality, and have, amongst other consequences, long influenced our very conceptions of those who can be conceived as authentic ‘intellectuals’, those that have the ‘right’ to enter and succeed in academia (Burke 2012).

Nevertheless, as this paper goes on to explore, the anti-intellectual, anti-rational backlash against academic elites is not framed as a backlash against white masculinized ways of doing

or being – rather the language and framing devices utilized by populist anti-elitism often present these elites in explicitly *feminised* terms, as I will go on to outline below.

## **Methodology**

The data I will be drawing on has been collected as part of a wider ongoing project that is currently exploring representations of the ‘social world of the university’ through student-produced online newspapers in 31 countries across the globe, from January 2016 to September 2017 (for a fuller account of methodology see Read, forthcoming). This timeframe arose by my desire to be able to cover the output of a student paper throughout the course of an academic year, and the timeframe would therefore allow me to cover universities who organised their academic year in January and those who began in September/October.

In relation to the analysis, I utilised a combination of analytical approaches that complemented my own epistemological position (critical interpretivist) and theoretical perspective (a feminist poststructuralist perspective influenced in particular by Foucault (1977, 1979) and Butler (1997)). As a feminist academic at a UK university who identifies with ‘left’ progressive politics, I felt explicitly invested and positioned in the debates and clashes around ‘free speech’ that I had previously been aware of through social media and through discussions on my own campus, but that were given greater visibility and intensity to me through my research through the archives.

In order to explore these debates and the discourses that infuse them, I utilised the following complementary analytical approaches: firstly, a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis approach as adapted by Waitt (2005), who outlines some more explicit/practical ways in which to undertake a Foucauldian analysis than Foucault himself outlined. Finally, I was also guided

by a thematic analysis framework (Clarke and Braun, 2013) in order to organise and facilitate the comparison of emerging themes from the analysis.

Although I originally included all 31 newspapers in my analysis for this paper, it became clear that debates specifically around ‘free speech’, ‘safe spaces’ and ‘no platforming’ in the context of the rise of ‘Trumpism’ and the radical right, was an issue raised primarily by the authors of student newspapers I had analysed from the UK, Australia and – not surprisingly – the USA. Although there were highly important, impassioned debates around related concerns in papers in other countries – for example the Rhodes Must Fall movement in South Africa and the growth of the Fees Must Fall movement in the same country, and protests/debates in relation to the right-wing Hindu nationalism of the BJP in India – for reasons of space I have not focused on these here. Similarly, the need to narrow down the scope for this paper led me to decide on my primary focus around a single issue – the invitation of a controversial radical right speaker, Milo Yiannopoulos, to speak at the University of California, Berkeley in late 2016 - as covered in posts in *The Daily Californian*, the university’s student newspaper. The issue was chosen due to its prolific coverage in the paper - I initially isolated 265 relevant articles dealing with these themes in the time period of the research, with 74 specifically mentioning the Yiannopoulos event and its aftermath - hence allowing me to make some tentative analysis of discursive trends in discussion with a relatively specific focus.

I have in addition utilised material from the following student papers: *Branding Iron* (University of Wyoming, USA); *Spartan Echo* (Norfolk State University, Virginia, USA); *The Hilltop* (Howard University, Washington, D.C., USA); and *The Student* (University of Edinburgh, Scotland, UK). Due to the lower volume of posts on these issues in comparison

to the *Californian* I have not attempted to isolate trends or patterns in these papers but have used this material as extra examples relating to the trends found in the *Daily Californian* posts. For ease of reference, when citing the posts in text I have utilised an abbreviation of the university's name (rather than the lesser known newspaper title) followed by date of posting.

### **The 'Real-world-Anti-Elitist' discourse**

As discussed above, anti-intellectual discourses are not new, merely heightened in the last decade and given greater exposure and legitimacy by the election successes of individuals such as Trump, and are given new articulation in their targeting of increasingly popular 'resistant' practices on campus such as 'no platforming' and the call for 'safe spaces'. As I will go on to discuss, the 'Real World Anti-Elitist' and 'Ivory Tower Rationalist' discourses refute the right of students or staff to refuse a platform to speakers, or to designate any part of the campus as spaces that are off-limits to other students or staff. In particular, both discourses condemn what is seen as the excessive emotionality, sensitivity and weakness of proponents of such 'safety strategies', and both make recourse to the notion of 'free speech' to make the case that students have no right to protect themselves from the views or actions of others that they might find upsetting or dangerous to their wellbeing.

What distinguishes the line of thought I've labelled the 'Real World' discourse is an anti-elitism that seeks to position the 'pro-safety' students as a naïve, cocooned and 'mollycoddled' group whose past and present privilege has led them to feel entitled to protect themselves from views with which they disagree. Such forms of protection - seen in



explicitly feminised terms – are contrasted with the ‘real world’ into which students must eventually emerge, and for which they will be ill-equipped, for this ‘real world’ is a harsh, tough environment in which they will have to learn to have ‘thicker skin’ and be able themselves to fight and win over others. As O’Keefe (2016) notes in relation to attacks on the ‘safe space’ strategy in particular, “implied in much of this debate is a disdain for safe spaces as soft, emotive, over-protective, feminised spaces that do not reflect the hard, ‘real world’” (87).

Of the three discourses I outline in this paper, the ‘Real World’ discourse is definitely a minority discourse as presented in the pages of the *Daily Californian*, as could be expected for a majority left/progressive student readership. Instances of this position mainly arose in reports that aimed to present multiple viewpoints to a story, or seeking to present a ‘counterpoint’ to majority opinion. Nevertheless, repeated examples can be found – in the *Californian* and other student newspapers in the study - of the discursive use of language to position supporters of safe spaces/no platform strategies as over-emotional and weak in implicitly or explicitly feminised ways: some examples include ‘petulant’ and ‘juvenile’ (Wyoming May 04 16), ‘special snowflakes’ (Berkeley March 16 16); and even ‘hysterical loons’ (Berkeley April 10 17). As well as the gendered connotations of feminine ‘weakness’ implied in words such as ‘hysterical’ (King, 1993), some terms used are also explicitly homophobic, for example the following statement utilising the pejorative term ‘pansy’, often used in homophobic jibes:

Safe spaces, unjustified and frivolous use of trigger warnings and movements to ban certain ideas and language are all ways in which so many Millennials are making victims and outright pansies of themselves. (Wyoming May 04 2016)

References to the need for students to face the ‘real world’ are repeatedly made by proponents of this discourse, for example:

Once you walk into this campus, you must understand that what you learn may offend you, anger you, terrify you and may even reduce you to tears, but those are experiences you need to cope with in the real world (Berkeley April 10 17)

Similar sentiments are found in a report outlining reaction to the Yiannopoulos protests by Trump’s campaign manager, Kellyanne Conway:

“I don’t even know if they know what they’re protesting. Is it the free speech?” Conway said. “In the real world, when these kids grow up and go try to find jobs, which they will in the Trump economy — life doesn’t work that way, folks.” (Berkeley February 02 17)

This discourse is one that can be seen replicated in gendered right-wing rhetoric of the over-protective ‘nanny state’ (Sawer 1996), or higher education systems that provide too much support for students who should be able to ‘fend for themselves’ independently (Leathwood and Hey 2009). The ideal of the ‘independent’ student has been shown to be highly gendered, classed and ‘raced’, assuming a student trajectory straight from school, a self-confidence bolstered by support and advice of friends and family with relevant university experience, and of a life with no caring responsibilities or paid work obligations (Leathwood 2006). The ideal of ‘independence’ is nevertheless assumed to be generally shared by all students in

posts such as the one below, where the author takes issue with the notion that safe spaces imply women and minority ethnic students are not able to take care of themselves:

We're told that they're about the free speech of women and minorities. But what this really suggests is that, unlike straight, white men, women and minorities cannot be expected to handle speech which is offensive to them without the caring hand of the SU [Student Union] (Edinburgh January 25 16).

It is also found in many 'common-sense' arguments that argue that children and adults complaining about bullying and harassment in the school and workplace are insufficiently tough and resilient and conducting themselves in ways inappropriate for the 'real world': pupils and students are told they need to toughen up and retaliate because they need to learn what it will be like in the world of adults (Newman, Woodcock and Dunham 2006), and adults are told they are no longer children and need to put up with things (Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik and Alberts 2006).

Collective performances of 'tough' masculinity reach its exaggerated epitome within fascism and neo-fascist movements, one strand of the new 'radical' or 'alt-' right. As Miller-Idriss (2017) discusses, this philosophy is founded on the valorization of a masculinity that is highly militaristic and authoritarian, stressing both belonging and camaraderie between men and 'the urge to express anger and frustration at mainstream society' (200). Such groups are the more extreme manifestations of more everyday 'normative cruelties' (Ringrose and Renold 2010), including the use of verbal attacks as 'humour' - of the heteronormative powerplays in everyday life.

Such discourses of tough, masculinised aggression arguably infuse the performances of both radical right speakers such as Yiannopoulos and the political speech of Donald Trump. Neither Trump nor Yiannopoulos align in their embodied presentation of self the form of idealised heteronormative athletically fit male body that is traditionally revered by fascists (Miller-Idriss 2017), and Yiannopoulos himself has noted that he is disliked by openly fascistic elements of ‘alt-right’ (in part for his sexuality and Jewish heritage - Panella 2017). Whilst Trump has tried to use his physical stature to intimidate (for example on the debate stage against Hillary Clinton – see Smith 2016), for both their primary articulation of aggression is verbal. The link between such ‘aggressive’ performances and the desire for power in relation to fame or popularity is one that is explicitly made by some critics in the student newspapers I looked at. For example, in criticism of Yiannopoulos’ visit, one student wrote:

His campus events are one long publicity stunt designed to present himself as a kind of hip, far right, youth folk hero — sort of Hitler Youth with cool sunglasses. “Look at me, I’m so rad, the PC police won’t let me speak on campus.” That’s his whole shtick in a nutshell, along with bigotry (Berkeley Jan 17 17)

Moreover, although not prominent within the posts of the student newspapers themselves, there were glimpses of the forms of intensely emotional language and acts against protestors by those on the radical right in reports of radical right disturbances and demos, graffiti and posters on campuses. For example, the dichotomy between the purported ‘strength’ of the radical right and the ‘weakness’ of the left can be seen in a report of a shooting at a Milo Yiannopoulos talk at the University of Washington, which quotes a Facebook message left before the talk by one of those arrested: ‘I’m going to the Milo event and if the snowflakes

get out off hand I'm just going to wade through their ranks and start cracking skulls.'

(Norfolk April 26th 17)

So how does this 'Real World' anti-elite discourse define the notion of 'truth', knowledge and ultimately the university itself? From a Foucauldian/Butlerian perspective, such a discourse not only constructs the university and university students in specific ways (as 'weak', as 'privileged', as feminised) but also constructs the 'university' and the 'real world' as two distinct and exclusive spheres, with the former's 'unreality' marking its weaker, inauthentic position in regards to a wider populist 'truth'. In radical right antipathy towards universities and student culture, we can arguably at times see both an anti-intellectual, anti-elite refutation of progressivism in academic culture, and an attempt to challenge or undermine the conception that academia has any authority to define 'truth'. Decoupled from the ostensibly legitimating principles of academic objectivity and rigor, the 'truth' can then become a notion that is defined and legitimated through an individual or group's power to 'shout the loudest'. A notable feature of Trump's 2016 was the extent to which Trump proclaimed a version of reality that he supported as the 'truth' even when faced with insurmountable evidence to the contrary, lying on a scale far surpassing previous presidential candidates (Finnegan 2016). Trump's ability to proclaim a position as truth despite lack of evidence, or indeed flying in the face of evidence to the contrary, was amply demonstrated by his own tweet on the Yiannopoulos debate, where he cast the protestors as the group committing violence on 'innocent' supporters of Yiannopoulos: 'If U.C. Berkeley does not allow free speech and practices violence on innocent people with a different point of view — NO FEDERAL FUNDS?'

In a recent newspaper article historian Jill Lepore cautioned against the notion that 'post-truth' politics originated with Trump, stating "it is simply wrong to imagine that Trump's election somehow changed the status of truth overnight" (Goldstein, 2016, p.21). Nevertheless the

ascendance of a key proponent of this discourse to the presidency of the most powerful country in the world is, in Foucauldian terms, a key legitimator for the ‘Real World’ anti-elitist discourse that is aligned with right-wing views on the need for individual ‘toughness’ and resilience, and in its more extreme versions, a radical right notion of ‘strength through power’ and the populist notion of ‘truth’ as that which is defined by ‘the people’ – or at least the leader of the people.

### **The Ivory Tower Rationalist discourse**

Critics that utilise elements of the ‘Real World’ discourse tend to combine this strand of thought with reference to a far more widespread critical position – that of the defence of ‘free speech’ and debate of alternative views on university campuses. For example, the Berkeley College Republicans argued that one reason for inviting Milo Yiannopoulos was “because he raises taboo political topics that our club believes are necessary for, and essential to, a complete political debate” (Berkeley Jan 27 17). As we shall see, recourse to the notion of ‘free speech’ also underpins an aligned but distinct discourse of criticism against safe spaces and no platforming that I’ve called here the ‘Ivory Tower rationalist’ discourse. Both discourses make a distinction between the space of the university and the space of the outside world. However, whilst the ‘Real World’ discourse tends to present the university negatively as an out-of-touch bastion of the elites, the ‘Ivory Tower’ discourse tends alternatively to valorise the university as the ideal site of disinterested, objective, rational debate. Although not quite as prevalent as the final, ‘progressive’ discourse in the articles of the Daily Californian, examples of the ‘Ivory Tower’ discourse were much more common in the articles of the Daily Californian than the ‘Real World’ discourse, and appeared in single-view ‘opinion’ articles as much as those seeking to report multiple viewpoints.

These critics tend to critique the emotionality of no-platforming and ‘safe spaces’ due to the encroachment of the messy feelings of subjectivity into the rationality of the process of debate. In the ‘Ivory Tower’ discourse, the abstract ‘rational’ principle of ‘free speech’ is a cherished academic ideal that trumps the possibility of harm from hearing such speech. In the controversy over the Milo Yiannopoulos invitation, UC Berkeley’s campus administration stated:

While we realize that the presence of certain speakers is likely to upset some members of our campus community, University policy, principles of intellectual and academic freedom, and the U.S. Constitution require that students and faculty members retain the right to invite individuals onto campus to participate (Berkeley December 4<sup>th</sup> 2016).

This was a position that was more reluctantly reached by others who vehemently opposed the views of the radical right, yet felt that principles of free speech on campus should prevail, especially at a university with a history of radical protest that created the Free Speech movement in the 60s, that eventually led to the enshrinement of its principles in the university’s own constitution. Whilst some writers expressed sympathy with the protestors at Berkeley, others articulated a more binarised conception of protestors as ‘juvenile’ , in opposition to the ‘reason’ of the ‘educated adult’ university:

Donald Trump was sworn in as the 45th president of the United States on Jan. 20.

Liberals can no longer simply cover their ears and shut their eyes to reality, for there will no be escaping conservative politics any longer. It is time to mature and realize

that you will encounter people with whom you may not agree, but the adult, educated, reasonable thing to do is to ignore them and move on if you cannot otherwise befriend them or tolerate their company (Berkeley 27<sup>th</sup> January 2017)

There are some echoes here of the ‘Real World’ discourse that places protestors as juvenile, emotional ‘snowflakes’. However, as mentioned above, in this ‘Ivory Tower’ discourse, the emphasis is explicitly on the ‘specialness’ of the university as a site where the Enlightenment forces of reason and the ‘light of truth’ must triumph over the forces of emotion (and presumably unenlightened ‘darkness’):

The Berkeley College Republicans believe that we should err on the side of more speech instead of less. Our campus is not a “safe space,” and true to Cal’s motto, “Fiat lux,” light will be shed upon issues in ways that some may find uncomfortable. (Berkeley 27<sup>th</sup> January 2017)

This leads us to the epistemological underpinnings of the Ivory Tower discourse, which arguably lie in the modernist belief in the possibility of ‘objective’ rational knowledge, and an ontological position on the possibility of objectivity itself. However, from the mid-twentieth century onwards a growing number of academics have questioned the objectivity of knowledge in the academy - both in relation to science and epistemologies such as positivism within the social sciences, and the androcentric and Eurocentric bias surrounding what is considered to be ‘great’ art and literature (Leathwood and Read 2009). Postmodernist critiques have questioned the very possibility of objective knowledge, and feminist critics highlighting the genderedness of Enlightenment conceptions of rationality and ‘truth’, with its assumptions that only men – and only white men - can be ‘rational’ and thus be producers



of truly scientific knowledge (see e.g. Hekman 1990; Hill Collins 1990; Harding 1991).

Moreover, writers such as Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) compellingly critiqued the ways in which academic culture (including academic language and conventions of speech and action) reflected upper-class and middle-class cultures and practices, mitigating against the success in the academy of those unable to pass through its corridors ‘like a fish in water’ (127).

Whilst some of the populist ‘anti-elite’ arguments against students on the left made use of similar notions of ‘free speech’, the anti-elite discourse is an uncomfortable fit with discourses of the Ivory Tower that emphasise the superiority of the (traditional) academy in arguably ‘elitist’ terms. Indeed the position of some students seemed to be explicitly to present themselves as firmly and proudly on the side of the ‘elite’, for example the following post by a writer concerned at the implications of the protest for the reputation of the university and the cultural capital connected to its social status:

Unlike the coterie of right-wing commentators enjoying a field day this week, it does me no pleasure to see something like this happen at my alma mater (one can almost feel the value of his diploma plummeting downwards). (Berkeley February 3<sup>rd</sup> 2017).

### **Countering the Critics: the Contextual Progressive position**

Needless to say, there was a wide range of counter-criticism to both these discourses in the pages of the *Daily Californian* and other student papers in defence of safe space policies and of ‘no platforming’ as a form of protest. One notable strand of defence against both the ‘Real World anti-elitist’ and especially the ‘Ivory Tower rationalist’ discourse is a discernible collection of arguments that I have tentatively labelled here ‘progressive’, that was slightly

more prevalent than the ‘Ivory Tower’ discourse, particularly in single-view opinion pieces. I’ve labelled this position as contextual due to the tendency in these arguments not to assume a universal moral equivalence between positions, and the significance attached to the relative social positionings, privilege and political power of individuals and groups involved in instances of contestation.

This position argues that, firstly, no platforming and safe spaces do not deny ‘free speech’ for anyone, only the right for certain groups not to have to be an *audience* to this speech in certain delineated spaces (either particular rooms or buildings on campus, or the university itself) (O’Keefe, 2016). Secondly, proponents argue that the mobilisation of such strategies is not merely against views or opinions with which students on the left disagree. Rather they are a mobilisation against speech or actions that are argued to potentially cause a high degree of anxiety or fear by some in less socially privileged social positions (Butler, 1997; Ahmed 2014).

At Berkeley and elsewhere these include radical calls to action that invoke strong language that implies physical as well as vocal resistance (and indeed there was extended debate in the Californian in the aftermath of the Yiannapoulos visit as to whether violence is ever justified in such instances):

The Berkeley Against Trump coalition calls on all solidarity-minded members of the campus to fight for this true legacy of FSM. The far-right is getting organized against us — we must get organized against them. The first step is coming out en masse to kick Yiannopoulos and his hateful bile off our campus. (Berkeley January 31<sup>st</sup> 2017)

As this quotation suggests, the notion of collective ‘belonging’ is a powerful motivation for resistance to, as well as proponents of, right wing movements, in this instance a conception of protection of a space felt as ‘ours’ from an invasion by those who would cause harm.

A strong thread through this discourse is the argument that freedom from harm should take precedence of unlimited freedom of expression. In this they make use of historical precedents in the history of activism. O’Keefe’s (2016) discussion of the practice of no-platforming includes a brief history of the origins of the practice in anti-racist and anti-fascist organising. Noting that UK’s National Union of Students adopted no-platforming as a policy in 1974 to protest against fascist organising on university campuses, she quotes the then NUS President, John Randall’s argument in defence of the policy: “What [is] the greater freedom? An abstract notion of freedom of speech, or a right to live in freedom from fear of persecution”? (Dickinson, 2015, in O’Keefe, 2016, p. 86).

This is the position taken by Judith Butler and eleven other Berkeley professors who sent a letter to the Chancellor, Nicholas Dirks, calling for the Yiannopoulos event to be cancelled. In a later interview Butler explicitly linked this argument to the nature and purpose of universities in relation to fostering learning. Noting the distinction between speech that is constitutionally protected and speech that is a form of harassment, she argued:

We are as a university bound to protect students, staff, and faculty, from behavior that creates a hostile climate. That is why the kinds of conduct that Yiannopoulos engages in are not permitted in the classroom, and would in fact be subject to disciplinary action, if they were (Berkeley 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2017).

Others made a similar point that Yiannopoulos' views are meant as insults rather than as academically valid argument, and therefore are disqualified from being allowed airing in academic debate:

The claim members of BCR make that Milo's views are needed for us to "fully develop intellectually" is utter nonsense. Any valid conservative principles actually worth debating are lost under his hateful polemics that dehumanize large swaths of our campus community. While members of BCR are free to use their "critical thinking skills" to discern substantive content among Milo's invective, I've used mine and have deduced that a man who can't treat many of my friends with basic human decency doesn't deserve any rational consideration whatsoever. . . . Hatred, however "humorously" delivered, does not constitute valid intellectual opinion and will not be received kindly. (Berkeley 1<sup>st</sup> February 2017.)

For the progressive position, then, the mobilisation of policies such as safe spaces and 'no platforming' is premised on the notion that more than a place of learning, the university should – in principle at least - be an arena where such learning is undertaken in an environment of safety. It is this notion of the role and purpose of the university as facilitating 'learning within safe bounds' that lies at the heart of protests by a group of Howard University students (HU Resist) calling for the 'banning' of Donald Trump from the campus (Howard 21<sup>st</sup> April 17). During Trump's presidential campaign rumours began to emerge on campus that Trump himself may visit the university, leading to HU Resists' campaign. Central to their argument was the need to maintain Howard University as a whole as a 'safe space' for African American students to learn. Echoing O'Keefe's and Butler's arguments

above, students from Howard note that this call (both a call for a ‘safe space’ and a call to ‘no platform’ the President), is not a call denying free speech:

This is not a ban on conversation or interaction, this is simply a ban on coming into this sanctity of our space,” said Durmerrick Ross, a freshman political science major. “If he would like to have a conversation or interaction or engagement with us, we are not opposed to him inviting us to the White House. We are not opposed to him renting out a convention center. (Howard 25<sup>th</sup> February 17).

Such conditions of safety and protection will never of course be absolute – especially when increasing numbers of students – and staff – experience forms of prejudice and harassment in daily life and interactions, and/or material precarity in relation to working and living conditions. Nevertheless, like the Berkeley protestors it is an openly political call for a degree of protection from harassment from radical right positions and their symbolic leaders, whether Yiannopoulos or Trump himself.

## **Conclusions**

In this paper I have attempted to outline some of the debates and positions taken both in favour of, and against, the strategies of ‘safe spaces’ and ‘no platforming’ on university campuses, in the current political climate of a resurgent right-wing populism across many countries in the global North. I have discussed what seems to be two similar, yet distinct, discourses of criticism – the ‘Real World Anti-Elitist’ and the ‘Ivory Tower Rationalist’ – that are both highly, yet slightly differently, gendered, classed and racialized. Both are distinguished by a binarised notion of the university and the ‘outside world’, although these

spaces are differently valorised. And importantly both are arguably underpinned by epistemological and ontological conceptions of knowledge and ‘truth’ that have implications for our understandings of the role and purpose of the university itself. These conceptions are countered by a range of left wing positions including a strand which I have tentatively called ‘contextual progressive’ – which is itself arguably underpinned by a third epistemological position that is critical in nature, openly denying the possibility that views and opinions can or should be treated as moral equivalents.

It is inevitably harder from this perspective to devise a general policy position that guides decisions as to whether a speaker should be given a ‘platform’ on campus, as the power dynamics between speaker and audience (and the wider student body) will necessarily vary according to context. Indeed, from a poststructuralist perspective, there is no single ‘true’ nature or meaning of a speech act, as the meaning of speech does not ultimately lie with the words themselves, but in their interpretation by others (Butler, 1997; Ahmed, 2014). This lack of fixity can potentially make it difficult in advance to definitively determine whether and to what degree an invited speaker may be ‘harmful’ in their speech or actions.

Nevertheless, agreeing with Butler, Smith (2001) notes that ‘hateful’ speech generates an effect only because it is able to call “upon the accumulated force of similar discourses – spoken words, written texts, and actual conduct – from the past” (395). These chosen words then contain – and have arguably been chosen by the speaker precisely because they contain – a socially recognised resonance that Ahmed (2014) calls ‘stickiness’.

It is then in anticipation of future repetitions of such speech, and the potentiality of the harmful effects/affects that may be generated, that some students and faculty then aim to counter on a localised level with the forms of protest described in this paper – and by doing

so challenging both the masculinised discourse of the ‘radical right’ and its challenge to the public valorization of the ‘Ivory Tower’, and also the traditional discourse of the university itself in regards to the ideal of – and possibility of – the disinterested pursuit of ‘truth’. What seems likely is that with the resurgence of populist political movements across the Global North, such clashes over the ‘freedom’ of speech and the nature and purpose of the university are likely to continue and intensify.

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