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The Precarity of Praxis and Intersectional Solidarities: A Visual Lens into Critical University Studies

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The Neoliberal University and the Crisis of Critical Praxis:

The contemporary university exists in a state of contradiction. Institutionally dedicated to producing and sharing critical knowledge, it also functions as a more corporatised entity driven by market logics, audit cultures, and what Shore and Wright (2015) term

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"technologies of governance" that prioritise accountability metrics over intellectual depth. This is especially apparent in the United States via its tenure system; in the United Kingdom through its Research Excellence Framework (REF) and in India via the Academic performance indicator (API) to just name a few. This contradiction becomes more pronounced with the idea of Academic Social Responsibility (ASR), which suggests that universities will actively support social justice, democratic engagement, and progressive social change beyond their campuses.

Within Critical University Studies (CUS), scholars have documented how neoliberalisation reshapes higher education through privatisation, precarious labour conditions, managerial governance models, and the subjugation of pedagogical and research practices to economic imperatives (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004; Giroux, 2014; Molesworth et al., 2011). Collini (2012) argues that the marketisation of British universities has fundamentally altered their social

mission, turning students into consumers and knowledge into a commodity primarily valued by economic returns. Similarly, scholars examining the Indian context have identified how commercialisation, caste hierarchies, and centralised control mechanisms limit critical pedagogy and democratic campus cultures (Pathania, 2018; Sundar, 2018).

The concept of praxis, understood in its Gramscian formulation as the dialectical unity of theory and practice aimed at emancipatory social change (Gramsci, 1971), becomes particularly fragile within this institutional context. Faculty and students who seek to translate critical theoretical commitments into tangible political action on campus or in surrounding communities face systematic disincentives such as casualised employment that discourages activism, institutional disciplinary procedures, withdrawal of resources, and exclusion from governance structures. As Chatterton et al. (2010) observe, the university has become a site where radical thinking is both encouraged

and policed. We have seen this most pronounced in recent years, where academic freedom has been ironically used in the United States and the United Kingdom to backtrack on trans rights and legitimise transphobia (Webster, 2024) whilst heavily policing student activists who have spoken out against the ongoing genocide in Palestine, often violently through expulsion and even deportation (Alqaisiya and Perugini, 2025).

This paper intervenes in these debates by examining how spatial practices, specifically unauthorised visual interventions on campus infrastructure, constitute forms of precarious praxis that both expose and resist the neoliberal university's domestication of critique. I focus particularly on how gender-nonconforming students in an Indian university context utilise the campus as sites for articulating refusals of administrative binary gender categories, thereby creating what Fraser (1990) terms "subaltern counter-publics" that challenge institutional

heteronormativity. At the core of this consideration is also what Madhok (2024) calls an urgent intervention into the lack of conceptual diversity in the humanities and social sciences towards an anti-imperial orientation.

Critical University Studies and Spatial Politics:

The university campus operates as a contested terrain where institutional authority and grassroots resistance engage in ongoing struggles for spatial and symbolic dominance. Scholars working within CUS have increasingly recognised that the physical infrastructure of the academy, including its architecture, landscaping, visual culture, and circulation patterns, actively produces and reinforces hierarchies of power (Lefebvre, 1991; Gulson and Symes, 2007; Temple, 2014). University space is never neutral but rather constitutes what Foucault (1977) conceptualises as a disciplinary apparatus designed to produce particular kinds of

subjects who are compliant, governable, and aligned with institutional norms.

The campus functions as a privileged site where this contestation becomes materially visible. They simultaneously serve as spaces of institutional control through official signage, branded materials, and architectural design, and as canvases for unauthorised expression that challenge the university's carefully curated self-presentation. The concept of the palimpsest, a manuscript page from which text has been scraped or washed off to make room for new text, yet traces of the old remain, offers a productive metaphor for understanding campus spaces as archives of struggle. Each removal of these visual artefacts or institutionalisation involves the continuous negotiation between administrative discipline and student or faculty resistance.

This layering fundamentally articulates what de Certeau (1984) terms tactics of everyday resistance,

wherein marginalised subjects strategically appropriate spaces owned and controlled by institutional power. While institutions deploy "strategies" calculated actions enabled by spatial ownership and panoptic surveillance, subordinated groups employ "tactics", opportunistic interventions that exploit temporal gaps in surveillance and control. The university campus thus becomes a crucial medium through which those excluded from official university channels can claim visibility, articulate dissent, and forge solidarities across lines of difference (also see Dasgupta, 2016).

Gendered Space and the Neoliberal University:

From a feminist geographical perspective, this spatial politics takes on particular significance. Feminist scholars have extensively demonstrated that institutional space is inherently gendered, historically designed to privilege cisgender masculine subjects and exclude or marginalise women, non-binary individuals, and gender-

nonconforming people (McDowell, 1999; Spain, 1992; Peake, 2016). The neoliberal university, despite its increasingly prominent public commitments to diversity and inclusion, commitments that often constitute commodified forms of ASR deployed for reputational management (Ahmed, 2012), typically perpetuates cisgender heteronormative assumptions through its built environment, administrative systems, and tacit cultural norms.

Ahmed's (2012) concept of non-performativity proves particularly useful here. She argues that universities make extensive institutional commitments to diversity through policy documents, mission statements, and administrative positions, yet these commitments function primarily as speech acts that document good intentions rather than as performative utterances that transform institutional reality. Diversity discourse becomes a way of not doing diversity work, allowing institutions to appear progressive while actual structural inequalities remain intact or intensify.

In the Indian context specifically, this gendered spatial politics intersects with caste hierarchies, class stratification, religious divisions, and linguistic hegemonies (Chakravarti, 2003; Rege, 2006). Dalit feminist scholars have demonstrated how upper-caste educational institutions systematically exclude or marginalise Dalit women through spatial segregation, cultural violence, and the normalisation of Brahminical patriarchal norms (Paik, 2014). Gender-nonconforming students from Dalit, Bahujan, Adivasi, or working-class backgrounds thus face compounded vulnerabilities that privileged institutional diversity initiatives routinely fail to address, instead focusing on liberal inclusion models that leave structural oppression fundamentally unchanged (Banerjea, Boyce and Dasgupta, 2022; Kumar, 2023; Mohanty, 2005).

Visual Culture, Counter-Publics, and Performative Resistance:

Visual interventions constitute what Butler (1990, 2004) recognises as performative acts that do not merely represent pre-existing identities but actively produce new political subjectivities through the very practice of unauthorised inscription. When gender-nonconforming students inscribe critiques of binary gender categorisation onto university infrastructure, they engage in what Butler terms "gender trouble" the strategic deployment of parody, excess, and refusal to denaturalise normative gender categories and expose their constructed, contingent character.

These visual practices suggest the idea of a subaltern counter-public, a parallel space for discussion where marginalised groups create and share their own perspectives. In these areas, subordinated communities express different views on their identities, interests, and

material needs, often opposing the mainstream narratives. Unlike mainstream publics that claim to be universal while ignoring or pushing aside dissenting voices, counter-publics acknowledge their specific and incomplete nature. They provide their own networks for communication, affirmation, and political action. This allows those left out of dominant circles to envision and pursue new ways of belonging and resisting. Warner (2002) extends this analysis by distinguishing between publics constituted through official, institutionally recognised forms of address and counter-publics formed through refusal, negativity, and oppositional consciousness. Counter-publics do not merely seek inclusion within existing structures but fundamentally challenge the terms through which inclusion is offered, often through cultural practices that dominant institutions deem illegitimate or unintelligible. Campus graffiti that refuses administrative gender categories exemplifies this counter-public formation, creating

visibility and community for those rendered administratively impossible by bureaucratic systems.

A Visual Lens into Precarious Praxis:

This study employs visual ethnographic methods to analyse student interventions on campus infrastructure. My methodological approach recognises the epistemological complexity of studying resistance practices that deliberately refuse authorial attribution. Following Sholette (2010), I understand anonymity not as an obstacle to analysis but as itself a meaningful political strategy that prioritises collective action over individual recognition and protects vulnerable actors from institutional reprisal. I therefore do not attempt to identify specific creators of visual interventions but rather analyse these materials as collective articulations emerging from marginalised academic communities.

The 'Visual Lens' methodology I employ draws on Rose's (2016) critical visual methodology, which

emphasises three sites of meaning-making: the site of production the site of the image itself, and the site of audiences. I utilise spatial analysis informed by Lefebvre's (1991) conceptual triad of spatial practice, representations of space, and representational spaces to understand how visual interventions challenge institutional spatial regimes. I also adopt a discourse-analytical approach following Foucault (1972) to situate these local interventions within broader systems of power/knowledge that constitute gender and institutional authority. I am particularly attentive to what Halberstam (2011) terms "low theory" forms of knowledge produced outside or against academic conventions, refusing the clarity and systematicity demanded by institutional discourse. The visual interventions I analyse constitute low theory in this sense: they are deliberately crude, ephemeral, unauthorised, and excessive, yet they articulate sophisticated critiques of institutional violence.

Sāhitya
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Case Study: The Administrative Violence of Binary Gender:

[Image 1 - In black spray paint across a metal shutter, three checkbox options are vertically arranged: 'Male', 'Female', and 'Fuck you'. A checkmark is in the box next to 'Fuck you'. The style is intentionally crude and striking, created quickly with black spray paint on a light background.]

The qualities of this visual intervention warrant close semiotic analysis. The choice of black spray paint on a light-coloured surface maximises legibility; this message is intended to be read by everyone in the campus space. The handwriting style is neither purely utilitarian nor elaborately artistic; it occupies a middle ground that suggests both urgency and intentionality. This is not spontaneous vandalism but a deliberate form of political communication. The textual content employs strategic wordplay that disrupts normative gender categorisation through what Derrida (1976) would recognise as différance, the simultaneous deferral and differentiation of meaning. By reproducing the bureaucratic form of checkbox gender selection (a visual citation of administrative documents used in university admission and employment processes) and then offering "Fuck you" as a selectable category, the intervention performs several simultaneous critical operations.

It makes visible the violence inherent in mandatory binary gender classification. What appears as

a neutral administrative procedure, a simple checkbox on a form, is revealed as a coercive demand that individuals sort themselves into one of two exhaustive and mutually exclusive categories. Those whose genders exceed, refuse, or complicate this binary are rendered administratively impossible; they literally cannot proceed through university systems without falsifying their existence. The third option thus articulates justified rage at this erasure while also creating space, however temporary and precarious, for those who cannot or will not comply with binary gender demands.

This visual intervention also enacts what Butler (1990, 2004) theorises as gender performativity, the understanding that gender categories are not natural facts that precede social recognition but are instead produced through repeated citation of regulatory norms. The checkbox format itself exemplifies this citational structure. Every time an individual checks 'Male' or 'Female', they participate in reproducing the naturalness of binary gender. By introducing a third option that

rejects the terms of classification entirely, the intervention demonstrates that this system is neither necessary nor exhaustive but rather a contingent arrangement of social power. The visual rhetoric guides interpretation through spatial arrangement. The vertical columnar structure prompts the eye to read from top to bottom, moving through the normative options before arriving at the critical third category. This progression enacts the critique it describes, beginning with apparently neutral categories, exposing their bureaucratic violence, and finally arriving at an epistemological and political refusal. The checkmarksymbol of completion, correctness, and administrative legibilityis strategically deployed to mark illegibility itself, turning the grammar of compliance into a vocabulary of resistance.

The choice of material substrate merits careful attention. A corrugated metal shutter is an inherently temporary surface: it will be opened, closed, potentially repainted or replaced. This impermanence mirrors the precarity of gender-nonconforming existence within

institutional space. Just as this graffiti might be erased by campus maintenance (itself a form of institutional censorship), students and faculty who challenge gender norms face potential expulsion, denial of promotion, harassment, or administrative marginalisation. The material conditions of the intervention's production thus metaphorically express the vulnerability of its creators and the communities they represent.

Significantly, there is no signature, no claim of authorship, no QR code linking to an activist organisation's website. This anonymity serves multiple functions beyond protecting creators from disciplinary action. It refuses the neoliberal imperative toward personal branding and CV-building that characterises contemporary academic life, where even resistance must be documented as "impact" to be valued. It suggests collective rather than individual authorship, implying that this intervention emerges from shared experiences and political commitments rather than individual genius. And it prioritises the message over recognition, enacting

a politics of solidarity that contrasts sharply with the university's obsession with measuring and crediting individual achievement.

Institutional Response:

[Image 2 – Several individuals, likely university maintenance staff, are shown painting over the visual intervention described in Image 1. Blue paint is being applied to the shutter, obscuring the previous

intervention. The photograph captures this erasure in progress, documenting the institutional response to unauthorised spatial appropriation.]

The institutional response to student visual interventions adds another layer to the campus palimpsest. Choosing to paint over them rather than addressing the student grievance reveals specific institutional anxieties and control strategies. Erasure reflects what Scott (1990) calls the "public transcript", the official, visible display of institutional authority. Through erasure, the university demonstrates its control over physical space and reaffirms the boundary between authorised and unauthorised communication. This act recognises its importance. If these interventions were truly insignificant or invisible to institutional power, they would not require any response. Erasure thus paradoxically affirms the political power of unauthorised visual culture even as it seeks to eliminate it.

From a labour perspective, the maintenance workers tasked with removing graffiti occupy a precarious position within the university's class structure. Often employed through outsourced contracts rather than as direct university staff, these workers receive minimal wages, limited benefits, and little institutional recognition (Bousquet, 2017). They are deployed to enforce institutional spatial control yet have limited stake in or control over institutional decision-making. This setup exemplifies the broader contradictions of neoliberal university governance, where casualised labour is used to protect the institution's public image while remaining excluded from its supposed democratic community.

Intersectional Solidarities and the Limits of Institutional Inclusion:

The visual artefacts analysed here do not exist in isolation but participate in broader ecosystems of

campus resistance and counter-public formation. This convergence reflects what Crenshaw (1989, 1991) theorises as intersectionality, the understanding that systems of oppression are co-constituted and mutually reinforcing rather than additive or parallel. Gender-nonconforming students in India face compounded vulnerabilities that cannot be adequately addressed by single-axis frameworks focusing solely on gender, caste, or class (also see Dasgupta 2025). The spatial politics of campus spaces thus becomes a site where these intersecting struggles can be articulated together, creating what Collins (2000) terms a 'matrix of domination' that refuses compartmentalisation.

The idea of solidarity is vital yet deeply intricate in this context. Mohanty (2005) warns against false universalisms that claim sisterhood or shared struggle while prioritising privileged experiences and marginalising those most vulnerable to multiple, intersecting oppressions. Genuine solidarity demands what she refers to as "feminist solidarity across borders",

a practice of coalition-building that recognises difference, challenges privilege, and centres the knowledge and leadership of those most marginalised by existing power structures. Therefore, visual interventions can act as spaces for fostering intersectional solidarity when they resist the university's tendency to compartmentalise and domesticate critique.

Conclusions:

This analysis demonstrates that authentic ASR is understood as translating critical theory into transformative political practice. This exists in deep tension with the operational logics of the neoliberal university. While institutions increasingly use the language of social justice, diversity, and community engagement for reputation and competitive edge, they simultaneously discipline, marginalise, or eliminate those who pursue praxis that genuinely challenges existing power relations.

The visual interventions discussed here exemplify what I call 'precarious praxis' as forms of critical engagement that function outside or against institutional approval, performed by actors with minimal institutional security, creating critiques that are vulnerable to immediate erasure but capable of spreading beyond institutional control. This precarity is not accidental but structural; it arises directly from the contradiction between the university's declared commitments to critical thinking and its material investment in maintaining hierarchies of class, caste, gender, and other axes of oppression.

Yet precarity also creates opportunity. The very conditions that make radical praxis risky, such as casualised labour, increased surveillance, and restricted speech, also foster shared experiences of institutional violence that can serve as a foundation for building coalitions across different forms of marginalisation. The university campus, as a space of unauthorised inscription and palimpsestic struggle, materialises this potential for

coalition. It offers a place where gender-nonconforming students, caste-oppressed students, contract workers, and faculty resisting managerialism can make their struggles visible and establish connections that institutional structures often seek to hinder.

For scholars committed to CUS, this analysis highlights several essential actions. Firstly, we must oppose the university's co-optation of critical discourse by upholding commitments to praxis that go beyond institutional acknowledgement or reward. Secondly, we need to develop methodologies capable of recognising and valuing diverse forms of knowledge production, such as anonymous graffiti and spatial appropriations that institutional frameworks might dismiss as non-academic. Lastly, we must foster solidarities that link struggles within universities to broader movements for social transformation, rejecting the false division between academic and activist work.

The neoliberal university prefers critique to stay within classrooms, conference papers, and peer-reviewed journals; spaces where dissent can be monitored, credentialed, and declared politically inert. The visual interventions analysed here reject this containment. They insist that critique must emerge in the world, occupy space, and disrupt the smooth operation of institutional life. This is praxis in its most fundamental form; the refusal to accept the status quo, paired with the imaginative construction of alternatives, however temporary or fragile they may be.

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