



ACADEMIC FREEDOM UNDER ERASURE

A Roundtable on Academic Freedom
March 22, 2024

INTRODUCTION

Academic Freedom Under Erasure, a roundtable on Academic Freedom was held on March 22, 2024, hosted by Dr. Eve Haque and *The Harms of Language Project* team in Toronto (and supported by the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies at York University).

The roundtable brought together scholars from across Canada for a day long event in order to consider a broad range of theoretical debates and disciplinary approaches related to academic freedom. Various contexts of academic freedom, from the historical to contemporary, were discussed.

This focus on academic freedom was not intended to preclude a more general interrogation of freedom of expression or free speech. Instead, we wanted to examine the particularity of the university campus for analyzing speech. This is especially pressing in the present moment where, for example, the alibi of academic expression is used to defend slurs and other forms of harmful language in the classroom including a push for platforming conservative enquiry on campuses, while protections for radical anti-colonial, anti-racist, and anti-capitalist scholarship and speech are being eroded.

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WHO ARE THE CASUALTIES OF THE CURRENT WAR OVER ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND FREE EXPRESSION ON UNIVERSITY CAMPUSES AND WHAT HARMS HAVE BEEN INFLICTED AS A RESULT OF THESE STRUGGLES?

MEET THE PROJECT LEAD

Professor Eve Haque is the York Research Chair in Linguistic Diversity and Community Vitality at York University (Canada). She is also co-editor for the *TOPIA: A Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies*.

Her research and teaching interests include multiculturalism, white settler colonialism and language policy, with a focus on the regulation and representation of racialized im/migrants in white settler societies.

Her current research project is centred on academic freedom, free expression and the harms of language. She has published widely on these topics and is also the author of “Multiculturalism within a Bilingual Framework: Language, Race, and Belonging in Canada” published with University of Toronto Press.



ABOUT THE PROJECT

Our project explores issues of academic freedom and free expression on campuses in Canada and internationally. We are interested in how these issues intersect with the right to freedom from discrimination and how various parties – academic administrators, staff and students, but also government policymakers, media outlets, NGOs and the general public – engage with these issues. We investigate how certain exercises of academic freedom and free expression come to be defended while others are condemned, and we are interested in who is most impacted in these struggles.

Our understanding of language’s power to harm takes seriously Morrison’s (1993) claim that, “Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence”. We follow Butler’s (1997) argument that as linguistic beings, we are susceptible to linguistic harm. Just as language has the power to call us into being, it has the power to disrupt, disorient and undo that being. This understanding goes beyond legalistic arguments about what constitutes hate speech and takes seriously claims of individual harm that follow from specific speech acts.

CONTEXT

In our neoliberal era, the precarity of academic speech is nearly self-evident. As research commitments and curricular development are increasingly conditioned by broader bureaucratic-financial pressures, it can, in fact, seem impossible to speak of academic expression without acknowledging its limits, its uses to protect forms of conservative linguistic harm, and its inability to contend with justice-oriented projects.

Haunted by the spectre of McCarthyism, but intertwined with a diverse landscape of linguistic control, the conditions undergirding how and under what terms academic speech acts can be made are imbricated in a series of political, linguistic, and historical shifts (Readings 1997; Butler 1997; de la Rosa 2007; Hogan and Trotter 2013; Haque 2016) that all differently inflect and contribute to our present moment.

Moreover, while academic freedom is eroded within universities of the so-called Global North, it is paradoxically exported as an imperialist metric for measuring intellectual excellence in the so-called Global South (see: Bergan, Gallagher, and Harkavy 2020; and Kaczmarck and Yildiz 2022). These contradictory regimes of power demand sustained analytic attention, particularly as they mediate the legibility of linguistic violence, the harms of language, and mechanisms for social redress.





GUIDING QUESTIONS

1

What is the work of speech, silence, silencing, and policy in these moments of crisis?

2

How are these conditioned by prior and historical models of linguistic control?

3

What conditions the limits of academic freedom?

4

With the rise of digital surveillance strategies such as doxing, how and to what end is academic freedom influenced and controlled through para and extra-institutional actors?

5

What frameworks can help us theorize and mobilize on these issues?

6

What are the boundaries between extramural and intramural speech?

7

What is the relationship between speech and linguistic harm and how does this relationship interface with constructions of academic freedom?

QUESTIONS FROM OUR SPEAKERS

Peter Ives - What is the distinction between academic freedom and freedom of expression? How are they related, yet separate? In what ways are these mobilized, and how is each respective framework useful in specific cases where a violation exists?

Shama Rangwala - How does the concept of freedom of expression take up 'space'? Where is speech located? In what ways is speech weaponized, delegitimized, and transposed in its form and inverted in its content?

Laura McKinley - What are the boundaries of extramural speech? How do social media and the intensification of network communication impact academic freedom and extramural speech?

Jeff Bale - What is the impact of memory culture in Germany on the parameters of free speech and open dialogue? What role might memory culture play in existing and emerging debates on antisemitism?

Sanober Umar - Who constitutes a public intellectual? What role does the university have in protecting precarious scholars who challenge normative and hegemonic discourses?

Shannon Dea - How can we conceptualize academic freedom, and how is it different from free speech? What are the boundaries and limitations of academic freedom?

Natalie Kouri-Towe - What role do trigger warnings have in higher education? Do educators have a duty of care to their students when engaging in scholarship on racial violence and racism in the classroom?

Sandra Robinson - In what ways does the visibility of the researcher become impacted when engaging in high-risk research? What consequences might this have for the production of robust analysis and research?

Mandy Lau - In what ways is the concept of hate speech framed and debated within the context of the emerging Bill C-63?

Sophia Martensen - What is the role of government in academic governance? What factors have impacted the growing levels of political interference in higher education?

Natalie Coulter - Are all public spaces safe spaces for researchers engaging in hate-based scholarship? How does the risk associated with particular forms of research impact the exercise of free speech?

EMERGING THEMES

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND CONCEPTUALIZATIONS

The first theme emerging from this roundtable is the conceptualization of free speech and academic freedom, and its theoretical underpinnings. Under this theme, we might ask:

- How are academic freedom and free speech different in their conceptualization?
- Where does academic freedom exist? Who is protected by it?
- How are analyses of academic freedom and free speech hollowed out, and how does this undermine meaningful engagement with each respective concept?

SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE EXERCISE OF FREE SPEECH

The next theme considered the role of social media in the exercise of free speech. Consider the following questions:

- What role does social media play in enhancing the visibility of the researcher and how might this impact the potential for critical knowledge production?
- How might the insecurity of the online space carry over into the physical space, and what repercussions might this have for the exercise of free speech and academic freedom?
- How do particular forms of speech circulate on social media?

SPACE, ACADEMIC FREEDOM, AND FREE SPEECH

Many of the speakers also touched upon the connection between space, academic freedom, and free speech, and asked the following critical questions:

- Where is speech located and bound?
- Which spaces are considered safe spaces to exercise free speech and academic freedom?
- What risks might be associated with online spaces, such as social media?
- How can safe spaces be created on university and college campuses without becoming carceral spaces where speech is policed?

THE DUTY OF CARE AND RESPONSIBILITY

Finally, the duty of care and responsibility emerged as a theme, both from the part of researchers and academic institutions/ governing bodies.

- What obligation does the university have to its employees, staff, and students (including precarious scholars) with regards to free speech and academic freedom?
- How can we alter the structures in place within academic institutions to protect researchers engaging in risky research?
- What responsibility do educators have in protecting their students in the classroom during conversations on racism and racial violence?

LOOKING AHEAD

At the end of the Roundtable event, participants discussed (1) the challenges in doing work/research on academic freedom and free expression on campuses and beyond, (2) potential synergies from current and future projects, and (3) activities to build on from the roundtable. We would like to take what we learned from this event and consider the following activities:

1 Create social media posts oriented towards educating more widely on academic freedom and freedom of expression/ free speech

2 Interviews with scholars and activists on recent and/or successful interventions with regard to the question of silencing critiques, for example, of Israel and pro-Palestine expression

3 Invite experts from other institutions for union talks while mindful of challenges which might be associated with this strategy and consider how we can sustain momentum and interest

4 The limitations of academic freedom is an important idea; how do we educate and defend this topic while simultaneously offering critique?

5 Use organizations such as "[Academic Freedom for All](#)" as a model for similar endeavours in Canada

6

Instructional skills workshop to teach folks about academic freedom and adopting a 'pyramid model' where participants can in turn facilitate sessions in their own institutions

7

Develop a research network and meet regularly to brainstorm around challenging case studies and consider the threshold of academic freedom and extramural speech

8

Develop a Summer Institute where scholars and folks from various networks can join to engage in conversations, projects, and activities on academic freedom and free speech

9

Organize teach-ins or lecture series on academic freedom, free speech, and extramural speech

10

Writing-based outputs: special issue journals or blog posts on the themes emerging from this event

11

...and more!

MEDIA Please enjoy some of the photos taken from the event!



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