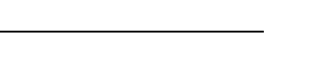

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REGULAR PAPER

Transgender negotiations of precarity: Contested spaces of higher education

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We use feminist and queer theorisations of precarity as emotional and embodied to explore how trans people experience and negotiate university campus spaces in North East England. Through analysis of 15 interviews conducted with university students and staff, we highlight how precarity is lived and felt through an exploration of the ways in which different spaces of the campus become contexts of hope, comfort, and belonging, as well as anxiety, fear, and violence. We detail the specific ways in which university spaces can come to shape feelings of precariousness and how these are relational to experiences of being trans in the wider city. We conclude by highlighting what an emotional and felt approach to precarity can offer geographers interested in power, marginalisation, and place.

1 | INTRODUCTION: PRECARITY, GENDER AND PLACE

Trans people can experience higher education institutions (HEIs) as ambivalent and contradictory spaces of comfort, security, and safety, as well as anxiety, insecurity, and fear. A growing body of scholarship highlights how this emotional and felt precariousness is specific to transgender people, emerging from binary understandings of sex and gender (e.g., Johnston, 2019). In this article, we draw on an analysis of 15 interviews with staff and students at a higher education institution in North East England to highlight how pervasive gender binaries can leave trans people feeling precarious in everyday encounters. We argue that precariousness – as a result of gender binaries – requires careful negotiation by trans people to locate and create spaces of security and comfort, particularly at the scale of the body. In other words, whilst there *are* possibilities for trans people to embody and perform their gender, these possibilities are precarious, and we explore how this precariousness is spatially responded to and negotiated as people engage with different spaces of the campus. To do so, we explore the specific spaces and encounters that cause trans people to feel precarious as well as the strategies used to cope and create spaces of comfort. Following other scholars, we use "trans" as a term that encompasses a broad range of gender identities that fall within the transgender spectrum – for example, transgender, non-binary, and genderqueer (Hines, 2007; Johnston, 2019; Stryker & Whittle, 2006). We contribute to feminist and queer scholarship by examining how precariousness is an embodied feeling that results in complex relationships with particular spaces.

The trans population – estimated at 300,000–500,000 in the UK – occupy multiple positions of precariousness as they move in and through everyday spaces, which are nearly always coded and policed as binary male/female (Ellis et al., 2016). Queer and feminist research has documented the spatially uneven equalities that exist amongst LGBTQ+ people (Browne et al., 2010, 2019; Duggan, 2002). Trans people continue to suffer disproportionate levels of verbal, physical and sexual assault, mental ill-health, suicide, and gender-based violence in schools, workplaces, and other domains (Yeadon-Lee, 2016). Bachmann and Gooch's (2017) survey of 5,375 LGBTQ+ people in England, Scotland, and Wales highlights that 41% of trans and 31% of non-binary people have experienced a hate crime due to their gender identity. More trans

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people experience school bullying (75%) than LGB people (25%) (Mitchell & Howarth, 2009) and 44% of trans people avoid specific streets for safety (Bachmann & Gooch, 2017).

These forms of discrimination are pervasive, producing a condition in which trans people's lives may feel precarious in certain times and spaces. As we highlight, however, these are not the only forms of discrimination that trans people feel, and there are many other everyday experiences that produce a sense of precariousness. For this reason, we follow Butler (2004) to think of precariousness as a condition of social life. In such a condition, *all* lives are vulnerable, and precariousness is felt by people when their lives become vulnerable through external actors and/or circumstances. Here, there is distinction between precariousness from precarity. Precariousness is our felt vulnerability and precarity is the way in which institutions produce and mould inequalities. For us, the precarious condition felt by trans people is a result of pervasive gender binaries, that are embedded in institutions – but not solely produced by institutions – always being embodied and negotiated. Therefore, we understand precariousness as lived, embodied, and situated (Bonner-Thompson & McDowell, 2020; McDowell et al., 2020; Muñoz, 2017; Pettit, 2019; Worth, 2015). However, we do not suggest that all trans lives are always vulnerable and therefore precarious, but that precariousness and vulnerability may be productive of collective action (Brice, 2020). By way of queering precarious geographies then, we examine how trans people create different spaces and situations out of precarious conditions, highlighting how comfort, belonging, and precariousness are co-constituted, whilst still remaining sensitive to the uncertain context produced by the HEI in which we conducted this research.

We begin by exploring feminist and queer readings of precariousness and precarity. We then situate these concepts in emerging trans scholarship, underlining how a spatial approach can deepen understanding of gendered bodies, lives, and subjectivities as complex and fluid. We focus on the anxieties and discomforts that are produced out of precariousness and then we explore the work trans people must do to locate and create spaces of comfort when occupying marginalised bodies.

2 | QUEERING PRECARIOUS GEOGRAPHIES

Precarity is not a "new" idea; people have always been affected by moments of precariousness. The term tends to be used to describe changes in economic circumstance, wherein precarity becomes a condition of contemporary neoliberal labour conditions (Waite, 2009) that is generated in and by working life specifically (McIlwaine & Bunge, 2019). Bauman (1999), Beck (2000), and Standing (2011) are among the scholars who have used precarity in terms of work and labour, including in both the availability of work and the quality of workers' pay and conditions. The 2007/8 financial crisis and subsequent austerity policies invoked by the UK government have also heightened precarity with growth in "zero-hour," "platform," and "gig" employment marked by low or unstable pay, on-demand *only* hours of work, and temporary or ad hoc contracts, often impacting the most vulnerable people (Hardgrove et al., 2015; McDowell, 2017; Vosko, 2000). This precarity has been exacerbated further due to the coronavirus pandemic.

However, precariousness is not simply a product of labour conditions, but is a social condition (Butler, 2004) that is embodied, lived, and may form atmospheres with unstable affects (Bonner-Thompson & McDowell, 2020; McDowell et al., 2020; Pettit, 2019; Worth, 2015). As cultural geographers have highlighted, precariousness is a "cultural reproduction, operating through imaginaries of and assumptions about how day-to-day life is, and should be, lived" (Harris & Nowicki, 2018, p. 388). In tandem, our research shows that shifting labour conditions are not solely to blame for the precariousness experienced by trans people, but so too are the normative social and cultural understandings of gender. To examine the emotional and affective experience of trans people, we develop Johnston's (2018) recent intervention where she notes that precarity and precariousness can have a lot to offer feminist and queer geographers grappling with issues of marginalisation and vulnerability. Drawing on Butler (2004), Johnston understands precariousness as an embodied feeling and social condition that emerges through experiences of marginalisation and injustice, always being reshaped by shifting identity positions, spaces, and institutions. Butler (2004, p. 30) argues that some lives are constructed as "more grievable" than others, meaning that how people and places experience precariousness is uneven as some lives are understood as more valuable. Particular institutions can create precarious environments for different people (Leahy et al., 2018), which are marked by continually shifting arrangements of gender, sexuality, race, class, age, ability, and nationality. In this sense, gender and sexual identities, embodiments, and performances that are not as normative as others in a particular spatial and temporal context are not as "grievable" as others, and therefore can become precarious. It is no surprise then that LGBTQ+ people have felt varying levels of precariousness across different spaces and times, as they often embody gender and sexual identities that are constructed as "non-normative" (Butler, 2004; Doan, 2010; Gorman-Murray et al., 2014; Johnston, 2018).

Those who are experiencing precarity of course do not necessarily only feel precarious – people attempt to create security and find ways to manage or live with hope. Through "cruel optimism" Berlant (2011) highlights how uncertainty becomes bearable as people are provided with – often false – hope for a better future, that can only be achieved through an individual work ethic, instead of a reconfiguration of power relations that create precarious conditions. Berlant argues that such optimism enables neoliberal agendas to continue and even be legitimised. Those suffering uncertainties, through austerity for example, can create new ways of "being together," where new relations of care and belonging emerge in otherwise precarious places (Bonner-Thompson & McDowell, 2020; Hall, 2018; Power & Hall, 2018). For LGBTQ+ people, creating a sense of hope or belonging, this may emerge in queer spaces comfort or create home lives that symbolise their queerness (Brown et al., 2014; Gorman-Murray, 2008; Schroeder, 2015). It is here that we wish to advance geographies of precarity to explore not only the specific ways queer bodies might become precarious, but also the ways felt precariousness informs how queer people attempt to create a sense of belonging, comfort, and hope, which may constitute non-normative identities and spaces – what it means to be queer may, at times, be intimately related to precariousness. We see this as a means of understanding the ways that normative ideas of gender and sexuality generate and intensify precarity – something that the current literature on precariousness is yet to fully explore (Brice, 2020) despite the ways that certain queer lives become less "grievable" or more vulnerable by transgressing social and spatial norms (Butler, 2004). Therefore, we wish to create space for more nuanced discussions around precariousness, examining how precarity might be itself a normative force that is felt, negotiated, and resisted, which may give way to new identities and possibilities. To develop this idea, we now integrate research in trans scholarship with accounts of precariousness as lived, affective, and embodied.

3 | SITUATING TRANS GEOGRAPHIES

Transgender studies is an interdisciplinary field that grapples with the lived experience of trans lives but also the theoretical tensions within feminist and queer theory (Stryker, 2006). Historically, some feminist perspectives have been exclusionary of trans people's lives, whilst some viewed queer theory as being guilty of utilising trans people's existences to exemplify the instability and fluidity of gender binaries (Browne et al., 2010; Hines, 2010; Stryker, 2006). This does not mean these perspectives are not being engaged with, and even transformed, by such scholarship (Stryker & Bettcher, 2016). Arguably, trans scholarship has prompted a rethinking of gender, sex, and embodiment (Stryker & Whittle, 2006). We follow other scholars that engage with inclusive feminist and queer theory that foreground the importance of material and lived experiences (Hines, 2007; Johnston, 2019; Misgav & Johnston, 2014; Namaste, 2000; Nash, 2011); "this scholarship is not just interested in representations or social constructions of bodies but also in the 'real' fleshy lived materialities of bodies. An explicit reading of transgender and gender variant people's spaces and places highlights often overlooked exclusions" (Johnston, 2015, p. 672).

Geographers working on trans issues have advocated a spatial approach to determine how trans lives are rendered meaningful (Nash, 2011). Bodies do not always fit gender binaries but are forced to live in the spaces shaped by them. This impacts how trans people negotiate everyday life and can have negative repercussions on mental health (McDermott et al., 2013; Roen, 2018). For Doan (2007), whilst feminist geographies have effectively critiqued how public and private spaces are formed and negotiated, understandings of how trans people experience place remains limited. In a later article, she urges geographers to interrogate heteronormative discourses further, together with "the parameters of the tyranny of gender as it constrains behaviour in a spectrum of spaces and localities" (2010, p. 649). Rooke (2010) argues that alternative gendered spaces are necessary to create feelings of comfort for trans people. Since these interventions, geographical work on trans people's lives is becoming a key theme in social geographies (Hopkins, 2018). Research has examined multiple forms of implicit and explicit transphobia and violence that emerge at work (Bender-Baird, 2011; Hines, 2010; Schilt & Connell, 2007), in prisons (Rosenberg & Oswin, 2015), and in medical and health spaces (Hawkins & Giesking, 2017).

By advocating a spatial approach that pays attention to the complex interrelationships between society and space, geographers have explored how, for trans people, feelings of security and safety exist in tension with insecurity, marginalisation, and precarity (Abelson, 2016; Jenzen, 2017; Lubitow et al., 2017; March, 2020). For example, Browne and Lim (2010) explore trans people's experiences of Brighton and Hove, UK – the "gay capital" of England. They highlight that how trans people have a sense of hope and belonging in different parts of Brighton, understanding that prejudices and oppressions are more frequent and intense in other parts of the UK, even though transphobia still occurs in the city. Brighton is often imagined as a place of greater potential for political action and as a place of safety and comfort, despite LGBTQ+ collectives not always being fully inclusive of trans lives and politics. This underlines the importance of questioning how feelings of belonging, safety, and comfort can emerge concurrently to those of marginalisation, disempowerment, and oppression (Browne & Lim, 2010).

Spaces of education tend to be presented as "inclusive" and "diverse" environments for trans people but may not always live up to this (Mearns et al., 2020). As Johnston (2018, p. 9) highlights, "universities have struggled to accommodate diverse embodied subjectivities due to the lasting reproduction of masculinist, heteronormative, ableist, racist and minority world-centric discourses," where high emotional distress is a "normalised" condition for students and staff (Peake & Mullings, 2016). Trans and education scholars in the US are highlighting how current policies fail to protect trans people in educational institutions (Rands, 2013) as innovations do not seek to restructure the power relations that shape trans people's lives (Meyer & Keenan, 2018; Woodford et al., 2017). Singh et al. (2013) explain how trans students can be included in higher educational policies, but feel peers need greater training on the challenges faced by trans people to ensure this inclusion is enacted in learning spaces. All too often, the responsibility of change is put upon trans people themselves, therefore reinforcing unequal power relations. Such inefficient policies have implications that can impact mental health, performance at work and/or studies, and social and family life. In work with US faculty, Pitcher (2018) demonstrates that trans people can be both hyper visible and invisible; being targeted for being trans or assumed cisgender. Some trans people may experience both, whereas other trans people may only experience one or the other assumption, depending on embodied markers of difference and stereotypes of trans people in specific cultural contexts. This form of othering requires unsettling emotional exclusions in the workplace to always be managed (Pitcher, 2017), where trans people may feel uncertain and vulnerable through their queerness.

There is pressure on trans people then to adopt self-management strategies in response to everyday transphobia in order to survive and cope in US higher education settings (Nicolazzo, 2017). Managing and coping can occur in different forms – actively resisting gender binaries (for example, not filling out binary sections of forms) or silently coping with experiences of being misgendered (Pitcher, 2017). Pryor (2015) and Nicolazzo et al. (2017) argue that coping strategies are formed through relationships outside of classrooms and engagement with other aspects of campus life, for example in informal networks of support, where trans people deal with the stress and frustration of everyday microaggressions. For us, this highlights the ways that belonging emerges in relation to everyday precariousness in HEIs. Pryor (2015) suggests that spaces that enable trans people to feel a sense of belonging and hope are places where people can encounter other LGBTQ+ colleagues. For example, Stewart (2017) argues that queer, critical race, and postmodern/structural spaces and pedagogies are more likely to allow for the expression of gender variance.

The capacity to cope is also shaped by other markers of social difference; for example, Stewart and Nicolazzo (2018) argue that trans students who can negotiate their gender discrimination with their class privilege are more likely to achieve academic success. The emotional labour required to cope, and make others feel comfortable, is often not recognised and institutions may do little to help trans people to develop a sense of belonging and emotional security. At the same time, as Pryor (2018) argues, such politics can become repurposed as a way of institutions championing themselves as inclusive – campuses can position LGBTQ+ people as vulnerable so that institutions can provide spaces of inclusion. Therefore, the politics of precariousness are embedded in institutional discourses, especially those around diversity and inclusion. However, as we argue, this work is still undertaken by the most precarious. Trans people are therefore forced to undertake different forms of emotional and identity work across a myriad of spaces both on university campuses and in other contexts, responding to a felt and lived precariousness. We now reflect upon the methodological and ethical dimensions of our research before discussing our findings.

4 | OUR STUDY

The data presented in this article are part of a study that explored the everyday experiences of trans staff and students on our study campus in North East England. Trans students and staff were recruited through mailing lists, posters and through sharing the project with the LGBTQ+ students society Facebook page. 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with trans students (12) and staff (3) between March 2017 and February 2018 in campus offices or nearby cafes. All authors involved in this paper conducted interviews. The participants identified as Agender (1), female (2), trans female (2), female-aligned (1), trans men (3), non-binary (4), and gender non-conforming (2). Participants also identified as bisexual (4), gay (1), pansexual (5), and queer (5). All but two people identified as "white-British or mixed white-British." One participant was "British Pakistani" and one "Chinese." The participants were aged 18–33 years. All interviews were transcribed fully, coded using Nvivo to build a framework of prominent themes, and analysed in further depth. To protect participant identities, we have anonymised the names of those who participated and the institution in which this work took place. We explore the data from both staff and students together and are attentive to the confidentiality of our participants to reveal limited information about each participant explicitly.

This research raised many ethical challenges. The experiences we asked participants to recall often stoked anxiety-inducing narratives. As interviewers, we tried to remain conscious of how participants felt when speaking with us whilst being conscious of the possible cathartic effects of sharing difficult stories. At the beginning of each interview, we reminded participants they could refuse to answer any question and could withdraw from the interview at any time without giving a reason. Furthermore, as participants were addressing their university experiences, careful consideration was given to interview location (Elwood & Martin, 2000). We gave individuals a choice as to where they felt most comfortable. In some instances, private offices were preferred whilst, at other times, we had to use public spaces. Most participants opted for nearby cafes off-campus.

In developing research questions and in order to enhance the validity and rigour of our approach, we worked with a student advisory group. This included those studying a range of subjects and included trans people. The student advisory group was a way for us to discuss interview schedules, recruitment and project design. Our recruitment was also endorsed by the trans representative of the LGBTQ+ society who also agreed to circulate recruitment information to society members.

We all identify as gay men, are white, and are university educated. As cisgender people, we do not share the same experiences of exclusion and oppression as our participants. However, research rapport and understanding are not always formed through shared identity but also shared experiences of places, cultures, and people. As non-heterosexual people, we have experiences of living non-normative gendered and sexual lives and negotiating related forms of discrimination, although we are conscious of the privileges we possess in being white cisgender men. Living gay lives, we are aware of the power relations that shape LGBTQ+ lives, meaning we have shared experiences of being constructed (and made to feel) non-normative in different parts of our lives. However, we are mindful that homophobia does not operate in the same way as transphobia does, meaning there are particular issues we have not experienced ourselves but have learnt much about from our participants. Additionally, trans people have been marginalised in broader LGBTQ+ politics, creating tension with this broad and diverse collection of people. This issue formed part of the interview discussions, exploring how participants felt in LGBTQ+ spaces.

These power relations are further complicated by our engagement with institutional spaces. We all occupied different positions at the time of the research – doctoral student, research, and professor. These positions enabled us to have shared experiences of the institution but also placed us in unequal power relations as researchers. As a way to manage these power relations, we all completed debrief forms following interviews, reflecting on each of our encounters. We highlighted how both participant and researcher felt whilst also noting any alterations that needed to be made to questions. There are multifaceted power relations at play in conducting this research that emerge through broader discourses of gender and sexuality, but also in institutionally specific relations. We have attempted to manage these through our planning and reflection of the project with the hope of contributing to positive change for trans people. We now consider our participants' navigation of anxiety-provoking spaces on campus.

5 | NEGOTIATING SPACES OF ANXIETY

In this first section, we examine the multiple anxieties that trans people negotiate on campus. Bathrooms and changing rooms were often mentioned, despite attempts at demarcating some bathrooms as "gender neutral." Cheryl refers to her negotiation of these feelings when using bathrooms:

> … you know like I never would go to the toilet between like 10 to and 10 past the hour. (Cheryl, transwoman, white, support staff)

For Cheryl, bathrooms become places associated with feeling vulnerable when extra people frequent them, creating temporal and spatial anxieties. Bender-Baird (2016) posits trans people must respond to power relations in set moments, times, and spaces, often adjusting their appearance. Here, we highlight how bodily functions must also be managed due to the anxieties that arise. Cheryl talks further of an encounter with a cleaner when trying to use the accessible bathroom:

> Cheryl: I've started using the disabled [accessible] loo because it's the least problematic, erm although I've been since recently challenged on that, so now I've started using the women's.
>
> Interviewer: Who challenged you on that?

Cheryl:	A cleaner … Because she was thinking well … say I was a woman, she knows I could use y'know the toilet that's right next door to it … it's one of those things of do I really want to get in the whole explanation of why I'm doing that? I almost like brace myself when I go to the loo, it's like y'know this kind of mental preparation, so going to the disabled was a way of kind of taking that out of the equation a little bit, but now I've got the same thing for both, because in either I'm going to get caught by the cleaner.

Due to a lack of gender-neutral toilets, trans people are sometimes required to use accessible bathrooms. However, accessible bathrooms – despite being demarcated as a space of refuge for trans people – can still promote feelings of precariousness.

Such anxieties are also part of the meanings that are attached to bathrooms at university, as Kurt, a transman, tells us:

> If you can't go to the toilet in public, it means you don't have any kind of refuge in public. So, if you just feel a bit shit or you get a bit of bad news, there's nowhere that you can go to go and have five minutes by yourself…. And most people can just go and do that. Whereas I'm like, "If you're trans in public, you're always in public." I think that's the thing. And I definitely feel like … I always feel like I'm being observed. (Kurt, transman, white, postgraduate undergraduate).

Bathrooms can provide spaces of safety, refuge, and friendship formation, yet can also promote fear, violence, and regulation (Bender-Baird, 2016; Browne, 2004; Cavanagh, 2010; Misgav & Johnston, 2014). Kurt highlights how he always feels observed on campus, and bathrooms that might provide a respite from this observation for most people are seldom available to him. For most people, the material boundaries of the toilet cubicle demarcate some form of privacy, which is not afforded to all trans people. Managing feelings of anxiety can become difficult when places that produce precariousness and insecurity feel inescapable.

Managing embodied practices were part of negotiating anxieties on campus. Lizzy, a transwoman who is also disabled, plays basketball at the university and finds changing rooms a source of anxiety:

> I only started basketball after I'd realised that I was trans. I tried using male toilets a few times and I did feel vulnerable and that's why I started using the accessible ones because I'm just able to do that and it's easier, it avoids situations. I can't imagine what it would have been like if I didn't have that, if I had to use the wrong facilities because I wasn't out. So, yes, I tend to just get changed at home. Like I mentioned earlier, changing rooms and being disabled is already a bit problematic. (Lizzy, transwomen, white, undergraduate student)

For Lizzy being trans and disabled provided more complicated forms of exclusion and anxiety. The material construction of changing rooms, and the visibility they afford is a source of intense anxiety and therefore she avoids using university facilities and changes at home, meaning her spatial and temporal pattern are managed differently to those who can use the changing rooms.

Some transwomen spoke about "playing down" femininities. For example, Rose is an undergraduate who is taking hormones to aid body transformation:

Rose:	HRT [hormone replacement therapy] does change the body shape and I feel very tired all the time, probably because you shouldn't mess up with the hormones … well, sometimes, like, some of my friends say, one of my friends is transphobic and he's in my classroom and I hang out with him sometimes, like wear some clothes that are big size and try to avoid too girlish dressing.
Interviewer:	Why do you wear clothes that are a big size?
Rose:	Like, to hide my butt.
Interviewer:	How does that make you feel?
Rose:	I can't truly be myself (transwoman, Asian, undergraduate student)

Rose's sense of discomfort about her body means she tries to "pass" as a man on campus, despite being a transwoman, a demand concurrent with feelings of comfort in her flat.

Lucy, a staff member who is a transwoman tries to "play down" femininity to avoid unwanted attention. Lucy adds:

> This goes for campus as well as the kind of general, part of the reason I do usually feel comfortable and quite un-hassled and in my safe space is because I deliberately choose not to wear … clothes that would draw attention to me. I don't wear makeup, I don't wear, I don't have a skirt. I mean I wear skirts sometimes when I am out and about in town but I won't wear a skirt here, I won't wear makeup. I won't wear lipstick when I come into work. And I think that is partly because I want to preserve my comfort zone. So in a way that shows I don't feel entirely comfortable yet at work and in a certain number of other areas in my life … professionally I know I wouldn't … but I, I think I have become very self-conscious and feel that I stood out. (Lucy, trans-woman, white, academic staff)

She explained how she attempts to avoid embodied practices that would mark her as "feminine." For Lucy, this investment in the campus as a safe space involves negotiating her trans embodiment. She also mentions an encounter that led to her avoidance of a colleague out of work:

> Actually, last night … because I live, this is probably, this information probably reveals one or two things, but … I went on a date last night, so I dressed up and I went … I went to the bus stop and like there was a member of staff who lives near me, and I was like "oh no!" And it is nothing to do with that member of staff, but I was like "Oh no!" But … I ran back 'round and waited for the bus to pass, and so "I won't pick that bus up, I will get a new one. I will get the next one." So … yeah, so ummm … still … I mean there is there certainly is this a part of the way I dress and I like to dress that I don't necessarily want colleagues to see. (Lucy, transwoman, white, academic staff)

Lucy highlights how this instability can shape how she moves through the city and points to the relationality between campus and city spaces. When she looks more feminine, she feels she has to avoid some colleagues. The campus is not yet a place that makes her feel fully comfortable.

Such anxieties are sadly all too common for trans people. As students (postgraduate and undergraduate) encounter supervisors, teaching staff, and lecturers, they are often faced with transphobic comments. These examples are from Jane and Jake who discuss encounters with some lecturers:

> Jane: The lad culture – in air quotes again – is perpetuated by some of the senior male academics. You are going to absolutely love this anecdote. I started wearing breast forms when I started transitioning because having a bit more of a feminine contour was really good for my self-worth and self-confidence. I also cycle a lot, I cycle into work. There's a shower at work. So, about 8:30 in the morning, just gotten into work, had my shower, got out of the shower, wet hair, got my boobs in, go into the office, come out of the shower, senior male academic, "Oh, you're looking very booby today."
>
> Interviewer: What did you say?
>
> Jane: There is a power imbalance there which made me not actually pull him up on it.
>
> Interviewer: So could you give me the "want to say version" and the in reality what did you say?
>
> Jane: So what I want to say, "If you'd have said that to one of your female students that would be sexual harassment. What makes you think it's not for me?" What did I actually said, I actually had a half hour meeting with him about my PhD, update on what's going on. (transwoman, white, postgraduate student)

> Interviewer: How did it feel when you were in your seminar when you were misgendered by your lecturer?
>
> Jake: It's just, it's really, really stressful, I guess. It just does end up making you feel like quite rubbish to be honest because especially if you're the middle of a seminar and you're in front of a lot of people you don't know, it's really, really hard to kind of speak up because it completely breaks the flow of the conversation and it makes people feel awkward because then they feel like they've offended you and it just causes a fair bit of confusion and awkwardness. (transman, white, undergraduate student)

In these encounters, Jake's and Jane's identities as "young people" (engaging with older and more established academics) results in disempowerment and felt precariousness. The corridors, classrooms, and social spaces in the buildings in

which these students frequent become sources of anxiety due to possible encounters with those who "hold" more power and reinforce the traditional gender binary.

Power relations unfold in spatial encounters on campus, as articulated by Jane:

> If I was asked to report or pull him up on that, I wouldn't. I wouldn't point the finger and say who that was because that person is in a position of power over me where things I would say would have a knock-on effect and repercussions on my future career. So, it's easier for me to keep quiet. (Jane, transwoman, white, postgraduate student)

Jane thinks carefully about challenging transphobic comments due to concerns about the possible ramifications, a situation which itself is generative of discomfort. These examples highlight how transphobia is not always challenged and provides some indication as to why. All too often, it is left to trans people to report such encounters, which is often seen as "not worth the time" or detrimental to future careers and relationships. Some people express anxiety in engaging in difficult conversations with those they encounter who reveal transphobia for fear of being seen as the "angry queer," "angry trans person," or "too disruptive" (Stone & Shapiro, 2017). For students, postgraduates, and early career academics, the issue of maintaining professionalism to avoid damage to career progression is an especially pertinent issue and a constant negotiation that emerges in and across spaces of encounter on higher education campuses. Power dynamics between students and staff, combined with the threat that this can pose to career prospects, can lead to a silence that leaves power imbalances unchecked, and the diversity and inclusion policies that HEIs might claim to practice do not protect those that they claim to (Ahmed, 2019). Misgendering and transphobic comments, then, can go unregulated on campus. Precariousness, in these cases, is produced through neoliberal institutional conditions that work alongside the precariousness of gender binaries, shaping social and spatial lives, where corridors and bathrooms might be avoided, or seminars and lectures missed. The lived experiences and negotiations of precariousness are very much embedded in the material and discursive spatialities of HEIs, where particular spaces that lead to certain kinds of encounters or do not afford privacy become more anxiety provoking. In the next section, we explore some of the ways in which our participants attempted to locate and create spaces of comfort to cope with this precariousness.

6 | CONTESTED SPACES OF COMFORT

For many of the participants the campus was imagined as a safer space than that of the wider city and enabled them to feel comfortable. Jake tell us:

> I don't know, maybe it's a bit naïve but I just assume in general in university space, especially one like this, is just going to be a bit more open-minded. It just feels a bit more diverse in general than I don't know, the local pub will or something like that. (Jake, transman, white, undergraduate student)

Jake, like many others, imagines the university as a liberal place that welcomes multiplicity in gender and sexual identities – this is not an uncommon feeling.

LGBTQ+ societies often provide comfortable spaces that offer respite from the everyday insecurities. As Alex, a non-binary student, tells us, "well, they only have, like, socials, but that's all they really have, which I find, like, it's nice to have a place where you can just chat with queer people." Jack, a transman and student, explains how the LGBTQ+ society provided necessary support when coming out:

> I wouldn't have come out if it wasn't for the LGBT officer [in the student union] now, because she was the one to make me … I do, I do tell her a lot that she helped me a lot, yeah. I think she knows, if she doesn't I will definitely let her know after this. (Jack, transman, white, undergraduate student)

Jack goes on to say:

> There's no like "hey, here, here are all the instructions," cause the first thing I did was google the name of the university and changing your name, or transgender, and nothing came up, so I just ended up going to the main building and being like "help." But yeah without the LGBT officer I wouldn't have had any idea what to do. (Jack, transman, white, undergraduate student)

Such spaces and societies often provide security for many trans students in higher education (Formby, 2017), from everyday conversations to navigating, often complicated and unclear administration systems, which we come back to later. It is here that marginalised people are undertaking the material and emotional work (Hochschild, 1983) to ensure that others are cared for.

However, such spaces do not enable all bodies to find comfort. Rose, an Asian transwoman, discusses how language makes her feel uncomfortable in such spaces:

Rose:	Like, the LGBT society got some events in a bar, but I never been there.
Interviewer:	Oh, you've never been?
Rose:	No, never joined those activities, because my English is not good. (transwoman, Asian, undergraduate student)

As discussed earlier, Rose is not out as trans to anyone on campus, therefore LGBTQ+ spaces can serve as places where she could be outed to peers and friends. At the same time, she finds these spaces inaccessible as they are often dominated by English speakers. Such relations are important for campuses that attract international staff and students, as non-white LGBTQ+ people's claim to belonging in the UK is not always legitimised by the broader community (Spruce, 2020). In another example, Sam explains how whiteness and class shape how comfortable they feel:

> So, I'm in a corner office with four people.… Three of them PhD students, one RA [research assistant]. Now the other reason that I haven't told the other two people in my office is that they're from different backgrounds. So, the two people I have told, my two friends, are both relatively similar to me in that we're all white middle-class people from Britain. And one of the other people in the office is a Saudi Muslim woman and another person is a guy from Indonesia who I know is very devoutly Christian. And I'm not sure that they would have positive reactions. But at the same time, I also think, is that me being a little bit racist in thinking that? So, I've taken the safe option and not said anything to them. But that could be in part due to my own prejudices. (Sam, non-binary/trans, white, postgraduate student)

Sam points to their own potential assumptions pertaining to the cultural and religious beliefs of their peers concerning gender and sexuality, highlighting a tension in the production of comforting spaces. Key here, is that Sam is aware of how their whiteness, class and nationality provides a way for them to create a comfortable working space.

A key message from these examples is that it is often left to the most marginalised to create spaces of security and comfort, utilising networks or embodying gender in particular ways to lessen the feelings of precariousness. As Sam tells us:

> So, I would say the student body is certainly very good at it or at least the student body as a whole is broadly apathetic and therefore, the people who do care enough manage to make their voices heard, I think. And so, the fact that the institution gives us the space to do that is good. I like that. The fact that it gives us the money to run events like that is good. (Sam, non-binary/trans, white, postgraduate student)

Sam praises the institution for providing space and funding to enable students to organise groups such as LGBTQ+ and feminist societies. Whilst this may be presented as positive, it allows institutions to remove accountability, and we would question who this "diversity work" is for (Ahmed, 2019). Campus spaces are clearly important for trans people, imagined and felt as secure relative to the wider city – and HEIs know this. Nevertheless, the ways in which this comfort and security is found places increasing emotional and material labour on students and staff who are marginalised. Events have to be co-ordinated, banners displayed, and energy is spent to create welcoming and comfortable spaces. Even so, when trans people try to create spaces of comfort, the ability to feel comfortable doing so is shaped by other identity arrangements – class, race, and ability. Therefore, whilst trans people on campus respond to precariousness to create sites of belonging, there are always other exclusions manifesting, creating new forms of precariousness. In the concluding section, we explore the importance of this emotional and material labour.

7 | CONCLUSIONS

We have built on understandings of precarity and precariousness as lived and embodied (Johnston, 2018; McDowell et al., 2020; Muñoz, 2017) to explore how trans people negotiate a higher education campus in North East England. This is not to say that trans people are *always* precarious, but can be made to feel precarious in different moments and spaces across

the campus. We highlight some of the ways in which university campuses can make trans people feel vulnerable, anxious, and insecure, but also the ways that trans people respond to this precariousness by attempting to locate or create spaces of comfort. However, these attempts to create comfortable spaces are unstable, contested, and even precarious themselves.

We have highlighted how precariousness and precarity are useful frameworks to examine embodied feelings of vulnerability (Johnston, 2018). For those who participated in the research, their lives often felt precarious due to binary understandings of sex and gender that shape higher education spaces and, at times, the uncertainty of future careers. Such precariousness is spatially imagined and experienced at different scales – be that the scale of the city, campus, or body. Focusing on these complex feelings, we have revealed how people respond to precarity by attempting to locate and create spaces of comfort. However, remaining sensitive to relations of power, such spaces are not comfortable and secure for all trans people. It is therefore important to keep experiences of precarity/security and vulnerability/safety in tension to reveal multiplicity in the ways people experience gender and place. Feminist and queer scholars may find this useful when thinking about how creation of more comfortable and inclusive spaces – thinking emotionally about precariousness – can highlight the contradictory and complex ways people negotiate insecurity and the emotional labour involved in responding to the *multiple* types of precariousness in their lives – along the lines of race, gender, class, sexuality, ability, and career status.

We contribute to trans scholarship by exploring the emotional and embodied experiences of a university campus in the UK, and providing insights into the ways that precariousness might be a useful framework for analysis. As we have highlighted, trans lives are not simply subject to uneven power relations that produce precariousness, but trans people are active in responding to feelings of vulnerability to create stability, comfort, and belonging. Vulnerability may constitute queer identities, spaces, and practices, as felt precariousness may produce different ways of being together. Always holding comfort/anxiety in tension can reveal how multiple power relations shape how different trans people are able to negotiate feeling precarious.

We have focused attention on the ways in which the spaces of a particular campus can act as important sites in which social relations take place. Departments, faculties, institutes, buildings, student unions, and social areas are imbued with power relations that shape everyday lives (Gieseking, 2007; Hopkins, 2012; Joshi et al. Sweet, 2015; Mearns et al., 2020). This research has contributed to knowledge concerning the ways in which HEIs are entangled in trans people's marginalisation, highlighting the need for further understanding of how diversity, inclusion, and discrimination play out in these spaces. In the UK, there are increasing pressures for universities to be "diverse and inclusive," yet from our research, it seems that much of this work is still being placed on marginalised people to create a sense of security, comfort, and belonging when they may themselves be precarious (Berlant, 2011; Bonner-Thompson & McDowell, 2020). Current equality and diversity campaigns (for example, Athena Swan and the Stonewall Equality Index) may not be working for those who are most marginalised, sometimes relying on stable understandings of sex and gender, whilst also becoming part of neoliberal agendas (e.g. institutional rankings). Critical geographers are ideally positioned to draw attention to the ways diversity and inclusion can be geographically *uneven* and therefore hold potential for adverse effects. We would suggest that institutions could invest in external organisations to *do* and support this work, so marginalised individuals are not always expected to manage their precariousness. This might also involve creating time and space for experts to engage in this work, without overloading already heavy workloads. Equality and diversity work is not easy (Ahmed, 2019), and requires financial investment and rethinking of current systems. We argue that social scientists should be continually critical of the initiatives that HEIs implement and questioning of methods to create belonging that only serve to reinforce the position of the (neoliberal) institution. Precarity-as-felt can provide important insights to understand how marginalised people are undertaking increasing emotional labour to create places of security, comfort, and hope as they negotiate the ways power continually re-emerges as equality, diversity, and inclusion continually transform.

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