

Introduction

Being Sensitive and Rhetorical Being

For there to be any sharing of symbolic meaning . . . a more originary rhetoricity must already be operating, a cons[t]itutive persuadability and responsiveness that testifies, first of all, to a fundamental structure of exposure.

Diane Davis, *Inessential Solidarity*

In a tweet first posted in late 2014, Sara Ahmed contends that sensitivity is not the deficit or liability that it's often made out to be, but an asset for subjects, and students specifically, in the struggle to survive: "Over-sensitive subjects / over-sensitive students are our best chance for survival." This book follows Ahmed's provocative claim and aims to theorize *sensitivity* as a rhetorical term of art, one that names the affective and even traumatic powers of language. In late 2014, there was a bloom of public controversy surrounding proposals that college instructors adopt the practice of using trigger warnings in their classes. While such proposals were actually quite few in number (two), the topic of trigger warnings became a site of passionate arguments about the powers of language and representation, as well as the responsibility of college and university teachers to their students.¹

The debate about trigger warnings marked a new permutation in arguments about higher education in America. The critiques of political correctness that had permeated the 1990s (and that also tended to target campus culture) had lost much of their traction (Weigel 2016). By mid-2015, critiques of students who might request or benefit from trigger warnings were very frequently delivered as critiques of students' sensitivity (see Hanlon 2015; Vivian 2023). *Sensitive Rhetorics* examines debates over trigger warnings along with debates over several other contemporary student activist issues in which claims about sensitivity were mobilized as critiques of students. As I'll demonstrate, claims about sensitivity are also claims about rhetorical theory: about what language, teaching, and activism can and should do. I propose that a rhetorical theory of sensitivity can equip scholars and teachers to meet student activism with a more ethical response in our scholarship and pedagogy.

Unsurprisingly in controversies related to higher education, many debates over contemporary student activism feature powerful appeals to academic freedom. Casting academic freedom as threatened or besieged is likely to elicit strong reactions from members of the higher education community, for whom academic freedom is a dearly held value. But like many beloved values, academic freedom is also a complex topos, imbricated with the beliefs and ideological commitments that help define it (see Cole, Cole, and Weiss 2015). Academic freedom is a site of disagreement, but as a topos, it also functions as a site of invention, of the production and circulation of arguments (Eberly 2000, 5). While there is a small body of legal precedent that delineates academic freedom in the United States, many scholarly and even popular treatments of the topic have been published in recent years. Perhaps the most widely held view of academic freedom is one that conflates it with First Amendment rights to freedom of speech and expression, arguing that academic freedom ought to serve the marketplace of ideas in which unrestrained competition is imagined to give rise to the best or most true lines of thinking. This neoliberal view of academic freedom, which advantages the corporate interests of universities, has been especially effective at recruiting adherents from all over the ideological spectrum to share in an essentially conservative and often outright reactionary critique of students' sensitivity.

Sensitive Rhetorics asks why appeals to academic freedom are often able to turn professors, even those with otherwise progressive values, against students. Across several different campus issues, critics have argued that the "sensitivity" of student activists poses a threat to academic freedom. Such critiques of sensitive students have the effect of redirecting public argument away from the policy issues to which student activists were responding and shifting the ground of the argument to the values of free speech and academic freedom instead. By analyzing critiques of sensitivity as they have circulated in public arguments about a range of campus issues, *Sensitive Rhetorics* challenges the common sense of such critiques and argues for the theoretical importance of "sensitivity" to rhetoric. I demonstrate that critiques of sensitivity mark a deep (though not necessarily conscious) ideological discomfort with the idea that language is a form of action, from the ancient sophistic view of language as intoxicating to the postmodern view of language as instantiating. A more "sensitive rhetoric" would affirm the power of language to injure, wound, or harm, since, as I argue, this power is a condition for rhetorical existents—or we might say, social beings—to relate to and affect one another.

The main argument of this book is that critics of "sensitive students" are missing the way that sensitivity is a condition of possibility for the work of teaching and learning that's central to the purpose of higher education. Through rhetorical analysis of the "sensitivity" debates I have selected, I the-

orize sensitivity as the condition of possibility for language to both injure, wound, or harm, and to affect rhetorical existents in the first place. The claims about sensitivity that circulate in these debates are also claims about the nature and power of language as well as pedagogy. By studying these claims and how they circulate, how they attach to powerful values like academic freedom, we can better understand the beliefs, values, and material investments that shape these debates.

Sensitive Rhetorics intervenes in these ongoing debates by surfacing submerged assumptions about higher education, the role of instructors and faculty, and the needs of an increasingly diverse student body. These assumptions frequently appear as premises, stated or unstated, in contemporary arguments about campus issues. University and college campuses are a focal point for public debate about the power of language to injure or do harm in part because the pedagogical relationship is always a rhetorical relationship in which parties are vulnerable to being affected by one another in language. *Sensitive Rhetorics* challenges the construction of students and faculty as occupying opposing sides in these debates.

College campuses are also once again the focal point of a renewed culture war, which is to say: a contest over the definition and position of crucial public values, including freedom of speech and of inquiry, an informed and democratic citizenry, disciplinary knowledge, professional expertise, and the rigorous critique of cultural norms. *Sensitive Rhetorics* contends that rhetorical theory and analysis can make important contributions to ordinary public decision-making, especially where community values meet concerns about ethics, justice, and effective rhetorical action. Building a theoretical case grounded in the conjuncture of activism and academia, this book contributes to a growing literature on social justice in university life. As Sara Ahmed argues (2012), doing activist work in higher education can also teach us about the institutional rhetorics of universities and the complex interchange between social justice organizing and institutional policymaking.

Sensitive Rhetorics joins an ongoing conversation in rhetorical studies about ethics, hospitality, and responsibility. Drawing on recent and influential works in the field, I argue that rhetoric is fundamentally relational, and that rhetorical relationships create ethical obligations and responsibilities that may sometimes conflict and may not always be reconcilable. *Sensitive Rhetorics* builds on earlier explorations of hospitality and rhetoricity (e.g., Davis 2010; J. Brown 2015; Rollins 2020) by examining how “sensitivity” functions as a figure for beliefs about rhetorical power and relationality in public debates, and it further theorizes sensitivity as a constitutive condition for being affected by language in a rhetorical relation. Grounded in accounts of specific student activist interventions and debates, *Sensitive Rhetorics* makes a case for the utility of rhetorical theory in understanding and responding to urgent po-

litical issues, and specifically for understanding how public rhetorics shape both public policy and pedagogical practice.

The public and academic values at stake in sensitivity debates are also *rhetorical* values. At stake is whether knowledge is an object that can be mastered and transmitted or a contingent construct of language and culture. At stake is how to establish, recognize, and make use of expertise if knowledge is something *other* than simple and objective. At stake is whether academic freedom would best be understood itself as the object of disciplinary knowledge, or rather as a condition of disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity as such. At stake is the role of education in a democratic society, and the responsibility of teachers to their students and to the wider public. At stake is the relationship between the work of scholarship and justice, if rhetoric is indeed an art of justice, that is, of living together with people who are different from us. At stake is how we (should) conduct scholarly inquiry and instruction, and ultimately whether or not public trust will remain vested in universities as sites of knowledge-making.

Sensitivity: A Common Thread

While the body chapters of this book focus on some of the most prominent domains of debate about sensitivity and academic freedom in the last decade—policies pertaining to trigger warnings, Title IX, safe spaces, and campus carry—there are undoubtedly other examples one could choose, entangled in much the same milieu as that which I analyze in the chapters that follow. As academic freedom is repeatedly invoked to bolster arguments about political and practical decisions, it becomes bound up in different ideologies and rhetorical ecologies. A common thread runs through many stories from scenes of contest over higher education: they are narrated as a battle between factions. Students are made out to be overly sensitive and overly censorious, while reactionaries within as well as outside the academy attempt to occupy the ground of free inquiry and debate. This drama has had a powerful influence on media and popular understandings of higher education, evidenced in TV series such as Netflix's *Dear White People* (2017–2021) and, more recently, *The Chair* (2021). Students are construed as extremely powerful, and whatever light is shed on the influence of alumni and donors in directing the action of university administrations, even in response to crises—such as escalating outbreaks of racist violence on campus—it doesn't outshine the spotlight on the sensitivity of students.

Many of the contemporary controversies that student activists are surfacing and engaging in are instructive for scholars and observers, not only in and of themselves but as sites of public debate about community values. By looking at the arguments that circulate about sensitivity, we can examine

(dominant) beliefs about how rhetorical agency and effectivity do or should function. Public rhetorics have policy implications, as well as pedagogical implications. Rhetorical theory can help us illuminate the implications of public critiques of sensitivity for public policy and for our classrooms.

My aim over the course of the chapters that follow is to build a theory of rhetorical sensitivity through analysis of contemporary student activist issues in which sensitivity has been at stake. In some cases, sensitivity is invoked overtly and often, whereas in others, similar arguments are encoded in terms of gender or race—or through the power fantasy attached to carrying a gun. Although it appears differently across these different areas of concern, *sensitivity* is the central term that delineates the scope of this project. Yet debates about sensitivity in higher education have been largely shaped by the circulation of arguments about academic freedom, specifically by worries that student activists will dismantle it. The relationship between these terms—*sensitivity* and *academic freedom*—illuminates the rhetorical landscape on which these debates play out. Although sensitivity is construed by its critics as the defining weakness of a generation (or two), I contend that sensitivity is a precondition for the process of inquiry and learning that academic freedom is meant to protect.

In the following section, I introduce relevant scholarship from three areas: academic freedom studies, rhetorics of student activism, and rhetorical theories of responsibility. Together these areas delimit the scope of this project, orbiting the central theme of sensitivity. This introduction contends that rhetorical theory is a crucial lens for making sense of the competing values attached to academic freedom, and of the ways they become articulated to and with pedagogy and policy in higher education. After all, debates over the proper relationships between knowledge, expertise, disciplinarity, education, democracy, and justice are debates that have defined the scope of rhetorical inquiry for millennia.

Conceptual Background: Academic Freedom

In a 2009 special issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly* dedicated to academic freedom, Jeffrey Nealon wrote that debates about academic freedom are largely confined to the university. But by the onset of the trigger warnings controversy just five years later, appeals to academic freedom had multiplied as issues in higher education garnered attention from a broader public. Often misunderstood as simply a special campus version of free speech, academic freedom is actually a legal doctrine, comprising a relatively small number of court decisions. But it's also a folk doctrine, by which I mean that both scholarly and nonexpert commentaries have contributed a lot to how academic freedom is defined and invoked in public arguments (Byrne 1989; Hofstadter and Metzger 1955; Menand 1996).

For the purposes of this book, it's important to see how faculty-centered appeals to academic freedom attach to and circulate alongside other (sometimes even competing) values and ideological commitments. Most often these include views about the proper production of disciplinary knowledge, the proper circulation of expertise through a credentialing and scholarly peer review, and the proper limitations of professionalism in a given discipline (Fish 2014). Propriety is key. Other arguments may invoke the value to the common good of a well-educated or well-informed democratic citizenry (Post 2012; Scott 2019), the highly esteemed freedoms of speech and expression, and the right and necessity of subjecting even widely accepted cultural and disciplinary norms to vigorous critique (Butler 2006). Yet one of the most fraught topoi connected to academic freedom in recent years is sensitivity.

Academic freedom bears a complex relationship to sensitivity. Most foregrounded in the past decade of debates about higher education is a relation of antagonism, in which sensitivity is construed as a, if not *the*, primary threat to academic freedom of our time. Sensitive students are said to be censorious students, able to effectively pressure faculty as well as administrators to remove topics, curricula, and even instructors from their classrooms if their sensitivities are offended. That there are, in fact, limits in both legal and folk doctrines to what academic freedom can protect, both inside and outside the classroom, does not seem to register a wrinkle of cognitive dissonance. Nor do the sensitivities of lobby groups, corporate donors, or alumni donors (McGee 2021) seem to be counted among the threats, which should tell us how the critics of sensitivity view money and status as determiners of whose sensitivity is truly threatening.

Sensitivity has also been said to be a key factor in self-censorship, often described in terms of a chilling effect. Under the floating sign of “viewpoint diversity,”² arguments about the value of conservative as well as regressive political viewpoints are mostly articulated as arguments about how students’ sensitivity makes the people who hold those viewpoints feel unwelcome in the academy (without a trace of irony—see Handa 2019). Although these types of political opinions are comparatively underrepresented in higher education, the available data still shows they do outpace the presence of people from underrepresented groups, especially at higher ranks (even according to data presented by conservative scholars to support their self-description as an endangered minority in academia, see Shields and Dunn 2016, 2; cf. National Center for Education Statistics 2021a). Yet conservatives hold the megaphone, at least insofar as their complaints about representation are more commonly amplified in mainstream media (and in state legislatures) than those of other minority groups in higher ed. This disparity should tell us where in the academy the deposits of rhetorical power still lie.

Understanding what types of arguments academic freedom has been claimed to shield—and where it *has* failed—is key context for critiques of sensitivity. Academic freedom failed to shield Steven Salaita when his appointment at the University of Illinois was abruptly rescinded in 2014 after reactionary outcry over Salaita's tweets about the state of Israel's bombing of Palestine. Former chancellor Phyllis Wise bowed to pressure from donors, an action that in itself exposed the institution to liability. She resigned, and the university settled Salaita's lawsuit. But the damage to Salaita's career was already done (Cloud 2015). Academic freedom does not protect scholars, especially those engaged in public intellectual work, from coordinated harassment campaigns, like those weathered by Dana Cloud, Saida Grundy, and many others (Cloud 2017; Kamenetz 2018). Academic freedom does not even effectively prop up the tenure system when a governor or state board of regents aims to dismantle or defang it, as in Wisconsin in 2015 and in Georgia in 2021. Nor does academic freedom seem to influence labor conditions for contingent faculty, grad students, or even tenured and tenure-track professors, not even in the midst of the ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic (Zahneis 2018). In fact, the relative strength of appeals to academic freedom seems to grow when its force is exerted downward: by state legislatures against public universities, by university administrators against faculty, and by faculty against students. This does not paint a pretty portrait of the relation between academic freedom and rhetorical power: academic freedom is often an ineffective shield for those with less institutional status, and an effective cudgel for those who already have more power.

And yet, academic freedom is supposed to provide insulation for those with less rhetorical power to criticize even the most dominant norms and beliefs. Judith Butler contends: "As long as voices of dissent are only admissible if they conform to accepted professional norms, then dissent itself is limited so that it cannot take aim at those norms that are already accepted and, hence, cannot inaugurate new fields or disciplinary paradigms" (2006, 114). Stanley Fish (2014) has argued that critique is only proper in a discipline when it is delivered in terms and style acceptable to peer experts who have established and maintained the very norms under fire. (It's worth asking here how expertise is actually valued in higher education: as a classification of mastery over a body of knowledge, or as an academic commodity and metric for retention, tenure, and promotion. The neoliberal interests of universities may be served by commodifying faculty expertise, even in ways that part with the interests of faculty themselves.) Fish's resistance to critique has some alarming consequences: it leads him to attack faculty shared governance, implying that administrators have their own form of expertise when it comes to tuition, fees, staff, resources, and parking structures, so faculty ought best to stay out of their way and separate our work from their nonacademic decisions.

The problem with this view strict view of academic freedom as an accessory of professionalism is that resources such as tuition and fees (and yes, even parking structures) affect access, for students as well as for faculty and staff. And access is more than simply enrolling in (or being hired by) the university, since access can be throttled even while one attends class, completes a graduate degree, or works as a professor (Price 2021). As Butler (2013) argues in an essay on academic freedom in the context of the Israeli state occupation of Palestine: “Academic freedom can only be exercised when the material conditions for exercising those rights are secured, which means that infrastructural rights are part of academic freedom itself.” Academic freedom is underpinned by its material conditions (see also Bérubé and Ruth 2015), and freedom of expression can be impinged upon not only by outright censorship but also by denying the possibility of its exercise—such as by denying freedom of movement (see also Butler 2015). If requests for access can be effectively pitted against academic freedom, however, then the people requesting are more easily dismissed as lazy, coddled, and overly sensitive.

In *Freedom of Speech and the Function of Rhetoric in the United States*, Michael Donnelly argues that free speech is a contingent and cultural value tied up with society’s beliefs about the proper uses of rhetoric. Academic freedom is similarly implicated in cultural beliefs about rhetoric, teaching, and knowledge. The sophistic view that rhetoric is an art of justice, that goodness, wisdom, and virtue can be cultivated and taught, and that knowledge is a construct best measured by its utility to humankind yields a very different approach to academic freedom than the view that knowledge is a product of professional training in disciplinary inquiry and rhetoric, at best, a handy way to convey it. In the age of Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok algorithms, in which populist suspicion of scholarly expertise and credentialed scientific authority can be measured by flattened rates of COVID vaccinations coupled with exhortations to “do your own research,” it is not guaranteed that the responsible exercise of scholarship—the performance of research and teaching—is going to remain vested in universities (see boyd 2018). If we want it to, we have to win a public argument about the goals and values of academic freedom (see Moody-Adams 2015; also Bérubé and Ruth 2022).

At stake are the reasons people choose to go to college, the financial investment of the state in assisting them, and in remunerating professors, instructors, graduate students, and other staff for their contributions to students’ education and to a body of knowledge. In other words, at stake are people’s lives and livelihoods, to say nothing of the quality of knowledge, deliberation, citizenship, democracy, and justice that the labor of scholarly work ultimately serves (or ought to serve). Should our lives and livelihoods depend on universities? Critiquing students for the neoliberal values of their universities does not seem like an adequate response to this question. In fact, doing so is a re-

actionary response that serves neoliberal ideology itself by settling blame on those actors with the least amount of agency in the institution.

Rhetorics of Student Activism

The fact that critiques of sensitivity have found a vein in which to circulate by targeting student activists necessitates an understanding of the rhetorical issues connected to student activism. What makes activism effective and sustainable? Recent social movement scholarship has emphasized the necessity of coalition building for successful activism, as in Karma Chávez's *Queer Migration Politics: Activist Rhetoric and Coalitional Possibilities* (2013). Erin Rand's *Reclaiming Queer: Activist and Academic Rhetorics of Resistance* (2014) also centers the importance of activist worldmaking practices in terms of both rhetorical invention and queer survival (see also Calafell and Ore 2021). Jennifer Nish's *Activist Literacies: Transnational Feminisms and Social Media Rhetorics* (2022) emphasizes the relational aspects of activism, examining the affordances of digital platforms for connecting activists with one another and across movements. Roderick A. Ferguson's *We Demand: The University and Student Protests* (2017) addresses student activists themselves, aiming to make usable some of the key insights from Ferguson's earlier book, *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference* (2012). Student activism—especially that which is rooted in the liberation of Black, queer, feminist, and disabled people—is about making a more just and livable world. When student activists target their critiques and demands at their own institutions, it is also about making their campuses more hospitable places to learn.

Not all student activism is animated by a vision of justice and a more progressive future; critical exceptions to these claims would include student organizations such as the reactionary Turning Point USA (see Boedy 2022) or Young Americans for Freedom (Hatemi 2021), the anti-feminist women's group the Network of enlightened Women, and Students for Concealed Carry (on the latter's astroturf—i.e., fake grassroots—origins, see chapter 4). The existence of such groups demonstrates that a diversity of opinion does exist on college campuses, which is to say that higher education is simply not a successful left-wing indoctrination factory. At many campuses in recent years, local chapters of the College Republicans have wielded substantial power to attract media attention and provoke disruption by inviting high-profile conservative speakers such as Ann Coulter, Turning Point's Charlie Kirk, or the one-time Republican darling Milo Yiannopoulos (for more on Yiannopoulos's campus harassment tactics, see chapter 1). Events like this can draw considerable resources from public institutions, who are required to pay for security when protests and counterprotests crop up in anticipation or response. Such provocations are strategic for those who wish to characterize higher education as in-

hospitable both to conservatives and to the exercise of free speech. Rescinding, canceling, or even simply challenging the invitations to their platforms that right-wing student groups may extend makes colleges and universities appear to be censorious (for more on “deplatforming” and campus guest speakers, see the conclusion). Student activism is not just one thing; it does not pull institutions in just one direction.

Whether progressive activism in higher education is itself a viable project is a central question for the emerging field of critical university studies. Matthew Boedy’s *May 1970* (2020) takes the month’s twin occasions of law enforcement violence against student protestors (at Kent State University and at the historically Black college Jackson State University) as points of departure for examining long-standing tensions in composition studies between radical pedagogy and the field’s disciplinary and professional status. Sara Ahmed’s indispensable work on diversity, equity, and inclusion rhetoric demonstrates the way institutions can co-opt even radical critiques (albeit not without tension, or we might say indigestion). *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (2012) examines, through interviews with what Ahmed terms “diversity practitioners,” how transformative work in universities has been limited by, resisted by, and absorbed into existing university cultures and procedures. This dynamic is one of the steepest challenges student activists face (the other being the power of administrators to drag out responding to student activists and simply wait for them to graduate). Ahmed continues her examination of what she terms “institutional mechanics” (6) in *Complaint!* (2021), tracing how the circulation and consequences of complaints (or the lack thereof) can teach us about how an institution works. *Sensitive Rhetorics* offers a way to conceptualize the strategic vulnerabilities of colleges and universities through the institutional rhetoric of sensitivity.

Institutional rhetoric offers an important perspective on student activism. Ryan Skinnell, in “Toward a Working Theory of Institutional Rhetorics,” reminds us of the many functions of institutions: they “foster—and sometimes betray—trust and dependency,” “invent and ossify customs,” “discipline and normalize institutional actors,” and “serve as arbiters of symbolic value,” to mention a few (2019, 78). Institutional rhetoric examines the constellation of these functions and the incoherence or contradiction they can occasion. In their “Institutional Critique: A Rhetorical Methodology for Change,” James E. Porter, Patricia Sullivan, Stuart Blythe, and others (2000) argue that institutions *are* changeable. They advocate for institutional critique as an activist methodology—that is, as a way of doing scholarship that also intervenes in institutional problems (see, e.g., Elder and Davila 2019). But they also point out that institutions can resist even ideologically successful arguments if material conditions could inhibit change. Thinking about the work of student activists as institutional critique can help us remember that students are scholars,

too, and that sensitivity is not the sole province of students, since institutions also have their sensitivities. Louis M. Maraj, in his book *Black or Right: Anti/Racist Campus Rhetorics* (2020), reminds us that institutions can act defensively, “preempt[ing] or skirt[ing] racial stress or even the subject of race to protect white feelings” (152n22). Defensiveness can be a sign of underlying vulnerability.

The rationale for academic freedom that links education to the common good is also relevant in thinking about rhetorics of student activism. Commonplaces about the link between education and democracy resonate throughout many histories of rhetoric as well as contemporary studies of democratic dialogue and deliberation (Asen 2015; Ben-Porath 2017; Boler 2006). As Rosa A. Eberly argues in *Towers of Rhetoric* (2018), many other cultural institutions, like TV or radio (or social media sites, for that matter), are “too interested in entertainment and ratings and profit margins to provide a place for publics to form by patiently allowing individuals to discover and discourse together about issues of common concern” (Archive 06). Eberly draws this conclusion: “The future of our democracy depends on public education” (Archive 06). Although our faith in this claim might be shaken by the ever-increasing interest of universities in entertainment and ratings and profit margins, I suspect that much of the rhetorical power of mobilizing academic freedom as a value derives from a continuing (if occasionally lapsed, or unrenewed) subscription to Eberly’s claim. And it’s not just what educators are doing that matters. It’s what students can do when they have the chance, which colleges and universities can provide them with, to deliberate and act together on matters of public concern.

Yet, the chance to act together is not always yielded easily to students. Jonathan Alexander, Susan Jarratt, and Nancy Welch argue in their introduction to *Unruly Rhetorics: Protest, Persuasion, and Publics* (2018) that when a discourse resists the voices of outsiders, disruption and unruliness may be one way for those outsiders to find entry. Civility, with all that it implies about politeness and deference to authority, is a powerful constraint on student activism. In *Writing Against Racial Injury: The Politics of Asian American Student Rhetoric* (2015), Haivan V. Hoang shows how an Asian American student group suffered from placing too much trust in civility. Their institution’s student government, failing to recognize the value of a diverse campus for all students, pulled financial support for an Asian American student mentorship program. In attempting to follow the prescribed institutional procedures, the activists sustained a significant and material loss. While Alexander, Jarratt, and Welch don’t necessarily valorize unruliness in itself, drawing distinctions about the ethical purposes of disruption, they do underscore disruption’s rhetorical force. And they remind us that an ethical rhetorical culture is not necessarily a civil or decorous one.

Rhetorical Theories of Responsibility

The question of what does make an ethical rhetorical culture brings me to the final area of conceptual background for this project: rhetorical theory, and specifically theories oriented toward exploring and cultivating responsible rhetoric. Judith Butler writes in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, “Does understanding from where speech derives its power to wound alter our conception of what it might mean to counter that wounding power?” (1997, 50). *Sensitive Rhetorics* attempts to respond to Butler’s query, taking seriously not only the power of language to wound but the vulnerability of rhetorical existents to being wounded. Language injures, argues Butler, when and because it exposes the body of the addressee *as* vulnerable to address. This rhetorical exposedness is termed *rhetoricity* by Diane Davis, which she defines as “an affectability or persuadability,” but which is actually not an *ability* at all (2010, 2). It is an incapacity, a *nonpower*: a sensitivity.

Sensitivity as a rhetorical term of art highlights the radical passivity of rhetorical existents—that is, our unclosable openness to the address or affection of others. This openness is the condition of possibility for becoming a rhetorical subject. Although the rhetorical “agent” is not a sovereign, responsibility for the exercise of rhetorical power derives from this open space, from the ability to respond, and from the prior inability to stop oneself from being affected by an other. This undergoing of affection, this suffering or even passion, has been described by Jacques Derrida as a “nonpower at the heart of power” (2006, 28). *Sensitive Rhetorics* aims to inscribe these valences of rhetoricity, its traumatic force and even violence (see also Rollins 2009), but also the possibility it thereby generates for becoming otherwise.

These claims about the nature of rhetoric and reality may appear to be unqualified. In *The Ethical Fantasy of Rhetorical Theory* (2018), Ira J. Allen contends that the idea of foundational truth is a fantasy, but a necessary or at least inescapable one, and that the advantage of fantasy for rhetoric is in its radical contingency and thus alterability. We judge our theories of rhetoric by how well argued they are, and by how much they seem to describe or explain our objects (or, subjects) of study. The theory of rhetorical sensitivity articulated in this project is not proposed as a noncontingent foundation but rather as a new or next alteration in thinking about responsible rhetoric. Theory is not simply a tool for understanding; that instrumentalist view would recuperate it to the teleologies of clarity and knowledge. Rather, theory is a way of inventing those new and next alterations in thinking that are necessary for seeing things differently, and for changing the conditions that constrain what is possible (see Alden et al. 2019, 4).

If sensitivity names a vulnerability to rhetorical affection that both exceeds and underwrites the capacity of rhetorical existents to receive and respond to

this affection, then sensitive rhetorics are those that take responsibility for the force of affection. This force may be effective or transformative, and it may also be violent, even traumatic—and sometimes all of these at once. Denying this will not make rhetoric more ethical. But to take up the work of sensitive rhetorics would mean doing scholarship in the pursuit of a more just and livable future.

Sensitivity, Vulnerability, and Wounding

Although I think *sensitivity* best names the irreparable rhetorical exposedness this book seeks to explore, I want to acknowledge the close connection to *vulnerability*, one I draw on throughout this book.³ Philosopher Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò has asked “why ‘I should be able to wound you’ ended up the guiding frame for (some) discussions about sharing and intimacy?” (Táíwò 2021). In this light, calling for vulnerability could be understood as a call to submit or yield oneself to the power of others, even in its potential for harm or violence. Yet, as I contend, to be invulnerable would mean to be insensate, incapable of being affected. Being able to be wounded is an inextricable aspect of being able to be affected. In this book, I am by no means calling for a right to wound others, but for the development of a theory of rhetorical sensitivity that accounts for this power, and further takes responsibility for it. In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* ([2004] 2006), Judith Butler links the acknowledgment of others’ vulnerability to the social granting of recognition that others’ lives are grievable, that they count as human. Drawing on the work of philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, Butler identifies “a constant tension between the fear of undergoing violence and the fear of inflicting violence,” a tension that stems from our mutual (if unevenly distributed) precarity (137). Butler argues that responding to another’s address, and to the precarity that address communicates, is precisely what arouses this tension. One is sensitive to the other’s address, without or against one’s own will: “There is a certain violence already in being addressed, given a name, subject to a set of impositions, compelled to respond to an exacting alterity” (139). This violence of address is constitutive; we would never feel it, never be moved by the tension it excites, unless we first sense it—and the vulnerability it entails.

Methods and Research Artifacts

Methodologically, *Sensitive Rhetorics* necessarily draws from a variety of humanities fields, including feminist and queer theory, critical race theory, disability studies, affect theory, and continental philosophy. A range of disciplinary lenses are needed to apprehend the key issues raised by contemporary student activism, and since academic freedom itself subtends the establishment of criteria and norms for expertise in all disciplines. This book depends

on rhetoric's capacity to incorporate multidisciplinary inquiry, a capacity that makes rhetoric a crucial field for scholarship that tests or exceeds the scope of traditionally siloed disciplinary works. My approach to rhetorical analysis is also inflected by Sharon Crowley (2006), who argues that rhetoricians should examine what beliefs and values are connected to an argument as it is circulated and changed by various parties to a public debate. Arguments are often taken up outside of the communities that originated them because of their appeal to some shared value, such as academic freedom—but such arguments may entail other submerged ideological commitments that rhetorical analysis can expose, explain, and ultimately intervene in.

Campus activism, and the public debates that swirl around it, can help illuminate the rhetorical, theoretical, and political issues at stake in these bodies of research. The research materials that delimit the debates under study in this project include public writing about these issues by students, scholars, administrators, and other commentators. I am interested in critiques of sensitivity that have been authored or amplified by members of the faculty, but I am also interested in instances of these critiques by outsiders, which evidence the influence and wide circulation of such arguments. Notably, though faculty members frequently tie their critiques of sensitivity to concerns about academic freedom, these critiques are often circulated, even by scholars, *outside* the context of scholarly peer review (e.g., in blog posts, or books published by popular presses). I am also interested in the way university and governmental policies stage or spotlight critiques of sensitivity, and the ways media coverage of student activism has circulated the same. Ultimately, all of these objects must be contextualized as satellites in the solar system of higher education, always moving in relation to the gravity of the university as an institution.⁴

Campus activism therefore anchors this study as the site of public debate about sensitivity. Although it's certainly not the only such site, debates about campus activism have preceded (or I might say portended) debates about sensitivity in other aspects of public life. Premises that first circulated in 2014 about the sensitivity of college students widened their scope in the years that followed to target whole constituencies of the US American public. Complaints about college students aren't a new phenomenon, but their rhetorical form reflects public beliefs about learning, higher education, and the purposes of universities. The critique of students' sensitivity circulated widely (and among disparate groups of stakeholders in higher education) in part because of its attachment to claims about the purpose and status of academic freedom. Academic freedom is a convenient proxy, rhetorically; outside the academy, sensitivity is said to infringe on the broader right of free speech instead. Academic freedom is a relevant and necessary topic for any analysis of contemporary debates about sensitivity in higher education; in each of the controversies detailed in the chapters that follow, claims about sensitivity and academic

freedom can be found together, each shaping the form of the other. Students' sensitivity wouldn't be understood as a matter of public concern if it couldn't be construed as threatening a public value. In the context of higher education, academic freedom is this value. Beliefs about it therefore constrain as well as enable beliefs about sensitivity, helping them to circulate and find currency.

If one views academic freedom as ensuring an unregulated "marketplace of ideas," then any attempt to criticize or alter the rules of the "marketplace" will be viewed as unwarranted and overly sensitive. Invoking academic freedom alongside sensitivity effectively redirects public argument, shifting the grounds of debate away from activists' issues and toward what are essentially rhetorical values: the social role of debate itself, and the purposes of hearing, discussing, and responding to different ideas (and practices) than one's own. Theorizing sensitivity is necessary to demonstrate how a rhetorical relation underwrites both difference and debate, and this relation depends on the ability of rhetoric to move as well as to wound. No doctrine of academic freedom that discounts this rhetorical sensitivity is adequate to the pedagogical or ethical demands of our current moment.

After 2020?

What has become of the "grave threats" to academic freedom that have been named from across the political spectrum over the past several years? Can we say definitively yet whether trigger warnings and safe spaces have destroyed the US American academy? Can we say that Title IX and campus carry policies have made college campuses less safe and more hostile? Higher education has faced significant changes and challenges in recent years, and in the wake of 2020, which saw both the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States and the loss of President Trump's bid for reelection. Can we say whether any of the threats to academic freedom supposedly posed by sensitivity that predated these events have subsided?

In Henry Reichman's *The Future of Academic Freedom* (2019), he argues that academic freedom has always been embattled. Pressure on and even threats to academic freedom come from dwindling state funding for higher education, replaced in university budgets with more tuition dollars and an increased reliance on the goodwill of private donors; from the erosion of shared governance, tenure, and labor protections as well as the ongoing adjunctification of the teaching faculty; and from plainly censorious state legislative battles, lately over racial sensitivity trainings that mention "white privilege" and all that's made to be represented under the sign of "critical race theory." Reichman also notes that "the physical safety of scholars—both students and faculty"—is increasingly jeopardized by harassment and threats of violence (2015, 249; see also Cloud 2017). The uptick in openly racist violence after President Trump's

2016 election only represented an intensification of hostility toward scholars of color that has shaped the US American academy since its inception.

So although the context for some of the issues analyzed in this book has changed over the years since the incidents I explore, we must remember that the context will keep on changing, and/but that there is no guarantee that these changes will always or overall represent progress. In fact, many of the debates examined here articulate backlash against progressive student activism that has never seemed to become self-aware of its consonance with regressive, reactionary politics. Even for those debates that many no longer feel of the present moment, we must pay attention to the way that arguments against sensitivity have developed, attaching themselves to values that help their circulation into wider public discourses and waiting for another moment of resurgence.⁵ Readers who rode out the Trump years must not forget that the discursive conditions for the critiques of sensitivity analyzed here, and for Trumpism's political success, ripened in the Obama years. While Trump's executive orders about higher education have been rescinded, lasting damage has been done in federal Title IX policy, in moving the Overton window of state legislative priorities for both higher education and K–12, and in the ongoing contest over immigration policy and the legal status of DREAMers, and so on. "After" doesn't simply mean "over."

Moreover, the advent in 2020 of a global coronavirus pandemic has thrown higher education into turmoil that's long outlasted the initial response of emergency remote teaching. In the absence of federal policies, colleges and universities in the United States have found themselves at the mercy of state legislatures' attitudes toward COVID-19 vaccine requirements (the irony of long-standing MMR vaccine requirements notwithstanding) and mask-wearing. Yet many of the pre-pandemic concerns about mental health, sexual violence, racism, and other ordinary traumas that affect students' lives and abilities to learn have only intensified, refracted through periods of long isolation and low social support, and pocked with grief for imagined futures, lost loved ones, and an incomprehensible global and national death toll. Perhaps "after" COVID, the temptation will be stronger than ever to harden, to become insensitive and invulnerable against the affection of others, perceived as a potential threat. But I hope this book will remind its readers that disavowing sensitivity does not protect us, nor does it give us the space to grieve and to heal; if we let it, our sensitivity can open us to a more equitable and just landscape for higher education.

Outline of Chapters

The first chapter, "Sensitive Students: Trauma, Trigger Warnings, and Access," focuses on critiques of sensitivity in the debate over using trigger warnings in

college classes. Students who advocate for using trigger warnings argue that language has the power to destabilize student survivors of trauma, and that trigger warnings are one way for instructors to help minimize the potential disruption caused by being triggered in a college class. Critics disavowed the rhetorical sensitivity of students and argued that academic freedom protected the right of instructors not only to select and assign course materials but also to challenge and even shock students for pedagogical reasons. Laying out the case for a rhetorical theory of trauma, chapter 1 contends that all rhetorical existents are vulnerable to one another because we are exposed to each other's affection in language. This chapter demonstrates the intervention that sensitive rhetorics can make in practical policy debates by surfacing the rhetorical consequences of how the trigger warnings debate has been argued. Beginning with this widely known campus issue, the first chapter illustrates the methods and theoretical framework that inform subsequent chapters. Sensitivity is not an ability; it is a condition of possibility for rhetorical affection and response that makes teaching and learning possible.

Chapter 2, "Sensitive Subjects: Sexual Misconduct Policy and Sexual Power," analyzes the trope of sensitivity in debates over campus sexual issues and Title IX. Student activists and advocates for Title IX see themselves as offering a critique of the operation of sexual power in institutions (see Ahmed 2017). Critics of Title IX argue that university Title IX proceedings violate the due process rights of the accused and encourage students to understand their sexuality as legally fraught and themselves as fragile victims—yet some critics, like Laura Kipnis, have come to see themselves as the real victims of Title IX and their opposition to the policy as a defense of academic freedom. I argue that critiques of sensitivity misrepresent or misunderstand student activists' arguments that sexual harassment is a form of institutional power. Following Jennifer Doyle's (2015) analysis of Title IX as "the administrative structure through which the university knows what exposure feels like" (24), I argue that an institutional rhetoric of sensitivity can help us understand the legal, financial, and ethical relations of the university as themselves structured by exposedness. Chapter 2 argues that while power can function to insulate sensitivity, even institutions are sensitive: an institutional rhetoric of sensitivity can help us understand the legal, financial, and ethical relations of the university as themselves structured by exposure.

The third chapter, "Racial (In)Sensitivity: Black Student Activism and the Demand for Safe Spaces," examines the wave of Black student-led occupations in 2015–2016, following the encampment of protestors on the University of Missouri's Carnahan Quad. Fora organized on campuses and online using the hashtag #BlackOnCampus articulated the commonality of negative experiences among Black students. Petitions like those published at TheDemands.org identified specific policy changes and other requests designed to improve

and implement universities' efforts toward diversity and inclusion, and to make the on-campus life of students of color more equitable and more bearable. Yet critics complained that the efforts of Black students to establish safe spaces to discuss and organize in response to their experiences were exclusionary, overly sensitive, and undermined free and academic debate. I contend that the occupation illustrates José Esteban Muñoz's (2009) framework of utopian performativity—that is, it both names *and* instantiates a safer future for Black students by and through the rhetoric of the demand. Chapter 3 contends that sensitivity enables marginalized communities to engage in the very debates that their critics were calling for. Sensitivity itself can be utopian; it can be a way of instantiating a future even in the midst of an intolerable present.

Chapter 4 looks at a slightly different constellation of academic freedom and sensitivity on the issue of campus carry policies, which mandate that public universities and colleges must allow concealed handguns in their classrooms. In this case, faculty as well as students who oppose guns on campus *on the grounds of academic freedom* are the ones targeted by accusations of sensitivity. "Vulnerability to Violence: An Account of Campus Carry in Texas" draws on the history of campus carry policy in Texas as well as the unsuccessful lawsuit brought by professors at the University of Texas at Austin against state and university authorities on the grounds that Texas's campus carry law infringes on their constitutional rights. This chapter argues that the threat of violence places serious constraints on academic freedom, but that the campus carry debate shows that the value of academic freedom can be cut loose by critics on an issue where sensitivity and academic freedom appear to be aligned rather than opposed. Academic freedom and sensitivity are not incompatible values. Remaining sensitive means refusing to be indifferent to violence.

The conclusion condenses the argument of the book that sensitivity marks a place in public argument where our vulnerability to one another as rhetorical existents gets denied and even buried. This final chapter also draws out the implications that those of us committed to the value of academic freedom and to its place in the education of a democratic citizenry should not be persuaded by critiques of sensitivity but instead make sensitivity the basis of a more ethical rhetorical theory. Sensitive rhetorics can reshape these debates about university policy and culture.