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## TERF Wars: Introduction

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# TERF wars: An introduction

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In the academic year of 2017–18, one of the editors of this volume convened a course on gender and sexuality at a UK university. The course elicited overwhelmingly positive feedback from students. However, following examinations an invigilator expressed concern, communicated via management, with the language some students used in their answers. Specifically, the invigilator took issue with students employing the acronym ‘TERF’ (Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist) to criticise a range of ideological positions, because they considered the acronym a misogynist slur. The course convenor’s line manager subsequently asked whether the term was used within teaching materials.

The convenor had not, in fact, used the TERF acronym at all in any of their teaching, nor explicitly engaged with questions of ‘pro’ or ‘anti’ trans<sup>1</sup> positions within feminism. A lecture on trans feminism had focused specifically on understanding transphobia as a manifestation of misogyny, drawing on the work of writers such as Julia Serano (2007), and media analysis of films, including *Silence of the Lambs* and *Ace Ventura*. It was the students themselves who applied what they had learned from contemporary popular discourse to their exam scripts. They had chosen to use the acronym to reference a series of increasingly fraught disputes over how feminism should conceptualise and respond to trans identities and experiences, and did so because ‘TERF’ was part of their everyday vernacular in discussing the politics of gender, sex and inclusion/exclusion in feminism. The invigilator’s objection to the acronym, meanwhile, is indicative of wider

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disagreements over the deployment of language and, indeed, the very terms of debate when it comes to disputes within feminism.

This anecdote illustrates an experience that we have had on numerous occasions as feminist scholars working in trans studies. We have not sought out the TERF wars; rather, the TERF wars have found us.

We consider a sociological understanding of this phenomenon to be vital, because it is difficult to comprehend what happened even in the minor disagreement described above without understanding how and why the convenor, invigilator, and students all effectively talked past one another. Intense debates over trans issues, feminism, anti-trans ideologies, and the very language employed by various agents in these debates are not just terminological disputes or about how sex and gender should be conceptualised. They are also debates about information, and how people relate to it in a time of information overload; they are debates about truth, and how people relate to truth in a 'post-truth era'. The trans/feminist conflicts we refer to as the 'TERF wars' reflect the current conditions of our time in which public discourse is dominated by political polarisation, deepened by the proliferation of misinformation and distrust in 'experts' whose knowledge may not speak to individuals' cultural common sense. These are contemporary phenomena with deep historical roots, which must be interrogated to make sense of the current landscape.

Analyses of trans-exclusionary rhetoric provide an important contribution to sociology. This is not only because they offer an insight into the production of ideologically ossified, anti-evidential politics (including within academic environments), but also because of what can be learned about power relations. Questions of whose voices are heard, who is found to be convincing, what is considered a 'reasonable concern' and by who, and how these discourses impact marginalised groups are key elements of sociological enquiry.

In this introduction, we set out the political, social and epistemic context in which this edited collection is located and into which it intervenes. We consider the current backlash against trans rights, the political landscape of anti-trans politics, and their relationship to older discourses of gender, femaleness and womanhood. We also examine the construction of knowledge about trans phenomena within feminism and more widely, the uses of 'science' in trans-exclusionary arguments, and the broader ideological landscape in which these arguments are made. In so doing, we show not only why a critical social interrogation of the TERF wars is necessary in 2020, but also why this interrogation should be a trans feminist one.

## **Trans-exclusionary politics and 'gender ideology'**

In the UK context in which we write, a significant upsurge in public anti-trans sentiment has taken place since 2017, when Prime Minister Theresa May announced the Conservative government's plans to reform the Gender Recognition Act 2004 (GRA); a proposal that was also supported by other major UK political parties. While the GRA enables trans people to change the sex marker on their birth certificates from 'female' to 'male' or vice versa, the process involved is frequently experienced as unduly medicalised, bureaucratic, invasive and expensive (Hines, 2013). This is because changing one's

birth certificate sex marker requires, among other things, living in one's preferred gender for two years and having a medical diagnosis of gender dysphoria (or homologous older term such as 'transsexualism'). Trans people in the UK can change their name and sex marker on nearly every other relevant record via a process of self-determination without first changing their birth certificate (including with the National Health Service, Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency and Passport Office<sup>2</sup>). Doing so usually only requires a simple statement of intent to be henceforth known by the new name and/or sex/gender. Yet, as a form of legal recognition, the birth certificate continues to have symbolic importance for many people. The GRA reform plans were largely driven by a proposal to allow trans people to change their birth certificates via self-determination as well. These plans were welcomed by many trans people and LGBT organisations.

In 2018, the UK government held a public consultation on GRA reform. The effect, however, was a backlash against the proposed changes. Leading up to the consultation, multiple campaign organisations were founded to specifically resist self-determination as the mechanism by which birth certificate sex marker can be changed. Organisations including A Woman's Place UK (WPUK), Fair Play For Women (FPPW), Mayday4Women, We Need To Talk and the Lesbian Rights Alliance held meetings across the UK, building a new trans-exclusionary feminist movement that also rapidly expanded online through digital platforms, such as Twitter and the Mumsnet 'feminist chat' message board. The activities and views of these groups have also been widely reported by the media. GRA reform has not materialised at the time of writing. On 22 April 2020, Women and Equalities Minister Liz Truss delivered a speech to the Women and Equalities Select Committee, where in reference to GRA reform, she indicated that the future of the Act would be reported by summer 2020. Truss emphasised three priorities in relation to this: the 'protection' of single-sex spaces (erroneously implying that the GRA has or would have interplay with who may use them); 'maintaining the proper checks and balances in the system' (implying a gatekeeping model for trans adults' autonomy); and 'protecting' under 18s from 'decisions they could make', raising serious concerns regarding the already highly constrained ability of trans people under 18 to access medical care related to gender, but also an implicit threat to bodily autonomy for all young people.

To understand the nature of the backlash, two important points are worth unpacking regarding what, exactly, is being opposed and espoused by groups like WPUK and FPPW. The first concerns how sex and gender are being operationalised: a central concept mobilised by these organisations is 'women's sex-based rights', and this concept is used in ways that emphasise the distinction of sex (as 'biological' or material reality) from gender (as social role or ideology). Organisations opposed to gender self-determination have argued not only that there is a clear distinction between sex and gender, but also that UK laws such as the GRA and the Equality Act 2010 should be interpreted in such a way that trans women are understood as 'male', trans men as 'female', and non-binary people as implicitly delusional (Fair Play for Women, 2017). That is to say, the view of these organisations is that while 'gender' may be subject to change, 'sex' is immutable. Notably, this position ignores decades of feminist scholarship which argue that gender and sex are discursively co-constituted (a point to which we return below),

along with the fact that ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ are not actually independently defined within UK law (Jenkins & Pearce, 2019; Sandland, 2005).<sup>3</sup>

The second point concerns what self-determination is argued to render possible. Organisations resisting self-determination discursively position it as ‘dangerous’, arguing that it enables ‘men’ (a category frequently presumed to encompass trans women and non-binary people assigned male at birth) unfettered access to women-only spaces. Trans people and allies often describe proponents of this approach as ‘TERFs’ because they tend to support trans women’s/girls’ *exclusion* from spaces such as women’s toilets, changing rooms, rape crisis centres, shelters and feminist groups.

The backlash against the proposed GRA reforms, and the trans-exclusionary feminist movement that has taken shape in the UK in relation to it, did not emerge in a vacuum. Rather, they are a contextual expression of a wider trans-exclusionary political climate with international dimensions. For example, in 2016, the US state of North Carolina introduced a law requiring individuals to use public bathrooms corresponding with their ‘biological sex’. The aim was principally to prohibit trans people from using toilet facilities consistent with their gender. Subsequently, similar laws (so-called ‘bathroom bills’) were proposed in other US states (Barnett et al., 2018). Proponents of anti-trans ‘bathroom bills’ argued that they were required to protect the safety of cis<sup>4</sup> women, who could supposedly become victims of harm committed by trans women and non-binary people, who, in turn, were (implicitly or explicitly) positioned as ‘men’ who ‘identify as’ women.

This kind of argument is a contemporary manifestation of older sex/gender essentialist discourses: trans women have long been positioned as a threat to cis women’s safety, especially in Western societies, because trans women’s bodies have been discursively associated with dangerous male sexuality and potential sexual predation (Westbrook & Schilt, 2014). Women-only facilities like toilets are often positioned as ‘safe spaces’ granting (cis) women protection against gender-based harm, and especially sexual violence (see Jones & Slater, this collection). Yet, this notion of toilet ‘safety’ is part of a wider protectionist politics around (cis) women’s bodies that function to protect idealised notions of white female vulnerability (Patel, 2017; see also Koyama, this collection). The cultural positioning of trans women as dangerous to cis women relies on gendered conceptualisations of (cis, implicitly white) women as necessarily fragile in relation to (cis) men, who in turn are conceptualised as having superior physical (and sexual) prowess. By positioning (cis, white) ‘females’ as a category *uniquely* vulnerable to the threat of ‘male’ violence (and especially ‘biological’ male sexual violence), trans-exclusionary arguments around toilet access – including those advanced by self-proclaimed feminist groups – lend support to the gendered and misogynistic discourses that have long positioned (white) women as the ‘weaker sex’ needing protection (by men, from men).

These discourses have racist undertones, as the implicit whiteness of the women who are the subject of protection means that racialised and especially Black women and non-binary people are more likely to be considered dangerously masculine (Patel, 2017). This is due to the enduring colonial legacies that have long defined racialised women as the unfeminine or ‘masculine’ contrast to white women’s presumed ‘natural’ femininity (see e.g. McClintock, 2013). Racialised women (cis and trans alike), non-binary and intersex people are especially likely to be rendered ‘gender suspect’ due to discourses that position bodies of colour as gender deviant in relation to white body norms (Gill-Peterson,

2018; Snorton, 2017). Moreover, discourses that position trans women and non-binary people as a ‘threat’ to cis women elude how (white) cis women’s ability to claim a position of vulnerability in this context is, itself, a reflection of the power that (white) cis women have over trans women (as well as racialised subjects of all genders). One’s ability to be recognised or awarded a position as ‘vulnerable’ is conditioned by whiteness and gender normativity. It is often trans women and non-binary people, especially trans women and non-binary people of colour, who are most vulnerable to gender-based violence in women-only spaces in material terms (see Jones and Slater, this collection). It is disproportionately cis people (both women and men) who are dangerous to, and perpetrators of violence against, trans women, not the other way around (Bachman & Gooch, 2018; Hasenbush et al., 2019). In this way, trans-exclusionary feminist politics can work to erase forms of gendered and racialised violence.

Notably, while many (but not all) trans people and allies describe trans-exclusionary feminist campaigners as ‘TERFs’, the campaigners themselves generally object to this acronym. In recent years, many have preferred to call themselves ‘gender critical’ – a term that denotes, less a critical approach to gender, and more an emphasis on claiming ‘biologically defined’ notions of femaleness and womanhood over gender identity and social concepts of gender. In addition to attacking trans people’s right to access public toilets in line with their sex/gender presentation, ‘gender critical’ feminists have criticised social developments such as LGBTIQ-inclusive school education and positive media representations of trans people. Increasingly, they argue that such developments result from what they call ‘gender ideology’ (see e.g. 4thWaveNow, 2019).

The language of ‘gender ideology’ originates in anti-feminist and anti-trans discourses among right-wing Christians, with the Catholic Church acting as a major nucleating agent (Careaga-Pérez, 2016; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). In the last decade the concept has been increasingly adopted by far-right organisations and politicians in numerous American, European and African states. They position gender egalitarianism, sexual liberation and LGBTQ+ rights as an attack on traditional values by ‘global elites’, as represented by multinational corporations and international bodies such as the United Nations (Korolczuk & Graff, 2018). In this context, ‘gender’ is made to stand in for identity politics and notions of social malleability: ‘*Gender* provides the theatre for the struggle for hegemony . . . a contest for redefining liberal democracy where “gender ideology” embodies numerous deficits of the so-called progressive actors’ (Kováts, 2018, p. 535, emphasis in original).

Mallory Moore (2019) traces the first appearance of ‘gender ideology’ in a ‘gender critical’ context: a comment responding to a 2016 blog post on trans-exclusionary feminist website *4thWaveNow*, which shared material from conservative advocacy group the American College of Pediatricians (not to be confused with professional body the American Academy of Pediatrics). From this time the concept saw increasing circulation in trans-exclusionary feminist discourse, especially following its use by ‘gender critical’ activist Stephanie Davies-Arai (who has been interviewed and profiled on *4thWaveNow*), at a London conference attended by anti-trans campaigners (Singleton, 2016).

Yet, what is actually meant by ‘gender ideology’ (along with anti-feminist uses of terms such as ‘genderism’ and ‘gender theory’) has not been clearly defined: as Elżbieta Korolczuk and Agnieszka Graff (2018, p. 799) argue, ‘these terms have become empty

signifiers, flexible synonyms for demoralization, abortion, non-normative sexuality, and sex confusion'. This makes them an effective tool in conjuring a moral panic around the breakdown of conventional notions of sex/gender, as evidenced for example in the increasing visibility of the trans liberation movement. Meg-John Barker (2017) observes a range of contradictions within the moral panic over trans existence within the UK media, with trans people blamed for both dismantling and reinforcing the current gender system, and trans women's status as women questioned on the grounds of biology in some contexts, and socialisation in others. The proposed solution is frequently to set aside questions of 'gender' in law and policy, and instead define women and men in law on the basis of 'birth sex'. In 2020 this became a legislative reality in several jurisdictions. In March the US state of Idaho banned trans people from changing their birth certificates, and in April the government of Hungarian dictator Viktor Orbán (an outspoken critic of 'gender ideology') moved to legally redefine sex on the very same day the far-right leader was granted the power to rule by decree.

Ultimately, the growing social acceptance of trans and non-binary people has challenged immutable, biologically derived conceptualisations of both 'femaleness' and 'womanhood'. 'Gender critical' opposition to this can be understood as an emotionally loaded, reactionary response to reassert essentialism, resulting in interventions such as the 'Declaration of Women's Sex-Based Rights' (see Hines, this collection) which effectively echo the demands of far-right, anti-feminist actors.

## Trans/feminist relations

While trans subjectivities and feminism are sometimes positioned as oppositional, especially by 'gender critical' writers, this way of framing their relationship is not the dominant (nor an accurate) understanding of the landscape of feminist thought. The starting point for the relationship is often identified with the publication of Janice Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire* (1979), which positioned trans women as violent male subjects infiltrating women's spaces and appropriating women's bodies. Eleanor MacDonald (1998, p. 3), for example, described Raymond's work as 'the classic (and until quite recently, nearly the exclusive) feminist statement on the issue of transsexualism'. Yet, Raymond's depiction of trans people is neither the first nor the exclusive feminist account of trans issues. Indeed, Susanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna's *Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach* (1978) was published a year earlier. This work extensively discussed transsexualism, not in terms of transsexualism-as-misogyny like Raymond, but as an example of how we are all 'doing' or performing gender.

MacDonald's own approach to transsexualism was not hostile, but rather, like Kessler and McKenna's (1978), curious about what trans perspectives 'might have to contribute to the understanding of gender experience, gender relations or women's oppression' (MacDonald, 1998, p. 4). While MacDonald noted that many feminist writers had ignored trans phenomena because of their apparent rarity and association with medical literatures, feminist approaches to trans issues were beginning to change when she made this observation. By the late 1990s, trans subjectivities and gender diversity became feminism's entry point to understanding the social construction of gender more generally in many feminist accounts. This was especially due to the advent of postmodern feminism and



queer theory – particularly Judith Butler’s (1990) interventions that theorised binary notions of sex and gender as culturally constituted – along with the emergence of transgender studies as a field in the 1990s (Stryker & Aizura, 2013). It also followed from trans people’s everyday involvement in feminist movements, which has been a reality in many countries for decades (Cutuli, 2015; Enke, 2018; Garriga-López, 2016).

Mainstream feminist thought has generally seen the relationship between feminism and trans phenomena as a locus for enquiry into the construction and manifestation of gender relations and systems. For example, the preface for the 2011 special issue of *Feminist Studies* on race and transgender studies opens with the claim that ‘for some time now feminists have struggled with the challenges that transgender subjectivity brings to sexuality and gender binaries, especially in the understanding of the category “woman”’ (Richardson & Meyer, 2011, p. 247). Richardson and Meyer do not imply, however, that these struggles concern whether or not feminism can be trans-inclusionary or whether trans being threatens feminist praxis. Rather, they highlight the challenges of centring marginalised voices in feminist scholarship, and the need to address the predominant whiteness of transgender studies, both of which remain highly relevant issues (Green & Bey, 2017). While there have been a few relatively prolific trans-exclusionary radical feminist scholars (e.g. Jeffreys, 1997, 2014), they have generally not been in dialogue with contemporary feminist theory, especially that written by trans women and allies with trans-inclusionary politics (with the exception of Hausman, 1995). Rather, trans-exclusionary feminists have generally sat outside decades-long trans/feminist productivity, partially due to convictions that (biological) notions of shared ‘femaleness’/‘womanhood’ are necessary for feminism, and trans bodies and subjectivities pose a threat to these notions (as discussed in this collection by Hines, Koyama, and Carrera-Fernández and DePalma).

In understanding the current landscape of trans-exclusionary feminist politics, the terminology used by different parties in the debates is central, and constitutes a challenge for analysing trans-exclusionary discourses. This is because language is being deliberately used to include, exclude, and/or denote power relations: for example, trans-inclusive feminist writers tend to prefer the term ‘trans women’, because this implies that a trans woman is a kind of woman (like ‘gay woman’). ‘Gender critical’ writers, however, generally use ‘transwomen’ and avoid using ‘cis’, which can (implicitly or explicitly) exclude trans women from the general category ‘women’, by conflating ‘women’ with ‘cis women’.

Similar debates surround the acronym ‘TERF’, which was originally used in the late 2000s by some cis women to explicitly distinguish their own radical feminism from trans-exclusionary approaches (Smythe, 2018). ‘TERF’ is now employed by many trans-inclusive feminists and rejected by trans-exclusionary campaigners. Individuals who object to the acronym ‘TERF’ often argue that it amounts to a misogynist slur, as in the case of the external examiner in the opening vignette. Certainly, TERF (like ‘cis’) is often used in angry commentaries online by both cis and trans feminists, either as an accusation (e.g. ‘you’re a TERF’) or an insult (e.g. ‘fuck off TERF’). Yet, it is important to understand and account for the power dynamic at play here. In examples such as those above, members of a marginalised group and their allies seek to identify, and express anger or frustration at, a harmful ideology that is promoted primarily by and in the interests of those who are systemically privileged *as cis* (men as well as women). That is not



to say that this is a helpful process without qualification. For example, a well-meaning but poorly-informed individual may be unfairly labelled a ‘TERF’ due to their lack of awareness or understanding of the realities of trans lives. This does not, however, mean that ‘TERF’ actually functions as a *slur*. Christopher Davis and Elin McCready (2020), for example, have argued that while the acronym can be used to denigrate a particular group, this group is defined by chosen ideology rather than an intrinsic property (in contrast to trans people for instance, or women). It is this denigration of a group defined by an intrinsic property that is necessary to constitute a slur. Moreover, in the case of ‘TERF’ the act of denigration does not function to subordinate within some structure of power relations (in contrast to acts such as misgendering, and sexist slurs such as ‘bitch’).

More confusingly, debates exist over the appropriate use and actual referent(s) of the ‘TERF’ acronym. Recent years have increasingly seen ‘TERF’ used to refer to transphobia or transphobic individuals in general, losing sight of its original meaning (trans-exclusionary *radical feminism*). Trans communities and their allies are often divided on when and how anti-TERF language might go too far; notably, trans feminist writers have criticised interventions which use excessively violent imagery, especially when this is propagated primarily by male and/or cis individuals. For example, Beth Desmond (2019) criticises a viral video in which a male video game character repeatedly stabs a female character labelled as a ‘TERF’, observing that ‘trans women have nothing to gain from a man delighting in inflicting violence against women’.

Simultaneously, a growing number of anti-trans campaigners associated with radical feminist movements have openly aligned themselves with anti-feminist organisations. For instance, from 2017 US group the Women’s Liberation Front (WoLF) have partnered with conservative organisations The Heritage Foundation and Family Policy Alliance, both known for supporting traditional gender roles and opposing abortion rights, comprehensive sex education and same-sex marriage. This raises the question of whether groups such as WoLF might properly be considered ‘radical feminist’ (and hence, ‘TERF’) organisations at all. However, it is important to acknowledge that such organisations *do* explicitly draw on the language of women’s liberation, and effectively represent the legacy of radical feminist writers such as Raymond (1979) and Jeffreys (1997). Feminists – and especially radical feminists – must contend with this: hence the creation of the ‘TERF’ acronym in the first place. In this work, we therefore seek to focus specifically on trans-exclusionary ideology and action that is associated with feminisms, rather than attempting to draw a boundary around what does or does not ‘count’ as a feminist intervention.

The TERF wars, then, are best understood as a series of complex discursive and ideological battles *within* (rather than *against*) feminism. Feminist histories and debates over language are central to this contested landscape. So too are notions of ‘truth’ and ‘neutrality’, which are invoked alongside trans-exclusionary feminist discourses to undermine trans activism and research.

### **‘Gender critical’ feminism in the post-truth era**

It is increasingly argued that we are living in a ‘post-truth’ era, where conventional notions of expertise and the epistemic status of facts are fragmenting, exemplified by the proliferation of so-called fake news especially in digital spaces (Marres, 2018). As an

unprecedented number of people have access to the internet and social media where they can read and circulate information of all kinds, numerous differently positioned knowledge claims now coexist digitally. Indeed, it has been argued that many people are abandoning conventional criteria of evidence in favour of alternative knowledges and beliefs (Lewandowsky et al., 2017). This ‘post-truth’ environment is frequently invoked by ‘gender critical’ writers, who argue that trans people’s knowledge claims are endorsed by media and legislative bodies in a manner that is difficult to oppose (Brunskell-Evans & Moore, 2018; Davies-Arai, 2018; Moore, 2018). For example, Heather Brunskell-Evans and Michelle Moore (2018, p. 5) claim the idea that young transgender people are ‘born in the wrong body’ is ‘relentlessly promoted by transgender lobbyists within a cultural climate where challenge is silenced’. Others identify ‘silencing’ factors such as ‘fear of criticism or controversy’ especially around ‘allegations of transphobic bigotry’ (Kirkup, 2019), cancelled event bookings after venues received complaints about transphobic content (Doward, 2018), and individuals refusing to participate in public discussions with those they feel are transphobic (Bindel, 2018). There are assertions that anti-trans campaigners (usually positioned as ‘women’ and/or ‘feminists’, although many journalists writing on these issues are men, and/or contributing to publications that have not historically favoured feminist perspectives) face opposition specifically for their commitment to truth. For example, Julie Bindel (2018), writing for *Quillette*, insists that ‘a feminist such as myself refuses to accept the idea that a penis is a female body part, or declines to mouth Orwellian mantras that completely equate trans women with biological females’.

It seems, however, that claims of ‘silencing’ are heard loud and clear in mainstream media and political events held across political lines. In the UK, ‘gender critical’ opinion pieces are regularly published in both left- and right-leaning outlets including *The Observer*, *The Guardian*, the *Daily Telegraph* and *The Mail on Sunday*. A Google search for articles on ‘transgender’ published in *The Times* in 2018 alone yields approximately 230 results, with headlines such as ‘Girl Guide leaders expelled for questioning trans policy’ and ‘Picking and choosing gender is demonic, writes churchman’. Multiple ‘gender critical’ events have also taken place in the UK Parliament and the Scottish Parliament, hosted variously by Conservative, Labour and Scottish National Party politicians.

Both ‘gender critical’ and Christian conservative writers frequently position trans communities and inclusive feminisms as a monolithic ‘cult’ (e.g. Davies-Arai, 2018; Hendley, 2019; Trinko, 2019). Often, this assertion relies on implication rather than argument: for example, Stephanie Davies-Arai’s (2018, p. 30) writing on ‘the transgender experiment on children’ includes a section titled ‘recruitment into a cult?’ but does not explain how/why trans communities might be understood as a cult. Instead, she argues that UK organisations which run trans youth groups, including Gendered Intelligence and Mermaids, ‘validate and reinforce a transgender identity’ by providing ‘vulnerable adolescents with the “tribe” they were looking for . . . [they] will find, perhaps for the first time, approval and belonging in these groups, as long as they identify as transgender’ (Davies-Arai, 2018, p. 31). In a highly-read blog post for *Feminist Current*, Alicia Hendley (2019) adds:

... while I'm reluctant to call trans activism a 'cult,' I'm aware of many disconcerting similarities: the absolute refusal to allow anyone to criticize issues; silencing, smearing, and ostracizing those who do ask questions (in this case, labeling them 'transphobic') about the ideology of transgenderism; and pressuring individuals (from parents to health professionals) to blindly adhere to the view that some people are 'born in the wrong body,' and that the only way to 'fix' this error is through medical intervention.

Importantly, these claims fail to engage with the extensively documented ideological diversity of trans knowledges, communities and activisms (e.g. Boellstorff et al., 2014; Ekins & King, 2006; Halberstam, 1998; Prince, 1973). For example, through qualitative interviews and participant observation within trans communities in India and the UK over 10 years, Surya Monro (2007) has demonstrated that trans people's views on sex and gender are diverse. They include accounts centring or de-centring the body, supporting or opposing gender abolition or 'degendering', relying on female and male identifications and/or seeking to occupy a non-binary space. Trans people may also strategically position themselves as more or less transgressive depending on their social positioning and circumstances. For instance, transgressive gender expression may result in loss of one's support network, or be the basis for being kicked out of one's family home. This can have profound economic impacts, with the cost of coming out or transgressing transnormative expectations being too high for many. Monro therefore argues for a 'gender pluralist' model of trans identity which acknowledges multiple approaches to identification; a model which is ultimately reflected in the community dynamics of many trans spaces (Pearce, 2018; Pearce & Lohman, 2019). Similarly, numerous trans feminist writers have extensively critiqued the so-called 'wrong body' narrative (e.g. Bettcher, 2014; Lester, 2017), along with the pathologising cis medical models of trans identity from which it arises (Gill-Peterson, 2018; Riggs et al., 2019; Stone, 2006).

'Gender critical' accounts are therefore often at odds with how trans people themselves theorise, identify, and describe their experiences. This is not to say that 'gender critical' claims are always entirely inaccurate. For example, Alicia Hendley (2019) argues that within 'trans activism' there is a 'silencing, smearing, and ostracizing [of] those who do ask questions . . . about the ideology of transgenderism'. Hendley does not describe exactly what these questions are, but it is quite reasonable to imagine that a given query might be perceived as an innocent enquiry by Hendley, but (depending on the framing of the question), could be experienced as transphobic by trans persons. For example, Hendley implicitly questions the fact that trans youth are at high risk for suicide ideations and attempts, describing references to this within trans activism as 'scare tactics'. To trans activists who have experienced multiple friends dying by suicide in their youth, this might quite reasonably come across as a transphobic question particularly considering empirical evidence regarding trans suicidality more generally (Adams & Vincent, 2019; Pearce, 2020). They might therefore seek to shut down the discussion or avoid future contact with Hendley rather than continue the discussion. While this disparity could be understood simply as an epistemic problem caused by different but co-existing forms of knowledge, Hendley's and her trans interlocutors' differing perspectives can also be understood in terms of misinformation and power (Lewandowsky et al., 2017). As we have shown, the insistence that there is one definable '(trans)gender

ideology' regarding sex, gender and trans phenomena is demonstrably incorrect. Consequently, the continued circulation of this idea can also be regarded as transphobic, as it is associated with inaccurate (and often prejudiced) views towards trans people rather than a commitment to genuine dialogue.

Even where 'gender critical' writers appear to engage with trans theory, these engagements are generally partial. For example, Michele Moore (2018, p. 225) criticises a 'proposed coalition of disability studies and transgenderism' without explaining what this coalition might look like, and without citing any trans writers beyond the introduction to the *Transgender Studies Reader 2* (Stryker & Aizura, 2013). The growing literature on intersections of disability and trans theory and activism (e.g. Baril, 2015; Chung, 2011; Mog & Swarr, 2008; Puar, 2014; Slater & Liddiard, 2018) is entirely absent from Moore's account. Some writers sympathetic to 'gender critical' positions have also made entirely inaccurate claims about trans authors' arguments. For example, David Pilgrim (2018, p. 309) argues that the 'blurred line between the personal vulnerabilities of individual trans-people [*sic*] and their collective societal position, as a social movement, can prompt trans-activists and their supporters to reject these gender critical feminist arguments for being bigoted and "transphobic" (e.g. Pearce 2018)'. Clara Greed (2019, p. 912) states that 'Transgender and gender non-binary toilet users may find GNTs [gender neutral toilets] provide them with a valuable alternative (. . . Pearce, 2018).' Neither of these arguments are actually made in Pearce (2018). Rather, it appears that Pilgrim and Greed chose Pearce as a token trans author to cite, without having read her work, which raises wider questions about the kinds of truth claims that are being made in the pursuit of trans-exclusionary agendas.

## **Mobilising 'science' and 'neutrality' in exclusionary politics**

The uses (and abuses) of truth claims in trans-exclusionary arguments raise questions about both the forms of evidence that are being used to justify these arguments, and the epistemic alliances that are being formed between self-proclaimed feminists and what have historically been 'gender-conservative' organisations (Krutkowski et al., 2019). As noted above, 'gender critical' feminists' arguments often run against (and ignore) decades of feminist theorising on the ontological and epistemic status of 'womanhood' and 'femaleness' (see also Hines, 2019). Gender scholars (e.g. Butler, 1990; Laqueur, 1990; Snorton, 2017; Warren, 2017) have shown how biological conceptualisations of sex are mediated by wider gendered as well as colonial and racialised norms that direct the social positions ascribed to different women and men, including one's ability to claim a position as a 'man' or a 'woman' in the first place. Western colonial narratives have not only constituted colonised racialised subjects as less than human, but also framed 'womanhood' and 'manhood' (defined in terms of white, European heteronorms) as characteristic of human culture, which colonised subjects were seen as unable to replicate due to their 'primitive' status. They thus remained female and male, at best, but were not granted the status of women and men (McClintock, 2013). This means that female and male are, themselves, socially constituted categories, changing over time and meaning different things in different contexts and for different people. Moreover, feminist science studies has demonstrated that gendered and racialised language appears

throughout contemporary biology (e.g. Birke, 1999; Haraway, 1991; Hubbard, 1990), making it worthwhile to distinguish between biology as organisms' material organisation, and biology as the scientific discourse about that organism (Birke, 2003). In appealing to 'femaleness' as a 'biological 'truth'', 'gender critical' arguments fail to account for how sex difference has itself been produced as binary through socio-biological discourses shaped by gendered and racialised ideas about 'womanhood' and 'manhood' (Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Laqueur, 1990). Yet, currently, 'gender critical' feminist groups are actively re-claiming 'femaleness' as a fixed, undeniable biological reality, and arguing that regardless of whether trans women are (socially) women, they cannot be 'female', because femaleness requires a particular biological makeup that one is born with (see Hines, 2019).

Essentialist arguments about sex difference are not restricted to 'gender critical' feminist groups, or to discussions around specifically 'trans bodies'. They also extend to higher level political and policy discourses. In international sports, for example, new regulations were recently introduced that restrict the right of some intersex women with high testosterone levels and XY chromosomes to compete in women's running races, regardless of their legal or social status as women, or possession of other female sex characteristics from birth (World Athletics, 2019). Sport regulators posit that these regulations are based on biological truths about sex that social considerations cannot overcome. Women with XY chromosomes and high testosterone levels are, they claim, 'biologically male athletes with female gender identities' (Court of Arbitration for Sport, 2019, p. 71). These claims were supported by self-proclaimed feminist commentators, including former competitive athlete Dorian Lambelet Coleman (2019), who stated: 'when we are told that 46, XY males [*sic*] with DSD ['Disorders of Sex Development'] who identify as female are no different from us because identity is all that matters, the effect is to erase our deeply significant, sex-specific experience both on and off the track'. Sport regulators have a long history of anti-feminist stances and excluding women, including via implicitly ascribing inferiority to (all) women's bodies for over a century (Erikainen, 2020). This exclusion has, however, disproportionately impacted racialised women from the Global South, in many ways because of the enduring discourses in the West that pre-position racialised (and especially Black) women and their bodies as unfeminine, failing to manifest normative 'womanhood' of the Western, white and middle-class form (Erikainen, 2020). Despite this, an alliance has emerged between powerful sport governing bodies and some 'gender critical' women's rights advocates. The effect is that new iterations of older, gendered as well as racialised boundaries between 'biological' femaleness and 'social' womanhood are being drawn. Yet, it is women's rights advocates such as Coleman herself who erase a deeply significant reality that has long been recognised in feminist (and especially Black feminist) politics: there is no single shared experience of female embodiment or 'womanhood' (Combahee River Collective, 1983; Koyama, this collection) – and neither chromosomes nor hormones 'determine' sex (Fausto-Sterling, 2000).

Both trans and intersex women, and racialised trans and intersex women in particular, face heightened levels of discrimination and exclusion from sports due to narrow conceptualisations of biological 'femaleness'. The most prominent cases have focused on intersex women and, most visibly, Caster Semenya, whose womanhood has been

questioned publicly since 2009, in inherently racialised ways that are intertwined with her position as a 'butch' Black woman from the Global South (see e.g. Erikainen, 2020; Karkazis & Carpenter, 2018). Trans women athletes have, however, also become the object of 'gender critical' media commentaries. For example, following the involuntary disclosure of her trans history, MMA fighter Fallon Fox's right to compete with other women was publicly questioned, including by fellow competitors who made public remarks about presumed advantages she may have due to having been assigned male at birth. Media coverage included depictions that pathologised and marginalised her identity in biologically reductionist ways (Love, 2019).

The sports example illustrates how notions of science (and especially biology) are mobilised to exclude some women from the scope of 'femaleness' (see also Karkazis & Carpenter, 2018). By appealing to 'biology', authorities lay claim to the 'neutrality' and 'objectivity' of science – a claim that has public appeal even if it has been contested in social scientific and humanities scholarship for decades (e.g. Haraway, 1988; Spanier, 1995). Yet, the authority of 'science' allows 'biological truths' about sex difference to be presented as incontestable realities trumping (merely 'social') gender. The alliance between self-proclaimed feminists like Coleman and powerful sports authorities further shows how the mobilisation of 'biology' as a basis for trans (and intersex) people's exclusion currently transcends traditional political positionalities. Moreover, science is used strategically rather than 'factually', in selective ways that enable trans-exclusionary groups to foreground their pre-existing political views upon something 'immutable', even while the immutability of sex is itself established discursively, via political means. As Hubbard (1990, pp. 15–16) argued three decades ago, the world of scientific facts is 'contextual not only in that it depends on who we are and where and when but also in that it is shaped by where we want our "facts" to take us'.<sup>5</sup> 'Gender critical' feminists are constructing and mobilising very particular, contested versions of biological 'facts' that are also lending support to the politics of anti-feminist organisations.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that we ourselves do not write from a position of neutrality for our own sake, nor for this collection as a whole. Instead, and in many ways like the trans-exclusionary voices we critique, we write from a located position that is both political and personal. We are trans and gender diverse feminists who centre personal and bodily autonomy as an uncompromisable value, while also being attentive to structures of power and inequality in ways that are led by the stated experiences of marginalised people. We write from perspectives shaped by our own gendered histories, and the circumstances of our 'entry into knowledge' (Hook, 2005, p. 23) about sex, gender and feminism through personal experiences and educational trajectories. Following Donna Haraway (1988), we conceptualise our writing as situated knowledge, where recognising situatedness also implies recognising failure in political innocence. Our social locations are epistemically and politically salient, and we are therefore not 'neutral' observers or outsiders looking into the TERF wars. Rather, these 'debates' are waged on our lives and bodies, as well as those of our friends, colleagues and loved ones. This has shaped our motivations for collating the articles that follow, as well as the trans feminist voice with which we speak collectively in introducing this collection.



## Outline of this monograph

This collection brings together a range of peer-reviewed interventions into complex debates over trans inclusion within (and beyond) feminism. As editors, we intentionally sought contributions from a diversity of perspectives. On some points, contributors take different approaches, use different language to one another, or draw different conclusions. We did not request that authors adhere to any given ideology or worldview, other than a commitment to recognising trans people's stated experiences as worthy of respect and recognition. Rather, what unites the essays in this collection is a commitment to evidenced critique, and an interest in building genuine solidarity within and between trans and feminist movements.

We begin with a look at the historical background to these debates. Part One, *Navigating Feminisms from Past to Present*, traces the entwined histories of feminism and trans activism and thought, examining how these have shaped contemporary debates within scholarship, activism, and the wider public sphere.

In 'Sex wars and (trans)gender panics: Identity and body politics in contemporary UK feminism', Sally Hines parses contemporary UK debates through examining the history of feminist thought. She explores the concept of 'womanhood' and debates on the 'proper' subject of feminism, revisiting feminist conceptualisations of the sex/gender distinction to contextualise the emergence of calls for 'sex-based rights'. Hines argues that this approach dismisses decades of feminist critiques regarding the social construction of sex, and risks reducing womanhood to reproductive capacity. She further insists that 'womanhood' becomes a productive category when it is freed from questions of 'sex' as essentialised biology, enabling allegiances across lines of difference for all people oppressed by patriarchal forces.

The second article, 'The ontological woman: A history of deauthentication, dehumanisation, and violence', critically unpacks the politicised constructs of 'womanhood' used to justify the exclusion of trans women from feminism. Cristan Williams focuses on the animating question that has inspired decades of trans-exclusionary politics – namely, whether womanhood is nature/God-given, or defined by the material conditions of one's life. She maps how trans-exclusionary arguments mobilise a specific rhetoric that then supports a specific morality in an attempt to justify harmful practices. Williams ultimately argues that the moralities and practices enacted by trans-exclusionary individuals and groups are toxic to both trans and feminist communities.

The third contribution is a reprint of Emi Koyama's 2000 essay 'Whose feminism is it anyway? The unspoken racism of the trans inclusion debate'. Stryker and Whittle (2006, p. 698) describe it as 'a stinging rebuke of both lesbian-feminists and transgender activists' for 'predicat[ing] their arguments on racist practices and assumptions'. Much of the language and discourse surrounding trans identities and bodies have changed in the 20 years since its authorship. Yet, the central tensions, illustrated through a critical account of the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival's trans-exclusion policy and the social, political and psychological threat that trans heterogeneity can pose to white, middle-class women (potentially both trans, and cis), remain powerfully illuminatory.

In 'Feminism will be trans-inclusive or it will not be: Why do two cis-hetero woman educators support transfeminism?', María Victoria Carrera-Fernández and Renée



DePalma deconstruct arguments that support trans-exclusionary ideologies and provide contrasting insight into trans feminist and queer approaches to education. Showing how schools act as agents of socialisation, Carrera-Fernández and DePalma position pedagogy as a potent political tool for combating heteronormativity and gendered violence. They not only propose that an emancipatory pedagogy can contribute towards the creation of more equitable societies, but also argue for a critical queer pedagogy that rejects exclusionary discourses and incorporates trans experience as part of a broader feminist educational agenda.

Part Two of this book, *The Medical is Political*, explores the relationship between ‘feminism’ and medical ‘science’ in the context of debates over how trans experiences are defined and conceptualised. In ‘Autogynephilia: A scientific review, feminist analysis, and alternative “embodiment fantasies” model’, Julia Serano analyses the theory of autogynephilia, according to which trans women’s gender identities are a by-product of their sexual orientation. The article charts the significant body of evidence that exists to dismantle the theory and shows how and why autogynephilia continues to be invoked by anti-trans actors. Challenging these mobilisations, Serano proposes an alternative ‘embodiment fantasy’ model as a better explanation for the evidence that has been used to support autogynephilia. She argues that the concept relies on essentialist, heteronormative, and sexist presumptions about women and LGBTQ+ people that are inconsistent with the basic tenets of feminism.

The next article, ‘A critical commentary on “rapid-onset gender dysphoria”’, dismantles the concept of ‘rapid-onset gender dysphoria’ (ROGD), a pseudoscientific diagnostic category for young people who supposedly believe mistakenly that they are transgender. Florence Ashley politically and historically contextualises the emergence of ROGD as a category, and deconstructs the evidence base and arguments used to support its use within scholarly contexts and by campaign groups such as 4thWaveNow. Ashley argues that ROGD reflects a deliberate and politicised weaponisation of scientific language to dismiss the overwhelming evidence that exists to support gender-affirmative approaches to care provision for trans teenagers.

The article by Rowan Hildebrand-Chupp, titled ‘More than “canaries in the gender coal mine”: A transfeminist approach to research on detransition’, offers methodological insights to inform research on the fraught topic of detransition. The figure of the detransitioner is often invoked by people on all ‘sides’ in trans/feminist debates, but the voices of detransitioned people themselves are almost entirely excluded from academic studies. There is a discursive defensiveness around detransition within many trans communities, due to concerns that individuals who imply (or state) that they experience regret following transition will be used to justify greater restrictions around access to gender-affirming medical services. Hildebrand-Chupp addresses these issues by unpacking concepts that are subsumed under the term ‘detransition’, and suggests categories to allow clear specificity when conducting detransition-related research. Through a critical engagement with how detransition is often poorly represented in research (including, and perhaps especially, ‘trans-positive’ research), the article creates space for a narrative that recognises the mutual need to acknowledge factors that contribute to negative experiences around gender non-conformity and transition.

Part Three, *Contemporary Discourses, Debates, and Transfeminist Resistance*, turns to questions of feminist activism and contestation in the current moment. These frequently hinge on debates that have unfolded primarily in the Anglophone West, but have influence far beyond, through the unequal hierarchies of knowledge in the postcolonial context. This is demonstrated in the article 'Disregard and danger: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and the voices of trans (and cis) African feminists', in which B Camminga shows how the consequences of a question asked on UK television reverberated through the African continent. Camminga explores responses to Nigerian feminist Adichie's televised suggestion that trans women are not women, and shows how this resulted in intense media interest, during which African trans women's voices were erased. Camminga seeks to amplify the voices of these trans women in questioning Adichie's definition of 'womanhood', which is seemingly at odds with the lived realities of both trans and cis women in African countries, and indicative of the unequal flow of feminist discourse between the Global North and South.

The next piece, 'The toilet debate: Stalling trans possibilities and defending "women/s protected spaces"', considers how gender-segregated public toilets have become a prominent site of debate and politicisation for 'gender critical' feminists, who position women's public toilets as safe spaces for cis women, and argue against trans people's right to access gender-segregated toilets. Drawing on data from the Around the Toilet research project, which explored the extent to which toilets can provide a safe and accessible space for everyone, Charlotte Jones and Jen Slater show how the very spaces that gender critical feminists politicise as safe for cis women become sites of danger for trans and non-binary people. They argue that trans-exclusionary politics and practices do nothing to improve toilet access, put trans people at a greater risk of violence, and contribute to a harmful homogenisation of 'womanhood'.

In the tenth article, 'Sex work abolitionism and hegemonic feminisms: Implications for gender-diverse sex workers and migrants from Brazil', Lua da Mota Stabile examines the consequences of Western radical feminist discourses around sex work and human trafficking for trans and gender-diverse sex workers from the Global South. Focusing on Brazilian sex workers migrating to Europe, she explores how Western feminisms often represent migrant sex workers in ways that reproduce colonialism, cissexism and racism. Concurrently, Western feminist politics have influenced international anti-trafficking and anti-prostitution discourses in ways that impact negatively on trans and gender-diverse sex workers. da Mota Stabile argues for the importance of recognising sex workers' self-determination, capacity and conscience, and proposes the development of regulatory and rights frameworks that are receptive of migrants, especially vulnerable groups from the Global South.

Finally, in 'The transfeminist and the liberal institution: A love story', Jay Bernard offers a critical reflection on their experiences of producing the 'RadFem/Trans: A Love Story' event as part of the BFI Flare London LGBTQ film festival. They consider the challenges of negotiating tensions between radical trans feminist politics and liberal cultural institutions, where the default approach is not to take (political) sides. They reflect on questions of representation, exclusions and inclusions, along with their own and others' social locations, in ways that offer lessons for navigating and transcending antagonistic politics.

Across these interventions, our aim is to advance understanding of the TERF wars, their place in the feminist past and present, and their relationship to ‘science’. While we do not claim to address every topic of debate in this multifaceted field, we aim to contribute to an unravelling of exclusionary discourses within both feminist *and* trans communities. Our hope is that one day these entrenched debates over ‘trans-exclusionary’ and ‘gender critical’ politics will become entirely irrelevant, so that we might instead unite around a shared interest in sex liberation and feminist freedom for all.

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## Notes

1. We use trans as an umbrella term, synonymous with contemporary uses of transgender, or trans\*, to roughly capture people whose gender identity/sense of selfhood does not correspond to the assignment made at birth (or in cases of genital ambiguity, slightly later). We recognise the term as leaky and imperfect; and that disidentification with sex/gender assignment does not infer trans identity. Trans identity also does not depend upon dysphoria, transition, or gender expression.
2. A doctor’s letter is required to change sex marker on passports, where a person doesn’t have a Gender Recognition Certificate, or a birth/adoption certificate with the acquired gender.
3. While ‘sex’ and ‘gender *reassignment*’ are separate protected characteristics within the Equality Act 2010, these categories would function in the same way even if named as ‘gender’ and ‘sex reassignment’. The former category is used in measures to prevent unfair treatment on the basis of an individual’s status as a woman or a man, while the latter is used in measures to prevent unfair treatment on the basis of an individual having undergone a social and/or physical sex/gender transition.
4. Cisgender (or cis) is a descriptive term indicating people who are not trans and/or whose experience of gender corresponds with their assignment at birth. In use since as early as 1992, the term has come to replace terms such as ‘not-trans’, ‘born-women/men’, ‘biological women/men’ or ‘natural women/men’, ultimately serving a neutralising function. In resistance to this, many ‘gender critical’ activists claim that cis (like TERF) is a slur. Recognition of the limitations of a trans/cis binary have been academically articulated (e.g. Enke, 2013).
5. See also Gill-Peterson’s (2018) work on the eugenic histories of trans and intersex medicine.

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