

Are Trans Studies and Lesbian Studies Compatible? Of Course, But Not If We Behave Like This

This one is dedicated to the great Margaret Cruikshank and the late Dana Shugar: lesbian theorists whose work insists upon the manifest value of lesbian thinking to the ethical charge of lay philosophy -- not to characterize material reality in new and exciting ways, but to model a devotional and reflective attention to what matters. I am grateful to their faith in lesbian ideas, which, directly or indirectly, has sustained me through feelings of abjection -- literal dismissal from the field of what matters, from the field of social concern -- by both destructively aggressive and mindwarpingly passive erasures.

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I had a conversation recently with a *New York Times* bestselling author about how I got fired from Irving ISD. (It was standing up for LGBTQ students' rights of expression.) The conversation was part of an interview they requested for their upcoming book about how ideological battles are affecting public education. They asked how I thought we could solve the "culture wars," which (100% *can* confirm) have lately in the U.S. given rise to movements to oust educators who have built welcoming spaces for LGBTQ/questioning students.

My answer was that we *all* really need to talk and we really need to listen, because most people truly want the best for our kids, even if they have some learning to do about 1) social reality, like that LGBTQ/questioning feelings do present in human beings of school age, and 2) how the education system and teachers' roles in it actually function.

My interlocutor's response to this (admittedly) idealistic proposal was, "Well, there are some people, like TERFs (standing for "trans exclusionary radical feminists"), who you just can't talk to, right?"

Enter "the good stuff" as far as my personal nerdy theorizing is concerned. Being a self-described "words person," I've been rather obsessed with uses of the word "TERF" for a while now. I'm sure I seemed like a weirdo for my excitement about getting to talk about the discourses around "TERF." But, getting the green-light from them to detour our exchange, I asked about this person's definition of a TERF, and from there, what part of the TERF ideology that they had seen would prevent dialogue, and after a couple of conceptual movements (in a really interesting conversation), we arrived at a core question: whether two people can offer differing *definitions* of sex and gender without one of the two people being unethical.

Their opinion was that it is politically necessary to establish, as fact, that sex is a fluid human phenomenon: that there is more diversity in human sex than the labels "male" and "female" imply. I agreed, of course, that there's great diversity across and between sexed embodiments, but I said I still think we should question whether, based on that diversity, it is then accurate/ethical/politically useful to consider sex fluid rather than bimodal. (Bimodal: having

two modes, meaning two statistical “outputs,” which in this case would be male and female, that occur far more often than others.)

Then they said something that always interests me in the extreme, because I’ve heard it so often. They cited Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* as having established as a fact that sex is fluid. This person was very thoughtful and amenable to discussion, so I saw an opportunity to really talk to someone about something I don’t often get to talk about: that is, what Butler truly says about sex in *Gender Trouble*. I said, “Whoa, it’s a coincidence that you bring her up,” explaining that I had just finished a paper about Judith Butler’s theory on sexual difference that same week. A later version of that paper is available in full on our website, but I’ll reproduce some of the earlier draft here, which I summarized in this conversation.

So, from the Butler paper:

I heard Butler called a feminist philosopher in my grad seminars but never a lesbian, except by me. I don’t know how she slid so safely into the canonized realms of philosophy, since all the lesbians she built from and who built from her didn’t become canonized. I imagine it has something to do with how her theory gets misread as not markedly lesbian, or female, or woman, and thus as though it’s not at all invested in the very issue it’s precisely about: the persistence of sexual difference as a human thought problem. Butler’s theory is cited, instead, as enabling a complete transcendence of sexual difference – an infinite freedom of gender – a misreading which locates her squarely in the postmodern, post-gender category of “queer theory.” In my experience, she’s only ever placed in the context of the queer academic scene, not the lesbian, which, upon a faithful read of her work, obliterates her most generative ideas.

*I believe the reason Butler’s work is cited most often as queer and not lesbian is that it’s used over and over to actually dispense with the idea that bodily differences inform how gender, as a disciplinary social system, works in the world. This dismissal of the idea that bodily sex matters certainly pushes into the background any theoretical issues around the political positionalities afforded at the nexus of sex, gender, and lesbianism. Readers may have heard of the book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, published in 1990 and interpreted by many since as the founding text of an academic field that, contrary to Butler’s own cautions about the word “queer,” came to be called “queer theory.” That book is believed to give us pathways to entirely redo gender, as if from scratch, which is, actually, not at all a thing Butler believed possible. The truth is, Butler explicitly said sexual difference matters. Further, she explicitly cautioned that queer be used as an analytic, not as a label, and that queer’s academic canonization would blunt its critical edge, so I guess folks just...didn’t...listen. But the academy tends to ignore lesbians, so not much of a surprise there.*

But to go to the text: what Butler is best remembered for is the moment in Gender Trouble where she coins the concept “gender performativity,” a term that gets taught in every introductory gender studies course in college I’ve ever seen, including mine (as well as other courses on identity politics, social theory, etc.). The idea is what it sounds like: an analytic to explore how notions of gender that we understand to be “real” and “true” are actually actions, doings – things “performed” rather than already present in our capital-b human Being. (It’s a theoretical inroad to explore how culture structures gender norms, through the “doings” of our everyday lives, and therefore how individuals might disrupt cultural conditioning with their own “doings” to reshape gender in small but potentially revolutionary ways.)

The part we appear to have lost of this concept, and of the entire book, is that gender performativity relies on a conceptual separation between gender and sex to lay out the very possibility of scrambling gender norms into new configurations. Basically (and this makes sense, when you really think about it): the bimodality of sex must be a thing, in order for there to be anything “there” socially for gender performativity to scramble. Otherwise we’re just lots of humans floating around, with no powers-that-be telling us what to do with our particular bodies, living in absolute freedom, and that’s a utopia that 1) does not exist and 2) would not be politically or ethically fraught whatsoever. Basically: if there’s no one telling us what to do with our particular bodies, which they do precisely because our particular bodies (including those of intersex people) are socially read as either female or male, then there’s no point to gender performativity.

Throughout the book, Butler’s conceptual baseline of an immutable thing called “sex” shows itself plainly. That’s because like all of us, in order to be able to write about this stuff with any clarity, she has to use the two separate words “sex” and “gender” to distinguish talking about bodies from talking about what we do with bodies. For Butler, sex is “what we’re working with” when we want to contest gender norms. It’s the “there, there” when we get flung into the world with a body, and cultural surroundings, and a set of resulting “gender troubles.”

But when people quote Butler on “gender performativity,” at least in what I’ve heard from college grads and in my own 10-plus gender studies courses, the concept gets shrunk down to one hyper-focused, mistargeted interpretation of a single line of the text. That quote, which has proliferated inordinately far beyond its intended application, is the following statement about male drag performers from Gender Trouble: “There is no original or primary gender a drag imitates, but gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original.”

The folks who have cited that moment in my presence have used it to argue that there's no such thing as "woman" – no originary woman-form for drag queens to imitate. This is a powerful observation if it is taken the way Butler intended it – that the term "woman" is culturally constructed by human assumptions about what sexual difference means. That segment in the book argues that one cannot draw a clear line from one's sex to the proper embodiment of a gender. There is no original gender, because gender is cultural.

The derivation that people tend to make from it, however, seems to be that gender (but mainly "woman," of course) is entirely made up, a misinterpretation which Butler herself appears to have noticed, since she tried to correct it in her next book, Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex (1996). Sex and bodies are both in the title for a reason. In Bodies That Matter, she wrote, "The misapprehension about gender performativity is this: that gender is a choice, or that gender is a role, or that gender is a construction that one puts on, as one puts on clothes in the morning, that there is a 'one' who is prior to this gender, a one who goes to the wardrobe of gender and decides with deliberation which gender it will be today."

One might wonder, then, where the constraints come from. If gender isn't a choice, or a role, or something one puts on, then what is it made of? How is it that there can be no person who exists separately or prior to "gender's" operations upon the self? The answer, for the lesbian theorists whose work cited Butler, is that gender is the trappings (and the trap) we are stuck in by the lived experience of a thing called "bodily sex," and specifically how it positions us within a regime Butler called the "heterosexual matrix." (The majority of queer theorists, who by and large do not dialogue with lesbian scholarship, tend not to cite that term "heterosexual matrix," nor do they tend to acknowledge the absolute centrality of actual, carnal sexuality in everything Butler wrote in the 1990s.)

Butler wrote in her 1998 essay "Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire" that "[t]he institution of compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from the feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire." This set of regulatory practices, which she calls elsewhere the "heterosexual matrix" of power, is – because it's "sexual" by nature – inextricably imbricated in how material bodies are experienced, used, and perceived. For Butler, sex is not gender – and in turn, sex as a social-material and psychological phenomenon is the central problem: the singular reason why gender is inescapable.

As you can tell, I wrote that Butler paper to serve as a corrective – respectfully, but I hope conclusively – to the widespread ideas that *Gender Trouble* 1) conceives sex and gender as the same thing/on the same plane of analysis and 2) proves that both or either are "fluid," with the

latter word signaling something like: *capable of changing freely to or from any form*. Usually, the logic goes one of a couple of ways. First, there's the one that comes from a misreading of Butler: that sex and gender are the same social and cultural thing (unrelated to the body), and therefore changeable, and therefore fluid. Another is that sex is observably fluid, therefore sex and gender are immaterial, gender being the one that matters, and gender, for its part, is changeable. *Gender Trouble* neither says nor implies any of these things; nor, of course, is it capable of "proving" anything – because it's theory. It's lesbian theory, which has political aims that must be named, and named correctly, so that they won't be mistaken for anything but lesbian.

A *pure* fluidity and/or changeability would, according to Butler, require material sex and cultural gender, as mutually-imbricated disciplinary regimes, to become fully disentangled, which she argues throughout her work is impossible (see her essay "Against Proper Objects" for a solid rundown).

Below is my favorite quote from *Gender Trouble* about how bodies matter. It's my favorite because it shows Butler, like Biddy Martin and other lesbian theorists, valorizing butch and femme lesbians' special powers (insert "wand" emoji) to contest the terms of heteronormativity:

“As one lesbian femme explained, she likes her boys to be girls, meaning that ‘being a girl’ contextualizes and resignifies ‘masculinity’ in a butch identity. As a result, that masculinity, if that it can be called, is always brought into relief against a culturally intelligible ‘female body.’”

[Read: “Culturally intelligible,” meaning that gender’s operations then step in to interpret the body that is being perceived.]

In sum: if you want to say that the idea of “male and female” is as much a cultural invention as “man and woman,” you totally can, but just don’t cite Butler, ‘cause that’s not what she said. (Plus, that move repeats the complete erasure of lesbian specificity in Butler and others’ philosophy that I’m really trying to take on and fix...so if we could just not misquote lesbians anymore...)

The conversation that day traveled from its starting point at the possibility of dialogue, to the matter of TERFs, to the fluidity of sex, which is a surprisingly well-worn path in my experience talking and writing about these things. It tells us that there are clear links between the failure of dialogue and the effort to define sex once and for all. We’re about to explore those links.

Coincidentally, another event dropped into my consciousness the same week as the conversation that prompted this reflection, via an email from Duke University Press. It was the release of a special issue of a journal I follow, *Trans Studies Quarterly*, out of DUP. The issue was titled “Trans-Exclusionary Feminisms and the Global New Right.” I’ve been waiting for years with vested interest to see how the term “TERF,” which has exploded in use across the internet, would

eventually be defined by scholars, so I was eager to read an entire issue of *TSQ* that promised to explore that classification.

Online, “TERF” is an extremely contentious term that has no single definition. My hope was that these scholars would lay some theoretical groundwork either to put a new, more precise word in its place or to operationalize it more meaningfully and enable clearer communication within feminist circles. But upon reading the introduction, “TERFs, Gender-Critical Movements, and Postfascist Feminisms,” which framed the goals of the issue, what I found was some serious panic stoking in its own right. After finishing the piece, I found myself flipping back through an article that, no matter how I searched, never could be found to delineate the term “TERF” from the number of other concerns its authors enumerated, including fascism. And in a couple of bold moments that I’ll cover, the article signaled its own (imagined) ideological rubber-stamping by “woman-of-color, Third World, and Black feminisms,” as though those are a big, sweeping cluster, which (combined with some other failures to define terms, and what they end up saying about the irrelevance of the body) cringe-inducingly revealed that its authors have not actually read, in particular, much Black or Third World feminist theory – especially not lesbian feminist theory.

On that note, when I was done reading it struck me powerfully that I know of two other *TSQ*-published authors whom these authors by their logic would consider “TERFs”: black feminist, trans-identified scholars Kai Greene and C. Riley Snorton. In their work, both their individual and co-authored pieces, Greene and Snorton have given us shining opportunities to learn from trans scholarship how to treat the conversations within and between sex theory and gender theory dialogically, instead of silencing the former. In my view, their piece in *TSQ* with Matt Richardson and Treva Ellison, “We Got Issues: Toward a Black Trans*/Studies,” should be read by all (Volume 4, Issue 2, p. 162-169). That piece opened my eyes to complexities and specificities, in both self-identification journeys and social experiences of being othered, that white queer folks just don’t live. (Additionally, I would thoroughly recommend Greene’s “Troubling the Waters: Mobilizing a Trans* Analytic” in E. Patrick Johnson’s 2016 collection *No Tea, No Shade: New Writings in Black Queer Studies*, and Snorton’s “Gender Trouble in *Triton*” in the same collection.)

Snorton – an Annenberg grad like I would’ve been; bless him for getting through – wrote that incredible piece for *No Tea*, which I wish to god I’d seen earlier in my graduate career. It examines how postmodern readings of texts, which celebrate the infinite freedom of potential textual interpretations, can operate to erase the specific effects of material and discursive control regimes that their authors have taken on the challenge of representing. He deftly dismisses (while explaining the dismissal) neoliberal, postmodern readings of Butler’s *Gender Trouble*: “both Delany’s novel [*Triton*] and Judith Butler’s oft-cited passage on drag in *Gender Trouble* (1990) suffer from similar forms of mischaracterization, which equate gender electivity and performativity with freedom from (gender) identity” (*No Tea*, p. 84).

Ugh – if only I had discovered Snorton’s work sooner. The validation I would have felt, from this scholar whom I never heard cited by the (I mean, #sorrynotsorry, but mostly-white and glaringly-privileged) English department’s queer theorists! I discovered Snorton’s paper far too late in my grad career, on the back end of year 3, when I’d already decided Butler was lost, along with myself. His citational absence at Penn tracks with the fact that the queer theory there did mostly come out of the English department, where pretty much everyone practiced exactly the same type of postmodern reading – the celebration of infinite gender freedom – that he has so persuasively critiqued. (See my “What Judith Butler” and “How Queer Theory Ate” papers that tackle those economies of citation, as well as Sara Ahmed’s book *Differences that Matter: Feminist Theory and Postmodernism*, which targets the apolitical uses of postmodern literary criticism like the ones Snorton describes.)

In Kai Greene’s piece for *No Tea*, Greene walks the line brilliantly of showing how black trans men’s experiences and black lesbian experiences of the body might be considered analytically relevant to one another. Both Greene and Thornton’s pieces are so good, and so helpful, and so...materially honest. And, crucially: they’re both “TERFy,” according to the recent *TSQ* article. Because they suggest that ultimately, the materiality of bodily experience, and the inescapable social categories imposed thereupon, are grounds for analysis that we should never – can never – abandon. Additionally, much of the black lesbian theory Greene cites in forging connections between transmasculine and lesbian experiences would say things about the importance of the body that the authors of the recent *TSQ* issue would most *certainly* regard as “TERFy” (and by their own equation, therefore fascist – I’ll get to where they bring that in). That’s one of several reasons why I took issue with their wholesale signaling that “woman-of-color, Third World, and Black feminisms” 1) are of one voice and 2) would be 100% on their team of accusing sex-centered feminism of fascism.

In E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson’s 2005 precursor collection to *No Tea*, titled *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, you’ll find a similarly “TERFy” investment in the body and materiality, in such writings as Jewelle Gomez’s “But Some of Us Are Brave Lesbians: The Absence of Black Lesbian Fiction” and Kara Keeling’s “Joining the Lesbians?: Cinematic Regimes of Black Lesbian Visibility,” the latter of which queries the acts of exclusion of identity terms while suggesting that it may still be useful to hold the term “lesbian” central in analysis. Both of these pieces deal with the visuality of the body, representations of the body, and perceptions of bodies as fundamental to a “queering” analysis that is also lesbian. (By the way, E. Patrick Johnson himself is totally on the team of bodies mattering. I took his seminar at Penn and, because of the lesbian-i-ness of my dissertation project, helmed the week about lesbians – in which I raised the thorny politics and imposed discomfort around discussing the female body in academic spaces. He was vibing with it. Plus, I just love him – check out his book *Honeypot: Black Southern Women Who Love Women* [2019]. That was the same day that someone else in that class suggested that the word “lesbian” was fundamentally “white,” which I heard several

times at Penn and which never made sense to me, given the history of lesbian writing by authors of color – and which shouldn't make sense if you believe in lesbian specificity at all.)

I've linked the introduction to the *TSQ* issue ("Introduction: TERFs, Gender-Critical Movements, and Postfascist Feminisms," which DUP made universally available) beneath this essay on the "Opinions Her Own" page of Stone Butch Disco, so you can follow the analysis below and also read it for yourself.

I felt a familiar, weird, sad disappointment after I put down this piece for (at least) three reasons. First, for the fact that there is, surely, increasing animosity spewed from the Right at gay and trans people just trying to live their lives, but also (clearly) increasing animosity spewed from queer academics and activists at anyone they deem "unenlightened." Second, that it's seemingly impossible for anyone to talk across their own "terms of art" when it comes to discussing the physical reality of bodies and/or the social realities of identity. Third, that this article actually replaced right-wing ideology on gender with its own ideology on gender, and stoked even more polarization in the doing.

American pundits have lamented political polarization for years as the bane of the meaningful communication upon which democracy, theoretically, functions. The Democrats, for their part, can't seem to establish a discourse of inclusivity that actually feels like it *includes* more than 50 percent of the country. (I love that the "red wave" didn't happen during the midterms, but recent elections have still been way too close to 50-50 for comfort.) One place I think we can move toward meaningful dialogue is to tackle the wild polarization created by competing definitions of sex and gender; and especially, the caricaturing of entire groups, either LGBTQ activists or sex-based rights activists, as made up only of ideological extremists. If you listened to either "side" caricature its supposed enemy (and these are "sides" unnecessarily drawn), you'd be led to believe that there are only ever people in the world who think "sex is 100% a choice" or "acting in any way unconventional to your gender will send you to hell." It's more diverse on both imagined "sides."

Right off the bat, there is a moment in this *TSQ* introduction article that upset me as someone who has studied this stuff forever and enjoyed work in *TSQ*. (I've already cited Snorton and Greene as *TSQ*-published authors who have written incredibly useful pieces of critique that say the exact opposite of what this piece says about gender. So before I get into the myriad disappointments of this read, first I'll say, do check out and follow *Transgender Studies Quarterly*; they often release free pdfs of valuable public scholarship, unlike a lot of other journals that are firewalled.)

The first moment my heart dropped was this one: in the very first paragraph, the authors write that "in all its multiple manifestations, gender-critical discourse ostensibly takes issue with the feminist theoretical notion that sex and gender are social and cultural inventions (Scott 2016: 300)" (*TSQ* p. 311). Hm. At this point, I realized that although I was going to have to keep

reading – to protect my self-identity as a “responsible discourse analyst” – this article seemed to be adopting all the same ideological shortcuts of the panic-stoking queer blogosphere. I realized we probably weren’t going to get anywhere, in this piece, with an operationalizable definition of the term “TERF.” Here’s why: There *is no* generalized “feminist theoretical notion” that sex and gender are *both* “social and cultural inventions.” If there were, the authors probably would have been able to cite more than one page number in one piece of 2016 scholarship to prove it. And, the truth is glaringly, obviously, quite the contrary: academic feminism, including Judith Butler’s feminist theory, has *always* moved from the notion that what you do with your body (gender) is a matter apart from and *post facto* to the body you’re thrown into the world with (sex).

[The middle chunk of my essay here is probably going to read like a cynical, rapid-fire critique – but dear lord, the more I look at this article, the more I believe that its rhetoric is glaringly privileged, profoundly dangerous, and wildly ill-informed.]

At this point, we’re one paragraph into this article, and it’s scrambling what any workable definition of “TERF” might be. While the authors use the term in their title, they haven’t addressed it in this first page except to subsume everything they’re writing about under the label “gender-critical discourse.” (And as I mentioned before, I was attracted to the article because of the title, which seemed to promise that the term “TERF” would be objectively explored and analyzed.) I skipped forward through the article and saw that the term “TERF” would not be defined or delimited in the pages that followed, either.

My beef with (especially scholars, of all people) repeating the invocation of TERFishness without definition feels to me more than justified, given the depressing interactions around that word that we’ve all witnessed for the last several years online. Right off the bat, I’d like to make known my experience with “gender critical” discourse – which is that in actual fact, perhaps unbelievably if you believe in the conflation of “gender critical” with “TERF,” I have had meaningful and nuanced conversations with those whose thinking flies under the “gender critical” banner. I’ve never had one of those conversations with anyone under the “TERF” banner. I’d imagine that’s because the “TERF banner” doesn’t exist for any of the “gender critical” people I’ve met. From their perspective, “TERF” is no banner. Actually, it’s considered a slur.

When you look at “TERF’s” discursive applications across the internet (amazingly, “online” is the very context this article focuses on, although they don’t appear to have visited the misogynist corners where it promotes nutzo violence) – the phrases “No TERFs,” and on 4Chan, “Kill TERFs,” are far more common usages of the word than any person saying they are one.

Many people other than me have raised the questionable circumstances in which the term is often used uncritically and without definition. That’s why it was surprising to me that the *TSQ* editors and authors here didn’t at least engage with those people. You don’t have to click around too long on any social media platform to see that, depressingly, “TERF” is increasingly being used to

accuse of exclusionism any woman talking about the politics of the sexed body, including (and especially hatefully, in my experience) anyone who mentions that femaleness is a meaningful part of their lesbian identity (can confirm). I've been called a TERF at least twice for saying, simply, that femaleness is inextricably *imbricated* in the historical and contemporary meanings of "butch" (and I posed that idea in an equally nerdy way at the time).

(An aside: it's unclear, in uses like that, what the accused TERFs are actually believed to be "excluding" anybody from. I've seen strong allies of trans people – and I'd count myself among them, based not least on the reason I lost my teaching job – called TERFs for talking about their own bodies. I just think the "trans exclusionary" part may not hold together in a lot of these scenarios where the word is used, especially when projects like Stone Butch Disco explicitly welcome dialogue with people who have diverse experiences and opinions around gender.)

The term's use has proliferated to the extent that, more than four years ago, *The Economist* banned its usage without accompanying analysis. My personal experience with it is as its opposition says; as an accusation floated with the clear intention to convince me to stop writing, talking, or believing myself about my own embodied experience.

As I say, plenty of reasonable people before me have pointed out the frequency of ill-defined and ill-motivated uses of "TERF," including academic philosophers paying attention to exactly the kind of polarizing discourse I explore in this essay.¹ The academic and feminist writing that already exists concerning "TERF," which is usually aimed straightforwardly at salvaging the possibility of dialogue within feminism, deserves *at the very least* a nod in a piece of scholarship that centers this term.

The few "gender critical" people I've seen who call themselves TERFs online do so ironically, because as they communicate in their posts, they're tired of being called TERFs. It is rare that someone in the "gender critical" corner uses that term unironically, or tries to stake out some actual value to it (and as a teacher, I *still* think we should attempt dialogue with those people). Instead, "sex-based rights" and "gender-critical" discourses generally, quite emphatically, contest uncritical uses of "TERF" on the basis that neither feminist nor queer communities have arrived at an operational definition.

At the very least, in thinking through these things we can attempt to do what these authors do not: to hold these different labels, "gender critical" and "TERF," apart for the purpose of analysis, at least until they/we establish a definitional connection. (And, before I get ahead of myself: the basic meaning of "gender critical" for people who use that label could be summed up

¹ [Derogatory Language in Philosophy Journal Risks Increased Hostility and Diminished Discussion \(guest post\) \(Update: Response from Editors\)](#), August 27, 2018.

[TERF isn't just a slur, it's hate speech](#), Meghan Murphy, Feminist Current, September 21, 2017.

Because Medium appears to have taken down the following article, here's an alternate citation/summary: ["TERF Is Hate Speech and It's Time to Condemn It."](#) Amy Dyess, Medium, October 2018.

in the notion that gender identities and feelings do not emerge from a pre-cultural natural reality; that a gender category is not an inherent trait of an individual; that any attempt to corral a body into a coherent gender category like man, woman, or nonbinary is a cultural construction – so, instead of gender being the material thing that “sticks” us in power’s clutches, that material problem is sex.)

It would serve this article’s own analysis to refer even once to a term that’s a common self-identification for political activists in this realm, “sex-based rights activist,” since that would (from the authors’ perspective) at least help explain what the “gender critical” people think they’re doing. But I think raising that term, “sex-based rights,” would put the authors at odds with the belief they’ve already stated that sex and gender are both cultural inventions. The authors just...don’t talk about sex as an analytic in this article at all. They don’t discuss that these different terms they’re tossing out – sex, gender, TERF – are used in diverse contexts to signal diverse priorities and definitions that call for analysis: socially, on/offline, politically, legally.

A tiny minority of people I’ve encountered in the “sex-based rights” or “gender critical” spaces say vitriolic or hurtful things (including unintentionally, which still needs to be called out) about or to trans-identified people. I’d be sympathetic to calling those folks TERFs. But even if it feels good to call the assholes “TERFs” (I myself used to enjoy calling them out), that term appears to offer us very little in the way of analysis, and instead seems to sweep up everyone who believes sex is an immutable human problem into a bogeyman image of a fascist.

In my experience, “sex-based rights activists” and “gender critical” people are rarely hateful in their communication, even when they’re angry. And many *are* angry: specifically, about what they perceive as a public-sphere denial of the specificity of the experience of living in a female-sexed body. (And when academic articles like this one are performing the same denial, do I even need to add the qualifier “what they perceive as”? Or can we confirm that this is just...actually happening? Even in “scholarship.”)

Actually, it even seems like *feelings* are expressed less often by the “gender critical” folks than logic-based attempts at sense making. Social media posts by my “gender critical” contacts usually forward what they see as logically defensible claims for the specificity of female-bodied life experience. And even when feelings show up, expressing angry feelings isn’t as common as expressing a sort of depressed, exhausted ironic humor at silencings around discussions of sexed experience. Further, yet more rarely are “gender critical” opinions or feelings expressed in a way one could call “hateful.”

“Sex-based rights” is a huge term in the “gender critical” subcommunity, and one with which, I think tellingly, the *TSQ* authors simply do not engage. “Gender-critical” discourse aligns itself with sex-based rights advocacy, the latter of which aims to retain legal and analytical specificity for a category called “sex,” as apart from “gender” – mainly, arguing that the law should not

subsume the category of sex into a new umbrella category called “gender,” because, as those folks hold, sex and gender are not interchangeable terms. (Again, the authors of this piece offer that any belief that sex is *not* a cultural invention makes one “gender critical,” then go on to say that “gender critical” marks both “TERF” and “fascist” ideologies – those being entwined. These definitional acrobatics render all people who believe we’re stuck with sex TERFs and fascists.)

People who know law know that there are numerous legal precedents for defining a person’s sex other than the one they were assigned at birth. For decades, in plenty of cases, transition has been validated as establishing various sex-based legal entitlement claims. Legally, someone can be the sex they transitioned to later in life.

Crucially, what that means is: sex is not, and given current legal structures, *cannot* be *absent* from the law. The position of these authors that sex is dispensable as an analytic cannot “fly” legally. And until very recently, there has been no serious political proposal to subsume the concept “sex” by a separate concept “gender” – not until recent briefings suggested that we do so by creating legal priority for a thing called “gender,” to be defined via self-identification.

One theoretical issue at the base of this discussion is that sex has not previously been subsumed by gender *because* sex and gender have not been separate concepts in the language of the law: because in the law, “woman” has referred to sex, whether the sex of birth or the sex resulting from transition (that discursive conflation is a recently-recognized problem that I attempt to address in another piece, “Acknowledging We’re Confused,” on SBD). Thus, all the failed attempts to add the Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution concerned female sex, not woman gender, even while they referred to that sex as “women.”

“Gender-critical activists,” generally, are responding to the fact that many progressive voices in the 2020s desire for sex to be *procedurally*, rather than merely linguistically, conflated with gender: that the *verbal* self-identification of sex be the only criterion for entitlement claims such as placement in a same-sex prison. That may be a good idea, or it may not. But “gender-critical” people believe not – and think that placing sex (again, which has been legally changeable) on the same legal plane as a self-identification of gender falsely conflates sex and gender, and sets feminism back quite a ways. You can see how “gender critical” ideas are certainly controversial, and merit discussion and argument – but you can also see that those arguments stem from logic-based premises rather than hatred, or fascism, or various other panic words.

It’s time, then, to break down this *TSQ* article’s multiple, differing uses of the term “TERF.” Ultimately, because it’s used as a catch-all, the closest we get to a definition is that “TERF” means anyone who thinks sex-based experience matters to feminism. I’ve established that one of points of interest is that the authors refer to “TERF” as a “movement” consciously linked to other movements: “the trans-exclusionary feminist (TERF) movement...and the so-called anti-gender movement” (313). I don’t know who’s doing the “so-calling” here, because I’ve never seen any of my own contacts within “gender-critical discourse” or “sex-based rights advocacy” use the

term “TERF” or “anti-gender” to describe any social movement. As people watching these discourses know well, “TERF” is far more often used as an accusation (including in this article), than as a term of self-identification.

This next bit performed an especially weird omission, as the authors laid out the prevalence of TERFism without noting that it’s not an identity: “In the past decade or so, the shorthand ‘TERF’ has traveled globally through online spaces” (313). It’s incredible to me that they don’t say where and by whom that shorthand is being used, or why it’s traveled so efficiently through online spaces. The truth is, it’s been largely spread on platforms like 4Chan, as in the popular phrase there, “Kill TERFs.” To fail to mention the platforms where that term has particular caché, especially as its meaning on many of those platforms has exploded beyond any coherence – except to create a population of females to hate (as these authors actually replicate, since fascists are surely hateable) – is downright ethically irresponsible.

The omissions and erasures in this piece are serious and harmful. By its authors’ logic, not only would black trans scholars Kai Greene and C. Riley Snorton be TERFs, but also Leslie Feinberg, herself trans-identified, and the foundational 1990s work of Judith Butler.² Here’s Feinberg

² For her part, Judith Butler has of late (quite depressingly, in my view) contributed to the bizarre, reactionary [lumping of sex-based political analysis in with a global conspiracy of fascist, Christian gender conservatism](#), without evidence of actual communicative or ideological links between any self-conscious “feminism” and either “fascism” or conservative Christianity – and, of course, despite the fact that sex-based analysis is often spoken into the air by an unorganized collection of lesbian individuals, who, believe it or not, are *not usually plugged into global Christian conspiracies*, and whom her 1990s books ally with. The conspiracy that sex-based analysis gets lumped in with is called the “anti-gender movement,” something that stands apart from “gender-critical” discourse in its intense heteronormativity. We should definitely note that Butler targets what she calls the “anti-gender movement” instead of targeting “sex-based analysis” – meaning she might retain some separate legitimacy for the latter, but may not realize how her rhetoric in this piece could be received by “anti-TERF” voices to target all of the above – and anyone unfortunate enough to be standing nearby. Indeed, it feels crucial that Butler never uses the term “TERF” here, and equally crucial that that exclusion [doesn’t prevent this reactionary, hostile, and nuance-less piece in Them from citing her authority to conflate anti-genderism, “gender critical” feminism, and TERFs](#). (The title of that piece falsely portrays Butler not only as mentioning that word at all, but as centering it: “Judith Butler Correctly Says TERFs Are Fascists, Angering TERFs.”) Butler may be well-insulated from the abuses of feminists that conflating sex-centered feminism with “anti-genderism” promotes; I rather hope she is. It seems in places that what she’s writing in the *Guardian* isn’t about feminists per se. She may not be witness to how everyday people receive the blunt of the disciplinary force for talking about the specificity of a female-sexed life experience. Still, Butler’s not immune to the wild confluences of the queer “hot take”: if you look at this piece in the *Guardian*, you’ll see about 15 conflicting ideologies that Butler says travel together. The following moment is telling, especially in its idea that sex-based rights advocates are against reproductive autonomy: “As a fascist trend, the anti-gender movement supports ever strengthening forms of authoritarianism. Its tactics encourage state powers to intervene in university programs, to censor art and television programming, to forbid trans people their legal rights, to ban LGBTQI people from public spaces, to undermine reproductive freedom and the struggle against violence directed at women, children, and LGBTQI people.” I think it would serve us well to note that the types of “think pieces” Butler is penning these days are not in the same vein of her deep-read philosophizing of the 1990s. It would also serve us well to note that she grants that “gender critical” feminists might be their own thing, while opposing the thing she calls the “anti-gender movement... a fascist trend”: “That is why it makes no sense for ‘gender critical’ feminists to ally with reactionary powers in targeting trans, non-binary, and genderqueer people. Let’s all get truly critical now, for this is no time for any of the targets of this movement to be turning against one another.” Even Butler, in the *Guardian* piece, respects the tenuousness of these different labels. I don’t think she’d approve – well, don’t think but especially don’t *hope* she’d approve – of the way this piece is cited in the *Them* article.

writing against the very conflation of sex and gender that this article advocates: “The use of the word ‘transgender’ has changed over the two decades since I wrote *Stone Butch Blues*. Since that time, the term ‘gender’ has increasingly been used to mean the sexes, rather than gender expressions. This novel argues otherwise” (these and other words available on <https://www.lesliefeinberg.net>).

The authors seem unhindered by the fact that they are reproducing what their nebulously-defined ideal targets, the TERFs, would likely interpret as a politically-inflected slur. The moral high-horse they assert from *knowing* that sex is a cultural invention simply gallops forth. For instance, they use “TERF” as a self-explanatory noun for people who have provoked entire corpora of way-more-complicated-than-that feminist dialogue – like J.K. Rowling, whose name they include in a rapid-fire list of “highly visible TERFs like [lots of others and]... the popular writer J.K. Rowling” (313). Now, hang on: can we not *at the very least* mention that J.K. Rowling, for all her flaws, has spent words upon words trying to dialogue with the people who hate her (and who, in more than a few cases, have expressed that they want her murdered)?

Rowling has attempted, successfully or not, to lay out the differences between what she sees as her own sex-based feminist politics and what people call “TERFy” speech. It is an incredibly contentious issue, all over the internet, that Rowling has been the subject of apparently-homicidal ire for her views on sex.

So, let’s look at what happened to stick her in that situation. There are two moments that the anti-Rowling online discourse usually cites as proof she’s transphobic:

1) She tweeted support for a female researcher, Maya Forstater, after Forstater lost her job based on what she (Forstater) called her “gender critical” views. That view, namely, was the one that people online quote the most, that “it is impossible to change sex.”

[Ms. Rowling](#) criticized that outcome and said she supported Ms. Forstater, who did not respond to a message seeking comment on Thursday.

“Dress however you please,” Ms. Rowling [wrote on Twitter](#), where she has more than 14 million followers. “Call yourself whatever you like. Sleep with any consenting adult who’ll have you. Live your best life in peace and security. But force women out of their jobs for stating that sex is real?”
#IStandWithMaya #ThisIsNotADrill.”

(Screenshot taken from the *Entertainment Weekly* article I cite below.)

2) Then, in 2019, Rowling tweeted a response to the following headline on global news outlet “Devex”:

“Opinion: Creating a more equal post-COVID-19 world for people who menstruate.”

The Devex article was about equalizing medical care for female-bodied people globally. Rowling’s comment, using characteristically *Harry-Potter*-esque wordplay, was, “‘People who menstruate.’ I’m sure there used to be a word for those people. Someone help me out. Wumben? Wimpund? Woomud?” (While I think she was going for the concept “female” here, rather than “women,” I feel like, to be fair to Rowling, we should admit that female-bodied people are still known as “women” in most of the world.)

Immediately following the emergence of the “wimpund” comment in 2019, headlines everywhere jumped on the bandwagon of declaring Rowling’s comments and/or Rowling herself as conclusively “transphobic.” But very slowly since then, the occasional nod to diversity in public opinion on the matter has trickled into online discourse, as more people (initially, probably, cowed by GLAAD and other advocacy organizations’ loud criticism of her) have come out to support Rowling, putting themselves uncomfortably at odds with the loudest contingent of the queer activist community. Headlines have slowly emerged which admit the possibility of dialogue about sex by naming one or another celebrity who has come out in support of Rowling (at this point, 3-4 years after she could have really used that support). One example of this new type of headline was carried by *Entertainment Weekly*’s January 17, 2023 article, “*Succession* star Brian Cox defends J.K. Rowling amid criticism over controversial trans comments.” (Note how her comments are no longer uncritically called “transphobic” in headlines, generally. But hey, damage to the discourse has by and large already been done.)

That article cited the increasing discord among celebrities as to whether Rowling, basically, has a right to speak. Ralph Fiennes’ comments, quoted in the article, specifically cite the common rhetoric that paints Rowling’s views of sex as “fascist”:

"J.K. Rowling has written these great books about empowerment, about young children finding themselves as human beings. It's about how you become a better, stronger, more morally centered human being," Fiennes said in a *New York Times* interview last year. "The verbal abuse directed at her is disgusting, it's appalling. I mean, I can understand a viewpoint that might be angry at what she says about women. But it's not some obscene, über-right-wing fascist. It's just a woman saying, 'I'm a woman and I feel I'm a woman and I want to be able to say that I'm a woman.' And I understand where she's coming from. Even though I'm not a woman."

While granting the possibility of dialogue by citing Cox and Fiennes, the *EW* article still betrays some biases borrowed from the online climate of hostility toward sex-centered feminism.

Not only does it repeat the false characterization of “TERF” as a “movement” (instead of noting that it’s generally regarded by those on the receiving end of that term as a “slur”) but it also reinforces patriarchy’s unwillingness to deal with anything female-associated as its own...thing.

In line with the vast majority of celebrities and organizations who condemned Rowling in 2019, the article frames Rowling’s “wimpund” comment as though it was entirely about trans women, instead of being what it actually was, which is 0% about trans women. If you just *read* the tweet: what Rowling was 100% doing in that tweet was defending the specificity of the class condition of being born female. And thus, by the wave of a magic wand that belongs properly to Bellatrix Lestrange or some other asshole, people born female fall out of even the most “inclusive” queer conversations:

The author, 57, later tweeted about taking issue with the phrase "people who menstruate," and has regularly drawn criticism from LGBTQ community supporters for reiterating ideologies that have been linked to the trans-exclusionary radical feminist (TERF) movement that often adopts the belief that trans women are not women.

Back to the *TSQ* article. It doesn't seem a fair, or complete, or *scholarly* account of the whole "adventure" of J.K. Rowling's reputation, which we've all witnessed over the last few years, to just call her a TERF like the blogosphere does and move on. And as with the other names on their list, these authors don't mention the complexity or dialogue surrounding her arguments, even to attempt debunking them. This is the loss of dialogue that academic philosophers have cautioned against. Only in the *New, Sad Humanities* is it "scholarly" to treat women writers who have positively spilt ink trying to lay out the logic of their arguments as 100% worthless interlocutors.

(And, full stop: most of the queer community members I've ever met acknowledge that it is ultimately impossible to achieve a total transition to male or female, which is why transition is a lifelong process. Never will accomplishing traits of maleness or femaleness equate, materially, to being thrown into the world with one of those two "starting points." Our bodies don't have to all be the same for us to respect each other. Hence, and here I'm going out on a craaaaaazy limb: I don't think J.K. Rowling's comments in those two incidents were ridiculous. I don't think they were transphobic. Actually, I think they were quite logical, as is Forstater's "belief" [read: it's a fact] that it's impossible to once and for all change fully into maleness or femaleness. Claiming "transition" can be captured in one time period that is full and final erases the difference between trans males' and trans females' experiences just as much as it erases the lived reality of being thrown into the world as "female" in the first place. I just think she would be better understood if she implied, instead of "women," that "females" should be the word for "people who menstruate." Also, let's acknowledge that she was addressing an article with a clear global outlook – and to refer to females as "women" still makes sense on a global scale. That's what United Nations personnel tend to mean when they say "women" experience female genital mutilation and "corrective rape," for instance.)

In apparently backwards order, the *TSQ* article *does* mention, *after* they've characterized several public figures as objectively-identifiable TERFs, that the people they're criticizing are themselves critical of the word "TERF," but in the same motion deny that those people have any reason to complain: "Even the argument by trans-exclusionary radical feminists that the term

TERF (an acronym for ‘trans-exclusionary radical feminist’) is a ‘slur’—rather than a description of a particular approach to politics—leans on a ‘politics of injury’ that distances itself from the real and very harmful work trans-exclusionary radical feminism is doing in the world” (326-327). I wonder if these people have visited 4Chan. I don’t blame them if not; it’s gross. But I have. And it’s gross.

I would grant a blanket claim about harmful rhetoric being the special province of “the TERFs” if there was any evidence that the harmful rhetoric surrounding that term is one-sided – or even that it’s coming more from TERF-accused discourse than from anti-TERF discourse. Or if this piece didn’t ignore so many ways and places “harmful work” is being done to invalidate feminist discourses that center female experience and to threaten with bodily harm those who do. Or if the authors didn’t enact their own harmful rhetoric against butch lesbians – I haven’t even gotten to that part yet.

If we’re going to talk harm, let’s talk harm.

What about the very real and harmful work it does to “tomboys” and young butches to put a queer gag order on saying that they’re validly occupying their female body, that they too can fight for society to recognize female diversity? To rape victims like my friend, who don’t want to report a crime because of their “cislesbian privilege” when the rapist is of a “less-privileged” queer identity? To people like J.K. Rowling, who *have* been doxxed and threatened with death as “TERFs” when they don’t identify as such and actually do offer some thoughtful-enough (if problematically-worded) social analysis that at the very least isn’t “fascist”? This article’s wholesale dismissal of the actual, embodied concerns of real people, offered with the cherry on top of asserting its own *scholarly* authority to redefine sex as a “cultural invention,” is incredibly harmful, in both the short and the long term. Even though this article is jargony: I can imagine a first-year grad student or late undergrad reading this and deciding that she will never again talk in an academic context about her body. That’s what I had decided...before I quit Penn and got my identity back.

And uh, let’s deal with *this*: signaling that these arguments have been rubber-stamped by feminists of color is insidious as hell. Have these people even talked to African feminists who have been called TERFs for centering “corrective rape” and female genital mutilation in their feminism, or Latin American feminists who have centered marital kidnapping and marital rape?

I thought we would get a useful working definition of the word TERF here, because these are scholars. But we didn’t. And I’m starting to think we never will. Not when we are denying the basic reality of sex, globally, as an issue in legal rights claims, United Nations appeals, pregnancy by rape, “corrective rape,” female genital mutilation, the asymmetrical imposition of compulsory heterosexuality upon female bodies, *Roe v. Wade*’s overturning, growing up with a female body in increasingly disciplinary and increasingly capital-producing realms of socially-mediated judgment, butch and femme lesbians’ vulnerability in homophobic encounters,

and just...life experience for all humans everywhere. Will we get a working definition of “TERF” which admits its ideological baggage, yet forthcomingly and logically justifies the term? Or will we continue to dismiss anyone who wants to talk about sex as a fascist, without examining the ideology behind that move?

Now, to butches. (We inevitably show up in these things, as a test case to prove feminists are wrong.) As I gloomily expected, the authors do eventually take the inevitable moment to shit on butch feelings – as scholarship contesting sex-based social analysis simply must:

“Think, for example, of...writer Tristan Fox’s article ‘A Butch Eradication, Served with a Progressive Smile,’ which appeared on AfterEllen.com in 2019, whose original title, it should be noted, was not ‘A Butch Eradication’ but ‘A Butch Genocide,’ riffing on the white nationalist conspiracy theory of ‘white genocide.’ Both of these recent anti-trans polemics present trans experience as a threat to putatively cis women (although butch as a formation is often understood by both those who so identify, as well as scholars of gender and sexual cultures, as sitting on the transgender or nonbinary spectrum), but, equally important, they imagine the status of being endangered as fundamental to the experience of cis girlhood (in Shrier’s case) and women (in Fox’s, although again, the assumption that butch is a word for cis women or lesbians is, for many, an inappropriate one)” (325).

The binary between “cis” and “trans” here operates aggressively, reminding us again that the word “butch” – a term that most *definitely* emerged in American culture in the mid-20th century as a way to capture the lived experience of being a male-passing female lesbian, à la Feinberg – remains at the center of debates about whether “cis” women deserve to have anything.

But, *hmm*, “putatively cis”...are they perchance admitting here what I think is absolutely true, and what Feinberg’s entire life represented: that butch lesbian lives explode the cis-trans binary, like, for instance, by exploding the “heterosexual matrix” Butler writes about?

No matter. The valid binary here is “cis versus trans” – a binary formulation composed, like “man versus woman,” of gender identities, rather than bodily situations. What the authors are not saying, in any of this, is the word “female.” What they’re not talking about is the bimodal, Butlerian problematic of sex in human perception. And ultimately, rather than deal with the uncomfy materiality of it all, they’d rather refer to that whole passé butch lesbian thing as “cis,” so as to question butch lesbians’ inclusion in any progressive gender politics.

After all, they cannot logically make their central argument in the piece (that talking about sex = fascism) and in any way allow for the threefold specificity of having a female body, avowing womanhood/lesbianism, and being masculine – or accordingly, the specificity of getting *specifically* shit on for that combination of materiality and gender presentation. (I’ve written about this elsewhere, but take for instance the near-universal experience of male-passing butch women getting literally “told” we’re trans – in this day and age, more by queer people than straight.)



Women's March  @womensmarch · 3h ...

It's 2023 and fascists, misogynists, bigots, and TERFs are once again ascendant. We need to show up and show out on January 22.

In one week, we march.

 15.5K  18  68  215 

The Women's March organizers remind us in a January 15, 2023 tweet, above, that sex-based feminist discourse and fascism are basically the same thing.

This butch-focused moment is, to me, the most telling part of the article. It just seems like it *always* shows up, the patriarchy-splaining of us butches, and here it is again. In that above passage about butches, note how the authors twice clarify that the definition of “butch” is simply not what the word “butch” means to most butches. And, as butch women field constantly, there are the ever-present gestures toward subsuming “butch” under the category of trans (rather than, as I suggest above, to respect how it *powerfully* disrupts the cis/trans binary). The authors truly do not give a single eff that they’re rendering female butch lesbian women’s experiences – which are so painful, and such a struggle, and such a gradual process of coming to self-love and self-empowerment – invisible and illegitimate. I don’t think they’ve talked to any of us. Here are those proper definitions of “butch.” Note that it’s not a lesbian thing:

- 1) “although butch as a formation is often understood by both those who so identify, as well as scholars of gender and sexual cultures, as sitting on the transgender or nonbinary spectrum”
- 2) “although again, the assumption that butch is a word for cis women or lesbians is, for many, an inappropriate one” (325)

Why are we citing “scholars” in general as proving that butches “[sit] on the transgender or nonbinary spectrum,” when clearly the words we choose are an ethical question, rather than an objective question scholars can answer?

Yet again, we have some self-appointed cultural authority swooping in to define butchness for us. But let’s be real: why would “butch” not, more “factually” (if we’re aiming for some unnecessary objectivity), *disrupt* the authority of the binary “cis versus trans,” since clearly – as this article itself indicates – butchness is *complicated*?

Because it’s really important for these folks, and for many others, that butch lesbians do not get their own identity. Why would that be important, patriarchy? Wait: patriarchy, *is...that...you?*

Alright. So I'm bolding the shit out of this part:

I have come to believe through 100s of moments like these – literally 100s, witnessing culture unfold around me and slap me in the face like Doc Ock's many tentacles, if those tentacles were penis-shaped – that butch lesbian identity will be *the 21st-century test case* for whether there is permitted to be diversity among “females.” It will be the test case for whether the “gay rights” movement will be subsumed into a form of queer gender conservatism that is just another heterosexualizing force in the world.

And, what's more:

I believe with every bone in my body that sexually masculine, female women will be the test case for the survival of feminism as *fem-inism*, as opposed to a “queer” neoliberal feminism: ungendered, un-female-concerned, uncritical, wherein everyone has the right to buy what they want to create who they (supposedly, already) “are”. If we cannot achieve public visibility as male-passing, masculine female women, “female” will simply mean “feminine,” and “feminine female” will equate to heterosexual, whether through a relationship with a “cis” male or a “trans” male. And that'll be the end of freedom for the sexed body.

The whole adventure of this article leaves the same metallic taste in my mouth of an interaction I had with a high-powered LGBTQ campus leader at Penn, who said that the word “lesbian” is...simply...“transphobic.” Why and how does this stuff fly in scholarly contexts?

With the frequent incorporation of “nonbinary” into the “trans” side of a binary formulation “cis versus trans,” I would caution against the ever-increasing trend, which Bidy Martin warned of in 1994 (as an ungendered queer theory was on the rise in the U.S. university system), to paint “cis women” as the “basic bitches” of queer circles. (She didn't use those terms, of course; that would be anachronistic and unscholarly – but it's a solid interpretation.) I wonder if Monique Wittig would ever have employed the prefix “cis” for a lesbian. She's the one who said that lesbians straddle the cultural line between man and woman: “a lesbian has to be something else, a not-woman, a not-man.”

If the historical othering of female diversity is half of what Wittig and Simone de Beauvoir said it is, have lesbians ever been “cis”? Jack Halberstam and Judith Butler both have brilliant pieces on how any attempt to conceptualize lesbian gender is in many ways “queerer than queer”...like, the O.G. queer (Two super-lezzie essays that Halberstam published in 1996, and basically everything Butler wrote in the 1990s, do this).³ And that makes sense given that Butler’s big-ol’-lesbian-based thoughts are said to have founded queer theory, even though people don’t usually call them lesbian when they say that. But I mean, it’s not just lesbians who are the O.G. queer. Like, let’s think about this, very seriously: have female women doing anything outside the realm of “approved female behavior” ever been properly “cis”? Especially when it comes to sexuality – if, as Butler writes, sexuality is a huge part of all this gender “ish”...like, come on, there *had* to be female sexual partners penetrating their male man friends with vegetables back in the day. Sorry; it’s just true.

So is “cis-” a useful denomination, or is it yet another constructed binary that limits our ability to conceive of the powers of bodies-out-of-line?

Perhaps, and bear with me here: perhaps it’s *powerfully* feminist that there are butch women in the world who have come to terms with our bodies through and despite all the patriarchy-enforced confusion, who live as inheritors of the male-passing female origins of the term “butch” and of the diversity of lesbians, like Feinberg did. Perhaps it’s actually super feminist that you can be a female woman like us, that you can use a strap-on, or literally whatever, for god’s sakes, and be a woman. That’s not something these authors appear to even have considered. There is no specificity here.

Fox’s article, which I’ve read and does deserve critique, still doesn’t say that anyone’s *experience* is a threat to butch specificity. What it does say is that a queer, ostensibly-progressive ideology is contributing to a disappearance of butch lesbian specificity in discourse. And, sorry folks, but butch lesbian specificity is disappearing in discourse. Just ask us. Since we know that to be the case, and it’s one of the reasons I left the academy: please note the unquestioned, unproblematized, truly *wild* gaslighting here of an entire population, female butch lesbian women, who know full well how the queer world, including these authors, is denying its right to the cultural identity that birthed it in the 1950s and that Feinberg so bravely occupied.

Moreover, and *come on* already: the signaling here that Fox believes in “white genocide” is entirely gratuitous and truly insidious – no matter how stupid the word “genocide” would have been if it had appeared in Fox’s title. In no way was this butch writing about her own experience of sex and gender “riffing” playfully on how she believes in “white genocide” – literally, they

³ Halberstam, J. (1996). Lesbian masculinity or even stone butches get the blues. *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, 8(2), 61–73. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07407709608571231>

Halberstam, J. (1996). Queering Lesbian Studies. In B. Zimmerman & T. A. H. McNaron (Eds.), *The New Lesbian Studies: Into the Twenty-First Century* (pp. 256–261). Feminist Press at the City University of New York.

say “riffing.” What. The. Fuck. The disappearance of female butch lesbian specificity in discourse is no “genocide” – duh – but neither would it make any sense to say that this butch – who stuck her neck out to write something controversial about sex/gender – believes in the term “white genocide.” This ridiculous parallel (“riffing,” really??) is, again, a cheap way to paint assertions of female lesbian specificity (not to the *exclusion* of other lesbians, but to the *inclusion* of butch gender negotiations of femaleness *within* the lesbian conversation) as fundamentally racist, which as I hope I’ve established, makes zero sense.

Okay, but this article isn’t about identifying bad fascists; it’s about identifying bad feminists: “To be clear, while we are here presenting twenty-first-century gender-critical trans-exclusionary discourses as highly syncretic yet distinctly postfascist palimpsests, we do not think it useful to engage in something like a game of ‘spot the present-day fascist!’ with either TERFs or anti-gender activists” (316). Okay, so “TERFs” and “anti-gender activists” (neither a term of identity, and the latter not really a term at all) are here separated – even while the article’s title, and rhetoric elsewhere, conflates them. Here, additionally, the term “gender-critical discourse” falls out of the conversation, possibly because it’s both better defined than TERF, and actually practiced by a real group of people. On the contrary, they write, “this special issue asks what aspects of feminist history and thought may participate in or collude with projects ultimately fostering a violent right-wing cultural hegemony and diffusing and bolstering the fascist potential in our gendered imaginations, even when these are presented as feminist” (317).

That...right...there. Feminist history and thought are the problem. They have *evil* within.

Honestly it would be more useful to spot the fascists – and you’d find many of them on 4Chan, attempting to silence or threaten sex-based rights activists with the term “TERF.”

Also telling: the word lesbian is mentioned exactly twice in this entire article. There’s that moment I just discussed, such a common one across the academy, asserting yet again that “butch” is not a lesbian word (despite, and can we say this part *quite loud*, the actual meaning and context of the term’s birth). The other time “lesbian” comes up is when the authors criticize the ridiculousness of people who think that “lesbianism” will (the authors narrow their eyes, sarcastically) be “lost” with the loss of female specificity:

“Trans politics of all kinds, according to this story, pose a threat to both lesbianism and womanhood, supposedly resulting in the radical erasure of the political power of both. Drawing out the contrapuntal paranoia with which much TERF rhetoric hums, the broader gender-critical movement rails against ‘Gender Theory,’ which it identifies as a US American ideology that, under the pretense of fighting for social justice, seeks to create a New Human that is neither male nor female (Bernini 2018). If this story sounds like far-right conspiracy theorizing, that is because it is familiar to and has long been promulgated by right-wing pundits and movements across old and new media platforms alike” (313-314).

I don't hear people decrying the loss of a thing called lesbianism. People will always fuck each other how they've always fucked each other. But I do hear people decrying the decreasing use of the *word* "lesbian," as "queer" has increasingly replaced it (that's a darn fact) due, at least in the academy, to a turn away from gendered analyses of sexuality (attending misreadings of people like Butler and Monique Wittig that miss how those theorists address the mutual entanglement of perceptible femaleness, the "woman" label, and lesbianism).

I absolutely have the receipts on the disappearance of the word lesbian in U.S. academic scholarship. For these authors to argue that the word "lesbian" is *not* disappearing in contexts of cultural authority is simply false – and gaslights the hell out of people who know it and feel it well, especially in economically privileged metro areas where it is far more acceptable to identify as "queer" than as "lesbian" (and if you're a lesbian, you sure as hell can't connect your lesbianism to your love of p*ssy). Sorry, friends. That parenthetical felt good to write.

While they're correcting butch lesbians' perceptions of their own identity, these authors absolutely nowhere admit that maleness or femaleness are real factors in the experience of social life. Never at any point do they even address the existence of male or female as human experiences, except in the phrase "white female vulnerability" (326), which they again paint as a discursive construction of problematic whites – signaling race where it rubber-stamps their argument, but ignoring any scholarship by people of color on the relevance of bodies or materiality. In sum, there is no reference in this entire piece to any material reality of the sexed body that anyone on earth might be dealing with. It's unclear how they can deny there's a US American ideology to this effect while they're enacting it.

Here's a moment that sounded clarifying, but then threw me for a loop: "Think, for example, of the transphobic point mentioned above that transgender identities allegedly offer an excuse for 'predators' to infiltrate women's spaces. In this instance, gender critical discourse attempts to juxtapose a vulnerable and silenced homogenous mass of 'real women' to pathological individuals who are neither authentically female nor male."⁴ Now, hang on. Don't we all *have* to know – once you think about it for a hot second – that "gender critical" discourse would never refer to someone as "inauthentically female or male"? That would make zero sense.

It's precisely the point of "gender critical discourse" that all people are thrown into the world materially as either male, female, or intersex. (It's also precisely the point of "gender critical discourse" that there is no "homogeneity" to female-bodied people; that we contain multitudes rather than adhering to cultural perceptions of the gender "woman.") There's no pathologizing involved in that definition of sex, and there's no question of inauthenticity when it comes to sex. Not from the "gender-critical" perspective. But since "sex" for these authors is a cultural

⁴ An aside: the fears about male predators in same-sex spaces are often rhetorically overblown, 100%, but if you follow true crime and/or care about females in prison, you know that's not *entirely* a non-concern, especially if verbal self-identification of sex grants legal entitlement to be placed in a same-sex prison.

invention (I'm thinking myself into knots writing this sentence), I am especially confused as to why they're reaching to the terms of authenticity/inauthenticity when they're referring to sex.

Okay, and this one just pissed me off. The authors take issue with a “feminist militancy grounded on an essentialist story of womanhood as always already under threat: in danger, at risk, and in need of protection.” Is that essentialist? Do these folks *read* feminism? You don't have to be an “essentialist” to believe that female bodies are still targeted for rape, domestic violence, discipline, and abuse on the basis of their material situation, in the same way that you can believe that all perceptibly *woman* bodies (like Feinberg, I'm treating social womanhood as a conceptually separate status/situation than material femaleness, although they clearly can co-occur in the same person's life) are targeted on the basis of the situation of being a woman, socially and culturally. Conceiving of all this happening at once, along different vectors – and, contrary to what these authors imply, as *definitely happening* – is the legal and political style of analysis at the root of intersectionality theory (that powerfully-useful black feminist theory which popular queer theorists like Jasbir Puar spuriously contest – see the “What Feminist Theories Are We Replacing” paper on “Opinions Her Own”).

In any case, how do you have a feminism without a belief that womanhood and femaleness are in various ways under threat of physical destruction, silencing, dissolution, and various other strategies of the ol' patriarchal “divide-and-conquer”...? Isn't some version of that the entire basis of feminism? This tells me that the authors disagree with the primary reason that feminists are usually pissed in the first place. That makes sense, because the rest of the article eschews feminism as it has always been practiced, even when it is not openly belittling feminists or misdefining feminism. (This is a good place to revisit the fact that it's one single 2016 citation which validates their faith in the “feminist theoretical notion” that “sex and gender are social and cultural inventions.”)

Equally confusingly, and suggesting in equal measure that these folks have not read much feminist theory, they write: “gender-critical activists...present the word gender as a shorthand for a currently unfolding anthropological revolution that—if not stopped in time—will eventually erase all differences between the sexes, depriving women, in particular, of their right to fulfill their biological destiny and pursue happiness” (312).

What...the...hell...did that sentence just say?

Ahem.

Sex-based rights advocates don't actually love telling women to fulfill their “biological destiny.”

Actually, uh, it's quite apparently, *literally always*, the contrary. Their entire “thing” is to fight the imposition of a false biological destiny on a perceptibly female body.

In fact: sex-based feminists *invented* telling “biological destiny” to go fuck itself.

So: whu-huhhhhh...???? What the fuck??

And what’s this about “depriving women...of their right to...pursue happiness”? Is that just for fun? What analytic is operating in that weird-ass statement?

Right there the authors appear to be signaling some kind of 1950s housewife interpretation of what a woman is, which...it appears...they’re saying “gender-critical activists” believe in...? But that’s the opposite of “gender-critical.” And the Second Wave happened. (It is still more confusing how they imply here that the discourse around sexual difference is *not* subject to erasure – since their whole piece is about how feminist ideas based on “differences between the sexes” are dismissible on face as fascist. If they’re framing anyone who believes sex isn’t a cultural invention as a crazy right-winger, they’re not exactly proving that the analytical frame of sex is likely to survive in academic spaces. My head hurts.)

And I wish I was done, but I simply can’t be, because here’s yet another angle on this weird criticism of feminism-in-general that the authors don’t appear to see that they’re enacting: this is one of *those* academic takes that paints feminism as the problem instead of the actually shitty *-isms* they mean to center (like: fascism). I’ve written about these takes elsewhere. But hey, I’m not surprised to find one here, given the fundamental mischaracterizations of feminist history, and the sweeping gesture toward “woman-of-color, Third World, and Black feminisms” made to delegitimize discourse about sexed experience instead of open up discussion about the *diversity* of sexed experiences. They write: “Ultimately, we argue that, in our specific moment, eschewing celebratory narratives of feminism as an incontrovertible political good—as we urgently rethink the boundaries between what we normally imagine as ‘feminist’ and ‘anti-feminist’ movements—is a condition *sine qua non* for any kind of antifascist trans feminist political and critical intervention” (313).

The article has placed the problem *within* feminism from “get” – from the title, and from the article’s first section heading, “Understanding Postfascist Feminism: Anti-Gender and TERFism.” So in “eschewing celebratory narratives of feminism,” the authors are saying that some feminist movements are anti-feminist. But isn’t what they mean that some right-wing fascisms might use the rhetoric of feminism to signal virtue? Why are they calling these “fascist *feminisms*” instead of “fake-feminist *fascisms*”? Putting “feminism” in the “noun” position instead of the “adjective” position is a subtle rhetorical move that, though likely unconscious, makes a version of feminism the problem instead of a version of fascism. (Which, no matter how unconscious, aligns with the authors’ conscious framing of a massive chunk of feminism – its sex-based perspectives – as immoral.)

Making feminism the Problem Noun folds quite nicely into all the knock-down, drag-out fights that feminists have had with each other for decades. It’s an old story: the patriarchy’s

tried-and-true strategy of “divide and conquer.” Females are raised to fight for male approval, to judge each other, to discipline each other in order to garner the authority of the “dad” in the room; as Sara Ahmed writes, it’s useful to conceptualize “women as female relatives. To become woman [she means: to become “woman” from “female,” if that is one’s course] is to become relative: not only in the sense of kin (connected by blood or marriage) but also in the fundamental sense of considered (only) in relation or proportion to something else” (*Living a Feminist Life*, p. 215).⁵

It seems like feminists are supposed to always be the problem for each other, instead of naming the beliefs that are actually the problem (like, perhaps here, fascism). We’re taking apart feminism instead of seeing across differences. Why? For this piece, it seems, that answer is simpler than elsewhere: these authors are taking apart feminism because they disavow its core starting point that sex matters. But the dividing-and-conquering is sometimes more insidious and requires more digging.

By its final, depressing paragraph, the authors have thoroughly conflated the sex-conscious thing that feminism is and has been for its entire history with things they call “TERFism” and “anti-genderism,” an inaccurate caricature of “gender-critical discourse,” and several other poorly-defined spectres of *movements that aren’t*, all of which this article frames as *identical kinds of fascism*. How, then, can we responsibly talk about our bodies as constitutive of our experiences? None of us want to be fascists!

Here’s my opinion: we HAVE to build a coalition against the actually insane Right, which actually seeks to limit what people are allowed to do with their bodies and what genders they are allowed to live. So we have to get on each other’s teams. And othering the blue-leaning, red-state females – who at the very least know their experiences of motherhood, sexual assault, life walking down the street, etc. used to be addressed by feminism – is not going to help.

The part that really really gets me is how much of a missed opportunity this article is. I live in Texas, surrounded by college-educated, nominally conservative women who would vote blue if voting blue was more coherent to them. Some of them did this round, because of *Roe v. Wade* getting overturned. Those women are not part of some global political project set out to destroy trans people. In fact, none of the women I’m talking about feel any animosity toward trans people, and those who are teachers use the right pronouns for our students. The truth is, they’re trying so hard. They’re trying so hard to be allies and to understand. But there is this ideological flinging of blame that blurs the goals of the LGBTQ left and just scares women away who still hold onto bodily sex as their political reality. These are female women (remember, I am operating from that Feinbergian conceptual separation between “female” and “women” in an attempt at clarity and inclusion, not exclusion) who own the female aspects of their experience –

⁵ To elaborate on my parenthetical in brackets up there, in the Ahmed quote: as I’ve written in this piece and elsewhere, I think it’s useful to conceive “female” and “woman” as terms operating on separate planes of analysis; terms that can coincide in the same person’s experience but don’t have to.

who have been assaulted, and had children, and had miscarriages, and had abortions – several of whom have come up to me and asked what’s going on with sex: like, in their words, does being female matter anymore? These women are powerfully alienated by the idea that those questions are unenlightened. They ask me under their breath.

You can fight for everyone’s right to exist and be themselves, and we should fight for those rights every day. But you can’t force people to redefine their own definition of sex or to believe that their feelings about their bodies lack political relevance. And it’s not helpful, politically or ethically, to try. I might even venture to say it’s unethical – it’s unethical to tell anyone, but especially female people, to redefine sex as a cultural invention.

As someone who’s obsessed with being careful with words and razor-precise about their definitions, and additionally who has documented the abuse the academy has perpetrated for years now against “feminist”-, “lesbian”-, and “female”-adjacent words, I *wish* I was more surprised to see “TERF” pop up here as a seemingly self-explanatory term within professional scholarship. What will surprise me, and – Can we please do this? – is if we start to talk for real about bodies. If we – radically (!) – let any person whose experience has taken them through the material trajectory of femaleness, including those for whom that’s a prior point in their life, speak about that. Please.

Before I end, I have to talk “binaries” and the discourse thereof: while this article accuses bad feminists of an obsession with enforcing the male-female binary, this article passionately enforces the cis-trans binary. And just as it accuses feminists of enforcing one definition of sex and gender, this article enforces one definition of sex and gender – as both being the same thing. On top of that, the authors assert multiple times, just like conservative extremists do, that anyone who disagrees with their definition aligns with evil: in their case, the evil of fascism. There is almost no attempt made to see through the ugliness that’s dividing nominally feminist camps, and to actually listen to folks who have different experiences of and understandings of sex and gender. (As I’ve shown, when other perspectives are cited, for instance surrounding the word “TERF,” they are cited to shoot them down; meanwhile, the same words are used to validate a one-sided dismissal of the targeted evildoers’ ideas. There’s just so much dismissal happening.)

If the academic world won’t step in to critique the abuses of feminist history and discourse here – like using the term “TERF” as though it doesn’t need to be specified, then deploying it nebulously toward any voice that says sex is *not* a cultural invention – then it’s clear that scholars can now safely, in their own circles, absolve themselves from listening to the diversity of people who don’t think sex is a cultural invention, and what their reasoning might be. And that...is dangerous. It will lead to this entire country hating each other more than we already do, and will just keep safeguarding and promulgating this bizarre, dishonest, queer high-horse-ishness about sex not mattering that I think justifiably exhausts everyone around me.

Even if I'm exhausting you, fair reader, at this point (understandable): I bet we can agree that both "gender-critical" and anti-"gender-critical" voices have to stop painting such broad strokes of who does and does not deserve to be listened to, especially when doing so paints right over the history of feminism and/or people's lived experiences. I think that if we can just calm down a bit, we have plenty of evidence that the majority of people who think it's reasonable to retain "female" as a specific legal and analytical category do not believe that trans women's identities as women aren't real or valid. In any case, we know for a fact that logically, those two beliefs in no way must travel together. The sociology of TERFism clearly begs more research (if these authors attempt a sociology; they haven't been able to identify a movement that flies under that banner), but even a clearer sociology won't help us solve the foundational Butlerian and Feinbergian problem of sexual difference. Dialogue might.

We also have plenty of evidence that we can stop attributing global, dark-web-secrecy-level political projects to a band of disparate feminist individuals expressing their own feelings. I'd venture to guess we can even find evidence on both "sides" that despite our differences, most people want to be good. Most people don't want other people to hurt. Most people want justice to be done. Female-bodied and women-identified people all over the political spectrum can stand in solidarity to make the world better if we just listen, and use our words thoughtfully. Instead of having a reactionary freakout, for instance, we might ask: what do "boundaries" or "inclusion" or other politically loaded words mean in X context? We don't have to give up on communication. And anyone trying to change the world can't give up on people. So don't give up.

And, as Bean said in the classic 1996 movie, "I'm getting quite near the end now":

This article's sweeping generalization, from title to concluding paragraph – that a political attention to sexual difference belongs properly to *fascists* – cannot be responsibly presented as it is, as a sociological fact borne of expert scholarship.

I'll end here, because it's just the truth:

The notion that one can escape from sex – that it, too, is a cultural invention – is powerfully white, Eurocentric, privileged as hell, and dangerous. Ask pregnant rape victims.

It rings of the disembodied power of the white male universal subject: the Western European ideal human form whose body is never out of place or out of line, because it's the physical-material baseline all the way down to the anatomy textbook. I can only imagine a group of people claiming sex is "invented" who have never had to care about the body; whose physical-material bodies aren't marked for social critique, or abuse, or violence, or discipline...or who have decided simply to disavow the reality that they are, and to abandon all the rest of us.

Because what all this means is that people will try to escape sex, of course. And then what happens to those who can't escape?