

Introduction

TERFs, Gender-Critical Movements, and Postfascist Feminisms

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In October 2018, the *New York Times* leaked a United States Department of Health and Human Services memo that sought to redefine “sex” as “a biological, immutable condition determined by genitalia at birth” (Hanssmann 2018). To experts of contemporary right-wing movements, this memo marked yet another moment during Trump’s presidency when the administration sought to curry favor with its electorate by attempting to codify into administrative law and policy an anti-trans—or, in the words of some of its proponents, an “anti-gender”—position. This attempt to legally redefine “sex” clearly reads as a bureaucratic rewriting of the online refrain “there are only two genders!,” which can be found across platforms in the “conservative blogosphere” in a number of semiotic genres: from YouTube right-wing comedy shows and Men’s Rights memes to white-nationalist Twitter (Cole 2018). Of course, neither grassroots conservative transphobia nor its party-political retrievals are unexpected recent occurrences. However, what seems worth investigating further about twenty-first-century varieties of transphobia is the gesture of framing trans exclusion not so much via the well-worn trope of an impending culture war, but as “a global battle of ideas” (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017b: 10) traveling under the banner of “gender-critical” politics. **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)** and, crucially, with the attendant trans political vision for a world where a multitude of lives beyond the gender binary are both imaginable and rendered materially possible. But the simplistic vignette of a clash of progressive feminist versus conservative anti-feminist ideas fails to capture the complexities of our current cultural moment, one in which much of what is under contestation is the meaning attributed to feminism itself.

Take, for example, the recent political vicissitudes of the Gender Recognition Act (GRA) in Britain. After the British Parliament held an inquiry in 2015 into transgender equality—which led to their recommendation to reform GRA to democratize trans people’s ability to access medical transition—the gender-critical trans-exclusionary feminist movement organized against the proposed changes to the act, causing the reform process to stall (Pearce, Erikainen, and Vincent 2020: 678–79). As is well known, the focus of the campaign that defeated the trans movement’s attempt to rethink GRA was the argument—presented as a vehemently feminist position—that the right to self-determine one’s own gender identity would endanger women in everyday single-sex spaces like public bathrooms (Jones and Slater 2020). In turn, this argument was backed up by the idea that “gender” is an ideological tool of deflection away from the everyday politics of “real” women’s lives and the multiple forms of oppression they face due more or less exclusively to their embodiment (Lewis 2019). Thus, gender critical thinking gets articulated, in some instances, as a classic conservative call to return to an imagined “golden age where everything was simpler and genders were what they looked like” (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017b: 14) and, in others, as a timely piece of feminist militancy grounded on an essentialist story of womanhood as always already under threat: in danger, at risk, and in need of protection. Moreover, a number of conservative gender-critical activists are advocating their position speaking emphatically as women: for example, popular European Catholic personalities like the German pro-life sociologist Gabriele Kuby (Kovats and Peto 2017: 117–18), the Italian blogger and chick-lit writer Costanza Miriano (Evolvi 2022), and the Belgian theologian and thinker Marguerite Peeters (Bracke, Dupont, and Paternotte 2017: 41) all 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 (Garbagnoli 2017: 154).

In both the avowedly feminist and the explicitly conservative articulations of gender-critical thinking, mobilization relies, in great part, on the ability of the addressee to identify politically and culturally as an “authentic woman,” which is itself a particular gender identification. In fact, gender-critical movements at large bear similarities with strands of liberal feminism centered on the primacy of gender over other vectors of power, authentic womanhood, embodied vulnerability, and individualizing notions of happiness and empowerment. For this reason, even the self-described conservative section of the gender-critical movement should not be seen simply as an anti-feminist project at a time of conspicuous rise of the Far Right on a global scale, as scholars typically view it (Corredor 2019). The driving objective of this special issue is to start a collective conversation on the

gender-critical movement as a whole by engaging it as an increasingly successful attempt to initiate something that, we propose, should be understood as a distinctively postfascist feminism. In this introduction, we firstly situate contemporary trans exclusion in our particular political juncture—one in which fascist movements, ideologies, and imaginaries that had been hastily declared defunct after 1945 seem to be having something of a powerful afterlife (Eco 1995). To frame the multiple stakes of this special issue, we go on to trace the contemporary retrievals of transphobic tropes like the notion of a singular, biologically determined womanhood and, critically, we do so by building on several decades' worth of critique from woman-of-color, Third World, and Black feminisms surrounding the question of what "feminism" may accrue in different cultural moments. 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 *conditio sine qua non* for any kind of antifascist trans feminist political and critical intervention.

Understanding Postfascist Feminism: Anti-Gender and TERFism

This special issue tells the story of two political projects that are simultaneously deploying transphobia, and transmisogyny in particular, as part of a call to return to a melancholically mourned "authentic womanhood" that has allegedly been lost. The trans-exclusionary feminist (TERF) movement (Pearce, Erikainen, and Vincent 2020; Hines 2020) and the so-called anti-gender movement (Bracke and Paternotte 2016; Graff, Kapur, and Walters 2019) are only rarely distinguished as movements with distinct constitutions and aims, and when distinguished are only sometimes discussed alongside one another, even though the parallels are multiple. TERFism is typically described as an originally fringe group of Anglophone—largely American, British, and Australian—1970s cultural feminism that has grown exponentially over the past decade partially due to heightened media exposure. In the past decade or so, the shorthand "TERF" has traveled globally through online spaces: highly visible TERFs like the theorist Sheila Jeffreys, the journalist Julie Bindel, and the popular writer J. K. Rowling articulate the movement's brand of transphobia by claiming that trans womanhood is a patriarchal invention aimed at infiltrating women's spaces and undermining feminist movement building from within (Pearce, Erikainen, and Vincent 2020; Hines 2020). 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. As Kuhar and Paternotte (2017b) explain, since the late 1990s, the right-wing self-described “anti-gender” movement has been organizing across Europe and parts of Latin America (Careaga-Pérez 2016) against transgender people’s rights and against a number of queer and feminist political projects including reproductive rights, legislation against gender violence, and anti-LGBT+ bullying initiatives, to name just a few.

Gender-critical movements often reemploy the well-known right-wing populist opposition between “the corrupt global elites” and “the people” (Wodak 2015: 46)—imagined, as part of populist rhetoric, through the figurations of “hardworking families” and “concerned citizens” (Villa 2017)—by tweaking it slightly. In anti-gender discourse, the corrupt global elites cast as the enemy of “normal everyday people” are the “genderists,” a vaguely defined collectivity that includes visible transgender celebrities and athletes; pro-choice and reproductive rights activists; scholars of women, gender, and sexuality studies; and supranational organizations like the European Union and liberal-leaning private foundations like the Open Society (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017b: 15). In fact, although the targets of the anti-gender movement are remarkably diverse, “transgender” as a broad set of experiences that may offer an alternative to binary gender roles and the heteronormative family is arguably the chief figuration against which anti-gender coalitions organize. Moreover, in entering what they frame as a global battle of ideas, the anti-gender movement references and repackages a number of often contradictory and incompatible ideologies and theories, derived from sources as far-flung as Catholic theology, anthropology, colonial-era ethnography, far-right anti-Americanism, and scientific racism, as well as decontextualized references to postcolonial feminist thought (Graff and Korolczuk 2018). Indeed, in this special issue, Jenny Andrine Madsen Evang provides tools for reading the tangled rhetoric of the anti-gender movement, insisting on the critical importance of understanding how it works and foregrounding its attempt to appropriate and redefine postcolonial feminist analyses in service of its white-supremacist project. To critically interrogate the overlaps among varietals of trans-exclusionary feminism and the wider gender-critical movement, the articles in this special issue expose a number of understudied recent or contemporary trans-phobic alliances: between second-wave US feminists and Zionism, online atheist groups and TERFs, and French theorists of materialist feminism and European religious conservatives.

What these articles showcase, we argue, is a particular manifestation of what Enzo Traverso (2019) describes as “postfascism,” a broad, open-ended and

uneven cultural moment of political and cultural transition in which tropes and rhetorical fragments echoing pre-1945 fascist projects intersect heterogeneously with the current political culture of neoliberalism. An example of how fascist imaginations and neoliberal *dispositifs* may intersect can be found in routinely deployed arguments about trans rights and the supposed attack on women's safety. 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. Importantly, both trans and cis womanhood are here rendered in highly ideological ways: the former as an example of individual behavior that is perverted and deviant and the latter as an ontological state whose normativity derives from its putative naturalness. As is well-known, in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, the entangled figurations of perversion, degeneracy, and crisis were key mechanisms employed to surveil, control, and curb both organized and everyday political dissent (Mosse 1985; Benadusi 2012). As Chang (2015) explains, in Fascist Italy in particular, a coherent figure—the crisis-woman—emerged that served to transform widely consumed liberal feminist narratives of the Euro-American "new woman" into fear-mongering devices aimed at making women conform to state-sanctioned femininities deemed natural, chiefly that of the fascist housewife and mother. The crisis-woman was deployed as a stand in for the degeneracy of modern society and, particularly, its increasingly androgynous gender roles that posed a threat to the binary gender system and heteronormative reproductive futurity.

In contemporary mainstream transphobia, then, we may be witnessing the postfascist resurfacing of the "crisis-woman" via representations of trans womanhood as a site of ominous danger and individualized risk. In fact, in the widely rehearsed trans-exclusionary argument mentioned above, the postfascist anxiety that degeneracy may lurk around the corner, always uncomfortably and unsafely adjacent to normalcy (and therefore constantly on the verge of corrupting, infecting, or sabotaging it) is coupled with a typically neoliberal sensibility that frames social issues like gender violence as matters of individual risk produced by a diffused cultural climate of insecurity. We do not, however, wish to present the emergent alliances that the contributors to this special issue are examining—in which supposed ideological antagonists collectively shape new trans-exclusionary imaginaries for the twenty-first century—as a unique historical development demonstrating a special, late modern tendency wherein even ideologies centered on fixity, uniformity, and homogeneity like fascism morph, hybridize, and adapt. Rather, our thinking is indebted to Ernst Bloch's ([1935] 1977: 5) pioneering insight that fascism entered the political arena, in the very first instance, as a "powerful

cultural synthesis” of a variety of conservative, liberal, and even progressive formations, the same “heterogenous surprise” (27) that today forces us to attend to the syncretic soldering of the fascist “crisis-woman” to the neoliberal “at-risk” woman (Banet-Weiser 2015) and, as we have argued, even to particular varietals of liberal feminism.

Even as it is making a number of overtures to liberal feminism (mired as these may be in ambivalence and contradiction), the kind of postfascist feminism we are examining here explicitly promotes the renaturalization of the heteronormative sexual order and of the gendered division of labor between men and women (Garbagnoli 2016: 190). Importantly and unsurprisingly, national and racial formations are also woven through the normative sexual and gender formations that the anti-gender movement sees itself as defending. Alongside its obvious anti-Semitic undertones, for example, the key anti-gender charge that gender ideology is yet another “world program” unleashed by “global elites” on “normal families,” encodes demographic anxieties and fears about reproduction and ethnonational decline (Kuhar and Paternotte 2018). Similarly, the call to citizenry to resist the translation of a morally suspect theory into European languages in particular makes implicit reference to well-worn colonial tropes of Europe as “the standard-bearer of civilization” (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017a: 268). If, as Finchelstein (2019: 97) has suggested, today’s right-wing movements that act within democratic national contexts are indeed engaged in a systematic “postfascist attempt to redefine democratic theory,” the anti-gender movement shows that that redefinition is occurring through the transformation of a number of terms, among them *gender*, *sexuality*, *nation*, *race*, *women*, and, crucially, *transgender*. In their multiple references to liberal feminism, religious conservatism, colonialism, historical fascist imaginations, and even a highly reappropriated and reconfigured version of postcolonial feminist theory, gender-critical movements demand that we carefully attend to trans exclusion as a complex palimpsest and avoid reducing it to an easily dismissible brand of reactionary thought.

A Postfascist Feminism of the 99 Percent?

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. As Bray et al. (2020: 3) remind us, the “post” in Traverso’s “postfascism” should be read neither temporally (as a straightforward aftermath of historical fascism), nor as negating any kind of world-historical frame, but rather as drawing out the entrenched “fascist potential” in supposedly democratic presents. Building on work on the

postfascist times we are living through, then, 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. In fact, the gender-critical politicization of a true womanhood under threat by trans politics is not only genealogically coherent with multiple conservative moral panics and resilient fascist tropes but also with the *longue durée* of liberal, bourgeois, white feminist exclusions perpetrated along racial and class lines. The authors of the contributions in this special issue collectively invite us to rethink the distinction between feminist anti-trans projects and anti-feminist anti-trans movements, such that we may be able to redefine trans exclusion cogently and capaciously.

The process of repackaging “gender” as postfascist politics involves a variety of social agents: from parent groups to neofascist youth organizations, from Catholic intellectuals to far-right publishers and pro-life activists, from infotainment personalities and online content creators to national political leaders. As Mickey Elster explains in this special issue, today proponents of trans exclusion are more likely to use what the author calls a strategy of “insidious concern” than a straightforward moral indictment of transness. In fact, from the outset, the first anti-gender thinkers were keen to not present themselves simply as reacting to queer and feminist social advancements, attempting instead to utilize the latter as opportunities to establish something of an alternative conceptual laboratory. In the late 1990s, for example, French priest and psychoanalyst Tony Anatrella (1998) published *La différence interdite: Sexualité, éducation, violence trente ans après Mai 68*. In it, Anatrella argued that the same Western societies that eagerly “celebrate diversity” in all its forms are waging a cultural war against the physical, psychological, and ontological differences between men and women (Stambolis-Ruhstorfer and Tricou 2017: 84). In Anatrella’s account—which is accidentally strikingly similar to what a number of extremely active far-right women content creators also argue today in explicitly white supremacist online spaces (Tebaldi 2021)—secular institutions and markets see sexual difference as a hindrance to economic progress, and, as he goes on to argue, it is women who pay the highest price for this late-capitalist twofold economic and anthropological restructuring. What is being articulated here is a distinctively right-wing anticapitalism which casts heteronormative cis women as the ultimate losers of modernization and, therefore, the potential vanguard in the resistance against it.

In the many national iterations of the gender-critical movement beyond the Anglophone world, the word *gender* is kept in English and presented as untranslatable (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017b: 14). As we will explain, we interpret this as another distinctively postfascist strategy that, by framing “gender theory”

as suspiciously “fashionable” imported knowledge, affectively binds it with fears of foreign contagion. For example, in Germany the slogan “Geisteskrankheit namens Gendermainstreaming” (A mental illness named gender-mainstreaming), first advanced in 2014 by the openly Islamophobic far-right group *Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes* (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamicization of the Occident) (Haller and Holt 2019: 1677), has reappeared in widely respected newspapers, magazines, and TV as part of the increasing circulation in mainstream media of gender-critical soundbites and talking points (von Redecker 2016). While non-Anglophone speakers might not be able to ascribe an exact meaning to the phrase “Gendermainstreaming,” they will be familiar enough with English as the idiom of global popular culture for the phrase to elicit an interpretation and an emotional response. Thus, anti-gender activism does not simply reproduce English words like *gender* in languages other than English. It takes these terminologies out of context and attempts to recontextualize them within a right-wing bid for cultural and affective hegemony that wields power productively rather than simply reactively or repressively. Much like the assemblage of fascist and neoliberal gendered figurations we have examined so far, the supposed untranslatability of *gender* is an easily recognizable postfascist rhetorical device: this is because refusing the possibility that a particular concept can be hybridized and rephrased in national languages other than English implicitly articulates the vision of a world made out of sovereign, linguistically and culturally uniform protectionist nations that will not bow down and assimilate putatively “foreign” theories of human experience. In spite of its own self-image as embattled against the feminist global traffic of meaning about gender and the body, the gender-critical movement has nonetheless managed to translate, popularize, and fundamentally reframe within public debate long-standing intellectual conversations about “sex” and “gender” as epistemological categories. In fact, as we have tried to show here, gender-critical activism functions itself as a large-scale translation process through which particular counter-theories and concepts are formulated and released into circulation. In turn, these new concepts and counter-theories can be described as articulating something which we name “a postfascist feminism of the 99 percent.”

In the early 2000s, the Pontifical Council for the Family (2006) published the volume *Lexicon: Ambiguous and Debatable Terms Regarding Family Life and Ethical Questions*—a dictionary that lays bare the “new forms of manipulation” that hide beneath apparently innocent terms and phrases such as *homophobia*, *reproductive health*, *pro-choice*, *discrimination*, and, in an entry titled “An Ideology of Gender: Dangers and Scope,” *gender* (Garbagnoli 2017: 153). The dictionary officially opened what the Pontifical Council for the Family called “a semantic battle.” The metaphor of a fight over meaning powerfully implies that, for the

Vatican, winning this particular war of position may mean contributing to redefining some of the basic terminologies regulating citizenship and belonging in democratic contexts, while reasserting the gender-binary system in an avowed attempt to stand with cis women—understood here as one monolithic and biologically overdetermined population—against the supposed attack on their very nature encapsulated by the word *gender* (Garbagnoli 2016; Case 2016). Drawing from the history of gender-critical thinking and its multiple current manifestations, we suggest that this ideological and political position can be cast as a postfascist feminism of the 99 percent insofar as what gender-critical actors consistently invoke is an injured mass defined by their ontologically understood gendered identification. Importantly, this imagined 99 percent of women oppressed by the corrupt “genderist” elites is fully stripped of the classed connotations of other kinds of mass feminist mobilization—chiefly, socialist feminism. Here, in fact, feminist working-class solidarity seems to be replaced by the idea that what should instead bring women together is a shared self-definition as biologically overdetermined and authentically gendered subjects—in other words, “normal women.” This postfascist variation on a feminism of the 99 percent is certainly both problematically essentialist and highly paternalistic, but, as we will see more clearly in the next section, it may not, in fact, be any less feminist for that, as it is also perfectly in line with a particular Euro-American genealogy of liberal feminism.

The Nature of Feminism

If trans-exclusionary politics of various kinds—including a generalized rhetoric voicing supposed concern over the well-being of people who might be referred to as “women”—have been folded seamlessly into global right-wing movements, this is not, in some ways, a new or even necessarily recent phenomenon.¹ So how is it that it has garnered the sustained attention of scholars only over the past decade or so?

Part of the problem—not all of it, granted, but certainly part of it—may be that it has taken until the last decade, at least in the United States, for mainstream feminisms to experience a paradigm-shifting reckoning with the ambivalent character of feminist activism and politics, even as this reckoning had long been called for and has been unevenly absorbed. This is not to say, of course, that the many varietals of thinking about gender that have traveled under the name of feminism over the past 150 years have not each had their critics. Indeed, the rise of liberal feminism in the United States—perhaps most obviously embodied by the movement for women’s suffrage, which spanned from the mid-nineteenth-century through 1919—is in fact perfectly coeval with the first criticisms of the US American feminist movement, as Black women (among many others) immediately

recognized that those liberal prerogatives would mean functionally nothing for the Black women and men who still lived under enslavement and the constant threat of white supremacist violence.² The tradition of critique of liberal feminism, which is these days more or less coterminous with what is referred to as “white feminism,” has always insisted on offering a clear-eyed account of its use-value for the ends of white supremacy, in part owing to what liberal feminism necessarily shares with liberalism itself.³ Rarely do these critiques ask whether feminism itself is the problem, focusing instead on how to make feminism better: more anti-racist, more responsive to both structural and localized injustices, less hegemonic. The project of doing feminism better, we worry, has obscured a host of sobering but absolutely critical questions about how we understand feminism itself.

Feminism is not, of course, one thing. There are endless varieties of feminist activism, theorizing, politics, and praxis. Critics of, for example, liberal feminism would not necessarily wage the same critiques of, say, many materialist feminisms (although materialist feminisms have their own critics).⁴ Feminism has many histories and, we hope, many futures. Recognizing that *feminism* is a word that refers to a multiplicity of political tactics, frameworks, and histories is also a critical starting point for the development of a more nuanced and importantly unromantic understanding of what *feminism* might and does mean right now. There is no stability of meaning that might be attributed to the term *feminist politics*. While this will be an obvious statement to anyone who has spent even the most minimal time thinking about feminism and its discontents, somehow the self-evident nature of this idea has not, at least to our mind, been sufficiently absorbed into our understanding of trans-exclusionary feminisms, gender-critical feminisms, or other veins of feminist thinking that could broadly be characterized by an enduring concern with refuting the womanhood of trans women and contesting the legitimacy of trans experience as a whole. Critiques of how feminism has, today and in earlier times, been invoked in service of a wide range of pernicious and anti-liberationist ends have somehow not yet spurred a careful enough reckoning with the enduringly ambivalent character of feminism.

We received many proposals for this special issue that made arguments that went like something like this: “Trans-exclusionary feminisms and gender-critical feminisms are not, in fact, feminisms. Actually, they’re X.” We do not intend this statement as a call-out of the authors of these submissions, all of whom were seeking to engage closely and carefully with trans-exclusionary feminisms. But the volume of this genre of submissions illustrates, to our mind, the problem: there is still a persistent sense, especially among white Americans or other scholars situated in the global North, that feminism is an incontrovertible political good that, while perhaps requiring some tweaks, needs to be saved from those supposedly

feminist bad actors that speak, without legitimation, in its name. This position requires a belief in something akin to a reform politics, and in turn it suffers from all the predictable liabilities of reform projects more generally, namely, an inability (or unwillingness) to see the problems that inhere in the structure itself, choosing instead to focus on fixing the smaller manifestations of the deeper-seated issues.

While we believe that there are situations in which reforms can be strategic, reforms can nonetheless only be strategic when embarked on with a clear-eyed understanding of the bigger problems. To state it clearly, this special issue is organized around the notion that trans-exclusionary feminisms, gender-critical feminisms, and all other problematic—if we dare use such an innocuous term, which these politics absolutely do not deserve—feminisms are, in fact, iterations of feminism. That the Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention in 1848 identified a set of priorities for women that were almost entirely unresponsive to the condition of Black and Native women does not mean it was not a feminist effort. White supremacist feminisms—think of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Margaret Sanger, and other self-avowed feminists who advocated for racial eugenics, among other ideas—are feminisms. Imperialist feminisms—think of feminist global interventionism, histories of “white women saving brown women from brown men,” as Lila Abu-Lughod (1998: 14), riffing on Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, once put it⁵—are feminisms. To suggest that trans-exclusionary or gender-critical feminisms are somehow the first movement to call themselves feminist while working against the ends of gender liberation but are not feminist movements flies in the face of the very real and very complicated histories of feminism across the globe. This special issue, then, proceeds from the assumption that trans-exclusionary and gender-critical feminisms are feminisms and thus demand careful historicization, analysis, and contextualization as a recent (but not in any way new) formation of feminism that has gained terrifying traction on a global scale over the last fifty or so years.

But why linger with this question, which seems, in itself, perhaps merely semantic? Well, there are a few reasons, and because we find each of them so important, we elaborate them here. First, to insist on the idea that feminism cannot accommodate oppressive politics is to commit to a kind of historical revisionism and present-day refusal of reality that bespeaks a will to ignore or even conceal the harm that is done in the name of feminism. If we want to develop a righteous, critical feminism that will remain handy in the fight against gender-based oppressions of all kinds, the first step to getting there is necessarily taking a long, hard look at the many ways that feminisms have previously failed in the fight for justice.

Second, and related, the impulse to understand feminism as an incontrovertible political good is a form of purity politics that—apart from being a

clichéd hallmark, in our current moment, of a particular cadre of the white Left—refuses to engage the pressing problem of ambivalence.⁶ On an individual or highly localized level, a politics of purity understands harm that one causes—intentionally, knowingly, recklessly, or negligently, to invoke one of the foundational logics of mainstream feminism’s most darling allies, American criminal law—as an extension of one’s identity. To cause harm is to be bad. This is, of course, a bad take on the condition of living in the world with other people; all of us will wound, and be wounded by, others. But what we are referring to as a politics of purity insists on the bind between identity and action, which in turn makes taking responsibility almost impossible. Under this framework, if acknowledging that one caused harm means that one is a bad person, it is difficult to account for the harm one causes because it means acquiescing not to a bad act but to a bad identity. The same principle can be, we think, abstracted into an understanding of what a larger-scale logic of purity looks like: if feminism is understood to have one unified character that is broadly if imperfectly beneficent, any indictment of feminism for the many elaborate harms perpetrated in its name becomes an attack on feminism as a whole, rather than an attack on what feminism is used to announce or enact. A careful accounting for the promises and liabilities of any set of politics seems more promising as a means of engaging the complexities of the world around us.

Finally, we linger on the reality of complicit or downright fascist feminisms in order to offer historical and contextual scaffolding in this discussion of a movement we have witnessed gain an intimidating traction over even just the last decade. Trans-exclusionary feminisms—in their manifold, quicksilver iterations—represent a rising tide of conservative feminism, a movement increasingly hailed by its proponents as something like a feminism of the 99 percent from a distinctively right-wing perspective. It is a movement—indeed, a *feminism*—that points to the existence, or even an apotheosis, of a coalitional and longstanding global Far Right imagination that has been decades in the making. That some feminists seem reluctant to recognize it as such speaks to the need for better and more widely available vocabularies, frameworks, and analyses for how to anatomize the multivalent fortunes of feminist politics in the twenty-first century.

The structuring economic conditions under which we currently live—neoliberalism—also demand incredible deftness in the face of ambivalence and complexity. Indeed, as Inderpal Grewal, Lisa Duggan, Nancy Fraser, Michelle Murphy, Rahila Gupta, and many others have argued, one of the particularly pernicious tactics of neoliberal economization—the effort to convert activism into profit, ideas into brands, and movements into markets—has been to parrot or even absorb feminist frameworks toward the production of capital.⁷ One of the hallmarks of what we might call this *style* of neoliberal economics is precisely its emphasis on flexibility, which manifests at times as an incredibly absorptive

capacity, a tendency to take the shape of the political container it fills. It can mold capitalism into feminism, for example—think of Sheryl Sandberg’s *Lean In* feminism and note, too, that bell hooks (2013) argued that “lean in feminism” is not a feminism but a “faux feminism”—or present a company that exclusively employs independent contractors to undermine decades-old labor organizing by taxi drivers as the only safe transportation option for trans people.⁸ This is simply to say that to deny the ambivalent character of feminism, in this particular moment, is also to voice a dangerous willingness to ignore how feminism, in particular, has been so successfully wielded in the service of racism, capital and labor exploitation, and imperialism, to name just a few of its harms—and, of course, transphobia and transmisogyny.

We are thus lucky, in this special issue, to have a piece in our forum—an eclectic assemblage of shorter meditations on the same topic as the special issue as a whole—by Sophie Lewis and Asa Seresin that does exactly the work we call for here, contextualizing the unfortunate but very real sympathies that have historically existed between fascisms and feminisms. Lewis and Seresin’s “Fascist Feminism: A Dialogue” presents a conversation between two theorists and critics of feminist movements, their promises, and their failures. In so doing, they join a conversation that has flourished over the last several years in particular on the use-value of gender-critical feminism, critiques of “gender ideology” and “genderism,” and trans-exclusionary radical feminism for the aims of fascism. As Judith Butler argued in a piece published in October 2021 in the *Guardian*,

Anti-gender movements are not just reactionary but *fascist* trends, the kind that support increasingly authoritarian governments. The inconsistency of their arguments and their equal opportunity approach to rhetorical strategies of the left and right, produce a confusing discourse for some, a compelling one for others. But they are typical of fascist movements that twist rationality to suit hyper-nationalist claims. . . . The anti-gender movement is not a conservative position with a clear set of principles. No, as a fascist trend, it mobilizes a range of rhetorical strategies from across the political spectrum to maximize the fear of infiltration and destruction that comes from a diverse set of economic and social forces. It does not strive for consistency, for its incoherence is part of its power.⁹

Of course, here Butler is embarking on a project slightly different from that of Lewis and Seresin; while Butler is interested in the terrifying potential of anti-gender rhetoric—both that which travels under the name of feminism and that which does not—to set the table for the rise of fascist or otherwise totalitarian politics, Lewis and Seresin’s discussion is organized around, among other things, the oft-ignored histories of how feminist politics have been used in service of folding women into fascist structures of governance. What these pieces share,

however, is an understanding of the labile political potential of feminism, and especially feminisms that understand themselves as broadly politics “about” women, rather than wide-ranging lateral efforts to build solidarity in movements organized against gender-based oppression.

One of the many sources of feminism’s political versatility in a range of both left- and right-wing projects is the fact that the notion of feminism has accrued an almost impossible capaciousness over the last century and a half. But one common tenet—not universal, but common—of many feminisms is the importance of sustained attention to how embodied experience is accounted for, and frequently hierarchized, in structures of power, including but not limited to epistemologies like medicine and law, the organization of family and kin, and statecraft more broadly. In some contexts this attention to embodied difference has been a vital site of resistance to, for example, racist violence and hegemony. Think, for example, of Ida Wells’s critiques of white women’s complicity in the proliferation of lynching and other white supremacist violence against Black men at the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth; Sandy Stone’s 1993 call for a “posttranssexual” politics that neither exacts a vow of secrecy nor requires gender-affirming medical treatments from trans people in exchange for being treated with dignity and respect; or Brittney Cooper’s 2017 call for a feminist politics that neither takes genital morphology as its universalizing foundation nor ignores histories of the deprioritization of Black people’s reproductive health, especially people whose bodies house a vagina, uterus, and ovaries.¹⁰ But in other contexts rallying calls that identify feminism as a natural outgrowth of an embodied politics of womanhood themselves become hegemonic, working distinctions between having a penis or not, having a vagina or not, or being able to gestate or not, among others, into benchmarks adjudicating whether a person or group of people and their attendant political priorities belong under the umbrella of women or feminism. This latter approach also assumes women to be the subject of feminism, and womanhood to be an easily delineated category that includes most cis women and excludes most trans people, including—or especially—trans women. This is, of course, a quick and flat rendering of a wide swath of feminisms that, while not all explicitly trans exclusionary, lean that way simply by virtue of relying on a restricted understanding of what might be indicated by *woman*.

Importantly, this latter approach to feminist politics is typically and profoundly committed to the assumption of a coterminousness between womanhood and vulnerability—especially sexual vulnerability. While we do not, of course, want to undermine the very real and very pressing threat that sexual violence represents for people of all genders—and we know that those who do not adhere to white supremacist and cisheterosexual gender norms are often disproportionately affected by its ubiquity—here we want to focus on the rhetorical force of

claims of vulnerability to violence. Butler's focus, above, on the ideological incoherence of the claims of those who criticize "genderism" or the existence of trans positive services or accommodations is certainly right, but political fearmongering about the threat that gender diversity poses to the political and social order frequently returns to invocations of the putative threat to "women" and children that these politics bear. This is not just an effort to pathologize trans people, and especially trans women and feminine people, by representing trans people as wolves in sheep's clothing, foxes in the proverbial henhouses of feminism and women's spaces. Rather, it is that, but it is just as much an effort to consolidate a sense of cis womanhood as ontologically defined by a particular relationship to victimization, the incursion of trans and otherwise gender-affirming politics being only the most recent perpetrator thereof. Think, for example, of Abigail Shrier's 2020 *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters*, or writer Tristan Fox's article "A Butch Eradication, Serviced 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).¹¹

We invoke these examples to illustrate how trans-exclusionary feminisms deploy the rhetorical flashpoints of victimization and endangerment as part of an ongoing effort to forge and consolidate a new vision of cis womanhood rising from the ashes of a theory of sexual vulnerability rooted in a profoundly racialized and cissexist understanding of embodiment. As rhetorical postures, ringing the alarm around the putative victimization and endangerment of individual cis women draws on an age-old strategy, at least in the context of North American feminisms, and one that has historically walked neatly in step with white supremacy and nativism. To frame trans women as a threat to cis girls and women—and often as specifically a threat to sexual safety, as advocates for trans-exclusionary bathroom bills have been wont to do—is to insist on the exchangeability of *woman* and *cis woman*, and simultaneously bears two seemingly innocuous effects. First, positing cis womanhood, as a putative experience, as under attack by trans people appeals to those who would call themselves feminists while also invoking older and more paternalistic and protective approaches to womanhood. It drafts those who would seek to protect "women" into transphobic and transmisogynist

projects, and makes it easy to do so, for who is *against* protecting women? And second, insofar as this rhetorical posture travels in step with a variety of mainstream feminist common sense, it functionally inoculates transphobic calls for the protection of cis women from critique. Think, for example, of *Soule v. CIAC*, a case emerging from Connecticut in which two (then eventually four) cis high school girls, all runners, three of them white and all of them affluent, sued the Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Conference under Title IX—a federal civil rights law protecting equity in education and sport—for having been “made” to compete against two high school trans girls, both Black and from less affluent areas. When their lawsuit—filed by the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF), a conservative impact litigation organization—did not convince a federal judge, who dismissed their complaint for lack of standing, one of the girls worked with the ADF to place a number of first-person articles about her own experience, one of which appeared on a billboard just down the road from us in Connecticut, where I-95 meets a number of other highways near Bridgeport. Featuring Chelsea Mitchell, one of the original plaintiffs who is now on a running scholarship at the College of William and Mary, a Division I school, the billboard read, “I was the fastest girl in Connecticut, until I was forced to compete with biological males [*sic*].”

This is exactly the kind of invocation of vulnerability we want to highlight, here; Mitchell admits that she is actually a very successful runner who has beat transgender girls in high school races many times, including Terry Miller, one of the trans girls named in the *Soule* lawsuit who Mitchell and her cis girl co-complainants claim was the source of such disadvantage to them. But these facts clearly have not been as effective as simply invoking the specter of trans girl runners as the harbingers of the future downfall of all women’s sports; Mitchell’s (2021) first-person article (carefully placed on yahoo.com), “I Was the Fastest Girl in Connecticut. But Transgender Athletes Made It an Unfair Fight,” contains a subhead that simply exhorts “Don’t Eliminate Women’s Sports,” as if that was ever on the table in her case or anyone else’s. Here we can see the neat alignment between the interests of trans-exclusionary radical feminists and those of conservative litigators: through the recourse to the rhetoric of victimization or sheer elimination, they present trans people, and especially trans women, as an endemic threat to both feminism and womanhood more broadly. These issues are taken up by the authors of two of the articles in this special issue, political scientist C. Heike Schotten and religious studies scholar C. Libby, who remind us, as Libby does by way of Emi Koyama’s (2020) work, that white female vulnerability is frequently used to argue against transgender rights. 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. The consistent recourse to the language of vulnerability and extinction—“butch genocide,” cis women’s vulnerability in bathrooms, the end of women’s sports, the list could go on forever—“foregrounds ‘the concept of harm’ as ‘central both to the feminist understanding of women’s experience in patriarchy, and to the optimal approach of feminism to law.’”¹² It is also, it should be said, an effort to reify the political innocence of women (well, cis women, and even then, only certain cis women) and feminism by defining those terms through a framework of phantasmatic vulnerability to trans people and politics without any accountability for the aggressive political harm they have also been used to effect.

To be clear, in this special issue we are not advocating for an abdication of feminist politics, nor are we asserting that the political potential of feminism has been evacuated. Particular feminist political traditions have been both formative and transformative for both of us in different ways. Rather, this special issue joins ongoing efforts to think about the emergence of trans-exclusionary politics, and trans-exclusionary feminist politics in particular, and to track how they have been increasingly folded into the broader landscape of conservative, authoritarian and totalitarian, and otherwise right-wing politics across the globe. It is also an effort to reckon with the memory of trans exclusion within the history of feminism, a history that has at times been flattened into easy narratives that lean in one clear direction or the other (e.g., all “second-wave” feminists were trans exclusionary; no “second-wave” feminists were trans exclusionary); the transphobic imperative to consistently frame transness through the lens of novelty undergirds trans-exclusionary feminist claims to the historical endurance of their beliefs.¹³ As the authors of essays in this special issue demonstrate, however, trans-exclusionary positions have emerged most loudly at moments when feminist movements have insisted on the centrality of trans liberation to their cause. If trans-exclusionary feminisms are at least fifty years old in the United States, for example, then the importance of trans people to feminist political liberation, as scholars such as Emma Heaney and Jules Gill-Peterson have demonstrated, is even more enduring.

Furthermore, if we think about trans-exclusionary feminisms as part of an ongoing litigation surrounding what constitutes legitimate womanhood, which has been consistently conscripted into the service of forms of structural power that we would do well to work against—white supremacy, xenophobia and nativism, ableism and eugenics—we may well end up being able to tell a clearer and more canny story about the rise of trans-exclusionary feminisms in our immediate pasts and presents and to try to short-circuit the warm welcome they have received in both right-wing and liberal movements at home and abroad. Trans-exclusionary politics within feminism have also become a veritable crucible for what we understand feminism to be and to do, and they point importantly to the different feminist horizons that are delimited or made possible by different visions of the feminist

political. For example, to return to the issue of how conservative litigators have cited Title IX in complaints seeking to bar trans girls from participating in high school and college sports, we could frame the questions that trans girl athletes present in a couple of ways. We could ask, What makes a “girl” or a “woman” athlete, and what measures must we take to protect that category within state-sponsored athletics? Or, we could ask, Is dividing sports participation into supposed “sex” categories really the best way to create equity for young athletes? To what degree might heavily biologized understandings of what “girls” and “women’s” bodies are capable of be as restrictive as they are protective? Are there other means of organizing athletes for competition (weight and height classes, etc.) that might create more equity and opportunities for participation? The first set of questions voice a feminist intervention on behalf of girls and women; the second set voice a feminist intervention on behalf of gender-based equity more broadly, asking how or whether moving away from the category of girls and women—assumed, too often, to also mean *cis*—might actually be of greater benefit to all who identify as girls and women, as well as participants of all other genders, too.

Like all edited projects, the special issue that is the product of our and our contributors’ work is a very different vision of the project than that which we had first imagined. We had imagined a collection of essays from writers in many different countries, written in many languages and translated to ensure their reach. We had imagined a special issue that connected geographies through the trans-exclusionary movement networks there: Poland to Brazil, through Catholicism, or the United States to Nigeria and to China through the shared strength of gender-critical writing circulating among evangelicals. The essays that we received, however, tended to cluster around a host of fairly well-studied sites, relative to this phenomenon, primarily the United States and England, although the issue also contains essays from writers discussing trans-exclusionary politics in Japan and France. While this is probably due at least in part to a mix of an overlapping Anglophone readership and the fact that conversations on trans-exclusionary feminisms have more or less exploded over the last five years in US American and British scholarly communities, we emphasize that even an issue full of essays showcasing distinct regions, languages, religious traditions, and political milieux would nonetheless never be able to offer a comprehensive account of the growing importance of trans-exclusionary politics to a vast range of right-wing movements. Trans-exclusionary politics is an increasing and increasingly complex phenomenon that has contributed to both the strength of right-wing movements and the strength of cultures of transphobia. This special issue, then, offers no definitive conclusions, but hopefully some productive foundations for future scholarship, movement, and careful thinking about how to more effectively fight both of these dangers.

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Notes

1. Black feminists have been criticizing the racial and class hegemony of the putatively universal category of woman since at least the nineteenth century. For a discussion of this tradition, see Carby 1987. For a very recent approach to the issue of white feminism and its racial exclusions, see Zakaria 2021.
2. Note that the 1848 women’s convention was held at a time when slavery was legal in most states and a major structuring condition of US American domestic production and its economic landscape more broadly.
3. Black, woman-of-color, and Third World feminist movements have all, albeit differently, identified and attempted to correct the strong liberal foundations of many US feminisms. Some of the thinkers central to these movements have also identified feminism as *inseparable* from the liberal tradition and suggested frameworks for theorizing gender justice that are not feminisms; womanism, for example, is distinguished by some thinkers as a political philosophy distinct from feminism (see Collins 1996). In the last five years a slate of articles have been published that also ask about the relationship between womanism and feminism, specifically asking whether womanism is a type of feminism or whether it is in fact a distinct political approach to the racialization of gender. For one such article, see Bowen 2021.
4. For just one example of a critique of Marxism and materialist feminism, see MacKinnon 1989.
5. Here, Abu-Lughod is riffing on Spivak’s (1988) oft-cited “Can the Subaltern Speak?”
6. On purity politics, see Shotwell 2016.
7. On the co-option of liberation politics as a strategy of neoliberal economics, see Duggan 2004; Grewal 2005; Fraser 2009; Gupta 2012; Murphy 2017; and Rottenberg 2018, among others.
8. During the fiftieth anniversary of the Stonewall Riots, Uber ran a series of ads in New York City featuring well-known local trans artists, activists, and performers, as part of the rollout of their “Right to Move” campaign, which Uber describes as follows: “Uber believes that everyone has the right to move freely, safely, and without fear. And that, not only in the month of June but year-round, everyone has a right to pride. This year, we’re committing to helping empower a better experience for our LGBTQIA+ community, and particularly the transgender community. It takes everyone, and we’re starting with us.” Safety and mobility are unquestionably major concerns for many if not most trans people, but Uber has, by most accounts, only exacerbated those concerns while revising their brand to capitalize on the attention to trans people and politics wrought by New

York's promotion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Stonewall riots as an opportunity for tourism industry profits. Uber has been the subject of long-standing complaints by trans and nonbinary drivers—who Uber has worked hard to keep classified as “independent contractors” to whom they owe few employee protections and whom they can thus prevent from unionizing—who have argued that Uber uses hiring practices that discriminate against trans and nonbinary people. On criticisms of Uber by trans employees and applicants, see Hussain 2022. On Uber's “Right to Move” campaign, see Uber n.d.

9. Butler continues, “In his well-known list of the elements of fascism, Umberto Eco writes, ‘the fascist game can be played in many forms,’ for fascism is ‘a collage . . . a beehive of contradictions.’ Indeed, this perfectly describes anti-gender ideology today. It is a reactionary incitement, an incendiary bundle of contradictory and incoherent claims and accusations. They feast off the very instability they promise to contain, and their own discourse only delivers more chaos. Through a spate of inconsistent and hyperbolic claims, they concoct a world of multiple imminent threats to make the case for authoritarian rule and censorship. This form of fascism manifests instability even as it seeks to ward off the ‘destabilization’ of the social order brought about by progressive politics. 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 in 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. It threatens violence against those, including migrants, who have been cast as demonic forces and whose suppression or expulsion promises to restore a national order under duress.”
10. On Ida Wells's anti-lynching campaigns, see Feimster 2011; Wells 1892; Wells 1895; Stone (1987) 1993; and Cooper 2017.
11. Leslie Feinberg (1992), Susan Stryker (2006), Joanne Meyerowitz (2004), among others, all have included “butch” as a gender identity that can be collected under the umbrella of transgender or nonbinary experience.
12. Here Libby cites Halley 2005.
13. Many transgender studies scholars have offered critiques of the persistent tendency of nontransgender writers or commentator and transphobic or otherwise politically hegemonic frameworks to portray trans people as a “new” phenomenon. For just one recent work that discusses this tendency, see Gill-Peterson 2018.

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