

Gender Critical Feminism as a Possible Resistance to Feminism

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ABSTRACT: By defining feminism as an intellectual and political movement that interrogates what social locations women are excluded from and that seeks to remedy all forms of sex/gender-based violence, this paper argues that gender critical feminism is a possible form of resistance to feminism. Insofar as gender critical feminism excludes trans women from the conversation and focuses on a monolithic shared experience of sex-based oppression, such feminism resists the type of justice it purports to seek. This paper analyzes key tenets of gender critical feminism, highlights how it responds to the “woman question,” and offers a brief commentary on the simultaneous rise of gender critical feminism and Trumpism in America.

KEYWORDS: gender critical feminism, resistance to feminism, philosophy of sex and gender, transgender scholarship

The policing of the boundaries of “women” has
never *not* been disastrous for feminism

Ahmed, 31

Introduction: Feminism and Exclusionary Politics

It may seem odd, or somewhat contradictory, to say that a type of feminism resists that for which it purports to stand, but that is what I will argue in this paper. While feminism, as an umbrella term, can be broken down into various schools (e.g. liberal feminism, radical feminism, Marxist feminism, intersectional feminism, carceral feminism, etc.), each with its own guiding theory and agenda, broadly construed, it can be defined as an intellectual and political movement that seeks justice for women and the end of sexism in all forms (McAfee). In seeking such justice, feminism is guided by questions such as “What social and political locations are women excluded from?” and “How do the complexities of a woman’s

situatedness, including her class, race, ability, and sexuality impact her locations?" (McAfee). Due to its tendency to speak from a limited location and fail to consider the multifariousness of women's situations, gender critical feminism does not resist sexism, but rather resists the very justice that feminists seek.

I will provide a more detailed definition of gender critical feminism in the section that follows, but broadly construed, gender critical feminism is the self-identifying term for a movement that fights the sex-based oppression of women. That is, gender critical feminists believe women are oppressed due to their immutable characteristic of being biologically female, and they resist self-assigned gender identities, viewing gender as the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes based on sex. As such, gender critical feminists are hostile to transgender rights. Rather than ask what social and political locations women are excluded from and rather than pay attention to the complexity of women's situatedness, they exclude trans women from the conversation and deny their existence. An argument can thus be made that gender critical feminism is a 20th- 21st century form of women's resistance to feminism.

And yet, it could justly be argued that gender critical feminism is perfectly aligned with the (exclusionary) tendencies of feminism throughout history. First-wave feminists and suffragettes such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton argued that virtuous and educated White women should get the vote before Blacks (das Neves), the founder of Planned Parenthood, Margaret Sanger, advocated for racial eugenics, and adherents to what has been termed "white feminism" fail to consider the locations of Black and Brown bodies, trying to "save them" instead.¹ Throughout history, feminists have had a tendency to speak universally about a "woman," who has increasingly been revealed to stand for only *certain* women, namely those White, heterosexual, cisgender, and affluent.

¹ This is a reference to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's assertion that speaks to a certain savior complex of colonialist discourse. Spivak states, "I have put together the sentence 'White men are saving brown women from brown men' in a spirit not unlike the one to be encountered in Freud's investigations of the sentence 'A child is being beaten'" (92).

Feminists reinforce such totalized understandings of “woman” when they reference how women make 83 cents to every dollar a man makes, ignoring the fact that the pay gap is even greater for Black and Hispanic women (Pew Research Center), or when they focus on the second-wave entry of women in the workforce, disregarding a legacy of slavery and the forced labor of Black women. Transness, as Jules Gill-Peterson documents, is nothing new, but the *hypervisibility* and accompanying inability of certain feminist movements to consider the complexities of trans bodies exploded in the 2010s with a particular focus being placed on trans women. Such tensions in feminism around the topics of “women’s rights” and “trans rights” are highlighted in a 2016 special issue of *Transgender Studies Quarterly* named “Trans/feminisms.” Here, “guest editors Talia Bettcher and Susan Stryker ... mark the trans/feminist relation with a slash, which signals both the connections and disjunctions between these two categories” (Currah 3). In classrooms where I teach Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality studies, students who are proponents of trans rights are often hesitant to identify as feminist, viewing feminism as an antiquated politics, despite their concerns about sex/gender-based violence. For younger generations, feminism is a dirty word, often referred to as “the f-word,” because of its seeming inability to accommodate diverse populations (Rowe-Finkbeiner).

I point out these historical tendencies to exclude certain women from feminist discussions of “women’s rights” because I do not want to naively offer a version of feminism that has offered justice to all women. Yet, I believe in the strategy of what Foucault would call a “tactical polyvalence of discourse,” the ability to reorient the meaning of discursive productions as a form of resistance, depending on how they are wielded (100). I do not think we need to “throw the baby out with the bathwater” in trying to remedy the past exclusions of feminism. While it is important to address the shortcomings of feminism, I believe this intellectual and political movement has the potential to combat forms of sex/gender-based discrimination.

While some of the most popular and vocal proponents of gender critical feminism have been British or Australian, such as Germaine Greer, Julie Bindel, Sheila Jeffreys, and J.K. Rowling,

gender critical feminism is a growing global movement with an increasing influence in the United States; gender critical feminism actually finds its roots in certain strains of U.S. radical feminism, a point to which I'll return. The appeal of gender critical feminism in the United States can be analyzed in tandem with a growing right-wing movement and Trumpism, an issue I will address in the third section of this paper. Overall, in order to demonstrate how gender critical feminism is a possible form of resistance to feminism, I will: (1) Briefly define gender critical feminism and its focus on sex-based oppression, (2) Tease out how gender critical feminists offer a totalized definition of "woman" that ignores other axes of identity, as well as the material and linguistic fluidity of sex/gender categories, and (3) Offer a brief commentary on how gender critical feminism dangerously aligns with certain ideas of Trumpism in the United States.

Defining Gender Critical Feminism

Gender critical feminists do not view gender as a positive attribute or identity marker, but rather, as a system of oppression that must be abolished (Lawford-Smith). According to gender critical feminists, gender is a set of repressive norms imposed on women on the basis of their sex, with sex being understood as an immutable biological fact, and as such, gender is something of which feminists must be *critical*. Gender is not a subjective category to be chosen or embraced but the product of a sex caste system that has historically viewed women as inferior, often based on their perceived childbearing capabilities. Gender should be eliminated, and feminists should focus on how women are oppressed as women due to their sex, a material condition that cannot be changed based on declarations of one's gender identity.

Holly Lawford-Smith, a leading figure in the gender critical feminist movement, states, "Gender critical feminism is not *about* transwomen [*sic*], and this popular mischaracterization centers men in the narrative of a movement created by women, for women, and about women." This statement implies the following: 1. Gender critical feminism is a movement about women, 2. Trans women are not women, but men, and so, 3. Trans women are a non-issue for gender critical feminists ("not about") and 4. By lamenting

that a discussion of trans women recenters men in a narrative for women, men are implied to be the primary oppressors of women. These assumptions are central to gender critical feminism and need to be carefully scrutinized.

First, it seems that if gender critical feminism is to be a feminist movement, it must necessarily be *about* trans women insofar as feminist movements are “by women, for women, and about women,” because trans women *are* women, a point to which I will return in the next section. While Lawford-Smith criticizes scholars who refer to gender critical feminists as either “anti-trans activists” or “trans exclusionary radical feminists (TERFS),” viewing both categorizations as slurs, these terms accurately portray what gender critical feminism is *about*, given that this strain of feminism explicitly denies the existence of trans women as women. More specifically, gender critical feminism negates the existence of all trans persons, with trans being an umbrella term to include identities such as non-binary and genderqueer. To refer to trans women as men *is* “anti-trans;” it is a form of oppositional activism that necessarily refuses the existence of trans persons to promote social and political change for “women” where women are defined as a monolithic category (hence, the name “anti-trans activists”).

According to gender critical feminists, gender is not undertaken as an identity but is an institution of patriarchal norms imposed on women as a result of male supremacy. Gender critical feminism has evolved from *certain* tenets of radical feminism that highlights the sex oppression of women *as* women. Originating in the 1960s, radical feminism views women as a political class, oppressed by men. While radical feminists may consider the way that other axes of identity such as race and class work to oppress women, for most strains of radical feminism, “woman” is nonetheless recognized as a class in and of itself, a designation conferred based on biological sex. Because men are seen as the oppressors, and this is particularly true in the case of radical feminists such as lesbian separatists who thought that women who had sex with men were literally sleeping with the enemy, it is unconscionable to say that gender critical feminism is about trans women, because doing so brings the enemy (men, who trans women are assumed to be) to center stage.

The type of feminism that focuses on men as the sole oppressor of women is exemplary of “white feminism” where women are understood to be universally bound by their shared imagined victimhood. Gender critical feminists point to unique sexual violence experienced by women as women with the claim that women are united by their experience of sexual violence. And yet, “Being a Black trans woman in America means you’re far more likely than most other people to experience serious roadblocks and harms, in the form of everything from extreme poverty to violent murder” (Forestiere). I do not cite this statistic to engage in what’s been dubbed the “oppression Olympics,”² a sort of battle that determines who reigns victorious as the most marginalized and thus the most epistemologically correct; rather, if an experience of shared violence is a necessary feature for inclusion in the “woman” category, surely Black trans women should be given such status. By providing such a narrow definition of what constitutes “woman,” gender critical feminists ignore how other intersections of identity undermine any supposed solidarity based on notions of sex. For example, Black and Brown bodies may view white supremacy as a bigger threat than patriarchy. The fact that many White women voted for Trump rather than Clinton in the 2016 presidential election should dissolve any assumptions of shared universal sisterhood.

However, the term “TERF” may be problematic in that it risks conflating all forms of radical feminism with the exclusionary politics of gender critical feminism. By definition, radical means “by the root,” suggesting that the goal of radical feminists is to uproot the patriarchal system, upend it at the source; yet such underlying oppression need not be based on a biological essentialism founded on notions of unchanging sexual difference. The views of gender critical feminists may align with radical feminists such as Germaine Greer, Robin Morgan, and Ti-Grace Atkinson, but other radical feminists such as Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon are trans inclusive in their radicality. For example, in her book *Woman Hating*, Dworkin critiques any given sex/gender binary and contends: “‘man’ and ‘woman’ are fictions, caricatures, cultural constructs. As models they are reductive, totalitarian, inappropriate to human becoming” (174). In addition to defending trans clients on the basis

² The term “oppression Olympics” is said to have originated in a conversation between Chicana feminist Elizabeth Martinez and Angela Davis in 1993.

of sex discrimination, like Dworkin, MacKinnon pinpoints the social construction of sex and gender, while emphasizing that trans women are women. While gender critical feminists believe that a focus on women's biological oppression is necessary to dismantle the patriarchy, in an interview with Cristan Williams MacKinnon retorts, "Male dominant society has defined women as a discrete biological group forever. If this was going to produce liberation, we'd be free."

Being and Becoming a "Woman"

The main argument of this paper is that gender critical feminism is a possible form of resistance to feminism, a resistance whose saliency lies in its refusal to acknowledge the existence of trans women as women. As previously noted, a key question governing feminist thought is "What social and political locations are women excluded from?" Insofar as trans women are women, women are excluded from the politics of gender critical feminism.

In policing the boundaries that determine inclusion into the category "woman," an essential question that gender critical feminism raises is: "What is woman?" I do not wish to undertake the task of providing any definitive reply to this query, and in fact it seems that the very need to continuously justify one's existence is part of the problem. As Sara Ahmed asserts,

An existence can be nullified by the requirement that an existence be evidenced. The very requirement to testify to your existence can end up being the very point of your existence. To be treated as a being who needs to provide evidence of being is also to be treated as an adverse party. (29)

A gender critical feminist would reply that it is not their intention to harm trans women; rather, such harm is merely the effect of their political position that starkly contrasts with trans women when it comes to defining sex. Whereas trans activists advocate for legal sex/gender recognition and inclusion into sex-segregated spaces such as bathrooms, prisons, and sports teams, gender critical feminists fundamentally disagree with such advocacy insofar as they believe sex is not something that can be changed; women are oppressed as women, as a political class rendered inferior by a sex caste system. Gender critical feminists

view prostitution as one of the worst examples of the institutionalization of this system, insofar as it reinforces the notion that women are supposed to provide sexual services for men (Lawford-Smith). As such, they fundamentally clash with the activists who seek to legalize or decriminalize sex work. For this reason, gender critical feminists have also been referred to as “SWERFS,” or sex worker exclusionary radical feminists.

While (purportedly) the direct aim of gender critical feminism is not primarily to harm trans persons, as “it is *not* ‘about’ trans. It is *about* sex,” in fact, the movement necessarily harms them in how it goes about defining and policing the parameters of what constitutes sex. For gender critical feminists, a woman is defined as such based on her biological sex, presuming the presence of vagina, XX chromosomes, estrogen, and other secondary sex characteristics. Gender critical feminists believe that women are victims of sex-based violence and sex-based discrimination, meaning they are oppressed because of their sex, defined as a cluster of these unchanging biological traits. For gender critical feminists, gender is an institution of patriarchal values that places women in an inferior position based on male assumptions of what such traits entail i.e., the vagina has been viewed as a passive receptacle for the active male seed, and such passivity has invited a host of other sex-based violence. Again, because gender is the product of historical stereotypes based on sex, gender critical feminists do not believe trans persons can claim a legal sex or gender recognition that differs from one they were born into.

The so-called “commonsense” views are increasingly driving contemporary responses to challenging questions regarding issues such as race, class, and gender (Pascale). For many (particularly conservative) Americans, the question “what is woman?” does not merit much thought beyond initial biological assumptions. Simply posing such a question has been met with ridicule and disdain towards those who raise it. For example, Lindsey Graham, a mother who runs a podcast called “The Patriot Barbie,” dressed up as a cat at a school board meeting in order to protest one of its transgender members. Graham noted, “I am a cat, meow, meow. I am not a woman dressed as a cat, but I am a cat,” as an act of derision

toward the board member, who in Graham's view defied very commonsense taxonomic understandings of "woman" (Browning).

For feminists concerned with the political and social exclusions of women and with sex/gender-based violence that takes into account other axes of identity such as race, class, sexual orientation etc., a response to what has historically been referred to as "the woman question" cannot be so biologically reductive. It is beyond the scope of this paper to offer an exhaustive account of the many ways feminists have reckoned with this question throughout history, though I will reference a few game-changing theorists who have made important contributions to the sex/gender debate. Putting forth a social constructionist view of gender, Simone de Beauvoir famously declared, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman," highlighting the way that gender stereotypes are socially and historically contingent (301). While de Beauvoir differentiates between sex as biological and gender as social (with both being products of historical construction), Judith Butler doubles down and contends, "sex is always already gender," highlighting the social construction of supposedly fixed biological categories, as she traces the heterosexual matrix that undergirds such a sex/gender distinction (10-11). Scholars like Anne Fausto-Sterling who highlight the prevalence of intersexuality further question strict binary constructions of biological sex. In Fausto-Sterling's "The Five Sexes: Why Male and Female Are Not Enough," she details the existence of five sexes, though even this number was cited as a provocation to further reflection, rather than any definitive reply regarding the criteria of what constitutes a biological sex. What seems to be a "commonsense" biological reply to the woman question becomes complicated with a host of other inquires such as: What about a "woman" who is born without a womb? A "woman" who has both sex organs? A "woman" who possesses a Y chromosome and gives birth, as in the case of someone with Swyer syndrome? What are the assumed criteria for checking the appropriate sex classification box? (Drouillard). I had previously noted that it is not my intention to offer any totalized reply to "the woman question," and part of this stems from my view that sex/gender is socially and historically contingent, meaning that the definitions change over time.

Paisley Currah offers perhaps the most insightful definition of sex/gender when he notes that he will not talk about sex/gender, but rather, sex/state to highlight the juridical-political narratives at play. By replacing “gender” with “state,” Currah does not wish to abolish the former, especially not in the way that gender critical feminists view it, but rather, he highlights sex/state because the term “sex” appears more often than gender in policies and decisions that legally affect trans lives. As the apt title of his book *Sex Is as Sex Does: Governing Transgender Identity* suggests, “Sex is whatever an entity whose decisions are backed by the force of the law says it is” (Currah 9). That sex is whatever a state entity purports it to be is evidenced through a historical analysis of how definitions of sex/gender have evolved based on interests of the state. For example, Currah explains that allowing a person to change their sex classification on a driver’s license may be a matter of security and the state’s ability to track people (i.e., it is in the best interest of the state to classify someone as F if they present with stereotypically feminine characteristics), whereas a change of sex classification on a birth certificate has historically not been in the best interest of the state. Such change has often been met with suspicion especially when the trans person in question has something to gain such as property or inheritance (103). Thus, Currah’s analysis is less about what sex/gender is and more about what sex/gender *does* for the government. Though I agree with Currah’s analysis regarding the state’s hidden logics behind sex classification, I am curious as to why there is not more state and public moral panic regarding non-binary classifications. This is not to say that non-binary persons are not targeted for discrimination or that they are not met with invasive search procedures during routine security checks. What I mean to highlight here is that in public discourse surrounding moral panic the focus is often on *trans women*. Why?

In the 1994 edition of her book *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*, a radical feminist and anti-trans activist Janice Raymond contends that the spotlight is on trans women, because “transsexualism remains, as in 1979, largely a male phenomenon.”³ She suggests the reasons for this include the fact that: (1) “men, being freer to experiment than

³ The term “transsexual” may be viewed as an outdated or pejorative term. However, trans scholars like Andrea Long Chu have reappropriated the word in a playful or positive light.

women, seek out and submit to the surgery more often," (2) "women have been saturated with different and more feminizing forms of body altering hormonal and surgical procedures," (3) "transsexual surgery is the invention of men initially developed for men," and (4) "behind this construction of man-made femininity is also the age-old patriarchal perception that women's bodies should be available to men" (xiii-xv). Furthermore, Raymond responds to her critics who accuse her of biological essentialism by suggesting that trans women are the real biological essentialists in their imitations of exaggerated hyper-femininity. That is, superficial qualities that feminists have rejected are now being used as justification for referring to trans women as women. Before responding to Raymond, I should first reiterate that while Raymond focuses on "transsexuals" who undergo surgical procedures, trans is an umbrella term to include a host of sex/gender classifications including, but not limited to, non-binary and genderqueer; furthermore, not all trans persons undergo surgical and/or hormonal intervention. But, again, why the obsession with trans women, as though this subset of trans identity were the most transgressive?

Andrea Long Chu suggests that femaleness is an aversion, something that we all are and all hate, a universal sex defined by self-negation (*Females*). That is, femaleness, rather than being defined by biological traits, is characterized by an existential condition of self-sacrifice, one to which we are all subjected. What I find compelling about Chu's provocative commentary is her association of femaleness with a sort of disdain or aversion. This projection of hatred is certainly seen in the case of trans women much more than in the case of trans men or non-binary trans folk. Is it because society "understands" why a person would want to opt for the more powerful and privileged position of "man," whereas to choose to be a "woman" is reprehensible and met with suspicion?

Chu takes on radical feminists such as Raymond, Ti-Grace Atkinson, and Jeffreys who suspect trans women of co-opting or appropriating women's bodies and experiences. For Chu, if the most radical of radical feminists are political lesbian separatists, those who take their consciousness-raising to the extremes of ridding their desire of patriarchal infiltration by refusing to sleep with the male enemy, then, perhaps, no one is a more radical feminist than

a transgender woman. Chu asserts, "We are separatists from our own bodies. We are militants of so fine a caliber that we regularly take steps to poison the world's supply of male biology. Because of Jeffreys, a few women in the Seventies got haircuts. Because of us, there are literally *fewer men on the planet*" ("On Liking Women."). Chu is rather playful in her writing, but the logic is sound.

And yet, rather than being seen as revolutionaries who attempt to escape the heterosexual matrix that feminists critique, trans women are not recognized as women by those in society who take the "commonsense" biological view. Furthermore, their association with men seems to imply the presence of a penis, which in turn connotes something threatening. In "Full-Frontal Morality: The Naked Truth about Gender," Talia Mae Bettcher analyzes the moral presumptions at play when we try to guess the "private" genitalia of persons based on their "public" gender presentation. Bettcher not only critiques sociologist and ethnomethodologist Harold Garfinkel's "natural attitude" about sex, governed by a "commonsense" view that assumes a natural immutability of sex based on a binary (bio)logic, she also demonstrates how his metaphysics of sex is in fact about moral order.⁴ While a person's genitalia is often referred to as one's "private" region and hidden from view, we are actually supposed to "wear them on our sleeve" so to speak and announce them via our gender presentation. Spatial boundaries, such as access to women's restrooms, and possible violations are centered around "coitus" and the belief that sex harms or dirties women. Responding to Raymond's claim that "all transsexual lesbians effectively rape women by entering their space," Bettcher emphasizes that such an "allegation is grounded in the view that transsexual lesbians are 'really men' (that is, intimately male) and therefore capable of violating intimate females by intruding upon their privacy" (333). Trans women

⁴ As Talia Mae Bettcher notes, Harold Garfinkel's "naturalist attitude" about sex draws from Husserl's phenomenology in that it presupposes a "commonsense" view according to which the natural world exists independently of our minds. Such a "naturalist attitude" supposes the following "commonsense" view regarding the nature of sex: "First, there is a commitment to natural sexual dichotomy: exactly two (mutually exclusive) sexes exist, every human being is 'naturally' one or the other, and exceptions to this division may be dismissed as 'unnatural.' Second, there is a commitment to the natural invariance of sex: a human being can never change sex, and any sex transfers are merely ceremonial. Finally, there is an almost exclusive appeal to genitalia: genitals essentially determine sex membership (Garfinkel, 1967)" ("Full-Frontal Morality).

are thus seen as “moral deceivers” who try to trick people via their gender presentation insofar as what they “wear on their sleeve” may not align with “naturalist attitudes” of a binary sex logic.

One of Bettcher’s key points is aptly captured in a comic titled “Hide” whose captions read “You need to hide your genitals. But only wear clothing that represents those genitals. Whenever people see your clothing, they should really be thinking about your genitals.”⁵ There are several issues with the way of thinking mocked in the comic, but one glaring problem is that we cannot be sure to properly perceive the “private” genitalia of a person based on their style of clothing or outward appearance. Lori Watson addresses this issue in her article “The Woman Question,” where she demonstrates how the presumptive gaze of the other influences the way we are treated and arranged within a given sex/gender system. Watson describes the skeptical look she often encounters when entering a woman’s restroom and recounts:

I am taken to be a man over 90 percent of the time In fact, others so routinely identify me as a man that I am often caught off guard and surprised if someone correctly identifies me as a woman. These experiences have changed me; they are, now, a defining feature of my life. Perhaps having experienced my gender/sex so uniformly and routinely confused has allowed me to “see” things, to understand the experience of living in a world in which your body is interpreted one way and your authentic self entirely rejects that other imposed identification. (247)

In this example, Watson’s actual genitalia do not matter; what is assumed about them is enough to justify a certain gendered treatment, a treatment that in turn affects how she views herself within a system of social arrangements. There is something about the *intersubjective* quality of oppression, where the assumption that one has “x” biological material contributes more to one’s subjugation than the actual possessing of “x” (Drouillard).

What I find particularly curious about the moral order that coincides with the

⁵ The imagery for this comic whose author is unknown may be found here: https://www.reddit.com/r/lgbt/comments/jvxx5w/i_love_this_comic_so_much/. Last accessed March 14, 2024.

“commonsense” view is that the presence of a penis presumes the possibility of violation. The assertion is that trans women are “real men” who only want to enter “women’s only” spaces to harm them. Yet, the supposed threat of violence identified with the penis and men more generally does not stop many women from supporting candidates and public figures who perpetuate violence. That is, if the presence of a penis really signaled the *possibility* of harm in such a malicious way, why did White women vote for a man who *actually* advocated for the sexual assault of women by “grabbing them by the pussy?” The moral panic guiding gender critical feminism, especially in the wake of Trumpism, appears to be less about trans women being “real men” and more about a lamentation that “real men” of a simpler time no longer exist.

In this section, I’ve highlighted how gender critical feminists have tried to define “woman” based on “commonsense” views governed by the presumption of certain biological traits. While not providing an exhaustive history, I’ve demonstrated how certain feminists and trans scholars have questioned totalizing attempts to define “woman” by pointing to the social and historical construction of sex/gender categories, especially as they are regulated by hidden logics of the state. Gender critical feminists are resistant to such fluid conceptions of sex/gender and have accused “postmodern” feminists of supporting ambiguous textual jargon at the expense of the material reality of women’s lives. While postmodern scholars like Butler had initially focused on the discursive production of sex/gender, others like Barad and Grosz have demonstrated the ambiguous potential of matter itself, countering the perception that our material bodies are passive matter without its own sense of agency. Yet, gender critical feminists seem uncomfortable with such ambivalence, and this is shown by the increasing visibility of gender critical feminists alongside the emergence of Trumpism. That is, both gender critical feminists and Trump supporters tend to highlight sex essentialism in their political discourse, forming significant points of convergence. Both groups “ground” sex differences at a particular point in history where transness has become more visible.

Gender Critical Feminism and Trumpism

Throughout this paper, I have highlighted some key tenets of gender critical feminism, examining how its reply to the “woman question” participates in an exclusionary politics that is antithetical to feminism. In concluding, I’d like to offer a brief commentary regarding a trend I find particularly alarming in the United States— the concurrent rise of gender critical feminism and Trumpism.

Gender critical feminists assume a “commonsense” or “naturalist attitude” view when they define “woman” based on fixed biological traits. According to this view, to deny such biological facts and their role in the oppression of women is to ignore the material reality of women’s lives in favor of what Raymond calls a “postmodernism so androgynous there are no longer any identities or differences at all” (xx-xxi). Implicit in a “commonsense” view that focuses on a concrete (stable) materiality is a disdain for ambiguity and fluidity. Behind this disdain is a discomfort with the uncertain, a discomfort that must make a facile distinction between the textual and the material, a materiality whose (stable) reality can be immediately ascertained with a bit of commonsense and self-evident simplicity. This simplicity is echoed on conservative news channels that confidently assert: they know what a woman is and who should and should not be allowed on women’s sports teams and restrooms, using the same logic as the Patriot Barbie’s episode dressed-up as a cat. Such politics of simplicity were the cornerstone of Trump’s election campaign and his call to “Make America Great Again.”

The “Make America Great Again” slogan was meant to incite a nostalgic longing for simpler (better) times, but *which* times are those? The times of the pre-segregation US? The pre-Obergefell America?⁶ In part, this slogan gestures to a less ambiguous time when gender roles were properly portrayed, and men and women knew who they were. In “Who is a Real Man? The Gender of Trumpism,” C. J. Pascoe demonstrates how the slogan is akin to

Make men ‘great again’ too, both fist-pounding, gun-toting guy-guys and high-flying entrepreneurs. To white, native born, heterosexual men, he offered a solution to the

⁶ Obergefell v. Hodges is the 2015 Supreme Court ruling according to which the fundamental right to marry is guaranteed to same-sex couples.

dilemma they had long-faced as the 'left-behinds' of the 1960s and 1970s celebration of other identities (Hochschild 2016: 229). (125)

The desire to regain masculine dignity and privileges of a simpler time is what Jennifer Carlson calls "mourning Mayberry," where Mayberry represents the fictionalized town of a 1950s sitcom (24; Pascoe 124). "White native heterosexual men" are thus mourning an America where their privilege was not questioned and where industrial jobs and worker's unions ensured them a secure place in the world. While gender critical feminists are not "mourning Mayberry" and would critique the sex-based oppression of this decade, portrayed in Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, their "commonsense" take of sex/gender dangerously aligns with conservative values. Just like radical feminists found themselves aligned with the purity politics of the conservative right in their anti-porn agenda, gender critical feminists (or Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists) are finding themselves in a similar situation with respect to traditional conservative definitions of sex.

This alignment of gender critical feminism and Trumpism is highlighted in a special issue of *Transgender Studies Quarterly* called "Trans-Exclusionary Feminisms and the Global New Right." In the "Introduction: TERFS, Gender-Critical Movements, and Postfascist Feminisms," Serena Bassi and Greta Lafleur note,

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). (312)

This longing for a return to a simpler time is demonstrated in Lawford-Smith's definition of gender critical feminism and her contention that such a movement is not "about transwomen." Lawford-Smith continuously reiterates that gender critical feminism is about "sex," and it is clear from her analysis that she does not understand why other feminists cannot easily see the material reality of the self-evident "woman" that she describes. Despite her attempts to decenter transness and refocus on principles of radical feminism, Lawford-Smith's reductive view of sex causes her to rub shoulders with conservatives like the Patriot Barbie.

In theory, gender critical feminists should not be Trump supporters and should wince at the mere association. One key viewpoint of gender critical feminism is that women are oppressed *as* women, in part, based on a shared history of sexual violence and assault. Gender critical feminists should have been appalled by Trump's statement that, because of his wealth and power he can do anything to women, most notably "grab 'em by the pussy." Many such feminists donned "pink pussy hats" and marched on Washington in protest of Trump. Yet, many White women voted for him. Why? Why would women vote for Trump after such unmistakable claims of sexual assault? I am not saying that the same women who marched in Washington (and who were criticized for a particular brand of White feminism) are the same women who voted for Trump; rather, I am trying to highlight a convergence of sex essentialism (and Whiteness) that these groups of women share despite their seemingly radically different politics.

Remarkably, fandom for Trump didn't wane when he contended that his sexist comments were nothing but "locker room talk," mere banter between men in a sex-segregated space. This reference to "locker room talk" was somehow justifiable, as it presented a "simple" reply regarding the reality of masculine behavior. Part of Trump's appeal is his nod to "traditional American values" and "traditional gender roles," both of which operate in tandem; that is, clearly defined sex roles are essential for the (re)productivity of the nation. For example, Brandon Gill, founder and editor of the *DC Enquirer*, a conservative news outlet, asks the following on his social media page, "Teenage boys used to fake their age during the world wars, because they wanted to fight and die for their nations. Now, we have 25-year-old men scared to be called the wrong pronoun. What went wrong?" This inquiry implies that "real men" are tough and patriotic and should be willing to die for the sake of the nation. Such comments are part of a moral panic surrounding the breakdown of traditional sex/gender roles. While gender critical feminists want to abolish gender, their ideologies feed into conservative dialogue as they continue to offer a reductive biological definition regarding the existence of "woman."

As previously noted, in defining women based on biology (and a shared historical oppression), gender critical feminists participate in what's been deemed "white feminism," a form of feminism that ignores the way that constructions of sex/gender are always in conversation with other axes of identity such as race and class. Perhaps gender critical feminists did not vote for Trump, but certain aspects of their ideology explain why certain White women did. It appears that many women voted for Trump because their fear of Black and Brown rapists outweighed their fear of White rapists. As Pascoe demonstrates, Trump was able to distance himself from claims of sexual assault by projecting such actions onto (racialized) others. Pascoe quotes the following statement by Trump,

When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're not sending you. They're not sending you. They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. *They're rapists* (Washington Post, 2015). (131)

One could suppose that the women who voted for Trump found more solidarity with his whiteness than they did with their womanhood (for otherwise, they would have voted for Clinton). Fear of the Black/Brown man raping a White woman in America is a very old trope, as evidenced in Ida B. Wells's *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* (1892). In *The Right to Sex: Feminism in Twenty-First Century*, Amia Srinivasan analyzes this fear of the "Black rapist" in tandem with the fear that a White man will be falsely accused of rape. Srinivasan asserts, "A black man is 3.5 times more likely to be innocent than a white man convicted of sexual assault;" nevertheless, "false rape accusations are, today, a predominantly wealthy white male preoccupation" (4-5). It's beyond the scope of this paper to elaborate further on this troublesome phenomenon, but I reference it here to highlight the larger issue of how the values of gender critical feminism align with conservative values inherent in Trumpism, namely the focus on sex/gender as a self-evident stand-alone category irrespective of other intersections such as race. The issue is not simply "Men raping women" or "men versus women," not when certain races of men are declared the rapists. Furthermore, defining "woman" based on a shared sex-based oppression excludes trans bodies and those bodies from the "shared" class of victimized women insofar as both trans bodies and Black/Brown bodies are often viewed as unrapeable, albeit with different

justification. Srinivasan undergirds this point when she details how Black/Brown bodies who bring forth sexual violence claims are not taken seriously due to their perceived hypersexuality (13). Bettcher extends this “unrapeability” to trans bodies in the sense that they transgress the “moral order” of the “naturalist attitude;” that is, trans women supposedly cannot be raped, because they are not really women (334). As Bassi and LaFleur highlight,

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 *long durée* of liberal, bourgeois, white feminist exclusions perpetuated along racial and class lines. (317)

In theory, insofar as it purports to combat the patriarchy, gender critical feminism should not vote in line with conservative values that have traditionally worked to the detriment of women through a glorification of traditional gender roles which gender critical feminists seek to abolish. And yet, the rise of gender critical feminism in tandem with conservatives is not an isolated case. I reference Trumpism specifically here because I have been analyzing gender critical feminism as a possible form of resistance to feminism in the United States; however, anti-gender movements are a global phenomenon contiguous with other conservative and post-fascist uprisings.

In conclusion, by offering a totalized and “commonsense” reply to the “woman question,” gender critical feminists participate in an exclusionary politics that they purport to resist. They also participate in a long history of (largely conservative) women who have resisted feminism. If feminism is an intellectual and political movement that interrogates what social locations women are excluded from and that seeks to remedy all forms of sex/gender-based violence, then gender critical feminism perpetuates the oppression it seeks to resist.

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