

Chapter 6

Feminists and the far right

The 'fascistic habit' of white feminism can easily move from latent to overt. It is a short step from seeing more marginalised people as collateral, to positioning them as enemies when they thwart our will to power. Sara Ahmed has described how some feminists use 'willfulness' to support trans-exclusionary politics. They employ the figure of the 'feminist killjoy' to create the impression that trans-exclusionary feminism is a brave struggle against an oppressive majority. This is described as 'willful feminism', Ahmed writes, when it is in fact 'willing transphobia'.¹ Similar strategies underpin feminist campaigns against the sex industry, which set themselves against the fictional 'pimp lobby'. It is not surprising that the majority of transexclusionary and anti-sex-work feminists are white.

This reactionary feminism accelerates the white feminist 'war machine', using the media and social media outrage economy to maximum effect. Although its numbers are small, this movement is tightly networked and highly organised. Its tactics are similar to the notorious harassment campaign Gamergate:

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it identifies and then relentlessly attacks target after target, seemingly with the aim of total submission. In [Chapter 4](#) I described one of these attacks, against Amnesty International following its support for sex work decriminalisation. Prominent trans people (usually trans women) and trans-focused or trans-supportive organisations are also targeted, with increasing frequency.

In 2018 trans-exclusionary feminists mobilised against the UK Labour Party, after it clarified that its women-only shortlists were open to trans women. As a result, more than three hundred women resigned from the party in protest. Also in 2018 an open letter was circulated to Stonewall, attacking the organisation for supporting proposed changes to the 2004 UK Gender Recognition Act that would make it easier to change legal gender. At the same time, Stonewall and other international LGBT+ organisations were targeted by the #GettheLOut social media campaign. The hashtag had been used extensively after trans-exclusionary feminists disrupted London Pride, claiming that ‘transactivism erase[d] lesbians’. The demand of #GettheLOut was that Stonewall and other organisations such as GLAAD, Lambda Legal, the Advocate and the Human Rights Campaign remove the ‘L’ from the acronym ‘LGBT’ in their mission statements. This was made after the organisations ignored a petition asking them to stop representing trans people.

After the UK Big Lottery fund awarded a grant of £500,000 to Mermaids, a charity supporting trans

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children and their families, it was subject to a campaign of letter-writing and social media messaging by trans-exclusionary feminists. Comedy writer Graham Linehan started the campaign on the online parenting forum Mumsnet, and it succeeded in convincing the Big Lottery fund to put the grant under review.² In response, gamer Harris Brewis (Hbomberguy) raised over £250,000 for Mermaids by playing *Donkey Kong* for more than two days. His Twitch stream during the marathon featured guests including Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Chelsea Manning. In retaliation, an 83-page thread was generated about Brewis on the far-right stalking and harassment forum Kiwi Farms, claiming that he had raised money for a 'child abuse cult'. The Big Lottery grant to Mermaids was eventually confirmed.

Writing in *Vogue* after the Mermaids furore had died down, Paris Lees said: 'God knows what lack of humanity possesses people to target vulnerable children and their families.'³ This lack of humanity is political whiteness – the thicker end of the wedge. Trans-exclusionary and anti-sex-work feminism amplify the mainstream movement's desire for power and authority, and pursue it by policing the borders of feminism and womanhood. The mainstream preoccupation with threat becomes an overt 'us and them' mentality, and the necropolitical desire for annihilation is deliberately turned on more marginalised people.

(Un)holy alliances

Unsurprisingly, reactionary feminists have often found allies on the right. In 2018 religious conservatives and feminists jointly backed the Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act (SESTA) and the Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA) in the US. The Acts banned online advertising of sexual services, also potentially preventing sex workers from using the Internet to organise, share safety information and screen potential clients. Advocates of SESTA/FOSTA, including Senator Kamala Harris, gave support over the objections of many trafficking survivors and their allies. The key objection was that by stopping sex workers from working on their own terms, the Acts would increase vulnerability to exploitation, especially for migrant and/or low-income sex workers, sex workers of colour and/or trans sex workers, who would be forced to choose between safety and survival.

The synergy between feminists and the religious right on sex work is perhaps best remembered from the anti-porn campaigns of the 1980s. 'When Jerry Falwell starts saying there's real harm in pornography, then that is valuable to me', Andrea Dworkin commented in 1985. A few years earlier, trans-exclusionary feminist Janice Raymond – author of the notorious *The Transsexual Empire* – had written a paper for the Reagan administration which guided its 1981 decision to deny Medicare for sex-reassignment surgery. In the 1990s Raymond turned her attention from

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transgender issues to sex trafficking – like many trans-exclusionary feminists, she is anti sex worker as well. The connection between the two ideologies peaks in scornful descriptions of trans women as ‘pornified’ representations of femininity rather than ‘real women’ (implying that sex workers are not ‘real women’ either).

Recently the right-wing connections of trans-exclusionary feminists have been boosted, because of broader rightward shifts that have involved increasingly open hostility to trans people. This has created a situation in which material alliances can be made. Hands Across the Aisle, co-founded by anti-abortion activist Kaeley Triller, is an initiative that aims to unite right-wing organisations with trans-exclusionary feminists and groups. Through Hands Across the Aisle, feminists associate with the US National Catholic Bioethics Center, the American College of Pediatricians (an anti-LGBT group not to be confused with the American Academy of Pediatrics) and Tucker Carlson’s website the Daily Caller (which has published pieces by white supremacists and neo-Nazis).⁴ Hands Across the Aisle’s mission statement reads: ‘We are radical feminists, lesbians, Christians and conservatives that are tabling our ideological differences to stand in solidarity against gender identity legislation, which we have come to recognize as the erasure of our own hard-won civil rights.’

One of the feminist groups associated with Hands Across the Aisle is the US-based Women’s Liberation Front (WoLF), founded in 2014 to ‘end male violence,

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regain reproductive sovereignty, and ultimately dismantle the gender-caste system'. In reality, the group appears to restrict itself mainly to trans-exclusionary campaigning. In 2018 its representative Julia Beck appeared on Tucker Carlson's Fox News show to discuss her opposition to the Equality Act, federal legislation that would protect sexual orientation and gender identity under civil rights law.⁵ In 2017 WoLF formed a coalition with evangelical and anti-abortion group Focus on the Family to oppose trans-inclusive bathroom bills and attempts to interpret Title IX of the Education Act to protect trans rights.⁶ WoLF has also been awarded funding by the Alliance Defending Freedom, an anti-abortion organisation that supports recriminalising homosexuality in the US.⁷

WoLF has had support from Republican lawmakers who couch their opposition to trans equality in the language of women's rights. The UK groups Fair Play for Women and A Woman's Place have had similar support, most prominently from the MP for Monmouth David Davies, who has consistently voted for stronger restrictions on abortion, for repealing the Human Rights Act, and against gay marriage. The echoes of colonial feminism here are strong. Another protector of women (only) when it comes to trans people is Carl Benjamin, who was investigated by police after his comments about raping Jess Phillips. In 2019 Benjamin was interviewed by the UKIP Head of Communications Kris Hicks about an alleged attack on journalist Julie Bindel following a University of Edinburgh event on

‘women’s sex-based rights’. Benjamin condemned the ‘level of vitriol’ he claimed was coming out of the trans community. UKIP shared the video with the comment: ‘The TERFS will all end up joining UKIP.’⁸

There have also been hands across the Atlantic, with growing connections between UK trans-exclusionary feminists, far-right media and the US religious right. In 2018 *Breitbart* supported the UK group Transgender Trend, after its Crowdfunder to develop a school resource pack on the ‘trans agenda’ was shut down (the funding page was reinstated days later).⁹ Conservative Christian groups have also promoted Transgender Trend’s social media feed.¹⁰ Catholic feminist Caroline Farrow is a prominent trans-exclusionary figure, and is also the UK Campaign Director for CitizenGo, a conservative petition site linked with ‘dark money’ from the US and Russia that supports far-right parties in Europe.¹¹ In 2019 the Women’s Liberation Front hosted a group of UK-based trans-exclusionary feminists for a joint meeting with the Heritage Foundation.¹² The Foundation, a conservative think tank staunchly opposed to ‘radical feminism’, had found common ground with WoLF in its opposition to the Equality Act. This meeting was a step too far for some: a number of prominent trans-exclusionary feminists distanced themselves from alliances with the right. But ideological continuities remain.

Reactionary feminism and/as conservatism

Many trans-exclusionary and anti-sex-work feminists would put themselves on the left. And there are certainly strands in reactionary feminism that come from the radical feminist notion of 'sex class' and the Marxist critique of commodification.¹³ As I described in [Chapter 2](#), in the radical feminist tradition, women's reproductive capacities, and men's need to control these capacities, are the original class system. The sex industry is also born out of male entitlement to women's bodies, reducing them to objects that can be owned, bought or sold. These ideas are not obvious bedfellows of heteropatriarchal conservatism, though it is easy to see why they do not acknowledge trans women as women or sex work as work.

The goals of reactionary feminists and conservatives are also not the same. While conservatives want to re-impose binary gender, trans-exclusionary feminism, which often calls itself 'gender-critical', wants to get rid of it. One of the biggest complaints of 'gender-critical' feminists is that trans people *reinforce* the gender binary by transitioning from one side to the other instead of being masculine women or feminine men. Non-binary and genderqueer people are conveniently forgotten here, as is the fact that many trans people offer passionate critiques of gender as they navigate it (as we all do) in order to survive. When it comes to the sex industry, although conservatives and reactionary feminists both want to eradicate it, this is

for different reasons. Feminists see the industry as a pillar of patriarchy. Religious and paleoconservatives (the patriarchy) blame feminists and queers, because the sex industry symbolises the decline of procreative sex and the heteropatriarchal nuclear family.

But despite these differences, there are many, many similarities. Just as the reactionary magazine *Spiked* (originally called *Living Marxism*) emerged from a Trotskyite splinter group of the International Socialists, reactionary feminism has grown away from its roots. (*Spiked*, which has funding from the ultra-conservative Koch Foundation, is now one of the main outlets currently platforming trans-exclusionary feminists.)¹⁴ Trans-exclusionary feminists and conservatives are both deeply attached to the binary of 'biological sex', despite mounting scientific evidence that sex is more complex than previously thought.¹⁵ For both these groups, sex cannot be changed or traversed: trans women cannot be 'real' women in any biological sense. Conservatives and trans-exclusionary feminists also share with anti-sex-work feminists the idea that the male body is inherently violent, although for conservatives, this only seems to be a problem in relation to men of colour and trans women, and not, for instance, Brett Kavanaugh or Donald Trump.

And notwithstanding trans-exclusionary feminists' claims to be 'gender-critical', these sex-essentialist discussions tend to arrive at gender essentialism in the end. Because in the absence of any mechanism to check chromosomes, or jurisdiction to search people's

underwear when allowing them entry into changing rooms or toilets, gender becomes a proxy for sex. Since the most recent iteration of ‘trans bathroom panic’ in both the US and the UK, a number of cis women have reported being harassed in women’s toilets over whether they had any right to be there – because they did not look feminine enough.¹⁶

To defend this sex and gender essentialism, both conservatives and reactionary feminists appeal to ‘science’. But they are actually deeply anti-intellectual in their dismissal of scientific findings that complicate the sex binary. This is also a world where, again discounting evidence to the contrary, simple causal relationships can be drawn between one thing and another. For instance, while conservatives believe that pornography causes teenage pregnancy, some trans-exclusionary feminists believe (citing the discredited concept of ‘autogynephilia’) that it causes men to want to transition. Anti-sex-work feminists believe that pornography causes rape. ‘Pornography is the theory and rape is the practice’ is Robin Morgan’s famous quote. Slogans like this – and the much-used ‘Women Don’t Have Penises’ (recently written on cartoon penises in a sticker campaign) – fit the contemporary populist era, with its disdain for ‘experts’ and ‘elites’ and calls for ‘common sense’.

For conservatives, this populism is a deliberate strategy. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, at the 2017 Values Voter summit (a yearly US conference for conservative activists and politicians), delegates

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were advised not to use religious arguments against transgender equality. Arguments based on ‘biology and reason’, they were told, would be more effective.¹⁷ This populist ‘common sense’ is the foil to the idea of trans people as proponents of the ‘gender ideology’ also being pushed by feminists and queers to undermine the heterosexual nuclear family. As I wrote in [Chapter 1](#), opposition to ‘gender ideology’ is a powerful unifying trope for the international far right. And despite its unsavoury connections, reactionary feminists also use the trope of ‘gender ideology’ in their attacks on trans people.

In 2019 a New Zealand group called Speak Up For Women distributed a petition signed by almost 40,000 people against the teaching of ‘gender ideology’ in schools. The press release read:

Of particular concern to Speak Up For Women is the way Ministry of Education-funded gender identity advocacy groups like Rainbow Youth and InsideOUT conflate ‘gender identity’ with sex. They promote a narrative that denies humans are a sexually dimorphic species, rejects biological sex, and preferences an ever-growing list of imagined genders.

Reactionary feminists and conservatives are united in their view of where these ‘imagined genders’ come from. The culprit is Gender Studies – specifically, postmodern and queer gender scholarship, because it deconstructs understandings of the body and refuses to treat binary sex as given. Trans-exclusionary feminists call the famous philosopher and queer theorist Judith

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Butler ‘the high priestess of genderology’ and blame her for erasing the category of biological sex. In 2017 the Brazilian religious right burned Butler in effigy outside a conference she had helped to organise.

Postmodernism is a target shared by the ‘alt’ right, who skewer it as irrational and relativist even as they articulate their own post-truth politics. It is also reviled by members of the intellectual dark web, including Jordan Peterson, who rose to fame after his passionate opposition to a Canadian bill that proposed outlawing discrimination based on gender identity and expression. The bill curtailed free speech, Peterson argued, by requiring the use of gender-affirming pronouns. Pronouns have become a key battleground of the war on ‘gender ideology’. They attract extraordinary outrage from people determined to show that others’ gender identities are not just socially constructed, but completely made up.

In 2019 over thirty ‘gender-critical’ UK academics signed an open letter in the *Sunday Times*, arguing that the Stonewall Diversity Champions scheme threatened academic freedom. One of the problems the letter identified was advice to ‘ask the pronouns’ of students. ‘Many of us’, the letter read, ‘would deny that pronouns refer to an inner feeling of gender identity, and wish to say so.’ (In response, over 6,700 current and former university staff signed a letter reaffirming the rights of trans staff and students.) Refusing to call someone what they ask to be called probably seems incredibly petty (and it is). And actions like

this highlight how warped reactionary feminism can become: if 'transgenderism' is seen as an ideological delusion, it becomes courageous to refuse to enable it.

Despite the scraps of socialism in its history, this is bourgeois feminism rooted in disdain for those who think and live differently, whose bodies are not easily assimilated to capitalist production and reproduction. Reactionary feminism, like conservatism, is deeply ideological in its policing of 'appropriate' gender and sex. 'Save Our Eyes' is a campaign against the managed prostitution area in the city of Leeds. In this attempt to keep the 'undesirables' out, 'our' eyes will be saved by moving sex workers back into criminalisation. After the Nordic model of client criminalisation was introduced in Ireland in 2017, Irish sex workers reported a 92 per cent increase in violence against them over the course of two years.¹⁸ And for reactionary feminists, this violence is not incidental, but intentional. In 2014 the head of Sweden's Anti-trafficking Unit, Ann Martin, said that violence against sex workers was a desirable effect of 'end demand' policies, acting as a deterrent from entering the industry and an incentive to leave it.¹⁹

This ideology echoes the conversion therapies for 'fallen women', queers and trans people favoured by the religious right. And the trans woman especially is always already 'fallen', particularly when she is Black because of the historical (and persistent) association between prostitution and Black womanhood. The phrase 'walking while trans' describes how trans women of colour are profiled as sex workers by law

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enforcement. It was widely used after Black trans woman and activist Monica Jones was found guilty of ‘manifesting prostitution’ for accepting a car ride from two undercover police officers in Phoenix in 2014. And trans-exclusionary feminism does similar profiling, in campaigns of moral judgement and outrage in which racism, transphobia and hatred of sex workers intersect.

In 2019 the new UK ‘gender-critical’ organisation Safe Schools Alliance registered objections to the relationship between the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) and Black trans model and activist Munroe Bergdorf. Bergdorf had been campaigning for the NSPCC initiative Childline. An open letter by the Safe Schools Alliance said that Bergdorf presented a ‘highly sexualised, porn-influenced image’ of what it meant to be a woman, and that this ‘sent harmful messages to children’. *Times* journalist Janice Turner claimed that Bergdorf was a ‘porn model’ in a tweet to the NSPCC, which was retweeted and liked over a thousand times. This was a case of walking (or existing) while trans. And together with the suggestion that sex workers posed a threat to children, it created a cocktail of bigoted outrage. The NSPCC cut its ties with Bergdorf immediately.

Pouring fuel on the fire

While mainstream feminism invests trauma in the outrage economy, reactionary forms fuel the fires with

sensationalism and grandstanding. A recent ‘gender-critical’ protest in London featured graphic photographs of post-surgery trans bodies; anti-sex-work feminists use explicit images and descriptions of violence against sex workers. This is the equivalent of the anti-abortion movement’s bloodied fetuses. Andrea Dworkin was an early – and extreme – proponent of this tactic. As author and journalist Charlotte Shane argues, for Dworkin terror was necessary – but her violent language was indistinguishable from misogyny and betrayed a deep hostility towards sex workers.²⁰ In Dworkin’s 1993 speech ‘Prostitution and Male Supremacy’, Shane writes,

[she] assumed the mantle of an imagined ‘john’ and said that ‘the prostituted woman’ is *‘nobody real, I don’t have to deal with her ... She is perceived as, treated as—and I want you to remember this, this is real— vaginal slime. She is dirty; a lot of men have been there. A lot of semen, a lot of vaginal lubricant ... Her mouth is a receptacle.’*

Anti-trafficking campaigns tell us that ‘every two minutes’ a child is being prepared for sexual exploitation like this. They tell us ‘this could be your daughter’. Or even ‘this could be you’. But these claims are based on shaky data.²¹ Definitions of sex work, trafficking and migration vary internationally, so there is very little agreement on what should be counted. In some contexts, all migrant women who sell sex are defined as trafficked. In others, it is women who sell sex full stop, or all undocumented migrants. ‘Trafficking’ is also a

blunt instrument to describe the complex relationships between migrants, people who sell sex (and people who fit both these categories) and the various people who facilitate their travel and work. Nevertheless, the myths persist, and the agitation grows.

In 2018 Edgar Welch of Salisbury, North Carolina, was arrested after firing a gun in a pizzeria that he believed was the centre of a 'child sex slave' ring linked with Hillary Clinton.²² There are echoes here of nineteenth-century 'white slavery' fears, and the 1980s panic about Satanic ritual abuse of children in daycare centres in the US. The terror of Satanic ritual abuse, stoked by the emerging Christian fundamentalist right, coincided with the AIDS crisis and was underpinned by concerns about protecting the heterosexual nuclear family from a number of threats (including women's employment).²³ The idea of 'stranger danger' at the heart of this panic is also at the heart of contemporary fears about trans women in women's space.

And in trans-exclusionary politics, dystopian fantasies reach their peak. In January 2019, at the joint panel with the Heritage Foundation, Women's Liberation Front board member Kara Dansky claimed that if the US Equality Act was passed:

Male rapists will go to women's prisons and will likely assault female inmates as has already happened in the UK. Female survivors of rape will be unable to contest male presence in women's shelters. Men will dominate women's sports. Girls who would have taken first place will be denied scholastic opportunity. Women who

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use male pronouns to talk about men may be arrested, fined, and banned from social media platforms. Girls will stay home from school when they have their periods to avoid harassment by boys in mixed sex toilets. Girls and women will no longer have the right to ask for female medical staff or intimate care providers, including elderly or disabled women who are at serious risk of sexual abuse.

This is a terrible world indeed. But it is not likely to materialise. In countries with gender self-identification, such as Ireland, Malta, Norway and Portugal, there has not been a rash of sex attacks by trans women, or men posing as trans women, in women's spaces. Trans women have not dominated the Olympics and other international sporting events since the 2003 International Olympic Committee guidelines allowed them to compete as women provided they had had sex-reassignment surgery and had undergone two years of hormone therapy (in 2015 the surgery requirement was removed, but trans women still have to reduce their testosterone to approved levels). Other claims, for instance about 'rapid onset gender dysphoria' (which posits that trans children are victims of social contagion) have been similarly debunked.²⁴

Reactionary feminists assimilate these critiques, however, as evidence of a conspiracy. Sex workers and their allies are dismissed as the 'pimp lobby'. Trans people and their allies become the 'trans cabal', or in an incredibly offensive formulation, the 'trans Taliban'. There have been comparisons between sex

workers and arms dealers, and trans people and ‘big pharma’, which betray a fascistic tendency to invest the enemy with immense power. And any challenge to reactionary feminist views is repackaged, via these conspiracy theories, as evidence that they are indeed right. Terms such as ‘trans Taliban’ echo other reactionary monikers, such as the racist ‘woke Stasi’ and misogynist ‘feminazi’, which are common on the far right. They also tap the contemporary appetite for conspiracy that has supported recent rightward shifts. Reactionary feminists may well be the *InfoWars* of the movement.

Also from the far-right playbook: claims of being silenced and oppressed. Reactionary feminists (or men speaking on their behalf) have made this claim in many high-profile media outlets. ‘We must not silence debate about transgenderism for fear of offending its activists’ – James Kirkup, the *Telegraph*. ‘Women’s groups claim “silencing” on transgender concerns’ – Jamie Doward, the *Guardian*. ‘Meghan Murphy and the silencing of women’ – Ella Whelan, *Spiked*. ‘Transgender activists and the real war on women’ – Judith Green, *The Spectator*. ‘Silencing women in the name of trans activism’ – Julie Bindel, *Quillette*. These loud claims about being silenced, made by people with substantial political and institutional clout, are evidence that exactly the opposite is the case. As Sara Ahmed says: ‘Whenever people keep being given a platform to say they have no platform, or whenever people speak endlessly about being silenced, you not only

have a performative contradiction; you are witnessing a mechanism of power.²⁵

Claiming to be silenced amplifies and circulates reactionary forms of speech by generating outrage. And this manoeuvre works not because reactionary feminists are speaking truth to power and being *accused* of transphobia, but because they are speaking *for* power by expressing transphobia. This is how reactionary feminists, like far-right figures such as Jordan Peterson and Milo Yiannopoulos, have built platforms from claiming they have none.

Reactionary feminism as capitalist-colonial mentality

Trans-exclusionary and anti-sex-work feminists represent peak political whiteness. They magnify mainstream feminist narcissism, not only centring themselves but also acting as gatekeepers who withhold the designation 'woman' from others. This especially applies to trans women, defined as 'biological men' while trans-exclusionary feminists proclaim themselves 'adult human females' (which leads to policing of other categories such as 'lesbian', reserved for 'adult human females' attracted to each other). And the juxtaposition of sex workers' rights and 'women's safety' implicitly withholds womanhood from sex workers as well. This is a reassertion of the normative economically productive body and reproductive sex. In this bourgeois mentality, neither the 'unnatural' or the 'unrespectable' woman can ever be a real woman.

Instead, these women become the enemy. In reactionary feminism, the alertness to threat that characterises political whiteness becomes a mentality of ‘us and them’. They are the trans Taliban; they are the pimp lobby; and they have all the power. Sex workers are described as ‘handmaidens of the patriarchy’ or even ‘orifices for sale’. Trans women are defined as rapists and child abusers who, in Janice Raymond’s words, should be ‘morally mandated’ out of existence.²⁶ The reactionary feminist will to power is then realised in necropolitics that harms these more marginalised women, under the guise of fighting powerful, conspiratorial lobbies and asserting rightful ownership of womanhood and feminism.

Here, the authoritarian overtones of political whiteness reach a crescendo. Sex workers are deliberately criminalised; trans women are denied access to space and resources, especially in response to the right-wing fable that there is no longer enough to go around. And in its hoarding of resources and shutting of doors, in its defence against the necropolis, reactionary feminism is complicit with the border walls of the right. It also echoes the far right in its weaponisation of ‘women’s safety’ – reactionary feminists are the ultimate wounded white victims. They are endangered as a ‘sex class’ (by people who are simply trying to survive). They are content to be defended, like property, by men who reserve their own right to perpetrate abuse.

As I highlighted in [Chapter 2](#), the idea of women as a universal ‘sex class’ is fundamentally white. It has

long been critiqued by feminists of colour, because it marginalises race, class and other issues and so can only represent and benefit the most privileged. In 2013 790 individuals and 60 organisations from 41 countries signed a ‘Statement of Trans-Inclusive Feminism and Womanism’. Among other things, the statement said: ‘By positing “woman” as a coherent, stable identity whose boundaries they are authorized to police, transphobic feminists reject the insights of intersectional analysis, subordinating all other identities to womanhood and all other oppressions to patriarchy.’²⁷

Many reactionary feminists have attacked the principle of intersectionality. There have been overt attacks in the feminist ‘intersectionality wars’ in academic spaces and on social media. There have also been proxy ones: reactionary feminists have supported denunciations of ‘identity politics’ and Gender Studies by the intellectual dark web and the far right. Writer and critic Flavia Dzodan has argued that such ‘Victorian feminist’ attacks on intersectionality reflect the anxieties of bourgeois white women faced with ideas and politics generated by former subjects of Empire.²⁸ In the current economic crisis, they may also reflect the anxieties of class-privileged women faced with Others demanding their share.

Dzodan views trans-exclusionary feminism as a settler-colonial mentality, an attempt to solidify sex and gender categories that sees womanhood as immutable. Its essentialist mindset rejects how ‘the coloniser could name us, assign us a place and a role in the

hierarchies'. The 'identity politics' it decries pushes back against this order.²⁹ The claim to ownership of feminism can also be seen as a colonial project. In 2018 Irish feminists wrote an open letter to the 'We Need to Talk' campaign, which had organised a meeting opposing Gender Recognition Act reform (under the guise of talking about abortion) in Dublin. Among other things, the writers objected to the campaign's assertion of feminist authority in their country. 'We have had enough of colonialism in Ireland', the letter read, 'without needing more of it from you.'

Today's reactionary feminists are descendants of nineteenth-century 'vice-fighters', Christian moralists and anti-miscegenationists, the bourgeois women enlisted by Fordism to 'improve' the working class, and those who ran the reformatories for 'wayward' Black girls and who abused them 'for their own good'.³⁰ And the lineage is not just ideological. The Magdalene Laundries in Ireland, built in the eighteenth century to house 'fallen women', have more recently become Ruhama, an outreach organisation for women in prostitution. Anti- trafficking campaigns were prefigured by the 'white slavery' panics associated with nineteenth-century temperance, underpinned by bourgeois concerns about 'working class drunkenness' and immigration. The fear of 'white slavery' was the fear that bourgeois white women would be exploited by Black and/or 'foreign' men, in saloons linked with prostitution (which was identified with Black women) and working-class and Black political organising.³¹ More recently, this 'white

innocence' has been set against the (racialised) figures of the trafficker and the pimp.

Contemporary anti-trafficking imagery often features white girls held captive by Black or brown men. As Juno Mac and Molly Smith write, 'he is a dark hand over her mouth or a looming, shadowy figure behind her'. The term 'modern slavery' has replaced 'white slavery', but this rhetoric remains suffused with race: many trafficking initiatives have 'innocence' in their titles, coding their victimised subjects as white.³² A number of people of colour accompanying white children through US airports have recently been profiled as traffickers. And while they rescue wounded white girls and women, anti-trafficking and modern slavery initiatives legitimise and strengthen border regimes, subjecting undocumented people to surveillance and punitive state action. Mac and Smith are right when they say that anti-trafficking is border policing.

White feminism has a long history of policing the border. Privileged suffrage campaigners positioned votes for women as important to prevent the system being 'overrun' by newly enfranchised African American or working-class white men. Carrie Chapman Catt, the founder of the American League of Women Voters, said: 'white supremacy will be strengthened, not weakened, by women's suffrage'.³³ And as Sophie Lewis points out, many of these feminists also supported eugenic programmes in which privileged white women were encouraged to reproduce while women of other classes and racialised groupings were not (these continue in

contemporary campaigns targeting ‘overpopulation’ in developing countries, protecting bourgeois economic interests from the ‘fecundity’ of the Other).³⁴ Marie Stopes was a committed eugenicist, and the name of her organisation was the Society for Constructive Birth Control and Racial Progress (many eugenicists also supported the sterilisation of sex workers, along with disabled people and other groups).³⁵ The women’s section of the British Union of Fascists counted former suffragettes among its members.³⁶

Contemporary trans-exclusionary feminism is similarly animated by the fear of being ‘overrun’. And this fear is almost always sexualised: reactionary feminists have much in common with conservatives who claim that increased immigration will result in increased rape. Dystopian fantasies of the female and lesbian ‘erasure’ that will result from trans women being recognised as women sit alongside the Islamophobic conspiracy theory of the ‘great replacement’ and the antisemitic spectre of ‘white genocide’ (there is also, incidentally, a theory that ‘transactivism’ is being funded by George Soros).³⁷ Traversing borders is a threat – and in the colonial mindset, the borders of class and nationality are at one with the borders of gender. Binary gender is a colonial and capitalist project, what feminist theorist Gloria Anzaldúa called the ‘absolute despot duality that says we are able to be only one or the other’.³⁸

Western borders are currently being reasserted in the context of economic crisis, to protect the global ‘haves’ from the ‘have-nots’. And reactionary feminism

is complicit with this capitalist and neo-colonial project. It foregrounds narratives of scarcity; it claims resources and support for the 'good' women rather than the 'bad'. Sex workers are criminalised and endangered by policies that purport to protect other women from sexual objectification and abuse. Trans women are denied access to the spaces they need for validation and help, or prevented from simply getting on with their lives (for instance, by going to the bathroom). And in the midst of a crisis of social reproduction, the effect is to keep more marginalised women from their own life-making. This is ultimately an eliminationist project.

Trans-exclusionary feminism in particular is one of a number of colonial and arguably eugenicist ideologies currently being resurrected, legitimated and mainstreamed under the banner of 'free speech', 'inquiry' and 'debate'. The crusade against 'gender ideology' is also a crusade to resurrect 'race science', and trans-exclusionary feminists have shared platforms (notably the pseudo-intellectual *Quillette*) with a number of proponents of the latter. For instance right-wing journalist Toby Young, associate editor of *Quillette* and an advocate of 'progressive eugenics',³⁹ and Noah Carl, the researcher sacked from Cambridge University in 2019. The investigation of Carl's work found that it 'demonstrated poor scholarship, promoted extreme right-wing views and incited racial and religious hatred'.

The crusade against transgender equality also rejects the colonial 'divide and conquer' tactics of the right. In 2017 the US Family Research Council held

its annual Values Voter Summit in Washington DC (at which Donald Trump was the first sitting president to speak). At the event, Meg Kilgannon of Concerned Parents and Educators of Fairfax County proposed a strategy to separate the T from the LGB. 'Trans and gender identity are a tough sell', she said, 'so focus on gender identity to divide and conquer.'⁴⁰ In June 2015 the Family Research Council had issued a policy paper called 'Understanding and Responding to the Transgender Movement' that quoted extensively from Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire*.

Divide and conquer means that these 'friends' of reactionary feminists will become enemies in the end. And attacks on trans people have already paved the way for attacks on LGBT equality more broadly. Current trans-exclusionary rhetoric echoes that which circulated about Section 28, a clause of the 1988 UK Local Government Act which outlawed the 'promotion of homosexuality' in schools. The Thatcher administration and its supporters justified Section 28 using the language of social contagion and 'grooming', with gay men especially demonised as a threat. And in 2019 a national debate on whether children should have 'LGBT education' began again, following protests by Birmingham parents against an inclusive curriculum initiative. Like supporters of Section 28 over thirty years before, protestors waved banners saying: 'Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve.'⁴¹ Also in 2019 the US Justice Department filed an amicus brief pertaining to a Supreme Court case, arguing that the term 'sex' in

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Title VII of the Civil Rights Act did not protect lesbian, gay and bisexual workers from discrimination. This was hot on the heels of a similar brief arguing that the term 'sex' did not cover gender identity, pertaining to a different case (in this latter case a number of briefs making similar arguments cited blogs and tweets by trans-exclusionary feminists, and a brief was also submitted by the Women's Liberation Front).

There have been many disavowals of trans- exclusionary and anti-sex-work feminism by white feminists (including me) who consider ourselves allies of the trans and sex-working communities. 'This is not our feminism!', we cry. But this is not wholly true. Mainstream white feminism, which uses the corporate media and state/institutional discipline to redress individual injuries, cannot tackle the intersections of heteropatriarchy, racial capitalism and colonialism that produce sexual violence. At the thicker end of this wedge, reactionary feminism is complicit with the far-right politics also produced by this intersectionality of systems. The necropolitics of reactionary feminism is where the political whiteness of the mainstream ends up.

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2. Sofia Lotto Persio, 'Big Lottery Fund reviews grant to trans kids charity Mermaids', *Pink News* (17 December 2018).
3. Paris Lees, 'The life-changing power of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and standing together as allies', *Vogue* (22 February 2019).
4. Hatewatch Staff, 'The Daily Caller exposed for publishing prolific anti-Semite: still employs editor with white nationalist ties', www.splcenter.org (2018).
5. Madeleine Kearns, 'Feminist testifies against the "Equality Act"', *National Review* (2 April 2019).
6. Nick Duffy, 'Radical feminists team up with right wing evangelicals to oppose trans rights protections', *Pink News* (8 February 2017).
7. Brynn Tannehill, "Feminists" who exclude trans women aren't feminists at all', *Huffington Post* (10 July 2018).
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10. R Totale, 'Bonzo goes to Oslo: Christian fundamentalists and the far right strike a new pose', *Libcom* (26 February 2019).
11. Adam Ramsay and Claire Provost 'Revealed: the Trump-linked "Super PAC" working behind the scenes to drive Europe's voters to the far right', *Open Democracy* (25 April 2019)
12. Tim Fitzsimons, 'Conservative group hosts anti-transgender panel of feminists "from the left"', *NBC News* (29 January 2019).
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17. Hatewatch Staff, 'Christian right tips to fight transgender rights: separate the T from the LGB', www.splcenter.org (2017).
18. Data provided by Ugly Mugs Ireland.
19. Mac and Smith, *Revolted Prostitutes*, p. 149.
20. Charlotte Shane, 'What Men Want.' *Dissent* Spring 2019 <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/andrea-dworkin-review>
21. Laura Agustín, *Sex at the Margins: Migration, Labour Markets and the Rescue Industry* (London: Zed Books, 2007), pp. 37–39.
22. Adam Goldman, 'The Comet Ping Pong gunman answers our reporter's questions', *New York Times* (7 December 2016).
23. Mary De Young, *The Day Care Ritual Abuse Moral Panic* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2004).
24. See Arjee Javellana Restar, 'Methodological Critique of Littman's (2018) Parental-Respondents Accounts of "Rapid-Onset Gender Dysphoria"', *Archives of Sexual Behaviour* DOI: 10.1007/s10508-019-1453-2 (2019).
25. Sara Ahmed, 'You are oppressing us!' *Feminist Killjoys* (15 February 2015). <https://feministkilljoys.com/2015/02/15/you-are-oppressing-us/>.
26. Janice Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire: the making of the she-male* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), p. 178 in 2004 Teachers College Press edition.
27. Feminists Fighting Transphobia, <https://feministsfightingtransphobia.wordpress.com/the-statement/> (2013).
28. Flavia Dzodan, 'Greatest hits of Victorian Feminism', <https://redlightpolitics.info/post/52372119164/greatest-hits-of-victorian-feminism-alien-vs> (2013).
29. Tweet posted at 9:49am on 4 February 2019.
30. Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, pp. 370-403.

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31. See for example Brian Donovan, *White Slave Crusades: Race, gender and anti-vice activism 1887–1917* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006).
32. Mac and Smith, *Revoluting Prostitutes*, pp. 59–60, pp. 75–6.
33. In contrast to their privileged sisters, working-class suffragettes in the UK tended to have a more anti-colonial outlook, and Sylvia Pankhurst was a vocal anti-fascist and anti-colonial activist.
34. Sophie Lewis, *Full Surrogacy Now: feminism against family* (London: Verso, 2019), p. 11.
35. Amos and Parmar, 'Challenging Imperial Feminism', p. 13.
36. Martin Pugh, *Hurrah for the Blackshirts: fascists and fascism in Britain between the wars* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005), p. 142.
37. Heron Greenesmith, 'Racism in anti-trans "feminist" activism,' www.politicalresearch.org (2019).
38. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: the New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), p. 19
39. Martin Belam, 'Toby Young quotes on breasts, eugenics, and working class people', *Guardian* (3 January 2018).
40. Hatewatch Staff, 2017.
41. This dispute was widely reported as 'Muslims versus gays', despite the existence of anti-LGBT prejudice across all social groups and the large numbers of LGBT people and allies from the Muslim community who intervened. There was also an open letter signed by a number of LGBT individuals and organisations, highlighting how the dispute had been weaponised by the government's counter-extremism strategy in ways that betrayed colonial attitudes defining all Muslims as 'backward' and homophobic.