

Empire and Eugenics: Trans Studies in the UK | *Trans Studies Quarterly*
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‘Sex is real,’ tweeted J.K. Rowling in her defense of transphobia at the end of 2019 (Rowling 2019). This high-profile outburst bubbled out of the bigotry actually informed by, rather than ignorant of, the legitimization of transphobia in UK academia. We can begin with the catalyst that brought together the two writers of this piece as collaborators: an exhibition entitled *Rights for Women* hosted by the Senate House Library, one of London’s major academic libraries, that ran from 16 July to 15 December 2018 (*Senate House Library* 2019). It chronicled the multi-faceted histories of activism for women’s rights — and included Sheila Jeffreys’ *Gender Hurts*, a manifesto about the ideological dangers posed by trans people. The only acknowledgement of trans women in the exhibit, Jeffreys’s text argues that ‘transgenderism’ is a ‘conservative ideology that forms the foundation for women’s subordination,’ and functions as a form of state and institutional power (Jeffreys 2014). Elsewhere she has argued that gender affirmation surgery abuses human rights akin to the ‘political psychiatry’ of the Soviet Union (Jeffreys 1997: 59), and that the 2005 Gender Recognition Act was passed by Tony Blair’s government to eradicate homosexuality (Jeffreys 2006). These are bizarre claims, and a far cry from the understanding of trans studies we would get from the vibrant research history of trans rights and studies in the UK. To understand the landscape for the struggles of this burgeoning, rich field requires tracing the conditions for how such an open display of transphobia in an academic library has become a familiar aspect of institutionalized transphobia.

The complaint that trans rights has become a hegemonic ideological institution armed with the power of the state allows transphobic rhetoric to employ a narrative of victimization in line with the ongoing mobilization of fictions of white female vulnerability to justify violence against marginalized groups. Without a factual basis for claims about the dangers supposedly posed by trans people, criticism of trans studies in UK academia employs a strategic amnesia that calls for the need to do critical research upon trans studies while simultaneously refusing to acknowledge or engage with the substantial weight of trans studies as a discipline. This strategy stretches back to the earliest transphobic manifestos by women such as Mary Daly and Janice Raymond, for whom the violent, Frankensteinian trans woman bogey always proved a more useful subject than the experiences of real trans women, not to mention other trans people in general. While US academia has institutionalized trans studies to some extent, it has remained a minority discipline in the UK. Here, the transgender spectre proves too useful a tool around which white women academics can position their fictional victimhood. Ignorance is not just bliss – it is useful, deliberate, and violent. There exists, then, within UK academia, a peculiar form of the Dunning-Kruger effect, the cognitive bias in which confidence is inversely correlated to actual competence; thus, the legitimacy and authority to speak on trans studies is justified via deliberate ignorance of trans studies.

2018 was a flashpoint in the mainstreaming of what many recognize as Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminism (TERF) or what proponents themselves term ‘gender critical feminism.’ In 2018, the UK government held an online survey for public responses to proposed changes in the Gender Recognition Act: if passed, these changes might have allowed trans people to alter their legal gender marker without being subject to the dehumanizing process of a Gender Recognition Panel. A few days before the closure of that survey, *The Guardian* published an article titled ‘Academics are being harassed over their research into transgender issues’ (*The Guardian* 2018). In this article, a group of academics — many of whom have never published on trans studies in any capacity — argue ‘that it is not transphobic to investigate and analyse this area [transgender issues] from a range of critical academic perspectives.’ These academics ‘also worry about the effect of such definitions on the success rates of journal submissions and research grant applications’ — another peculiar, unsupported claim. The article has no hard data to support its assertions; in the absence of data, sources, and evidence — elements that should be familiar to academics — the article traffics in *worries* and *concerns* under the guise of academic freedom.

Such vagaries, or even outright lies, are a popular tactic of the UK press when it comes to (mis)representing trans issues. To give a few examples, in an interview with *The Telegraph*, popular children’s author Jacqueline Wilson is ‘very, very worried’ about ‘young children taking any kind of drugs, hormones or whatever,’ and ‘having major surgery’ (Wilson 2019). The article does not bother to point out to Wilson that no UK trans healthcare providers administer hormones or surgery to children. A *Sky News* article from Sally Lockwood deploys the headline, “‘Hundreds’ of young trans people seeking help to return to original sex’ and includes the bald-faced lie that we have ‘no data’ on ‘the number who may be unhappy in their new gender or who may opt to detransition to their biological sex.’ Not true: of 3398 patients, 0.47% ‘expressed transition-related regret or de-transitioned’ and only three patients made a long-term detransition (Davies, McIntyre, Rypma 2019: 118). Stories such as these rarely, if ever, consult academics who specialize in trans studies or trans academics themselves who remain sidelined, silenced voices in these narratives that seek to define them as predatory figures.

Trans studies seems to exist in a bubble, unacknowledged by those who argue against it, unconsulted when the issues it has studied for decades become headline news. Intense media outrage against trans people and mendacity is widespread in the UK, with *The Times* having published 323 largely critical articles on transgender rights and lives in 2018 alone. Media platforms that support this agenda encompass leftist and progressive outlets as well as the right and the mainstream. The UK branch of *The Guardian* holds the editorial position that, ultimately, trans rights threatens feminism, a stance that provoked a rebuttal from the publication’s US office (Levin, Chalabi, Siddiqui 2018). It is indicative that a subsequent letter by a few dozen ‘gender critical’ academics published in *The Sunday Times* warranted widespread consideration, but the open letters signed by thousands of university colleagues affirming trans rights found little media attention (Pennock and Ashton 2019 and *The Independent* 2019).

That UK newspapers should profit on outrage and spin is no surprise. That the same deliberate ignorance should thrive in academia is more concerning. One major cause for the respect still accorded to transphobia among radical feminists in the UK has been explained by Sophie Lewis as due to the absence of any dialogue on ‘the effects of globalization and police brutality [...] on race, gender and class, and how they all interact’; because of this absence, ‘middle- and upper-class white feminists have not received the pummeling from black and indigenous feminists that their American counterparts have’ (Lewis 2019). We can see then that this manifestation of transphobia in the former heart of empire metastasizes out of fictions of white female vulnerability and institutional ignorance, if not outright suppression, of Black and women of colour feminisms. Perhaps this explains the popular equivalence between being trans and the performance of blackface: the conflation weaponizes lip-service outrage against antiBlackness bereft of historical consciousness or consideration for embodied experience. Akwugo Emejulu, Professor of Sociology at the University of Warwick who works on racial, ethnic and gender inequalities, argued that ‘Any feminist worth his or her salt should be advocating for the most marginalised’ (Strudwick 2018). Along with Vanita Sundaram, a Professor in the Department of Education at the University of York, Emejulu argues for the similarity of the biological essentialism of transphobia with eugenicist racism. There is a gulf between the understanding of feminism as a means to help the most vulnerable and a tool to affirm white women’s purity and power.

Of course, the devil’s advocate approach to academic transphobia does not confine itself to the intellectual sphere: it compounds the hostility inflicted upon trans and nonbinary students and staff in higher education. According to UK LGBT advocacy organization Stonewall, more than a third of trans students faced negative comments or conduct from university staff and three in five from other students. Seven percent were physically attacked by university staff or a fellow student (*Stonewall* 2018). Meanwhile, *Times Higher Education* spotlights ‘gender critical’ philosopher Kathleen Stock as a brave academic under attack because students display trans pride flags at her university (Grove 2020). Much like the alt-right, ‘gender critical feminists’ exploit concerns about academic freedom, labour, and debate to claim their right to platforms at institutions where they can profess that to be trans is pathology or even mutilation — and then melt under critique from trans students, staff, and their allies like the snowflakes they accuse them of being. Nonetheless, many trans scholars and trans-inclusive feminist allies rightfully remain wary of entering public debate when the already-biased media arenas fetishize antagonism and such platforms themselves help to legitimize transphobic views. Instead, they decide when, where, and how to communicate, while mindful that discourse should lead to policy and action.

While ‘gender critical’ academics self-martyr in academic and media publications, the fuel for the UK transphobic movement is comprised of angry and ill-informed online users. Many stem

from the online parenting website Mumsnet and the remnants of the UK Skeptics movement; Youtube has proved a popular congregating spot for the latter, which has become a notorious recruitment tool for the alt-right; As Edie Miller writes, ‘Mumsnet is to British transphobia more like what 4Chan is to American fascism’ (Miller 2018). This online transphobia has been spearheaded by former comedy writer Graham Lineham, who took to the ‘gender critical’ movement after an episode of his television show *The IT Crowd* was criticised for its offensive portrayal of a trans woman, and has since been warned by the police for his harassment campaigns. Lineham and Mumsnet’s war deluged the funder of trans charity Mermaids, The National Lottery, with so many complaints that Mermaids had its funding reviewed and threatened (it was ultimately not revoked). Absurdity is best fought with absurdity: this culminated in a countermove by leftist Youtuber Harry Brewis who raised \$340,000 for the charity in a 57 hour marathon live-stream playing the video game *Donkey Kong* that included an appearance from US Millennial progressive politician Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. This series of events perhaps better resembles a fever dream than a serious overview of the major events in UK transphobia, but this is our current landscape. This is the result of sidelining trans studies in favour of fear-mongering, ignorance, and online hate mobs.

We cannot pretend that our respective research on theorizing trans in early modern studies or queer of colour critique in long nineteenth century America occurs in a vacuum. Senate House Library is just down the street from our institution. Complaints by a more junior and precarious academic are more readily ignored than emails from a newly appointed faculty member. Policy can be a useful tool if you are strategic. Our university’s policy on trans inclusion is more progressive than the government’s: the challenge is to transform documents into action while always being aware of their limitations in the project of making a space more livable.

Together with our colleague Ella Metcalfe in Maths and Physical Sciences we were successful in securing an internal grant to hold our institution’s first symposium on trans issues and for trans people, ‘Trans Studies, Trans Lives: Past, Present, and Future.’ Our call sought to bring together academics, activists, and creatives. We hoped to create a visible counternarrative of community and affirmation fusing the often bifurcated efforts of the research versus social and advocacy groups. All would be welcome to come, discuss, and learn in a spirit of generosity. In many respects, the event was a triumph: excellent presentations of research from the medieval period through to the present and many forms of artistic and literary production informed by lived experience; outstanding turnout from students, staff, and faculty; participation from nonacademics living in the wider community; visible support from senior administrators. Our keynotes were trans legal scholar Stephen Whittle and nonbinary psychologist and writer Meg-John Barker who have made major contributions to the landscape of twenty-first century trans studies. We aimed to include a mix of senior scholars, junior scholars, artists, and activists, including papers on medieval, Victorian, and early twentieth century trans history and literature,

trans and lesbian solidarity, nonbinary experiences and bureaucracy, embodied transness, and navigating transphobia.¹

Nonetheless, there were failings we share here in the hopes that others can learn from to do better.

In our pool of submissions presentations by and on peoples of colour were few. Insofar as trans studies in the UK is a nascent field, trans of colour studies is further marginalized even though, as scholars elsewhere have argued, one cannot responsibly consider trans in isolation from race (Snorton 2017 and 2019). We procured additional funds to subsidize travel and accommodations for minoritized and precarious presenters; we also tried to compensate by earmarking funds explicitly for presenters of colour. Although the final program had Asian and Black presenters, for a combination of reasons such as cancellations and illness, in the end our lineup was entirely white. Most egregiously, one of our speakers who was to present on the criminalization and pathologization of queer Black masculinity was misgendered by security who then doubled down on abuse. They rightfully withdrew their labour, a move that forced immediate public reckoning with the limits of liberatory work that can be done within an institution and subsequent administrative discussions about better practices. They then became a target on Twitter for transphobic abuse for a reason we would not discover until the following day: a self-described ‘gender critical feminist’ had infiltrated the all-day event and — using a profile picture of Ayn Rand — was derisively tweeting the proceedings until they saw the opportunity to direct their eager audience to attack a trans person.

There would be value in a crowdsourced, public document to circulate organizational strategies to make such events safer and more just; we sought feedback from attendees on ways to improve. For instance, beyond pronoun tags and information on gender neutral toilets, it would be useful to recruit volunteers to help guide people to the toilets if they felt unsafe. We had talked to the security staff about our event and how to treat our guests. Overall, they were wonderfully supportive and welcoming to our attendees — except that when one of them went on break, the replacement flagrantly ignored the guidelines. Ideally, then, there should always be a volunteer present throughout the conference to help receive guests and ensure their safety. We had prepared statements about respect and community that we read out and included in the

¹ Full papers included Prof. Stephen Whittle: A Perfect Storm: The UK Government’s Failed Consultation on the Gender Recognition Act 2004; Dr. Meg John Barker: Trans: Adventurers across Time and Space; Prof. Robert Mills: Recognising Wilgefortis; Dr. Katherine Inglis: Trans Visibility in Late-Victorian English Publishing; Prof. Ann Heilmann: James Miranda Barry and the Conundrum of Historical Transgender Representation; Prof. Pamela L. Caughie: Queer Modernism and Trans Lives: Lili Elbe’s Life Narrative; Prof. Susan Rudy: On Gender Ontoformativity, or Refusing to Be Spat Out of Reality: Reclaiming (Trans and Cis) Lesbian Solidarity through Experimental Writing; Meshach Yaa-Yaw Owusu: Black Trans Masculinities: Redefinition as Survival [this paper was withdrawn; see below]; LJ Thuringer: Who Needs Gender; Aiden Greenall: “Please select one: Mr./Mrs.?”: “Mx.” and Non-Binary Resistance; Lo Marshall: Negotiating Gender Diverse Worlds Built on Binary Expectations: The Kenwood Ladies Pond; Victoria Sin: Embodied Narratives; Lara Bochmann and Erin Hampson: StepOut (short film); Felix Kawitzky: The Changeling’s Story: The Fantastic Duplicity of Queer Bodies in Sci-Fi and Fantasy Fiction.

program. A major concern was anticipating possible disruptions, although we hadn't considered online trolling. Rules against tweeting can be instituted, though may be ignored by hostile attendees (and banning devices entirely creates accessibility concerns). We planned our configuration throughout the room to keep an eye out for possible disruptions along with strategies for communication and minimizing attempts to hijack the environment. But there are no truly safe spaces: only safer spaces.

Ultimately, we are based in the birthplace of eugenics (early founders of eugenics, Karl Pearson and Walter Weldon, conducted this research at our institution) and located in the former imperial metropole. It is no coincidence that our outsourced security staff, with few benefits and poor labour conditions, are disproportionately people of colour. We have buildings named after the founders of race science whose mark remains more subtly on programs and entire disciplines of study. In her most recent book *What's the Use? On the Uses of Use*, Sara Ahmed devotes a chapter to our institution as the case study for the confluences of colonial race science, utilitarianism in education, and neoliberalism — and earlier in the work she discusses debates about trans access to bathrooms (Ahmed 2019). Race science's hierarchies inform the rigid gender binary. Transphobia, too, is eugenics: the same normative logics of biological determinism and reproductive futurity are driven by the familiar, righteous rhetoric of worries and concerns mobilized readily for reactionary and faux-progressive ends. While galvanized by the Gender Recognition Act, one can situate the virulence of this wave of transphobia in relation to Brexit and the 'hostile environment' towards immigrants as officially stated by former Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May when she was in office. British 'purity' is under attack: the threats are both without and within the crumbling erstwhile seat of empire.

We are perhaps reaching a crisis point in UK transphobia. A recent lightning rod case involved a tax researcher, Maya Forstater, not having her contract renewed after she tweeted her commitment to (as the judge at her employment tribunal phrased it) 'refer[ring] to a person by the sex she considered appropriate even if it violates their dignity and/or creates an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment' (Bowcott 2019). This sets an important legal precedent for transphobia, preventing it from becoming a protected belief. The decision garnered much transphobic criticism, most prominently from J. K. Rowling, but drew a line between trans people's legal rights and the rights of transphobes to harass them.

Currently, the state of trans research at our institution is intensely ambivalent. On the one hand, funding has been secured for the Writing Trans Lives project, a series of workshops featuring established trans authors such as Travis Alabanza, that aims to support aspiring trans writers' endeavours in a culture that frequently dismisses them in favour of cisgender voices. On the other, our university is also playing host to a Women's Place UK conference, a group that espouses feminist values alongside justifications for demonizing trans people and sex workers. Perhaps our symposium made our institution more of a target: a journalist from one of the aforementioned major news outlets disingenuously tried to goad a response from one of us about

this upcoming conference based on involvement with the trans symposium. It remains to be seen how these issues will play out at a broader institutional level. Nonetheless, we alongside the thousands of UK academics who signed open letters to affirm trans rights must continue to strive to further trans rights inextricable from the project of feminist anti racist social justice. We cannot let transphobic eugenics foreclose our efforts when its logics always seek to delimit the possibilities of those it minoritizes.

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