

“But I thought we’d already won that argument!”:

“Anti-gender” Mobilizations, Affect, and Temporality

Clare Hemmings

Introduction: The Terrain of Gender Studies

I work in a context rife with what are called “anti-gender” attacks: these are attacks on feminism and LGBT movements that are on the rise globally, frequently articulated in conjunction with anti-migrant or racist views, and which writers such as Sonia Corrêa, David Patternote, and Roman Kuhar have linked to right-wing ascendancy.¹ I speak from the context of life and work in the United Kingdom, a place with deeply divided feminist accounts of gender and sex, and extremely high levels of aggression against trans people’s right to self-determination. The overlapping sites of higher education, media, and politics are suffused with what are called “culture wars,” although we might more accurately rename them: campaigns to paint minority rights as either irrelevant within or responsible for growing economic and social instability. I grant you that this doesn’t have quite the same ring to it. Not since the 1980s have we seen a Conservative Party leadership center questions of sex, gender, sexuality, and race so cynically, dismissing Black and trans rights as pointless identity politics, or part of a left-wing or European conspiracy, playing into and producing populist scapegoating in the face of increased austerity and state collapse.² And as I finalize this article for publication, Rishi Sunak’s Conservative government is threatening to

¹ See, for example, Sonia Corrêa, “Gender Ideology: Tracking Its Origins and Meanings in Current Gender Politics,” *Engenderings* (blog), December 11, 2017, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2017/12/11/gender-ideology-tracking-its-origins-and-meanings-in-current-gender-politics>; David Patternote and Roman Kuhar, “Disentangling and Locating the ‘Global Right’: Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe,” *Politics and Governance* 6, no. 3 (2018): 6–19. A 2019 *Signs* special issue focuses on the relationship between national and transnational right-wing attacks on “gender ideology”: Agnieszka Graff, Ratna Kapur, and Suzanna Danuta Walters, eds., “Introduction: Gender and the Rise of the Global Right,” *Signs* 44, no. 3 (Spring 2019): 541–60 .

² Peter Walker, “‘Culture War’ Issues: Tory Leadership Hopefuls Weigh Up Benefits of Engaging,” *The Guardian*, July 10, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/jul/10/culture-war-issues-tory-leadership-hopefuls-weigh-up-benefits-of-engaging>.

intervene to impede the extension of the Scottish Parliament's recognition of trans people's gender identity.³ In these arguments, it is minorities who are positioned as aggressors rather than targets of violence, and feminist "anti-gender" activists targeting trans people trade in a similar rhetoric, as Alyosxa Tudor has made plain.⁴

In addition, center-left and right-wing UK newspapers privilege feminists' feelings of being silenced by trans and non-binary claims to recognition, such that alliances between them are exceptionalized.⁵ If you put up a public statement of support for colleagues challenging the lack of consultation at the Open University before establishing the Gender Critical Research Network, as we did at the department of gender studies at the London School of Economics in the summer of 2021, you can expect to receive incensed promises of libel action from feminist lawyers and groups campaigning for sex-based rights. and capitulation from an institution whose interest in protecting free speech appears to only ever work one way. And if you launch an Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded network exploring the narratives and politics of "anti-gender" movements transnationally, as myself and my colleague Professor Sumi Madhok, did in September 2022, you can expect

³ Libby Brooks and Peter Walker, "Sunak Government Threatens to Block Scottish Gender Recognition Law," *The Guardian*, December 22, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/dec/22/sunak-government-threatens-to-block-scottish-gender-recognition-law>

⁴ Alyosxa Tudor, "Decolonising Trans/Gender Studies?: Teaching Gender, Race, and Sexuality in Times of the Rise of the Global Right," *TSQ* 8, no. 2 (2021): 238–56. See also Tudor, "Terfism Is White Distraction: On BLM, Decolonising the Curriculum, Anti-Gender Attacks and Feminist Transphobia," *Engenderings* (blog), June 19, 2020, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2020/06/19/terfism-is-white-distraction-on-blm-decolonising-the-curriculum-anti-gender-attacks-and-feminist-transphobia>. At the time Tudor was writing the links between the British Right and feminist anti-trans activists were less clear than they are now, under a Conservative government.

⁵ Kim Humphery, "Trans Rights Have Been Pitted Against Feminism But We're Not Enemies," *The Guardian*, July 6, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jul/07/trans-rights-have-been-pitted-against-feminism-but-were-not-enemies>; Susanna Rustin, "Trying to Erase the Biological Definition of Sex Isn't Just Misguided—It's Dangerous," *The Guardian*, July 28, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/jun/28/erase-biological-definition-sex-gender-self-identification-trans-transgender-feminist-case>.

complaints against its remit and online harassment of its Advisory Board.⁸ In each case, accusations are accompanied by an insistence on misogyny: *ours*, not theirs. We are accused both of harming women and of failing to comprehend the violence women face.

It is bewildering, infuriating, and disorienting to be so accused. As a queer feminist theorist of some decades, I am used to being targeted as a pariah, an aggressive man-, family-, or nation-hater. And I have experienced homophobic and sexist aggression within and outside higher education throughout my life. I am also used to being positioned as a betrayer of real (materialist) feminist commitments or dismissed as a member of an obscure elite, safe in a corner of an ivory tower. I am used to being accused—as someone who takes a pro-union stance on sex work and pornography—of actual violence too, on occasion. And as a bisexual woman, I am used to having my sexual subjectivity called into question. Perhaps my bewilderment has something to do with the privileges I inhabit as a white, middle-class professor who was able to forget for a moment that, when the shit hits the proverbial fan, institutions have no real interest in protecting queer feminists. Or, following Sara Ahmed’s reflections in “An Affinity of Hammers,” I have been able to forget the relentlessness of anti-trans misogyny and anti-sex work fervor for straightforward reasons: because I am not a sex worker and I am not trans.⁹ Even so, for this set of reflections on the anniversary of *Feminist Studies*, I want to start with those feelings of disorientation and discomfort. I want to start from that intensity of aggression that Elsa Dorlin describes as “a will to obliteration,”¹⁰

⁸ The harassment of the network organizers resulted in our having to run our first workshop as invitation-only. Thankfully, the support among UK feminists remains sufficiently robust that we welcomed over 300 people to the event over the day. Details of the network can be found at: <https://www.lse.ac.uk/gender/research/AHRC/AHRC-home>; details of the workshop and a podcast of the final panel, “The Politics of Transnational “Anti-Gender” Mobilisations and Resistance: A Conversation” with speakers Judith Butler, Sonia Corrêa and Françoise Vergès can be found at: <https://www.lse.ac.uk/gender/research/AHRC/AHRC-workshops>

⁹ Sara Ahmed, “An Affinity of Hammers,” *TSQ* 3, no. 1–2 (2016): 22–34.

¹⁰ Elsa Dorlin, *Se défendre: Une philosophie de la violence* (Paris: Zones, 2019). Dorlin’s work owes a debt to Aimé Césaire’s work. For a brilliant discussion of the ongoing importance of his decolonizing philosophy, see

because anti-gender activism is a deeply feeling economy, and because this might offer some clues to working through some apparent stalemates.¹¹

I am not the first to point to affect as central to the experience of anti-gender attacks: Andrea Petó, Sonia Corrêa, and Stella Nyanzi all describe encounters with anti-gender rhetoric as terrifying in its insistent irrationality.¹³ They rightly point to the framing of gender studies, and feminism more broadly, as forms of aggression in themselves: to the family, to heterosexual complementarity, to the nation and its integrity. Elżbieta Korolczuk talks movingly of the blistering speed of these right-wing attacks as well as the difficulty of challenging the anti-gender discourse that frames gender as itself a form of elite violence.¹⁴ For Joni Cohen, that anti-gender trick of deflection is one that draws on long-standing anti-Semitic tactics, representing feminism as an elite global conspiracy committed to the eradication of local and national values.¹⁵ That this is a form of populism that threatens to challenge sexual and gender as well as anti-racist and immigration rights is hardly news: *Roe*

Aimé Césaire and Françoise Vergès, *Resolutely Black: Conversations with Françoise Vergès*, trans. Matthew B. Smith (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020).

¹¹ I was recently passed this statement by the Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention, which makes a clear case for seeing trans-exclusionary activism within the gender critical movement (as anti-gender activism within feminism is sometimes termed) as genocidal in intent and argument. It is an extraordinary statement not least because it refuses to countenance the feminist arguments about trans people as aggressors, seeing these as a baseless but central part of the rhetoric needed to generate popular support for anti-trans violence: <https://www.lemkininstitute.com/statements-new-page/statement-on-the-genocidal-nature-of-the-gender-critical-movement%E2%80%99s-ideology-and-practice>

¹³ “Andrea Petó on Gender and Illiberalism,” *illiberalism.org*, March 14, 2022, <https://www.illiberalism.org/andrea-peto-on-gender-and-illiberalism>; Sonia Corrêa, “Interview: The Anti-Gender Offensive as State Policy,” *Conectas*, March 7, 2020, <https://www.conectas.org/en/noticias/interview-the-anti-gender-offensive-as-state-policy>; Max Bearak, “A Fiery Ugandan Activist Soothes Her Wounds and Contemplates Her Future,” *Washington Post*, September 6, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/09/06/uganda-stella-nyanzi>.

¹⁴ Elżbieta Korolczuk, “Counteracting Challenges to Gender Equality in the Era of Anti-Gender Campaigns: Competing Gender Knowledges and Affective Solidarity,” *Social Politics* 27, no. 4 (Winter 2020): 694–717.

¹⁵ Joni Alizah Cohen, “The Eradication of ‘Talmudic Abstractions’: Anti-Semitism, Transmisogyny and the National Socialist Project,” *Verso* (blog), December 19, 2018, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4188-the-eradication-of-talmudic-abstractions-anti-semitism-transmisogyny-and-the-national-socialist-project>.

v. *Wade* was overturned in the United States;¹⁶ deportations to Rwanda have been confirmed as justifiable for people seeking asylum in the UK;¹⁷ anti-feminist violence has escalated in Pakistan, Brazil, Hungary, Poland;¹⁸ and closures of gender studies programs and attacks (legal and physical) on their members are increasingly routine.¹⁹ As Rodrigo Borba argues in relation to Bolsonaro's Brazil, homophobic, anti-migrant, and anti-gender feelings are effective because they so skillfully harness moral panic ("ordinary families" and the nation itself are framed as being attacked by outside forces).²⁰ Anti-gender advocates are thus able to frame those challenging racism, homophobia, or transphobia as the aggressors, because gender itself is already understood as an aggressive concept designed to deny the reality of binary sex and the natural order of sexual difference. That's why, for Ahmed, anti-racist, anti-homophobic, and anti-sexist interventions can be understood as the *origin* of violence rather than as a response to preceding violence.²¹ The affective economy of anti-gender movements is thus also temporal, since it justifies feelings of who is to blame in the sequence of political loss and gain. Whether the feeling is of abandonment by global capitalism or

¹⁶ Recognizing the deep significance for US and global sexual, gendered, and reproductive politics of the recent over-turning of abortion legislation, *Feminist Studies* has reissued articles from the last ten years of the journal as "Digital Special Re-issue: On Abortion." See <https://muse.jhu.edu/issue/48253>.

¹⁷ Michela Wrong, "The Rwanda Deportation Scheme Might be Legal, But it Remains Deeply Shameful," *The Guardian*, 19 December, 2022: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/dec/19/rwanda-deportation-scheme-legal-shameful-britain-asylum-seekers>

¹⁸ Sonia Corrêa, David Paternotte, and Roman Kuhar, "The Globalisation of Anti-gender Campaigns: Transnational Anti-gender Movements in Europe and Latin America Create Unlikely Alliances," *International Politics and Society* 31, no. 5 (2018), <https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/human-rights/article/show/the-globalisation-of-anti-gender-campaigns-2761>; Maham Javaid, "Pakistan's Feminists Say Will Persevere Amid Increased Threats," *Aljazeera*, March 22, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2021/3/22/pakistans-feminists-say-will-persevere-amid-increased-threats>.

¹⁹ Weronika Grzebalska and Andrea Pető, "The Gendered Modus Operandi of the *Illiberal* Transformation in Hungary and Poland," *Women's Studies International Forum* 68 (May-June 2018): 164–72.

²⁰ Rodrigo Borba, "Disgusting Politics: Circuits of Affects and the Making of Bolsonaro," *Social Semiotics* 31, no. 5 (2021): 677–94. While Sonia Corrêa is hopeful following the defeat of Bolsonaro in the recent election, she acknowledges that 'the road ahead is rocky and full of traps. We can breathe again.' (personal correspondence with Sonia Corrêa, 31 October, 2022).

²¹ Ahmed, "An Affinity of Hammers," 28.

anger at the imposition of the rights of trans, feminist, or migrant subjects, fantasies of minority status are often all the more powerful for not being rooted in empirical truth.²²

Affect also serves a temporal function in anti-gender rhetoric with respect to equality and women's rights. Anti-gender proponents often position themselves not as anti-equality, but as *the real defenders* of women's rights. In a neat trick, the argument goes: yes, sure, there were some problems with inequality for women, but these have largely been addressed. Anyone continuing to challenge the heterosexual family and nation is simply going too far, and instead common sense about both the nature of sex difference and the importance of complementarity should prevail. It is "la theorie de genre" that is dangerous for children in France, not anti-feminism;²³ it is homosexuality that is perverse in Poland and Hungary, not masculinist sexual violence;²⁴ it is trans subjects who are agents of patriarchy transnationally, not, well, patriarchs.²⁵ The affective mode here is reassuring: anti-gender arguments are reasonable, understandable, self-explanatory even; while queer, feminist, and migrant claims for recognition and political change are beyond reason, laughable, violent. It is this affective temporality, too, that links gender theorists with migrants (and particularly Muslims) since it is "other cultures" that are thought to threaten the reasonable family, since what is characterized as Muslim hyperbolic patriarchy is conceived of as a relic of the Western, or modern, nation-state's past.²⁶ On the one hand, there are abhorrent queer, feminist, trans

²² Shakuntala Banaji and Ramnath Bhat's brilliant new book *Social Media and Hate* evidences the extreme aggression towards minorities online as articulated through proponents' temporal fantasies of having already been dismissed (and thus already victimized). Shakuntala Banaji and Ramnath Bhat, *Social Media and Hate* (London: Routledge, 2022).

²³ Sara Garbagnoli and Massimo Prearo "La Croisade 'Anti-Genre': Du Vatican aux Manifs Pour Tous," *Tout OpenEdition*, November 13, 2017, <https://journals.openedition.org/lectures/23496>.

²⁴ Agnieszka Graff, "Report from the Gender Trenches: War Against 'Genderism' in Poland," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 21, no. 4 (2014): 431–42.

²⁵ Susan Stryker and Talia M. Bettcher, "Introduction: Trans/Feminisms," *TSQ* 3, no. 1–2 (2016): 5–14.

²⁶ Ferruh Yilmaz, "From Immigrant *Worker* to *Muslim* Immigrant: Challenges for Feminism," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 22, no. 1 (2014): 37–52.

abject hysterics who don't know when to stop; on the other, abhorrent migrant patriarchs from contexts that haven't yet begun to include women in the modern social and political moment. As Katarina Nygren, Lena Martinsson, and Diana Mulinari note, this affective teleology is underwritten by the separation of feminism and women's rights in the global field, so that feminism itself can be positioned as running counter to women's interests.²⁷ And so too these oppositions function to represent queer and trans subjects as *de facto* white and global North subjects, unhelpfully counterposed to racialised and migratized women as **Global** South subjects in needs of gender critical feminist protection.²⁸

If we add to this picture a further dimension of anti-gender rhetoric that claims that the anti-colonial position should be to resist the imposition of gender given its thoroughly Western history of imposition, then the affective temporality that annexes gender studies as both *elite and dominant* is complete.²⁹ It matters little that anti-gender advocates have minimal interest in challenging sexism, racism, or colonialism, or that the white men that the anti-gender narrative paints as marginalized remain the most powerful, healthiest, and best paid globally.³⁰ It matters little that it is *transnational feminists* who have been pointing to the problems of epistemic, economic, and military imposition of Western gender equality arguments and emphasizing the importance of Global South feminist networks and theories,

²⁷ Katarina Giritli Nygren, Lena Martinsson, and Diana Mulinari, "Gender Equality and Beyond: At the Crossroads of Neoliberalism, Anti-Gender Movements, 'European' Values, and Normative Reiterations in the Nordic Model," *Social Inclusion* 6, no. 4 (2018): 1–7.

²⁸ The term "migratism" is Alyosxa Tudor's; they use it to mark the ways black and brown subjects in Europe are assumed to come from "somewhere else", and to highlight the specific discrimination that migrants race (whether or not they are racialized). See, most recently: Alyosxa Tudor, "Ascriptions of Migration: Racism, Migratism and Brexit," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* (2022): <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.1177/13675494221101642>

²⁹ Éric Fassin, "Anti-Gender Campaigns, Populism, and Neoliberalism in Europe and Latin America," *LASA Forum* 51, no. 2 (2020): 67–71.

³⁰ The forthcoming volume *Transnationalising Anti-Gender Politics*, will bring together interventions challenging this blunt characterisation of "gender" as a Western, but "sex difference" as pre-colonial or indigenous. See Aiko Holvikivi, Billy Holzberg and Tomás Ojeda, eds *Transnationalising Anti-Gender Politics* (London: MacMillan, 2022).

for many decades.³¹ But it does help to explain why being in gender studies right now feels a bit like being in a bad episode of *The X-Files*—the terrain is familiar but its pieces are constantly being rearranged into strange, new configurations.

Storytelling

In 2011, I published *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*, which identified three dominant narratives that keep feminism's accounts of its own past intact and linked to one another, but with different affects and inflections.³² These are progress, loss, and return narratives that identify the same core transitions across decades but understand them as variously positive, negative, or about to change. As I was writing *Why Stories Matter*, my focus was on the progress narrative's investment in a move away from essentialism to sexual identity and critical race politics and into queer deconstruction as a heroic one that leaves adherence to narrow understandings of biology and fixed identity categories behind. The fights were fought and, in a progress narrative, *won* through the sex wars, Black feminist critique of the universalist claims of socialist and radical feminism, and the separation of feminist and queer objects of inquiry. Frequently, progress narratives bring with them a self-congratulatory tone—their prevailing subjects are dismissive or smug in relation to what has been transcended. In a loss narrative, the same markers and shifts are framed as a move away from real politics into abstraction via a divisive identity politics that shatters the unified category of “woman.” The tone of the loss narrative is one of lament, both for a time of better feminist thinking and for the presence of clearer and more politically

³¹ For example, Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, eds., *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); Valentine M. Moghadam, *Globalizing Women: Transnational Feminist Networks* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 2005); and Ashwini Tambe and Millie Thayer, eds., *Transnational Feminist Itineraries: Situating Theory and Activist Practice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).

³² Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

adroit subjects of feminist thinking and action. The loss narrative's affect is of marginality, and the relentless repetition of that marginality is central to its logic. The return narrative is closely related to the loss narrative insofar as it anticipates and proposes changes in feminist thinking that center the perspectives and subjects of the loss narrative. What each narrative advocates should come next may differ—typically materialism, embodiment, radicalism, real politics—but what needs to be displaced is the same (abstraction, fragmentation, a turn to language). My argument was, and still is, that each narrative gloss produces a teleology that does not hold up to closer scrutiny, characterizes decades as discrete and uniform, and—crucially—in doing so, limits the history and context of both Black feminism and sexual politics.

Over a decade ago, I understood these narratives as locating the subject in a particular history through their affective register, and here, as part of the anniversary celebration issue of *Feminist Studies*, I want to explore their continued value for a contemporary feminist context. What I characterize above as my own disorientation at the resurgence of anti-trans thinking, for example, positions me as firmly within a progress narrative that imagines the work of critiquing anti-porn, anti-sex work, and anti-BDSM, as well as anti-trans or queer arguments, as triumphant. That's perhaps where the shock comes from: the disorientation and the feelings of bewilderment arise from both a feeling of deep misrecognition, but also a sense of déjà vu. Each year I teach Judith Butler and Nancy Fraser's 1997 argument about whether the need for sexual minority rights should be thought of as "merely cultural,": I am always surprised that my sense that Butler wins the argument by clearly demonstrating that sexuality is a concept with an economic as well as cultural life is not necessarily shared, and I always put it down to my students not having a full grasp of the history of feminist thinking (by which I really mean *my* history).³⁴ My conviction about the progressive nature of feminist

³⁴ Judith Butler, "Merely Cultural," *Social Text* 52/53 (Autumn-Winter 1997): 265–77; Nancy

debates is shared by trans-inclusive feminists Patricia Elliot and Lawrence Lyons who ask in a similar vein: “why are we called upon to revisit this debate over the value of trans lives again and again?”³⁵ “Didn’t we challenge sex essentialism?” I lament, even as I spent over a decade critiquing the certainty that we had moved to a more sophisticated queer feminist time and place. Why won’t essentialism concede defeat so I don’t have to have the same fight over and over again?

Taking another look at the loss narrative, the story that feminism has abandoned sexed embodiment and radical politics has of course always been anti-trans, not to mention anti-sex work, anti-porn, and anti-queer. The affective dimensions of that story have nevertheless been intensified by increased trans recognition in politics and the rapid circulation of ideas possible on social media.³⁶ Trans claims to womanhood are written into a loss narrative as illegitimate, the story goes, because they substitute gender for sex, thus removing misogyny from the spotlight and replacing it with (false) identity.³⁷ Trans claims of inhabiting womanhood or manhood are themselves characterized as a violence against women because of the ways oppression on the basis of sex is based in a hierarchical sexual dualism: men have power over women and cannot voluntarily remove themselves from that dynamic with individualist identity tricks.³⁸ The affective motor of this loss narrative is

Fraser, “Heterosexism, Misrecognition, and Capitalism: A Response to Judith Butler,” *Social Text* 52/53 (Autumn-Winter 1997): 279–89.

³⁵ Patricia Elliot and Lawrence Lyons, “Transphobia as Symptom: Fear of the ‘Unwoman,’” *TSQ* 4, no. 3–4 (2017): 359.

³⁶ Thanks to the East London Queerantini Group—Levi Appleton, Raf Benato, Carrie Hamilton, Irini Moustaki, Leticia Sabsay, Alyosxa Tudor, and others—for ongoing conversations about the nature and extent of that intensity.

³⁷ For *Why Stories Matter* I analyzed narrative glosses from feminist interdisciplinary journals in English over a three-decade period. I haven’t done that labor for the last ten years in any systematic way; this analysis is based on a more cursory reading and on the broader discourses of anti-trans campaigns as well as responses.

³⁸ This argument is particularly clearly represented by Sheila Jeffreys, but versions of it circulate continually in both academic and cultural-media forms. Sheila Jeffreys, *Gender Hurts: A Feminist Analysis of the Politics of Transgenderism* (London: Routledge, 2014). See also the special issue of *TSQ* that takes Jeffreys’s books as a starting point for reflecting on the history of what they call trans/feminism as an important counter to this and

hyperbolic, extraordinarily aggressive, characterizing transwomen as rapists and transmen as not only betraying the sisterhood but also suffering from internalized homophobia. In a loss narrative, a feminist anti-trans position is radical and unpopular, silenced and unspeakable. Its genre is one of its advocates as heroes willing to say the unsayable to overcome those standing in the way of feminist freedom. The insistent fervor cannot be over-stated here: trans rights are framed as illegitimate because of women's rights, with the two understood as being ever distinct. The blame for this purported erasure of women from the center of feminism is placed firmly on queer and trans-inclusive actors and institutions (such as Stonewall),⁴⁰ and common cause is made through these overlaps with right wing anti-feminists, as Tudor has trenchantly pointed out.⁴¹ It is an extraordinary risk for feminists to invest so heavily in sexual essence, since that commitment is so central to the right-wing anti-gender articulations that argue so strongly against feminism. And indeed this is a risk unlikely to pay off, as Korolczuk argues, since nothing will delight the right wing more than being able to take up a simultaneously anti-trans and anti-reproductive rights position under the guise of protecting women, as has been borne out in Poland and the United States.⁴² The Far Right is, to put it bluntly, as likely to celebrate the burning **in** effigy of Sheila Jeffreys as it is Judith Butler.⁴³

We can perhaps make a different sense of this grotesque figure of “trans threat”

related positions: Susan Stryker and Talia M. Bettcher, eds., “Introduction: Trans/Feminisms,” *TSQ* 3, no. 1–2 (2016).

⁴⁰ Stonewall was critiqued in 2021 for its trans-inclusive advocacy by gay and lesbian and feminist individuals and organizations, and the subsequent twelve months have seen institutions withdrawing from participating in their Diversity Champions program (in more than one case, pre-empting losing Champion status because of lack of attention to LG(BT) rights by using trans-skepticism). See Haroon Siddique, “Stonewall Is at Centre of a Toxic Debate on Trans Rights and Gender Identity,” *The Guardian*, June 5, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/jun/05/stonewall-trans-debate-toxic-gender-identity>.

⁴¹ Tudor, “Decolonising Trans/Gender Studies.”

⁴² Korolczuk, “Countering Challenges to Gender Equality.”

⁴³ Butler was burned in effigy in São Paulo. See Clare Hemmings, “Unnatural Feelings: The Affective Life of ‘Anti-Gender’ Mobilisations,” *Radical Philosophy* 2, no. 9 (Winter 2020): 27–39, <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/commentary/unnatural-feelings>.

central to the contemporary loss narrative by having another look at the progress narrative. Like the loss narrative, the progress narrative is suffused with affect and had a triumphalist tone at the time of the publication of *Why Stories Matter*, satisfied in its identification of the ills of earlier sex essentialisms and later identity politics. This critical tone expressed a rather smug pleasure, a repeated discovery of the unacceptable essentialism in particular schools of feminism, and in particular the racism in both radical and socialist feminism *from that time* now thankfully past. The moral high ground of finding racist sex essentialism again and again somewhere and sometime else in any and all feminist universalist claims has always been enormously appealing (particularly for white feminists), and again speaks to my surprise that sex essentialists did not just disappear or rehabilitate themselves appropriately following accusations of racism. Apparently, I forgot my own lesson that the progress narrative is also a dangerous fantasy, one that simplifies and excludes and crows from the rooftops about its virtuous distance from these racist, heteronormative ills. While that critique of essentialism was and is important, what I want to argue here is that it necessarily under-explored the triumphalism and aggression that went hand in hand with progress narratives' casting of radical feminism as the bearer of racist sex essentialism, making it carry that particular burden for feminism *as a whole*.

As a result, progress narratives were and are rather ill-prepared for what Elliot and Lyons call the symptomatic nature of radical (or lesbian) feminist transphobia.⁴⁴ In their important psychoanalytic reading of anti-trans aggression, Elliot and Lyons explore the trans-exclusionary feminist externalizing of shame as a response to the (unacknowledged) realization that a unified community of radical lesbian feminism has always been a fantasy. Developing Elliot and Lyons's work in terms of progress and loss narratives here, we might speculate on anti-trans aggression as a combative attempt to overcome the shame of being

⁴⁴ Elliot and Lyons, "Transphobia as Symptom."

accused of racist essentialism as the ground of that fantasy of unity. That externalization most certainly cannot target Black feminists—given that the aggression is intended to refute accusations of racism—but trans subjects constitute an appropriate stand-in. In other words, I want to suggest that the transphobia that is central to the current feminist loss narrative emerges at least partly as an attempt to deflect that accusation of racism. We could further analyze this anger and say that responding to this shame with aggression redirects the vitriol resulting from the politically unspeakable desire to obliterate that critique (and its originators) displacing that aggression onto a white-coded trans subject. This is not to say that a Black trans subject somehow fares better in an anti-trans loss narrative, but that the relentless refusal to engage the Black feminist critiques of sex essentialism implicitly whitens the alternative object of this ire. In this reading, the splitting of “gender” from “sex”, and the whitewashing of “gender” as *the* violent critique of “sex” allows for queer and trans challenges alone to be recast as the enemy (while Black feminist critics of sex are excised from feminist history, but indirectly).⁴⁵ In return, trans-inclusive feminists can remake radical feminists into a reassuringly singular and familiar target of vitriol: as with the earlier progress narrative, this deflection of their own enables queer feminist thinkers to continue to ignore their own inattention to race and racism.

And what of the return narratives in my analysis? In this anti-trans narrative the fantasy loss is repaired by a fantasy return to a binary opposition of “real sex” as we have seen. That return of course also comes with the need to ignore the links between sex essentialism and the resurgence of anti-abortion, anti-homosexual, and anti-reproductive

⁴⁵ Several theorists have explored the overlaps between Black and trans critiques of sex essentialism, as well as the hostility towards both as part of white feminist theory and politics. See Jade Crimson Rose Da Costa, “The ‘New’ White Feminism: Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminism and the Problem of Biological Determinism in Western Feminist Theory,” eds Kristi Carter and James Brunton, *TransNarratives: Scholarly and Creative Works on Transgender Experience* (Toronto: The Women’s Press, 2021), 317-34; and Kai M. Green and Marquis Bey, “Where Black Feminist Thought and Trans* Feminism Meet: a Conversation,” *Souls* 19 (4): 438-454.

rights agendas that have always been at the heart of right-wing anti-gender practice. It is the same ignorance that enables feminist anti-pornography advocates to separate themselves from a right-wing censorship agenda.⁴⁶ But there is another strand to that return narrative that departs from the right-wing insistence on the integrity of binary sex in purely essentialist terms. This strand identifies and relies on sex as binary, certainly, but as *determined* as the site of violence and oppression rather than as a site of *natural* difference or complementarity. “Gender” for this strand is ludicrous not because it challenges the natural status of women and men, but because it is a smoke screen that obscures “sex” as the primary locus of women’s oppression.⁴⁷ For materialist feminists such as Christine Delphy, say, sex matters because it reflects, or is even an outcome of, ongoing positions of structural inequality rather than of essence.⁴⁸ Materialist feminists’ claim that sex is central is bound up with their insistence on politicizing sex in order to challenge its naturalization, and for Delphy at least, that materialist analysis is consistent with an anti-racist position. Delphy sees religious domination as overlapping with sex domination such that banning the headscarf in France is a sexist red herring deflecting from materialist accounts of intersecting state or institutional violence.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, as Ilana Eloit has argued, Delphy’s materialist account could not accommodate a radical departure from understandings of “woman,” as her disagreement with Monique Wittig’s insistence that “lesbians are not women” makes plain.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ See Whitney Strub, *Perversion for Profit: The Politics of Pornography and the Rise of the New Right* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), which tracks the relationship between the Right and sexual moralism over several decades.

⁴⁷ This strand of sex determinism is allied with the theorization of women as a “sex class” and with social reproduction theories of women’s oppression.

⁴⁸ Christine Delphy, “Un féminisme matérialiste est possible,” ‘Mon Dieu! C’est la révolution et je suis encore en peignoir!’ *Nouvelles Questions Féministes* 4 (1982): 50–86.

⁴⁹ Christine Delphy, *Classer, Dominer: Qui Sont les “Autres”?* (Paris: Éditions La Fabrique, 2007).

⁵⁰ Ilana Eloit, “American Lesbians Are Not French Women: Heterosexual French Feminism and the Americanisation of Lesbianism in the 1970s,” *Feminist Theory* 20, no. 4 (2019): 381–404. See also Eloit, *Lesbian Trouble: Feminism, Heterosexuality and the French Nation (1970-1981)*, PhD Thesis, 2018, London School of Economics and Political Science. Monique Wittig’s controversial statement can be found at the close

There are other compelling accounts of sex as central to an analysis of women's oppression that should also not be shoehorned into an essentialist box that doesn't really fit. The work of Catharine A. MacKinnon, for example, has been much maligned within progress narratives for its essentializing of sex as the primary site of women's oppression. Yet this is a mistake, because sex for radical feminist MacKinnon is a *naturalized* rather than natural category, much as it is for materialist feminists. The difference is that for MacKinnon, it is *sexual violence* that is the structural framework of oppression that produces "woman" as a violable category.⁵¹ For MacKinnon, sex oppression in the sex industry affects trans women (who have few economic options) in misogynist ways, just as it affects women assigned female at birth.⁵² Similarly, Andrea Dworkin, whose anti-pornography position was dismissed as essentialist in progress narratives, was in truth a determinist who had no truck with the "truth of sex," but included trans women in her understanding of the radical victimhood underpinning the sex industry.⁵³ Neither MacKinnon nor Dworkin need sex to be an essential category in order to be abolitionists.⁵⁴

of Monique Wittig, "The Straight Mind," in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 21–32.

⁵¹ Catharine A. MacKinnon has been writing across several decades. See, indicatively, MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987); and MacKinnon, "Sex Equality: On Difference and Dominance," in *Theorizing Feminism: Parallel Trends in the Humanities and Social Sciences*, ed. Anne Herrmann and Abigail J. Stewart (New York: Routledge, 2001), C11.

⁵² Cristan Williams, "Sex, Gender, and Sexuality: The TransAdvocate interviews Catharine A. MacKinnon," *The TransAdvocate*, 2015, https://www.transadvocate.com/sex-gender-and-sexuality-the-transadvocate-interviews-catharine-a-mackinnon_n_15037.htm.

⁵³ As Cristan Williams notes, Dworkin's work has been mis-cited as part of a trans-exclusive feminism, when she was in fact explicit about trans rights to health care and surgery, and considered trans realities to be a challenge to the violence of patriarchy. Williams, "Radical Inclusion: Recounting the Trans Inclusive History of Radical Feminism," *TSQ* 3, no. 1–2 (2016): 254–58.

⁵⁴ As Claire Thurlow shows, trans-exclusionary feminism may also assert its credibility through refusing its characterization as transphobic. For Thurlow this is one explanation for the popularity of the term 'gender critical' instead, and she is suspicious of this form of distancing rhetoric. This is an important insight, but my point here is that there are some versions of materialist and radical feminism that are more actively trans-inclusive. Claire Thurlow, "From TERF to Gender Critical: A Telling Genealogy," *Sexualities* (2022): <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/13634607221107827>

I am not a fan of either MacKinnon or Dworkin’s privileging of ‘sex’ as foundational of women’s oppression, but my point here is to highlight ways in which progress narratives have mischaracterized both materialist and radical feminist approaches to sex as more singular than they are in order to mark out their own distance from essentialism. And this is of course what progress narratives do: they are ever confident that the problem has been identified and overcome—identifying a secret essentialism here or an exclusionary identity there—always ensuring that the culprit remains the same: a myopic feminism invested in “women” or rights, more easily and predictably subsumed by the overarching neoliberal enemy than other forms. And as both Jennifer C. Nash and Robyn Wiegman have trenchantly observed, the answer—intersectionality—becomes increasingly empty of content or method, fetishized as the lone Black feminist approach to social justice.⁵⁵ The tone of celebratory critique so associated with progress narratives, though, has transmogrified into a more brittle (perhaps even masochistic) certainty that all the rights agendas that were at the heart of radical or liberal feminism, as well as those emerging from LGBT and trans rights agendas, are variously hetero- or homonormative, trans- or homonationalist, racist, or colonial, and (of course) subsumed within the logic of capital.⁵⁶ The certainty—it’s global neoliberalism what done it!—is suffused with a rather pleasing affect of its own too: that if only “they” had listened to the critiques, feminism would presumably be less co-opted and neoliberal now. But I am also struck by the tone of relentlessly pleased disappointment that this endless debunking produces as we discover (once again) that any site of possible transformation has already had its well poisoned. These shifts in the tone of progress narratives mean that they

⁵⁵ Jennifer C. Nash, “Re-thinking Intersectionality,” *Feminist Review* 89, no. 1 (2008): 1–15; Jennifer C. Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019); Robyn Wiegman, *Object Lessons* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

⁵⁶ Jasbir Puar’s work is careful to present her concept of “homonationalism” as a subset of heteronormativity, while its take-up often sees it as too straightforwardly emergent from LGBT communities and their participation in nationalism and capitalism. In Puar’s account the homonationalist desire for recognition is a doomed assimilationist one whose mapping reveals the contradictions at the heart of contemporary power relations. Jasbir Puar, “Mapping US Homonormativities,” *Gender, Place and Culture* 13, no. 1 (2006): 67-88; Jasbir Puar, “Rethinking Homonationalism,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45, no. 2 (2013): 336-339.

are morphing into loss narratives, in fact, where what is lost are the radical underpinnings this time of queer feminist critique, the playful, hopeful openness of poststructuralist or posthuman intervention. Both loss narratives *and* progress narratives continue to pinpoint identity politics as the problem that needs to be escaped from, in other words. In materialist or radical accounts, it is the turn to queer abstraction that is an inevitable outcome of substituting gender (identity) for sex (essence or oppression). In the affective or posthuman turn of progress narratives, it is increasingly queer theory and liberal feminism that have a reductionist understanding of power or a fetish for the individual that can be easily co-opted.

Jenny Gunnarson Payne and Sophie Tornhill, brilliant critics of anti-gender discourse, quite reasonably suggest a return to Marxist or socialist feminist accounts that can reclaim anti-woman violence without falling into those doomed individualist identity politics as one way out of the current impasse between progress and loss or return narrative in feminism.⁵⁷ For Payne and Tornhill, a feminist return must jump back over queer feminist politics to rescue a feminism less amenable to a right-wing anti-gender take up. It is a seductive argument, but its resonance across a range of progress and loss narratives might alert us to one of its central dangers—it tells the history of these transitions as though identity *did* in fact displace real politics, as though a unified feminism had been present only to be fragmented, and as though queer feminism was indeed primarily concerned with textual unsettling rather than anti-heteronormative justice. And yet, these are precisely the teleological fictions that pit culture against materiality as a zero-sum game. It is that opposition that is so pleasing to anti-gender arguments (including feminist ones), since it already does the work of associating gender with culture (and thus “unreality”) and sex with materiality (and thus the baseline of common sense) that is so crucial to the Right. This fantasy of being able to go back – to a

⁵⁷ Jenny Gunnarsson Payne and Sofie Tornhill, “The Enemy’s Enemy: Feminism at the Crossroads of Neoliberal Co-optation and Anti-gender Conservatism,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* (2021): 1–21, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13569317.2021.1921937>.

time of pre-identity investments, to a more real politics – plays directly into anti-gender proponents’ hands. It continues to position queerness in ways that make it both the scapegoat and pivot for the histories that understand transformative politics as displaced by identity (reducing trans claims to dignity as individualist ones in the process). As Éric Fassin has also argued,⁵⁹ it fails to get at the fact that the ongoing pitting of culture against politics is precisely why trashing queers, trans people, and feminists of all kinds works for the Right as part of garnering support for populism in the first place.

Conclusion: Sex/Gender and Recitation

The question surely remains: if the return narrative brings with it a high a risk of reinstating the opposition between culture and economics, if it trades in the terms that make anti-gender rhetoric so appealing in the first place, what might we do instead? This is a methodological question as well as an epistemological and political one, and rightly so, given the questions of location and ethics in feminist knowledge production that it foregrounds. I know what I do not want to do: I do not want to respond to the invitation often leveled at trans activists and allies to sit and discuss trans rights with anti-trans feminists. Ahmed is rightly scathing of this invitation as part of what she calls the “rebuttal system” at work that treats some people as needing to provide evidence of their existence and not others: she says, “there cannot be a dialogue when some at the table are in effect (or intent on) arguing for the elimination of others at the table.”⁶¹ But this refusal is not a fatalist position: solidarity has to take place in a context where there is an ability to speak across difference, and that requires the people at the table being minimally understood as real subjects.

Others propose what we might describe as a version of feminist standpoint

⁵⁹ Fassin, “Anti-Gender Campaigns.” For Fassin, this opposition enables minorities to be fused to “identities” and thus bracketed out as part of the problem for both Right and Left.

⁶¹ Ahmed, “An Affinity of Hammers,” 31.

methodology. Elliot and Lyons suggest that we focus on the experiences of the subject represented as “un-woman” as a way of generating knowledge that undoes anti-trans or anti-gender claims about “sex” as an enduring binary.⁶² This tactic has been expanded by queer and trans feminists who plot histories of feminist-lesbian-trans affinity across time, exploring how the question of “sex” has always been barricaded in by its exclusions and opened up by outsiders of many kinds. Thus Cameron Awkward-Rich and Jules Gill-Peterson explore overlaps in lesbian and trans-masculine and feminine epistemologies, respectively, and Tudor highlights the importance of Black feminist perspectives that have challenged the borders of “woman” in conjunction with trans and lesbian perspectives.⁶⁵ This is wonderful work and it intervenes in the presumed temporalities of queer, feminist, and trans recognition to try and shift contemporary standoffs and oppositions between subject-positions that are often more uncannily alike than different. The aim is to intervene in the affects of rage and humiliation that arise from those standoffs – and in the case of Awkward-Rich acknowledging these bad feelings as part of a valid history of trans and lesbian connection – while starting from and valuing trans and gender non-conforming realities.⁶⁶

In a similar spirit, I want to take up Karine Espinera and Marie-Hélène/Sam Bourcier’s encouragement to stay with the question of sex and gender and grapple with the co-constitution of these terms and their relationship to one another as a key site of exploration and intervention within trans-inclusive feminism.⁶⁷ If the separation of sex and gender has

⁶² Elliot and Lyons, “Transphobia as Symptom,” 378.

⁶⁵ Cameron Awkward-Rich, “Trans, Feminism: Or, Reading like a Depressed Transsexual,” *Signs* 42, no. 4 (2017): 819–41; Jules Gill-Peterson, “Toward a Historiography of the Lesbian Transsexual, or the TERF’s Nightmare,” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 26, no. 2 (2022): 133–47; Alyosxa Tudor, “Im/possibilities of Refusing and Choosing Gender,” *Feminist Theory* 20, no. 4 (2019): 361–80.

⁶⁶ Cameron Awkward-Rich, *The Terrible We: Thinking With Trans Maladjustment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022).

⁶⁷ Espinera and Bourcier are reflecting on the importance of sex/gender as central to the emergence of transfeminism in Spain and France in the 2000s, but I believe this commitment can be extended. Karine Espinera and Marie-Hélène/Sam Bourcier, “Transfeminism: Something Else, Somewhere Else,” *TSQ* 3, no. 1–2

been hugely significant politically and intellectually in both progress and loss narratives and as a way of underpinning right-wing anti-gender arguments, perhaps it would be worth refusing that teleology and distinction as part of telling different feminist stories of oppression and liberation. If sex and gender can only be understood as existing in antagonistic relationship to one another in the dominant narratives I've been mapping, might we want a method of thinking them together again to shift both their affects and temporalities?

In a recent piece on anti-gender affect for *Radical Philosophy*, I explore Gayle Rubin's "sex/gender system" as one intervention that we might want to center in engaging anti-gender rhetoric, and I extend that analysis here.⁶⁸ As a reminder, Rubin's proposition is that sex/gender is a *system* that naturalizes patriarchal exchange of women within kinship structures.⁶⁹ "Sex" and "gender" do not follow from one another and are not distinct objects for Rubin; their naturalization elides the power relations that obscure the workings of inequality. These are classed inequalities as well as heteronormative and sexist inequalities (since they concern inheritance within patriarchal kinship structures), and Hazel Carby extends thinking of sex/gender as a system (again: *system*, not description) to explain why Black women do not count as women in racist modes of exchange.⁷⁰ For Carby, Rubin's

(2016): 84–94. The overlaps between trans and feminist histories are denoted in different ways but different authors. Thus Stryker and x use "trans/feminism", which highlights the inseparability of these traditions, despite their different inflection, while Espinera and Bourcier use "transfeminism" to insist on the impossibility of telling the story of feminism without trans perspectives. I tend to use "trans-inclusive feminism" for versions of feminism that are explicit about their trans affinities, as part of my acknowledgment that not all feminism have that affinity, even though many do.

⁶⁸ Hemmings, "Unnatural Feelings," 37–39.

⁶⁹ Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 157–210.

⁷⁰ Carby's work resonates with that of Hortense Spillers, whose trenchant critique of the whiteness of "woman" has been enormously influential in Black feminist challenges to feminist understandings of women's oppression as only, or primarily, rooted in "sex" oppression. Hazel V. Carby, "White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood," in *Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies*, eds, *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain* (London: Hutchinson (1982), 212–35; Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 64–81.

framework can usefully be extended to think of sex/gender as a tool of colonial patriarchal exchange in which all women are objects of exchange, but where some women's exchangeability as part of white, class-hierarchical kinship within coloniality is obscured. Sex difference is an outcome of the collapse of sex and gender, for Rubin, and it is not only those assigned female at birth or who conform to its requirements who are badly served by that system. Black women, unmarried women, sex workers, gender non-conformists, and trans or queer subjects all hover on the edges of that naturalization: excluded but also in a position of considerable risk (of violence and obliteration) as they make visible that process *as a process*.

If we think alongside Rubin about the importance of sex/gender as a system that naturalizes oppression, we might be able to amplify the materialist and radical feminist work on sex as a category of oppression from a perspective that folds in queer feminist work, rather than seeing these as always antagonistic. We have already seen that return narratives prioritizing sex are not necessarily anti-trans, but if we read with Rubin, we might also be able to complicate that history as always anti-sex work or anti-pornography as well. In addition, we might have an opportunity to think again about sexual violence from a perspective that doesn't need to reject its trenchant critique of patriarchal authority, even if we do not want to retain its framing as a singular site of oppression.⁷¹ After all, for Rubin, that sex/gender system enables oppression of *exchangeable* women as women and punishes all those who are disposable within that system as "not quite" or "absolutely not" women. In a sense, this reading effort on my part sees Rubin's 1970s work as just as significant as her

⁷¹ This point has been elaborated through difficult and important conversations with Alyosxa, with other members of the AHRC "Transnational 'Anti-Gender' Movements and Resistance" Network Advisory Board, as well as with members of the department of gender studies at LSE as we struggle to resist anti-gender attacks while refusing to cede the terrain of feminist accounts of sexual violence. When you are accused of misogyny and violence against women as part of anti-trans aggression, it is – we have found – easy to forget what is shared.

1980s work in providing a ground for queer theory and a critique of the “sex wars,”⁷² Might this reclaiming be a way to give radical and materialist feminists such as MacKinnon and Delphy a history that routes through Rubin’s early work, before heading to Black feminist Spillers, lesbian feminist Wittig, and transfeminist Gill-Peterson? In a sense, my proposition is a kind of rescue mission that takes up what, in *Why Stories Matter*, I call “recitation”—a method whereby one messes with the citation traces within dominant progress, loss, and return narratives that instantiate sex and gender (and radical, materialist and poststructuralist feminisms) as distinct.⁷³ Recitation of this kind refuses to see Black, lesbian, and trans feminisms as *necessarily* a departure from radical and materialist feminisms, intervening to challenge the standoff at the level of the canon. Recitation of this kind also holds out the possibility of an afterlife romance between Wittig and Delphy, one that allows them to de-escalate their argument about the essential difference between “sex” and “not sex” through agreeing that they differ primarily in the methods they propose for denaturalizing a sex/gender system. Might the politics of that recitation also hold out the possibility of a grammar that allows for the fact that those assigned female at birth do indeed experience horrific violence in homes, at work, and on the streets and that this system targets and victimizes others as well? Does this recitation help to shine a light on a sex/gender system that collapses the two terms as the colonial, classed, and misogynist means through which the oppression of all sex- and gender-deviants works and through which all women (willingly or not) are reduced to a specific set of reproductive and affective functions?

It might not seem like it, but this is an optimistic proposition: that intervening in

⁷² In that later work, Rubin suggests separating “sexuality” from “gender” (to think generatively about sexuality studies as concerned—temporarily—with a different object), but has less to say about “sex” or kinship systems as such. Gayle S. Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aine Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 3–44.

⁷³ Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*, “Citation Tactics,” 161–90.

citation tracks might help fend off resilient feminist ghosts and strengthen the theoretical tools for resisting anti-gender attacks in all their guises. It is probably more optimistic than I really am, given the spread of the Far Right and the role of anti-gender rhetoric in its populist appeal. But if the separation of sex from gender is one of the tactics of the Right, then perhaps proposing putting them back together and insisting on their relation as one of power and authority (with sex no truer than gender, but each with its foreclosed other) might at least allow us to point the finger where it belongs. I am increasingly convinced that this teleological and conceptual separation of sex and gender (as though they were real things rather than both patriarchal tricks of the light) is one of the worst of many deadly right wing jokes. Let us reclaim the political terms that challenge these teleologies and refuse to participate in maintaining the sex/gender system that exchanges those it constitutes as women and makes deviants of everyone else.