On Collective Endurance: Thinking Gender Studies in Illiberal Times—A Conversation

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Thinking Gender Studies in Illiberal Times—A Conversation

CLARE HEMMINGS AND ROBYN WIEGMAN

Abstract: In honor of *Frontier*'s fiftieth anniversary, Clare Hemmings and Robyn Wiegman offer a wide-ranging conversation about the institutional and intellectual history of the field now called gender studies. Working in different national contexts—Hemmings in the United Kingdom and Wiegman in the United States—both scholars have devoted their research to deciphering how stories of the field have been told, how these narratives have become part of the field's reproduction of its own common sense, and how (or when) these narratives have been resisted, rejected, or revised. At the same time, they both have been embedded in the practices they identify and study as insiders, as each served multiple terms as chair/head of their respective departments and programs. Using a discussion format, the scholars reflect on these histories and their successes while also attending to the geopolitical rise of state authoritarianism and nationalism that threatens feminist world making in general and higher education in particular.

Keywords: gender studies, "anti-gender" movements, queer and feminist theory, right-wing populism, university culture, educational reform, field formation

THE TIME OF EMERGENCY: ON THE GEOPOLITICAL PRESENT

Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies *was founded in 1974 and approaches its anniversary, much like other formative feminist journals, at a time of intense global crisis, from the wars in Africa, Europe, and the Middle East to the rise of new right-wing populism around the world. Let's begin by situating our reflections on the field and the challenges to its future in the context of a political present in which "gender" has become central to authoritarian agendas and ongoing global antagonisms.*[1]

CLARE HEMMINGS: First, many congratulations to all the editors past and present at *Frontiers*! Who knew so many feminist journals founded in the 1970s would survive as long as they have: this really is cause for celebration. And we need to celebrate our successes given that gender studies as a field is now so consistently under attack: in both the United Kingdom and the United States, where we write from, and also transnationally. I work at the largest research and teaching center for gender studies in Europe, and from a perspective of current job safety. But even within this context, attacks on the field from both within and outside of the university have been increasing in recent years. That's partly due to the rise of "anti-gender" movements that target sexual and gendered minorities and rights, and police national borders in the name of family values; and also to the increase of transphobia outside and within the university, outside and within feminism.[2] Gender studies in the UK at the moment is subject to very high levels of aggression (as indeed are other trans-inclusive academic or institutional contexts), and individuals are frequently singled out and accused of being misogynist or homophobic in their claims that trans or gender nonconforming lives are worthy of respect.

ROBYN WIEGMAN: It's interesting to consider when gender studies and its various institutions of support—journals, of course, as well as national or international academic organizations—haven't seemed imperiled, whether from within or without, as you say. But am I wrong to sense that the current conjuncture feels far more threatening, in part because right-wing authoritarian movements are globally linked, financially and ideologically? Failed British politician Liz Truss, among others, regularly attends events organized by the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in the United States, and we know that a certain strand of Christo-fascism has strong alliances around the world, from Marie Le Pen's party in France, to Victor Orbán's government in Hungary, to Vladimir Putin's regime in Russia.[3] In my national context, as most readers of *Frontiers* will know, there's a very concerted effort to de-institutionalize public education as a federal pedagogy for democratic citizenship. All sorts of new laws have been passed in the last few years outlawing what can be taught, what books can be read, what pronouns can be recognized, what bathrooms used, along with the near complete dismantling of diversity efforts. Familiar concepts have become targets: critical race theory, intersectionality, gender theory, queer theory, even the word "inclusion" is now used in right-wing circles as a slur. I remember when the critiques of diversity came from the Left, against the liberalism of multiculturalism![4] Gender studies is just one target in a broad political agenda against both liberal institutions and the counter discourses (like critical race theory) used to challenge them from the left. We're in a period of

radical deconstruction, revolutionary in its intent. I use these words—radical, deconstruction, revolutionary—on purpose because these have been words we thought *we* owned.

CH: Yes, you're so right, we're seeing all sorts of what we used to call progressive projects coming under severe threat at the moment. Gender studies as a site in itself isn't the main focus for aggression. Within higher education that privilege is currently reserved for academic groups refusing to align with Israeli state violence, or who teach critical race theory; or for the people who are the most vulnerable: migrants, Black people and people of color, trans and gender non-conforming people, all of the above.[5] In that regard, it's not accidental that gender studies at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), which has long been committed to transnational and intersectional feminist studies as well as queer and trans studies, is especially visible right now. One of the particularly nasty techniques that this "anti-progressive" agenda uses is to flip the question of marginality or vulnerability on its head. So "anti-gender" advocates claim that it is women, children, and families who are under threat; anti-migrant advocates claim it is hard-working citizens whose lives are precarious; heterosexuals and transphobic lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals claim that that it their integrity that is being challenged.[6] In each case it is the complainant who mobilises their fear of redundancy, laying affective claim to the margins—and therefore a righteous self-defense—in ways that are difficult to counter.[7]

RW: All of which serves as an alibi for increased aggression, while also blaming the victims for the aggression expressed against them. How dare "they" steal my job, ruin my country, challenge my belief in biological sex. The psychic structure of projection legitimates ongoing violence. The operation of this structure is not new of course, but it does seem to have new political powers in the context of media forms that enable viral accusation and panic (and far too many death threats). What interests me most is how the projection of threat onto the other—to use an older but familiar language—stokes the very insecurity it seeks to annul. That insecurity, of an exterior world that one cannot control, may be more endemic to human life than many folks would like to think, which is why it is endlessly available as a weapon for political projects of ethnonationalist and heteronormative purification—and I might add for liberal and left leaning identity politics too (even if we are hesitant to admit it). When I say endemic, I am not just thinking of psychoanalysis writ large but more specifically of the last book of Lauren Berlant's, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, which explores in very complex ways the threat that "other people" pose to anyone's sense of individual security.[8] The pandemic brought this home, even as people made

their own COVID "pods" and sought ways of interrupting contagion without losing contact with others. Inconvenience of course sounds rather benign when compared to the violence of othering that generates ethnonationalism, endless war, and genocide, but Berlant's book insists, as cultural studies thinkers regularly do, on the everyday architecture of power and its emotional intimacies.

CH: As Judith Butler makes so clear in their new book *Who's Afraid of Gender?* contemporary political life is driven by fantasies about threat and safety.[9] That has particular force in the United Kingdom at the moment because the self-named *gender critical* lobby has gained legal as well as cultural traction in recent years. Several employment cases have been successfully brought against universities by gender critical feminists claiming unfair dismissal on the basis of their beliefs.[10] And this has closed down open debate about transphobia, for example, as the protection of belief is usually conservatively interpreted as "beyond critique" by institutions. In fact, people here are not as routinely anti-trans as the political landscape might suggest. There was broad *agreement* with opening up the category of self-definition in the 2018 consultation for review of the Gender Recognition Act (GRA), with the majority of respondents positively affirming a range of aspects of trans rights. But this was matched by anxiety about trans self-determination challenging single-sex protections (in prisons, sports or religion) made by the Equality Act (even though such protections were not at risk).[11] Anti-trans activists (feminist and otherwise) have mobilised so effectively—they are also exceptionally well funded, as you note—that the fantasy that trans rights and women's rights cancel one another out is now a widely held worry even though it is a pernicious fiction. The Supreme Court Judgment on 16th April 2025 ruled that "sex", "man" and "woman" should be given a "biological" rather than "legal" meaning in the 2010 Equality Act. The consequences of this decision are retrogressive, unsustainable, and contradictory: the interpretation of "sex" as biological will be impossible to enforce in anything but the most egregious ways.

RW: It's absolutely the case that a lot of the aggression and straight-out propaganda of right-wing attacks in the United States revolve around the question of trans life. And this wide spread critique of "gender ideology"—we should call it a moral panic—really seems intent on legislating a genocidal desire that trans people not exist. It's not a project of control, then, so much as one of eradication. And the right-wing dream is to federalize what is happening at the red state level, to abolish "gender ideology," which means abolishing the very idea that identities are more expansive than the myth of dimorphic gender has allowed. It

was clear from the outset that the Supreme Court's decision that took down Roe v. Wade was also a set up to change the landscape of trans health care.[12] There has never been a time, it seems to me, when the reproductive rights of women and the health care rights of trans people were more politically entwinned, more in need of a shared critical discussion and political project. This will entail not only collective opposition to the right wing's agenda to eliminate medical professionals (both gynecologists and gender-affirmative practitioners) but a broader conversation about the coercive role of forced reproduction and birth for our understanding of cisgender formations. And given the longstanding antagonisms between the medical establishment and trans people, the current conjuncture will require deft political negotiations so as not to contribute to the wholesale assault against medical authority being fueled and funded by the religious right as it seeks to legislate all realms of personal embodiment through its theological beliefs.

CH: Most worrying is that these combined attacks—on perceived challenges to the family and nation—are increasingly state-led. The UK Government rationalized ignoring the broad evidence of pro-self determination from the GRA consultation by capitalizing on those bogus claims that trans women's rights threaten women's rights or (in the fantasy of the power of the trans predator), women *tout court*.[13] We know, because of their appalling record in this regard, that no one in the recent Conservative-led UK government was the least bit interested in safeguarding women's rights, but they were delighted to be able to underwrite their brutal policies by pretending to be. In Brazil, India, Turkey, and Hungary, challenges to what is called "gender ideology" are underpinned by state surveillance and threats of job losses or prison for those who do not tow the (party) line.[14] Theorists of these state-led crackdowns that scapegoat minorities and blame progressives or identity politics for the decimation of welfare provision, healthcare or public education, have located these attacks as part of a broader privatized anti-intellectualism, or—increasingly—as the sign of a new global fascism.[15]

RW: The global conjuncture that you are citing is very much the historical and geopolitical context that shapes Butler's book *Who's Afraid of Gender?* that you mentioned earlier.[16] Butler lays out how the fear of gender functions in both right-wing and feminist contexts, creating strange bedfellows who simultaneously detest the very idea of gender as a form of complex dis/identification irreducible to the man/woman plot lines of the hetero-nuclear family. Most interesting to me is how feminist anti-trans activists and religious "preservers"

of the mythic biological family both *desire gender*; they have no interest in eliminating it, only in controlling it by conflating its meaning with reproductive definitions of sex. This is a powerful configuration of desire and prohibition, and Butler of course has been a lightning rod internationally as the avatar of dimorphic gender's potential historical end.[17]

CH: The very speed and voracity of expected transnational agreement at new enemies whose evil cannot be questioned certainly seems to confirm the sense that we are facing the rise of global fascism, aided by increasingly securitized borders and heightened nationalisms where the transgressors are always already known. Think of the speed and voracity with which any critique of the Israeli state and its military has been cast as virulently anti-Semitic: this has been going on for some time, but particularly since October 2023. And these are certainly attacks on intellectual freedom. In Germany, even the mildest support for Palestinian rights is likely to result in suspension, and invitations and funding have been rescinded because of purported support for terrorists.[18] In India, critiquing the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) within higher education is consistently met with expulsion and death threats.[19] In Hungary, the argument that finally led to the closure of the beleaguered gender studies program was that "gender" threatened national security (the basis of which is family).[20] So these are terrifying times indeed.

RW: I've come to feel that we are living in the affective detritus of the end of the world—a certain world that is. Call it liberal democracy, secular humanism, whatever. I know this is dramatic. But to my mind, "cruel optimism" is in the rearview mirror, in the sense that the affective atmosphere of the present is pessimism all the way down: anti-Black violence, alt-right global surgence, wars that beget wars, climate change and its denial, the specter in the United States of the continued spread of Trumpism no matter election results, the rise of new McCarthyisms.[21] Years ago in the 1990s I thought we were in "the mean time," the interregnum between the political transformations and activisms of the 1960s and 1970s and their backlash: the reconstruction of the second reconstruction, so to speak. Now? Post-pandemic, the massive hysterization of populations around all forms of racist hate, the spectacle of genocide and its denial: lots of people I know—across identities and affinities—are feeling the present as an increasingly affective intensity. It might be about generation, about feeling that one is running out of time, out of one's life time, and things really suck. When I consider what people mean by the idea of collective "affective atmospheres" it is this experience of the present, which is kinetic and gut level,

that I think of. And this seems true no matter the little patches of relief, as in the sugar high that some people experienced in the summer of 2024 with Joe Biden's resignation as a presidential candidate. Trumpism may be called a cult, but the illiberal juggernaut of global right-wing populism has sunk its teeth in so many institutions (think the university) that its demise is not in any sense just one election cycle away. I'd say the same for Labour's seeming triumph in your elections in July 2024.

CH: I like your use of the term "Trumpism", no matter the election results. And indeed, the recent Labour election win in the UK is both something to be pleased about, and something to remain cautious about. There's a danger that the immediate relief might lead to taking one's eye off the ball, even though the demise of a Conservative government is an enormous relief. That pleasure was already tempered by the fact that the Labour seats gained along the southeastern coast of the UK were enabled by a split in the right-wing vote: people in constituencies like Folkestone and Hythe expressed discontent with the Tories by voting Reform Party (a Far Right-wing anti-migration party) rather than by endorsing Labour policies. We can already see that right-wing affect playing in the chilling violent attacks on migrants, Muslims, and mosques in the aftermath of the killing of three girls in Southport. The fake news and virulent racism that circulated following the attack falsely indicated the aggressor was a Muslim and a recent migrant. The evidence to the contrary has made no difference to the spread of Far Right demonstrations that are sweeping the UK as we finalise this conversation. And there is little sign that Labour will come out strong in favour of trans rights either; Labour women are as likely, if not more likely, to perpetuate the "women's right versus trans rights" rhetoric at present.

RW: We've gone from congratulations for the survival of *Frontiers* and other feminist journals to a descriptively dystopic rendering of the present, one in which gender studies as an academic field and to its critical idioms are under enormous threat, a threat that we see as far more extensive and consequential than those that have come before, in part because of the way gender studies is just one of a host of interconnected and imperiled targets. Where do—if you do—find political optimism? This isn't the world we wanted to co-create.

CH: Of course, none of these attacks happen without resistance. The right-wing violence that has swept across the country in recent days (in August 2024) has been met with widespread anti-fascist counter demonstrations that give hope.

Individuals, communities and organisations have been resisting "anti-gender" attacks for many decades, though not without consequences for burnout. Recently, my colleague Sumi Madhok and I established a network, "Transnational 'Anti-Gender' Movements and Resistance: Narratives and Interventions," that brought together people who have been doing this work in different parts of the world to generate a conversation about overlaps in "anti-gender" techniques to strengthen networks on the one hand, but also to provide support to one another in our efforts to push back in our own local and international spheres. It's been devastating to hear about the repeated rolling back of rights under this umbrella, but it's also been heartening to think with other people about the opportunities for transnational analysis and organizing too.[22]

RW: I'm not sure that counts as optimism, but I'll take it for now!

THINKING "GENDER," AGAIN

Given the global conditions we've been discussing—especially right-wing mobilizations of gender (and anti-gender) to forward authoritarian and nationalist projects—how do we assess gender studies' relation to "gender"? What attachments do we have to "gender"? What is the urgent theoretical work it can—or can't—perform in the present? How, in short, do we think "gender" now?

CH: Both of us, in different ways, have challenged the attachment to the term "gender" as a panacea for a variety of ills over the last several decades, even while we are committed to the project of gender studies. While we certainly shouldn't cede the ground to "anti-gender" pundits, we also shouldn't forget the complex, often vexed history of the term either. In the United Kingdom, "gender studies" was initially understood as an apolitical sleight of hand: a way of avoiding the accusations against "women's studies" or "feminist studies" as biased (as though "gender" were neutral!).[23] In Portugal, there was a brief window where establishing gender studies programs was state-endorsed as a way of showing commitment to gender equality (for European Union funding purposes); and in a similar way, in the 2000s in India, it was linked to "citizenship studies" to show access to a certain version of modernity.[24] But if you were studying "gender studies" in Sweden or Brazil in the 2010s, that would more likely signal a queer focus, retrospectively marking "women's studies" as too essentialist or heteronormative to be fit for purpose. So when you're teaching people from different parts of the world, you're teaching different histories of "gender studies," and you're intervening to try and have a transnational conversation about what that multiplicity might mean.

RW: In the past I have tended to think of "gender" as a framework for identification and hence as an object of desire, as something that people "want" as a form of sense making, which is of course a kind of sociopolitical fantasy that total self-determination is possible from amongst the rubble of deeply historical notions of what bodies mean and do. But the fantasy life of "gender" seemed quite different to me in terms of its operation in the field's political imaginary than was the case with "women," with all of its ontological implications. "Gender" allowed for expansion in ways that "women" had come to close down. But something is happening now to gender as an object of desire—everyone wants something from it, even those who want to abolish it, but its definition, its political purchase, its historical resonances have become the scene, as we've been discussing, of an enormous political fight. And it is striking to me that this fight is staged largely around the boundary where women meets non-dimorphic feminine genders. Masculinities, trans or otherwise, are far less resonant in debates except in the familiar accusation from the anti-gender ideology folks that transwomen are men, not women. But even this accusation, meant to shore up "women," reveals the category's instability in relation to a fixed or unified referent. To defend against something is to tacitly acknowledge its existence.

CH: "Gender" as a category in itself needs a more complex, transnational genealogy, too, one that allows for tracking its contested meanings in a specific location such as the United States, as Ara Wilson has done recently.[25] Or I'm thinking of Alyosxa Tudor's and Jana Cattien's recent analyses of the ways in which "antigenderism" in Germany carries the racism and anti-migrant sentiments that are linguistically and politically impossible to name.[26] And given that "anti-gender" advocates also make the claim that "gender" itself is a colonial or Western import—cynically coopting the trenchant and longstanding transnational feminist argument for careful attention and resistance to the histories of its violent imposition—these histories are really urgent right now.

RW: For the Far Right, of course, gender is ontological, prescriptively so—that's part of the fight we're in, about dimorphic renderings of biology as an ontology. But unlike many places in the world, "gender" in the United States never had much of a state project to be captured by. No commissions, no national investment in women or gender as a measure of the advancement of the society as a whole. We couldn't even get an Equal Rights Amendment passed! So unsurprisingly, until recently, the question of "gender" and its relationship to "women" has more or less been internal to the field which is why in my book *Object Lessons*, the first chapter on "the progress of gender" talks about

how the optimism for gender was a way to escape the sense that the category of women was essentialist, narrow, universalizing, implicitly white, implicitly heterosexual—in short contaminated, both a political and theoretical error. There wasn't much of a sense that the argument had any bearing on the state, only on the so-called state of the field. All of this has changed. As we've been discussing, we are living now in a moment—I suppose we should say an era—when gender is being taken up by various kinds of state actors, including judges, in a weaponized way, for the benefit of right-wing ideologies and fantasies of national "restoration."

CH: It's interesting, isn't it, to consider the different roles of the state in regulating higher education contexts transnationally, and the bearing those differences have on the ways "gender ideology" is being policed currently? Marco Aurelio Máximo Prado has done really important work on the ways in which state surveillance mechanisms that remain in post-dictatorship Brazil can be repurposed to allow routine reporting of "gender ideology" by students in schools and universities.[27] Leticia Sabsay makes a similar intervention in respect to neo-authoritarianism in Spain, where the right-wing state wields accusations of "gender ideology" through its anti-democratic post-dictatorship infrastructure.[28] And the state governance of higher education more broadly, in France, for example, means that anti-gender mobilisations take the form of a critique of "theory" (*la théorie du genre*) in ways that position it as a foreign interloper, on the one hand, and align it with the local and national demonization of "critical race theory" as dangerous to democracy on the other.[29] In the United Kingdom, the historically elite nature of higher education means that anti-gender attacks as part of anti-progressive state agendas form part of a broader dismantling of whole sectors of higher education—mostly, but not exclusively, the humanities.

RW: The ground has certainly been laid in the United States, as school boards and legislatures throughout the country go after public funding, too. At the University of Florida, the entire Diversity, Equality and Inclusion office has been disbanded, its employees fired. In Indiana the right-wing legislature has banned all state funds from going to the world renown Kinsey Institute at Indiana University because, in their terms, sexuality = pornography, LGBTQ = pornography.[30] They are using the roadmap developed in anti-abortion politics to chip away at education now, denying public dollars to things they don't like, and making the notion of "parents' rights" into the right to police not only teachers and librarians but students as well. The next stop is cameras in classrooms to

listen in to what teachers have to say. It is the extension of the security state into the sinews of everyday institutions, with discourses about gender and sexuality serving as the measure and meaning of education.[31] All this of course without any grappling with the complex meanings and different genealogies that have accrued to "gender" as a signifier.

CH: As a range of theorists have argued quite persuasively, "anti-gender" mobilisation is appealing to the Far Right as part of national and transnational securitization precisely because of its breadth and malleability. It's been described as an "empty signifier" that can carry all those fantasies about threats to family and nation, all those fantasies about trans, gender non-conforming or queer challenges to sexed certainties, or the ontology of sex as you describe it.[32]

RW: We were pretty sure we knew what "women" meant, which differentiated it from gender and allowed gender to operate as a kind of empty signifier. This, too, seems to be changing.

CH: Yes, there's something about the relentless predictability of how descriptions of gender as "ideology" work at individual, community, and state levels, as well as transnationally, that might make us revisit the idea of contentlessness that comes with the "empty signifier" idea. Gender is definitely a carrier for projection and a holder of the fantasy of what Butler calls nostalgia for a time of sovereignty that never was in their new book. And "anti-gender" arguments certainly garner popular support for a range of feelings of precarity that otherwise seem to have no place to go. But at the same time, *what* is assumed to being dismantled by "gender ideology" is remarkably consistent: nationalist certainty, heterosexual familial authority, familial reproduction, religious authority, sex as binary and unchanging. And of course, who is demonized and scapegoated follows suit: migrants, racialised minorities, teachers of anti-racist or LGBT education, abortion activists, queer and trans people, and so on.

RW: Gender is not so much empty, then, but available for a wide variety of attachments; in the past we might have thought of this as an under-determination, which allowed it to travel with flexibility. But in the political present, as you suggest, it is overdetermined, stuffed to the gills with affective power and increasingly contradictory analytically. Is it something one "has" or "is"? Is it an analytic category marking relationships of power and hence not so much about identity as about structure? Is it, or I should say *when* is it, deployed as a synonym for women? For queers? For non-binary? This makes the question we

started with—about how the nomination of "gender" has changed the field—an especially interesting one, as it carries not only a critical complexity but a risk and burden unimaginable a few decades ago.

CH: It's a living object lesson.

RW: (lol)

GENDER STUDIES FROM THE INSIDE

Given the global and local attacks we've been discussing, what might be some of the ways we would want to keep the field of gender studies in a critical and engaged state at this moment of the twenty-first century? What does that field look like from our perspectives now?

RW: I'm trained as an Americanist, as you know, so my work on the field has been about its history in the United States, where it started out primarily as an undergraduate program, and only later became degree granting at the graduate level. This history has created different kinds of institutional formations between universities but also between undergraduate and graduate curricula within specific programs and departments. For a brief moment, people thought that the field was "maturing" when it was able to have graduate training. But then around the turn of the century, during the heyday of the naming debates, there was a lot of contestation about a PhD and whether or not that was capitulation to the university, to the idea of disciplinarity, to the problem or the haunting specter of complicity or not—all the familiar worries about institutionalization.[33] Certainly the debate about the PhD has lost a lot of currency, and when it comes to the name of the field, people don't seem invested in it anymore, now that the compromise has been made: in the United States most programs now collate terms, as in the many departments and programs that go by gender and women's studies. At Duke, our compromise is rather unique, with Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies being the official name to replace the founding formation as the Program in Women's Studies.

CH: I think the attacks we've been navigating in the field, and will keep on having to navigate, generate a different set of priorities, right?

RW: Neither of us seems to feel much urgency anymore about the theory/ practice debate that was once very intense in the field. Remember writing essays

that implicitly or explicitly defended theory? Now of course nearly every gender studies program has a required course (often the only required course) called "Feminist Theory," even as it is sometimes difficult to decipher what kind of writing and research in the field will be taken as *not* theory. I'm also less inclined to get worked up by the essentialism/anti-essentialism debate these days, which might surprise people a little bit because that debate is rearing its ugly head again, though not so much in gender studies per se as in the political sphere where anti-trans legislation, as we've discussed, is being constructed on the essentialist notion of "woman" as a biological being. But you can be anti-trans and anti-essentialist at the same time, as some of the TERF discourse points to, so my disinterest in the old debate has to do with the complete collapse of the assurance we once had that anti-essentialism was *the* politically progressive position.

CH: No one ever claimed their own work was essentialist, of course; it was always a slur. And what's interesting to me too is the way in which that debate flattens the complexity of different approaches, in two distinct ways. The first is that it assumes that anti-essentialism will guarantee a set of pro-trans or pro-queer positions, as you say. That's certainly not true of materialist feminist legacies, where someone like Christine Delphy, for example, can now take an explicitly anti-trans position.[34] Delphy: whose work on "woman" as constructed through gendered labor was formative for developing a constructivist position and who has resisted culturalist arguments about veiling in France so persuasively.[35] Secondly, as you note, some radical feminists accused of being essentialists—Andrea Dworkin or Catharine MacKinnon, for example—straightforwardly include trans women in their understanding of womanhood.[36] Perhaps in the end the critique was better made that these figures were too single-issue-focused in their political understanding of women's oppression, which is a bit different from their being essentialist. I'm much more interested in how we might think of "sex" as having a complex feminist history, one engaged with by radical, materialist, Black, transnational, and queer feminists in both distinctive and overlapping ways, always attuned to questions of power, legacy, and transformation.

RW: The issue of sex—as sexual difference—is definitely returning, from within trans studies conversations, as Andrea Long Chu's review of Butler's *Who's Afraid of Gender?* suggests.[37] It is going to be fascinating to see how this conversation develops. Along with trans studies, I'd also name Black feminist thought as a chief characteristic of the field's contemporary identity, given its near hegemonic status. By this, I don't mean that whiteness is not a problem in the field

or that other women of color feminisms are not important discourses or that problems of racism have been in any way solved. But Black feminist thought has the most stature in figuring both the present and the future of the field—and its ability to be figured in the field's present tense is a decided change from earlier moments when, as we have both noted, Black feminism was emplotted as the always deferred future, the never achieved beacon of the field's political fulfillment. Today, in the United States at any rate, you cannot be fully credentialed in gender studies at the level of doctoral study without encountering the impact and significance of Black feminist thought. I don't just mean reading a little bell hooks and the one famous article by Hortense Spillers but a far deeper engagement. And yes, that can mean a kind of performative anti-racism which raises its own problems, but my point is that Black feminist thought is not marginal in gender studies as a field. This is part of the reason that the field is under attack and that it can be merged so effortlessly from the right with critical race theory, itself a referent for intersectionality, another "forbidden" idea.

CH: Up to a point, that's certainly true in the United Kingdom too, but I think there's probably as much emphasis on decolonial thinking as Black feminist thought, which has to do with our different histories of settler/colonialism no doubt.

RW: At the same time, I don't think that there is yet a robust understanding of the different critical traditions that comprise Black feminist thought, whether we're talking about second wave Black feminist thought and its engagement with Marxist and socialist theories, as in Angela Davis's work, or psychoanalytic traditions, or transatlantic configurations. The psychoanalytic is hugely important in understanding Spillers' "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," where she was working through Freud, French feminism, and Lacan.[38] And those genealogies are different from socialist feminist ones and can be, at times, analytically antagonistic, even if we read them collectively as contributing to a broad political project in the name of Black women or Black feminism. Why be concerned about this? Because the work that signifies Black feminist thought tends to travel somewhat monolithically, positioned too often as a critique of white feminist theory or white queer theory. I'm interested in what there is to learn by decentering the critique of whiteness.

Let me emphasize *critique* here. For years, the field has talked about decentering whiteness, which is important, but I am thinking about the implications of decentering the critique of whiteness as the foundational value of Black feminist thought in order to open up space to investigate the difference

between, say, the collective entity, women of color, and Black feminism, or what was once called third world feminism and the nominations in use today. When and where do these terms overlap or diverge? What's at stake in their usages within the theoretical and political practices that comprise them? How do they speak to different historical and geopolitical situations? So for me the question to be explored is not how are they different from white feminism or colonial feminist projects but how are they situated vis-à-vis one another, in their diversity across the historical and geopolitical landscape of multiple histories of race and racialization. Certainly Indigenous feminisms—which are not monolithic globally—offer a different discourse and analytic about the concept and history of "nation."[39] And much work in Asian American feminist studies enables attention to racializing projects that are not congruent with a tacitly US formulation that constantly thinks of race as Black and white.[40] You could call this comparative racialization but even in that conceptual framework there is often an underlying notion that what is being compared are stable entities, histories, and processes.

CH: These are concerns you've been working on your whole career. And you're right that there's a way in which that critique of whiteness—rather than robust and deep engagement with Black, of color, and transnational or Global South theories and methods—tends to dominate. There's something very, well, odd, about what feels like a routine certainty about the ills of "white feminism," but precisely who is meant, or what that white feminism really looks like (inattentive to race, certainly, and part of the neoliberal problem, surely), is a bit less clear. One has to be careful, right? Not to hand the populist "anti-gender" Right *and Left* the tools to obliterate gender studies by only focusing on the problems of femonationalism, neoliberal white feminisms, and so on. Not because that work isn't important, but because feminist thinking is so much more than that.[41] And indeed, as you indicate here, because the search for "the solution" that can resolve problems of power and inequality for us, finally, is itself a form of anti-intellectualism that feeds the blunt triumphalism of right-wing ascendency.

RW: I'm also interested in giving more attention to the divergences between post-colonial and decolonial work, on the one hand, and work on the afterlives of slavery on the other. I recently taught a graduate course on political affect at the end of the world and one of the things that became apparent, in reading through Foucauldian theories of power, was first the critical importance of the critique of biopolitics via attention to the necropolitical, and second the subsequent Afro-pessimist critique of the necropolitical.[42] What becomes very clear

in these conversations is the difference and contestation between the colonial, post-colonial, and decolonial trajectories of analysis and the place of the history of slavery and the formations of race and racialization in each. I'm more interested in understanding the history and stakes of these antagonisms than in any rush to settling them under the rubric, say, of anti-racist scholarship. Likewise, in pursuing the decentering of the critique of whiteness, I want the antagonisms within anti-racist work to become more salient to the field and more globally attuned, which would yield greater interest in the different genealogies of Black feminist thought, giving us a richer understanding of the specificity of the conversations in their national and historical contexts. And for that, I think we're going to need to displace the fantasy—yes I would call it that—that intersectionality solves the problems of past inequalities and theoretical blind spots because one of the things that intersectionality often does, which I find detrimental, is to encourage a mode of thinking that takes a method, rendered as a formula, as itself adequate to the problem of understanding difference, both temporally and geopolitically as well as spatially and psychically. I'm not dismissing, to be clear, how intersectionality has changed the field and its political imaginary but it doesn't always deliver the nuance it promises.[43]

CH: One of the things I've really learned from colleagues in my own context over the years is the central importance of transnational thinking if we are to sustain a vibrant, resilient gender studies. I think that's less popular than Black or decolonial approaches, but it's really key to being able to develop translatable concepts and methods for the field. Of course, by this we can't mean "area studies," as Gayatri Spivak warned us so long ago.[44] We have to insist on thinking that can be translatable across contexts and that decentres familiar, Western epistemologies in ways that open up generative futures and pasts for the field. In a similar vein, there's an increased visibility I think to South–South conversations in feminist and queer epistemology—theorists like Sumi Madhok and Rahul Rao are key here—that look to Global South archives for the ways in which they challenge dominant Western epistemologies and shift the terms of the conversation, but also because of their refusal to endorse fantasies of a precolonial essence or simplicity.[45] This detailed work is inspirational to me in terms of how it takes on both coloniality and postcolonial re-entrenchments of the nation state (that often use "anti-gender" arguments). We're in a particular bind, aren't we? On the one hand, the question of "gender" as that which is and has been imposed on a range of contexts is really important for challenging colonial legacies. And one can extend this to interrogate the descriptive and analytic use of "gender" in the first place as entirely unequal to the task of exposing and/or ameliorating embodied harms. Black and transnational feminist

theorists, including those from the Global South, have long pointed to those inadequacies.[46] But on the other hand, "gender" doesn't just disappear once it has been critiqued; it might well be taken up, as we have seen, in anti-feminist, post- and anti-colonial discourse as "the sign" of Western corruption (rather than corruption being its own despicable evidence). Or, it might continue to circulate simultaneously as providing access to "the modern" in wartime situations such as the one unfolding as we write: where "gender equality" and "sexual equality" are understood to belong to Israel, and their absence is wielded as a sign of the unique "barbarism" of a Palestinian population.[47] Indeed, one of the reasons why gender studies remains so significant and so worth protecting is because it holds the historical memory of how gendered and sexual backwardness is wielded as a consistent tool to characterize racialised and ethnic or religious minority populations as irredeemable and hence worthy of obliteration. And this links us back to the importance of resisting anti-trans sentiments too, which similarly mobilise the threat of sexual violence against women as a justification for anti-trans terror. The populist call to protect women (born women) provides a common affective ground—we might say solidarity even—among disparate right-wing forces.

RW: To do the work you are talking about requires enormous language training, which is of course the province of the humanities. Is it an accident that within the university the humanities is the domain most often targeted for downsizing if not elimination? Not everyone has the skills to do transnational work and the solution to this problem is not one that gender studies as a field can correct on its own. This is where we need to be more engaged with the university, not just as distractors and critics, but also as participants in what's left of its educational project (which for me is different from "credentialing" and "servicing" students). While over the years I've heard feminist scholars talk repeatedly about interdisciplinarity—the field's identity is built on it—I've rarely heard arguments about the alliances we need to build in order to do the kind of research that meets the field's political demand. And yet I think we all know that the marginalization and diminishment of the humanities go hand in hand with right-wing assaults on gender studies.

FIELD WORK, REDUX

Both of us have written books that tried to account for the academic formation of feminist knowledges: "Why Stories Matter" identified three major narrative tropes in the historicization of Western feminist theory: progress, loss, and return. Its interest was in what was occluded by each of these narratives and how

they falsely produced a stereotype of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. "Object Lessons" considered the political desire invested in the objects of study arrayed in identity knowledges, with attention to "gender," "women," "queer," "whiteness," "American," and "intersectionality," by focusing a psychoanalytically inflected consideration of the "stakes" of the field that focused more on desire than method. How, if at all, do these approaches hold up today?[48]

CH: I never thought that the *only* way of characterizing the field was in terms of progress, loss and return narratives, but the framework certainly does look as though it still holds, at least at the general level. If anything, these narratives continue to circulate with a heightened intensity. In the earlier work I'd argued that a progress narrative is always convinced of the exclusionary ills of what is being left behind: often identifying visible or hidden racism or homophobia in earlier feminist thinking. There was a rather smug, satisfied tone to a feminist progress narrative that relished the myopia of the approaches it found repeatedly lacking, celebrating the proliferation of queer, intersectional thinking as the cutting edge. One effect of that tone is to separate feminist from queer theory in ways that you've also been concerned with.[49] Progress narratives now continue to focus on those exclusionary ills, and have amped the claims up even, positioning the strands of feminism that need leaving behind as almost wholly co-opted, entirely neoliberal, central to the working of anti-democratic, carceral authoritarianism. Progress narratives position "trans-exclusionary radical feminists" (TERFs) as beyond the pale, and point still to the limits of single-issue feminisms that seem to have little in common with intersectional or decolonial approaches that animate the field. One problematic effect of this, in my view, is that radical feminism is once again collapsed into its least complex versions, and carries a disproportionate burden of social and cultural transphobia. I tend not to use the term TERF for that reason.[50]

RW: That is a very good point. Why give TERFs the entire terrain of radical feminism's past?

CH: And let's be honest, gender studies as a field isn't teeming with trans-exclusionary feminists (though there are one or two), so it felt for a while—perhaps naively—as though a progress narrative might have won the day. But, of course, the political, policy, or activist fields are deeply riven, occupied by advocates of both progress and loss narratives, and those single-issue claims for women's rights are woven into the dominant conservative fabric. This might be why progress narratives have a less celebratory tone these days, as well: because despite many decades of feminist critiques of what might now be called

"white feminism," the harms done in the name of gender equality continue unhindered. In the United Kingdom, at least, the most visible form of feminism is one that centres a (white) woman (assigned female at birth) whose oppression is sexual oppression.[51]

RW: I tend to feel I've lost the arguments I was trying to make in *Object Lessons* which is my excuse for continuing to repeat them! But seriously, the progress narrative seems very alive and well: gender surpasses the failures of women, trans triumphs over the cis binary, Black feminism rescues the future by giving the field a past it doesn't have to be ashamed of or angry about. These are the field's objects of optimism and like other objects before them, they carry enormous political investments. Nevertheless, we live in deeply melancholic times, surrounded by losses of all kinds, some we can learn to mourn, others we don't. Do you also see loss narratives operating in the present?

CH: The loss narrative is if anything more voracious and un-reflexive in its self-representation as wounded and vulnerable than ever! In my earlier work, I identified the feminist loss narrative as a lament, a cry against perceived marginalization of radical or materialist feminisms (in the face of the progress narrative); and a simultaneous *repetition* of that sense of redundancy that was so present and visible as to beg the question of its legitimacy. That's still true in loss narratives: they centre a perplexed and hurt woman who feels under threat for asking "common sense" questions about the excesses of queer, trans, and intersectional claims about power. Loss narratives used to belittle "the cultural turn," though, and while there were some narrators who vilified trans people for their betrayals, this wasn't as heightened or central. The loss narrative now is animated by claims that trans and gender non-conforming people seek to *replace* "ordinary women", as well as the more familiar claims that "sex" is unchangeable. The loss narrative, then, continues to present itself as under erasure and its analysis as unpopular but bravely necessary; yet as with earlier loss narrative, it is in fact pervasive.

At the center of the loss narrative is the innocent female target of sexual violence, whose reasonable expectations of safe spaces are being trampled upon and whose right to their beliefs are disrespected at every turn. She is often in a bathroom or prison—two of the exceptional spaces of the 2010 UK Equality Act—about to be set upon by a trans person; she is the concerned mother whose anxiety about her gender non-conforming child is dismissed. The fact that when women are subject to sexual violence it is highly unlikely to be by a

trans person has no bearing on this narrative and its capacity to move people.[52] It is—as has ever been the case—men known to women who are the most likely perpetrators of violence against them, and prison officers, not other inmates, most likely to violate people's rights in carceral contexts. Indeed, the fact that it is trans and gender non-conforming people who are the most likely to be targeted in *both* bathrooms and prisons, and the fact that mothers' "concern" is legitimating the decimation of *any* trans health care services for young people in the United Kingdom as I write, is apparently neither here nor there.[53] Indeed, one of the reasons I am still interested in narrative and feminist theory is precisely because of the violent power of such lies, the ways in which the "sick joke" of trans and gender non-conforming people being cast as agents of violence in spaces in which they rightly fear for their lives makes no sense otherwise. You can hear my frustration and desperation, I think.

RW: Yes, absolutely.

CH: I wanted to ask you the same question, Robyn, which is whether you think the work in *Object Lessons* (and earlier work as well) is still relevant or not?

RW: I'm pretty convinced that the diagnosis I offered about the political imaginary of the field remains true—about the way the desire for justice is woven into our relations to objects of study, which allows us to invest with optimism in certain objects and despair over others when they disappoint us. In the last chapter of *Object Lessons* on the "desire for gender" I predicted that trans studies, once it moved past its oedipal struggle with queer studies (which of course had had its own oedipal struggle with feminist studies) would find itself not so much torn by its object but in need of differentiating between when its object fulfilled the political promise of the field and when it didn't. Hence we have the now familiar concept of transnormativity and a concern about the elisions—of race, nation, ability, globality, translatability—in the field, which is part of the process by which optimism in the object is reproduced and sustained.[54] I called this internal critique. It—internal critique—operates to generate left political authority for the field by differentiating bad and good objects, bad and good critical relations.

Our conversation has me thinking about how gender studies writ large might now be even more attached to narrating itself around good and bad objects than it was when I was writing *Object Lessons*: certain objects are good; studying good objects makes the critic good; identifying with good objects guarantees your non-

complicity and reproduces your political optimism. Bad objects carry a risk; this risk is necessary to conquer, to show power over the threat of the object's ability to drag you down with it. I have an essay in the special issue of *SAQ* edited by Jennifer Nash and Samantha Pinto on "Feminism's Bad Objects" on Rachel Doležal, who was born white but understands herself to be Black.[55] She's the perfect kind of bad object because dissembling her self-representation puts one on the side of justice. Still, I thought she offered a case study far more interesting than judgement would allow us to see, but I didn't want to "side" with her. Figuring out how to refuse the double bind of for/against, yes/no is part of the challenge. For this reason I really appreciated Emily Owens' piece in the same issue which uses the status of TERFs as a bad object to raise questions about what we need from the bad object and why the bad object is necessary in order to make the position of the critic good.[56] I see that structure at play everywhere.

CH: Sometimes it feels like that's the only pleasure left: the pleasure in the distance from the "bad object" and its capacity to carry that lingering feeling that *we* have failed to make progressive politics appealing.

RW: When we use the language of social justice, it gives us a sense that we're the good ones. That language itself guarantees it. But maybe this rhetorical emphasis on a moral structure for critique is a bit of a losing game now because it requires a liberal political culture to do its work. This is part of the point of Eva Cherniavsky's argument in *Neocitizenship*, that under the conditions of neoliberalism, critique has little traction. Trying to expose the hidden abuses of power, the foundations of systemic violence, the discursive construction of inequality so that people change their minds is not actually effective.[57] In her terms, bourgeois nationalism and its citizenship project—based on the idea of a shared collectivity in a secular national space—has lost its grip on social organization. Once the Left and liberal Left would have applauded the idea of bringing bourgeois nationalism and its fantasies down, but the illiberalism that neoliberalism has unleashed, the sheer anti-collectivity and precarity of its deconstructive project—in league with right-wing Christo-fascism—has implications for what we think critique can actually accomplish. My former colleague at Indiana University, Purnima Bose, says that we are living in newly medieval times: unreason, in the language of alternative facts and fake news, and belief, sundered by conspiracy, reign.[58] There's a lot of truth to this, which means the conditions in which we struggle politically have radically changed.

CH: How do you argue people out of belief?

RW: It hardly seems possible, like trying to argue with people's desire. And there are enormous pedagogical implications here as well. Take anti-racist pedagogies. They have long been built on the idea that ignorance is the problem that must be corrected but it has never been clear how new knowledge would supplant the pleasure of negative affects and the anti-epistemology of systems of belief (i.e., the belief in white superiority, the pleasure of racial hatreds). Sheldon George, who works on histories of race and racism in the United States through Lacanian psychoanalysis, is especially interesting on this score, as he offers a powerful counter to the way that racism has often been understood as a form of ignorance.[59] In his analysis, racism is not about knowledge, but enjoyment, a source and force of pleasure. Hence, knowledge isn't going to break the desire for the pleasure that being racist affords to non-Black people, the shoring up of the ego that racism offers.

At the same time, it is important to say that the relationship between knowledge and belief is not just one about right-wing projects. In *Object Lessons*, I was well aware that the analysis I offered about the political imaginaries of identity knowledges was not a critique, not an attempt at revelation as the means of changing a relation. I called it an "inhabitation" because even if I had wanted to, there was no way of arguing practitioners out of their belief in the political imaginaries that conditioned their investments in the fields I studied. I'm not making a parallel here between these examples but trying to say something about the complexity of the relationship between knowledge and belief as it operates in the spheres that concern us, in the pursuit of social transformations that our conversation has repeatedly named. So, my point here is that while we understand ourselves to have knowledge that backs up our belief, it is belief in our knowledge that fuels us and, let's admit it, can also fail us.

CH: The relentlessness of object-attachments in the terms you've critiqued—trans studies, decolonial studies—these will continue to be disappointing, right? And I hear you about the overwhelming sense of everything being familiarly crushing. One way that I'm trying to think this through—not to lose heart—is to think about what happens when a category like "queer" or "trans" becomes less a disappointing fetish, but a more *general category* that can be adopted to do certain kinds of work. Take the example of universalizing "they/them" pronouns in English that are (in progressive, young, or educational contexts) increasingly common, and that I find myself using as a default until I have more information. I didn't think I'd ever do that—in fact I was irritated by what I perceived as a sidelining of the experiences of visibly gender non-conforming and trans peo-

ple's need for other language—and anxious that I'd be the last "she/her" standing, along with my other femme comrades! But I've also adjusted, and had to think a bit more about the value of universalizing language and thinking, which takes me back to Sedgwick again. It was a bold, but not really fully developed, claim that queer minority positions should be universalized to provide a radically different account of the world that refused heteronormative terms.

RW: That is more your idea, I think, than Sedgwick's and it is a compelling one! But regardless, your comment about femme comrades reminds me of a situation we encountered when you were visiting Duke many years ago and participating in our Beer and Queer Theory reading group. As I remember it, the gay guys in the group had crushes on all the femmey straight women, much to our irritation. (Lol) Naming that irritation—envy, jealousy, anger—points to the way institutional and associated spaces bred competition, not alliance and solidarity (except our alliance in the face of being dinged). How are we to think about competition in the midst of institutional change—or the disidentification and forms of alienation that group dynamics generate?

CH: I do indeed remember that: how funny! We weren't doing enough feminine affective labor, Robyn! It points to the question of where lesbian or bisexual women fit in the histories that changing institutional practices and forms of recognition inaugurate. In the exchanges you mention, it seems that lesbian and bisexual women are too dour, take ourselves too seriously to be flirted with. That's a bit crushing! But more seriously, these *inevitable* differences and disappointments within queer and feminist groups are also harder to sit with when—as you say—political and intellectual depression are so high, when such egregious violence feels more routine than ever. We are dealing with the disaffection that comes with really inhabiting a failed as well as successful project. And no matter what people say, really facing the failure of the project of feminist theory as a transformative one is painful, raw, and hard to recover from. So I do want to hold on to the queer feminist intellectual and political practices that I still think have the capacity to shape lives and inheritance differently, but we also have to take seriously that the spaces for these interventions might increasingly be outside our own academic environments.

AFTER GENERATIONS: AFFECT AND ENDURANCE

The question of the political present is also a question about the political past and our affective relationship to it. Much recent work in feminist studies as well

as lesbian studies is returning to what we call second wave feminism, often in order to renew attachments to it or find different affective affordances from it. How do we think now about generational narratives, especially in the context of affect studies which, arguably, orients our attention toward temporality and historicity differently?

CH: This question directly relates to the third narrative I identified in *Why Stories Matter*—the return narrative. A loss narrative easily morphs into a return narrative, because it needs to make a case for looking back as the way of moving forward. But all of these narratives trade in self-serving fantasies that feminisms are anachronistic or contemporary (whether positively or negatively inflected). A feminist loss narrative works to persuade its audience of its repeated sidelining or threat of extinction, and so of course it can't locate its lament from the perspective of a present recognition: it has to look to a past that will resolve its ills. That's why authors of loss narratives quite literally say, "let's go back to a time when 'sex' mattered," for example, even though it has never ceased to matter. And a feminist progress narrative has to imagine (as I apparently did) that its own attachments are better than what came before, and will always position itself at the critical cutting edge of debunking prior claims. So a lot of energy on both parts goes into reinforcing linear temporalities and the containment of particular strands of feminist thinking in clearly defined decades or "waves." It's easier to think of a radical feminism associated with the 1970s as "past"—as either lamentably or thankfully lost—than it is to reckon with a radical feminism as consistently present and as taking myriad forms.

RW: This is the issue you tagged earlier about the reductionism enfolded into TERF.

CH: Yes, and this points to a larger problem with "generations," which reinforces thinking in distinct time frames and flattens similarities across decades and ages. The argument is always about displacement—that one generation hands over the baton and another collects it—as well as responsibility. "Generation" is the motor for both progress and loss narratives: it seems descriptive but in fact it renders difference in age terms and pits one version of feminism against the other. It's deeply ageist—we're not dead yet!—and assumes one can refuse accountability or make someone else carry it. That makes the attention to ongoing struggles over feminism seem overwhelming rather than historically continuous (including the tools we have developed to address them). Instead of generational thinking, perhaps we need to cultivate *collective endurance*. Because, you know,

I *am* really tired. And so are those around me. The sheer energy required to keep battling on in the face of these deep challenges to intellectual and political freedom in the contemporary moment isn't always available at an individual level. But I don't want that to mean taking up a loss-led position that masks that exhaustion as despair and tries to claw back a past that was anyway always phantasmatic. Is that growing old(er) gracefully with others?

RW: And with ourselves, which is hard. Your point about endurance being irreducible to generations resonates with me, especially in the context of your insight that the present tends to be viewed from a position of progress; each generation knows more, is less complicit than the past. At least that has been the temporal structure of much academic feminist writing, even if in the process certain figures are rescued from the past to become icons of historical transcendence. (We don't use the language of foremother anymore—for good reason—but the field definitely has figures we continue to draw on for sustaining a past we are willing and eager to inherit.) I've been more interested in other versions of keeping time, including ones that don't stake their political progress on the implicit idea that the present, any present, can "know" itself. In my view, we are always trying to catch up to the present; our attempts to name it are approximations. This is true even as I began this discussion trying to find a way to settle myself into a narrative that can handle the vertigo of the geopolitical present. The narrativizing is itself a way to create distance from its overwhelming and largely incomprehensible affective immediacy.

CH: We've been bringing in feelings of devastation and exhaustion, frustration, and depression, and even some elements of pleasure and hopefulness in our discussion so far. Affect is really key both to how the erosion of rights in the face of right-wing aggression works—how people become convinced that their very lives are in peril (even when they are not)—and to the ways in which alternative ways of being in the world might be mobilized.

RW: You are much more interested in affect now than you used to be, aren't you?

CH: The first piece I wrote on affect was "Invoking Affect" in 2005 and I did the research for it during my first visit to Duke's Program in Women's Studies back in 2003 (which is also when I met you, Robyn).[60] I was cross! I was cross that "affect" was claimed as a remedy to a problem that I didn't recognize. I was enraged that the story of poststructuralism as having written out the body and feeling seemed to be accepted, in order to inaugurate what became known as

"the affective turn." I felt then, and still do, that this story necessarily wrote out feminist, queer, of color, and Black work (which had always been attentive to feelings and the body, even when also poststructuralist). This was the work I loved! So I was, and remain, un-persuaded by the impetus to link affect to the non-epistemological, since it felt like a straw figure was being constructed in order to mark that interest in affect as both new and necessary. But I've also softened in my animosity too (I do see the irony in my account of my transitions in affective terms!), and have been really interested in work that takes up affect in relation to materiality (material culture but also the lives of objects), animal studies, and the environmental humanities, for example. I am just still not buying arguments that need to dismiss poststructuralism first to do that work!

RW: I'm probably more interested in the affective as distinct from the epistemological, more willing to run with that idea and hence to view feelings and emotions as tied to narrative form in a way affect, at least conceptually, is not.[61] But amen on your last point. I'll never give up wanting to attend to the gap, by not collapsing it, between the material world and our language-based comprehension of it, which is one way of saying I'll never be done with poststructuralism or psychoanalysis.

CH: In my work since 2005, the question of affect has been largely concerned with this: what kind of queer feminist knowledge is produced when we attend to affect? How does affect underwrite the particular stories we tell about feminist and queer theories? How might affect be felt and thought with to invest or tell stories otherwise? But also specifically as "method"—what if we start from affect (the unspeakable, the cherished)?[62] How might what I call elsewhere "affective dissonance" enable a form of solidarity that doesn't always take us back to identity or require a feminist subject?[63] One thing is for sure: feminism needs affect—rage, stubbornness, care—to effect any form of transformation.[64]

RW: I came late to affect theory proper, in part because of my training in cultural studies—Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams—where political feeling was always part of the calculus.[65] And in coming late I missed being invested in the earliest debates about what was emergent, what forgotten—all the anxiety and irritation that comes when something is declared a "new turn" in thought. In teaching work on affect recently, I was very much drawn to the Brian Massumi analysis of fear and of affect in anti-epistemological terms, as a sensorial atmosphere produced by discourse (specifically discourses of the state of exception) but experienced pre-discursively, becoming a kind of ontology of the social if you

will.[66] I like affect theory best when it doesn't position itself as an answer to something (especially, as you say, as an answer to the limit of poststructuralism) but poses trouble for settled understandings. As we've discussed, the matter of the epistemological—of what knowing can do, the entire liberal apparatus of knowledge and criticality as setting us free—is under great pressure today, especially when it comes to what we can expect from critique. And believe me, I do still expect a lot from critique—I want it to have power—even as I agree with those who rightly make us consider the political effects and challenges of the contemporary conditions in which it must operate.

CH: Knowledge or critical work as freeing are also fantasies beset by contemporary events: where possessing and expressing knowledge about the history of Palestine, for example, has been cast as anti-Semitic in itself, as a lack of support for Israeli military action in Gaza post October 2024. To "know" something is in fact—and here I'm reminded of Sedgwick's work on ignorance as a condition of heteronormativity—to be rendered suspect, inappropriately gendered, on the side of "terrorism."[67]

RW: What you are talking about here is an interesting addendum of sorts to the relation between knowledge and belief I was trying to work through earlier. When I first heard your example, I wondered whether knowledge about the history of Palestine could even be acknowledged, could ever be rendered as "knowledge," given how swiftly it can be converted in the language of a certain form of Zionism into anti-Semitic racism which renders the Palestinian—or any Arab or Muslim for that matter—as all hatred, without "reason." There is of course an enormous amount of work that goes into annulling not only that specific knowledge but any knowledge that threatens the levers of colonial power. Then I remembered a remarkable essay by Nadia Abu El-Haj on disavowal that gets at the double-bind of knowledge (and narrative) of the times we're in. The essay begins by referencing Edward Said's lament in 1984 that "a Palestinian national narrative of exile and colonization remained unintelligible in the Euro-American world" only to query the other forms of power that have emerged that "do not require the kinds of ideological closures (denial, official or unofficial censorship) that were central to Said's analysis." [68] El-Haj argues instead that "Israeli settler-nationhood no longer depends on the suppression of the historical trace, the state secret—on denial. It can just as easily operate through the embrace of a far more brazen and explicit seizure of power: I know very well, but nevertheless."[69] Nevertheless: I will continue to make of you what

I want to; I will know your story but nothing will compel me to heed it; I will not allow it to teach me anything about myself. Brazen is the right word.

On the face it this scenario seems disconnected from the kinds of censorship we talked about at the beginning, in which certain words, identities, and histories are being outlawed in the moral panic about sexuality, race, and gender. To censor is to suppress; it is compelled by the desire *not to know* as if not knowing will eradicate the entity being suppressed. It is laughable to the point of tears that the right thinks that not teaching about gender identities and sexuality will eliminate gender and sexual variance. It really is a disease model that they are working with: ignorance as inoculation against the homo/trans virus. This is the privilege of ignorance that you referenced via Sedgwick earlier?

CH: Yes. Love your theorisation of "ignorance as inoculation"!

RW: At the same time, there is a "nevertheless" that is germane to the contemporary context in the United States. I'm thinking here of the way Trumpism accepts and sometimes even celebrates the sexual violations and vulgarity of its leader. Supporters don't doubt that he bragged about grapping women by the p*; had affairs while his wife was pregnant; shows no interest in fathering or faith; encouraged an insurrection; and admires dictators. All of it. They know "very well," and yet "nevertheless" they support, even love him. And what they love is that he can't be shamed. Right-wing authoritarianism touts its shamelessness, makes its admiration for and rule through intimidation and violence a feature not a bug. Donald E. Pease has written provocatively of the way the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement is a restoration project, one that annuls historical guilt by glorifying in a white settler subjectivity that can be triumphant not just *in* its violence but in its self-defined *right* to violence.[70]

All of this creates a very different pedagogical environment for how young people in particular come to politics. While I reject much of the way we have thought about generations in feminist historiography—continuity and rupture, waves and backlash—we don't all come to politics in or through the same affective atmospheres. So much of our conversation has been trying to register the affective conditions of a now that is hard to grasp, hard for lots of reasons, including the fact that we don't know, can't know, where our characterization of the collective experience of the present is apt and where it fails.

ON ARCHIVES, OR THE PERSONAL IS STILL THE POLITICAL

The question of archives, of what is and is not recorded or remembered, has been a salient theme in feminist and queer studies for years now. For some scholars, the emphasis has been on finding new modes of thinking and writing that can generate alternative archives and ways of conceiving the past and the present. In closing, let's discuss our own efforts along these lines and the possibilities and limits we see in the current explosion of personal writing.

RW: In *Why Stories Matter*, you were pretty insistent that the project was not about critiquing the way the histories of feminist theory were being written in order to write better stories, but in coming to understand the routines and affective grip that the narratives that were circulating gave us. But I know that you have begun writing in a hybrid idiom, using autobiography and memoir. And you are not alone. So much of the interesting and important work in the fields that matter to me are currently trying to transform academic discourse. I'm thinking here about the re-emergence of personal writing and of poetics. Can you talk about your use of the frame of the personal as a way to think through political and theoretical questions? What has motivated you in turning to a new form? What are its challenges?

CH: I've been thinking about my family's "memory archive" and writing fiction and theory based on the different narratives and characters that appear in intergenerational storytelling and their alignment and dissonance with the archival record. I've been building on the legacy of British feminist cultural studies and the memoirs of people like Jo Spence, Carolyn Steedman, and Annette Kuhn to work with contradictory family stories as *genres* of history, ways of telling the stories of sexual, gendered, and raced inheritance as comedy, tragedy, epic, or melodrama.[71] The aim is to centre the question of (my family's, but also broader) class transitional whiteness as relying on gendered and sexual scripts that erase accountability for right-wing attachments. Writing what I call "empirical fictions" about my family's contested class-transitional politics has been a way of trying to grapple with a post-Brexit, increasingly fascist present in the UK. That's been important as a way of trying to deal with the difficult affects of the present, but it's also been challenging too: how to be accountable for those histories, rather than letting other members of my family carry the can is an ongoing knot I have yet to untangle![72] That work has also been a way of honouring the long traditions of memoir and other creative work that

grounds feminist, queer of color, Black, and trans theories—Cherríe Moraga, Leslie Feinberg, Audre Lorde, Annie Ernaux, Tanja Tagaq—from both within and outside of academic settings.[73]

In the context you work in, this kind of creative non-fiction is increasingly called "auto-theory" isn't it? Can you say a bit about what that looks like, and what your own engagement with it is? Do you think of auto-theory as archival in ways that might resonate with these historical antecedents?

RW: I suppose, if I am being most generous to autotheory, I would consider it an archive of the self or what I've heard scholars call "self-study." But I've grown a bit worried in the decade since Maggie Nelson used the language of "autotheory," drawn from Paul Preciado, to describe the hybrid nature of her book *The Argonauts*, about the spread of the term, especially given its commodification and the way neoliberal projects of privatization also render the self as human capital. I sound so paranoid! Anna Kornbluh's recent book on immediacy and too late capitalism has a chapter on the rise of memoir and the personal essay and links both to changing conditions of production and consumption, and the decline of institutions (including journalism and the university).[74] She's helping me be less suspicious of self-writing (or what a conference at Brown called "first person writing") and more interested in how it both reflects and engages with these changing conditions of production and consumption.[75]

At the same time, because academics are seeking other ways of connecting with an audience (echo the decline of the humanities), other ways of positioning themselves in their acts of interpretation and invention, there's a broader taxonomy that has emerged in some of the criticism that seeks to differentiate, at least at the level of nomination, autotheory, autofiction, creative non-fiction, and critical fabulation. Autofiction has gotten the most literary critical attention, given its imbrication in autobiography and the novel and because as a hybrid form it is older, being the name for Serge Doubrovsky's book, *Fils*, in 1977.[76] The last two of these are more engaged, I think, with the kind of archival insistence that you are describing in your own work, which has something to do with documentation as well as the longstanding traditions in both cultural studies and so called "minority" writing that take experience as the ground of philosophical and political world-making.

CH: Your essay in the anniversary issue of *Feminist Studies* is certainly archival as well, in that you were documenting some of the everyday challenges in gender studies as a field: decision making, political maneuvering, growing and safeguarding a field that is always vulnerable to external (and internal) chal-

lenges.[77] I know you're working on a new project right now, one that takes us back to the archives of "lesbian feminism."

RW: I like the way you are thinking of archive in two senses—as the production and attention to deep time (i.e., historical legacies), and as a way to record and engage the micropractices of everyday life. A lot of autotheory—at least the work I appreciate the most—is working at the level of everyday life. Claudia Rankine's *Citizenship: An American Lyric* comes immediately to mind.[78] As to your question, I've not tread too far into personal writing though I always write with an "I," staged sometimes with a bit of personal narrative, sometimes not. In the piece you mention above on lesbian feminism, which I wrote for a forthcoming special issue of *SIGNS* on "Lesbian Studies Now," I ended up, after getting the reader's reports asking me to cut to the chase of my argument, eliminating a lot of the personal narrative that situated my take on lesbian feminism in the chaos of 1970s feminism (I was nineteen!). But the essay was never committed to a new or hybrid mode of writing, and the archive that concerned me was not lesbian feminism per se but the queer criticism that has generated "her" contemporary reputation as white, heteronormative, essentialist, etc. In paying attention to the archives created by critics engaging with lesbian feminism as a figure from the past, I wanted to reject the queer progress narrative—what I think of as the ego of the present—because no matter how much smarter we think we are than the failed feminist projects of the past, there remains a persistent struggle to render asymmetries of power as complex as they are.

CH: Can you say more about what you mean by "asymmetries"?

RW: It's an old issue for me, arising from reading Sedgwick's *Between Men* in graduate school in the 1980s; its first chapter is titled "Gender Asymmetries and Erotic Triangles."[79] My work then was focused on a genealogical account of the asymmetry of power at work in the phrase "Blacks and women," where "race" was always a signifier of blackness, while "women" was implicitly rendered white. This is now a very familiar story, canonized in the collection *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*.[80] My recent essay on Doležal returns to asymmetry but from a different angle. There I was trying to explore what I call the impasse of whiteness in feminism where the need to critique or discipline white feminism can produce, on the part of white feminists, a fetishization of non-whiteness, at times even a kind of theological relation to Black feminism.[81] We reject Doležal for her fetishistic desire to be Black, but the flipside is that her fetishism was born of a desire not to be white. This desire is interesting to me, viewed from within

a field that is invested in white women not being white, at least not politically white. So while I'm not in favor of Doležal's fantasy solution—and her autobiography is a real catastrophe of confusion—I thought there was a lot to say about the impasse itself: not only that white women cannot *not* be white (it's not a choice) but that we cannot have a transparent relation to our own whiteness. Its power is not reducible to our consciousness of it; this is a point that Black feminist thought has repeatedly made. Maybe the simple way to say this is that white people don't necessarily know they are racialized white, and even when we do know this—even when we try to take responsibility for it—there is no way to undo its social meaning, its historical effects. Asymmetry helps me think about the way that structures are impersonal even as they are differentially experienced in highly personal ways. Feminist work has long been interested in the incommensurabilities between positions within a structure of power—incommensurabilities that are larger than individuals, that can't be righted or transformed at the level of individuals even if we can critique them. It's along these lines that I still see the need for old fashioned academic writing that can occupy at the level of the analysis a space more expansive than the first person. You are still writing in an "academic" vein, aren't you?

CH: Yes, I am actually happiest (that's quite the relative term!) working within feminist and queer intellectual traditions of producing different knowledge: at the level of research design (what we think a project should do); epistemology (what knowledge it can generate); methodology (how we might go about that); and in terms of writing and interpretation (how we tell others what we think we've found out). I don't think I will ever abandon trying to bring those aspects of queer feminist intellectual work together, however open to a variety of forms and modes of authorship I am.

I'm also right at the start of project that's bringing a few threads of my work together and expanding them under the rubric *Feminist Knowledge Struggles: Telling Stories Differently*. In part it's a sequel to *Why Stories Matter*, taking off from the question about how queer feminist theories and methods might help us intervene in the social world. Part of it is an archival project that uses some of my previous methodological developments—recitation, affective dissonance, empirical fictionalizing—to intervene in received histories and practices, but also to generate new archives that foreground contested meanings. It's in this project that I'm hoping to go back to Sedgwick and knowledge/ignorance at the level of methods. I also explore reading (with) others as part of a cherished queer feminist practice that has always animated the field. In particular, I read

with my late friend Amal Kabesh's work on Palestine, gender and psychic lives of violence and reparation, as part of holding open grief as a generative space of gendered and raced political refusal. It's also a way of archiving Amal's writing, and of course, a way of keeping her close.

RW: When I edited my friend Tom Yingling's work in the 1990s, after he died of AIDS, I was quite committed to the kind of archival work you are describing, which is bound up in both mourning and remembering.[82] There's so much to say about grief right now and the archival emphasis that is about trying to speak to and overcome the silences of the archives—what they don't record or remember, what they aggressively, actively erase. But there are alternatives. At Duke we have the Sallie Bingham Center curating valuable materials in the hope to preserve what the future might need. This is of course conservative, this insistence on conserving. It flies in the face of rhetorical projects that triumphantly declare that everything needs to be burned down. But we're already living in ruins, and some people are living in more intense and more literal ruins than others. If the end of the right to abortion effected by the Dobbs decision teaches the privileged world anything, it is that everything can be undone. So much is being undone. There's a Left political project in actually holding on; it's not glorious; it doesn't feed the outrage machine; there is no catharsis, but it is I think incredibly necessary.

CH: My own institutional archiving project has been with students enrolled in a course I've been teaching called "Archival Interventions: Feminist, Queer and Decolonial Approaches." The students are introduced to all sorts of feminist, queer, trans, and decolonial archiving projects, including Indigenous archiving, feminist separatist archiving, digital trans archiving and the postcolonial archiving project of "reading in the margins" or "along the grain." Memoir, image-archiving and "critical fabulation" also take central methodological place in the course. The students visit archives in London or elsewhere, in person or online, and develop research questions from their visits that generate their own archive-based projects. It's been amazing to see the brilliant projects they've done, taking their feminist queer decolonial tools to archives like the Bishopsgate Institute, the Museum of Transology, the Black British Cultural Archives, as well as the Wellcome Institute, the Vagina Museum, the Stuart Hall Archives, 56a (a squatting archive), as well as a range of transnational archives on landless women in Beijing, Jewish memorial archives, walking tours in Ireland, Armenian, and Italian family archives, among others. The excitement comes in producing knowledge differently, taking the past seriously

but being willing to intervene politically to recast its threads to reflect the urgency of surviving the present. In the end, that's where some of my hope lies: in the continued animation that the encounter with the richness of a queer, feminist "living archive" generates.

RW: Everything you've said here makes me want to emphasize the need to renew feminist thinking about institutions and institutionalization. We have a huge privilege here at Duke in that we're a private institution, because public institutions, especially those in red states, as I've noted, have state legislatures bearing down on them. I did a program review a few years ago at a private institution in a southern state in the United States and one of the things we told the provost was that as a private institution, they had a major role to play in the political moment that we're living in. Of course, the right-wing has used the war on Gaza to go after private institutions after decades of starving and surveilling public ones—how excited they were to force Harvard's first Black female president, Claudine Gay, to resign.[83] This from a political party that welcomes neo Nazis. I don't think higher education has ever been more imperiled, at least not in my lifetime.

CH: It's really surreal. But in a way, I think these challenges provide opportunities to think through how the institutionalization of gender studies might work going forward, right? How might our contexts weather these challenges, if at all? Those attachments to the thriving of the field must surely turn out to be very important if we are to struggle with rather than only be flattened by the intense political difficulties—including profound political difficulties and depressions we are operating within—that face us and frame any ongoing relevance for the field. You're right that we need to be able to occupy and animate our contexts as sites where the pushback—intellectual and/as political—can come from. You've got to have *a space*, an interdisciplinary space, where the commitment to the critiques and generation of knowledge as a political project can be safeguarded. We both work in those spaces, we collectively built those spaces with others; they are spaces where those critiques are not about generating knowledge for its own sake, but about the importance of thinking with and through "gender" in all of its historical and contemporary resonance: to critique militarism and securitization; to historicise the weaponisation of women's rights while insisting on their importance; to provide robust accounts of the intellectual and political significant of trans, queer, anti-racist, and transnational epistemologies.

RW: There's political capacity in where we're located. And given what we're facing now, I couldn't agree with you more about the importance of preserving these

institutional spaces; it seems more vital than ever. So instead of just congratulating or celebrating *Frontiers*, we really should close by thanking the journal and the many people who invested their time, their knowledge, and their belief for their endurance. The field cannot exist without the work they have done and the work they are committed to doing for anniversaries to come.

CLARE HEMMINGS is a professor of feminist theory in the Department of Gender Studies at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Her main research interests are in histories and practices of the overlapping fields of feminist and queer studies. Her books include *Bisexual Spaces* (2002); *Why Stories Matter* (2011); and *Considering Emma Goldman* (2018). She has recently been principle investigator for the Arts and Humanities Research Council (UK) funded network "Transnational 'Anti-Gender' Movements: Narratives and Resistance." Her recent writing focuses on why a "memory archive" allows for different understandings of gender, sexuality, class, and whiteness. She is currently working on a book that develops methodologies for feminist studies' resistance to right-wing politics and epistemology provisionally entitled: *Feminist Knowledge Struggles*.

ROBYN WIEGMAN is a professor of the Program in Literature and former director of the Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies program at Duke University. She has published *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (1995); *Object Lessons* (2012); and a number of edited collections and special issues, including the award winning "Sexual Panics, Sexual Politics" for *differences* in 2019. She is currently working on two monographs: *Arguments Worth Having*, and *Racial Sensations*. Recent essays have appeared or are forthcoming in *South Atlantic Quarterly*, *Critical Inquiry*, *Postmodern Culture*, and *Signs*.

NOTES

1. This conversation began as an in-person event in Durham, North Carolina in November 2023 as part of the fortieth year celebration of the Duke University Program in Gender, Sexuality and Feminist Studies (GSF) and built on the decades-long collaborations between GSF and the Department of Gender Studies at the London School of Economics (LSE). Clare Hemmings served twice as department Head at LSE while Robyn Wiegman was Director of GSF (formerly Women's Studies) at Duke from 2001–2007. Under their leadership, Duke and LSE collaborated on a number of projects, including co-sponsoring a conference in Budapest on Gender and Empire in 2007. Hemmings was a GSF visiting scholar in 2003 and a visiting professor in 2006, and offered both a keynote address at the inaugural Feminist Theory Workshop at Duke in 2007 and a book talk on the publication of *Considering Emma Gold-*

man: Feminist Political Ambivalence and the Imaginative Archive in 2020 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press). At LSE, Wiegman participated in the two-day workshop organized in 2015 by Hemmings and Sadie Wearing, *Why Do People Attach to Inequality? Understanding Global Politics Affectively*, and delivered a series of lectures on feminist and queer theory in 2008, 2009, and 2012. She also conducted a short doctoral course on feminist writing and research in 2009 and a publication workshop for doctoral students in 2017. As researchers, Hemmings published a response to an essay, first delivered as a talk at LSE by Wiegman, in *Feminist Theory* in 2014. In addition to these collaborations, both scholars were featured speakers at the 2005 conference on "Heteronormativity—a Fruitful Concept?" at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology. See Robyn Wiegman, "The Times We're In: Queer Feminism and the Reparative Turn," *Feminist Theory* 15, no. 1 (April 2014): 4–25; Clare Hemmings, "The Materials of Reparation," *Feminist Theory* 15, no. 1 (April 2014): 27–31.

2. See 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*, May 31, 2018, https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/democracy-and-society/the-globalisation-of-anti-gender-campaigns-2761; Agnieszka Graff, Ratna Kapur, and Suzanna Danuta Walters, eds., "Gender and the Rise of the Global Right," *Signs* 44, no. 3 (Spring 2019).

3. CPAC is arguably the central performative space of the right-wing movement in the US, more active and more conservative (until recently) than the Republican party. It regularly features international figures connected to right-wing politics in their own countries, and serves as an employment network for people interested in becoming professional influencers, activists, congressional support staff, and political actors. See Alexander Hinton, "I went to CPAC to understand Trump's base. They believe, more than ever, he is a savior," *AZMirror*, February 27, 2024, https://azmirror.com/2024/02/27/i-went-to-CPAC-to-understand-Trumps-base-they-believe-more-than-ever-he-is-a-savior/.

4. See, for instance, Avery Gordon and Chris Newfield, eds., *Mapping Multiculturalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

5. Throughout late 2023 and 2024, university administrations in the United States turned to the police to disperse, harass, and arrest protestors against Israeli state violence. We are still reeling from Minouche Shafik's betrayal of Columbia University students both on campus and in her testimony to the United States congress in May 2024 in which she reproduced the well-funded attack line that all members of pro-Palestine protests are anti-Semitic. The use of the protests to forward authoritarian agendas to suppress campus speech and (further) undermine faculty governance is one of the more harrowing aspects of the cynical power grab currently underway in right-wing politics.

6. One of the more heartbreaking confrontations in this context has been the estab-

lishing of The Lesbian and Gay Alliance (LGB Alliance) in 2019 in the UK. Its founding mission has been to contest what they see as a move away from definitions of homosexuality as "same sex" attraction and towards "same gender" attraction. It is trans and gender non-conforming groups and community that the LGB Alliance blames for this shift, and it gained visibility as an organization when Mermaids, the trans children's charity, tried—unsuccessfully—to have its charitable status withdrawn. See Lauren Moss and Josh Parry, "Trans Charity Mermaids Loses Challenge Against LGB Alliance," *BBC News*, July 6, 2023, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-65340857.

7. On these tactics, see Sara Ahmed, "An Affinity of Hammers," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 3, no. 1–2 (May 2016): 22–34; Clare Hemmings, "Unnatural Feelings: The Affective Life of 'Anti-gender' Mobilisations," *Radical Philosophy* 2, no. 9 (Winter 2020–21): 27–39.

8. Lauren Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023). See Robyn Wiegman's long review, "On Reading Berlant Reading the World," *American Literary History* 5, no. 2 (Summer 2023): 873–83.

9. Judith Butler, *Who's Afraid of Gender?* (New York: Macmillan, 2024).

10. See Haroon Siddique, "Maya Forstater Was Discriminated Against over Gender-Critical Beliefs, Tribunal Rules," *The Guardian*, July 6, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/jul/06/maya-forstater-was-discriminated-against-over-gender-critical-beliefs-tribunal-rules; NA, "Prof Jo Phoenix Wins Gender Critical Discrimination Case Against Open University," *Leigh Day*, January 23, 2024, https://www.leighday.co.uk/news/news/2024-news/prof-jo-phoenix-wins-gender-critical-discrimination-case-against-open-university/.

11. In the government consultation over the Gender Recognition Act in 2018 no proposed changes to the Equality Act 2010 were made (including the "same-sex" exceptions of prisons, religious spaces and sports). See https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/17743/pdf/.

12. See Zane McNeill, "The Supreme Court Ruling the Right is Using to Eradicate Transgender People," *The New Republic*, February 14, 2024: https://newrepublic.com/article/178681/dobbs-ruling-war-trans-community; Premilla Nadasen, "Dobbs and the Politics of Reproduction," *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 3–4 (Fall–Winter 2022): 325–31.

13. For discussion of the government's unnecessarily conservative response to the consultation over the Gender Recognition Act, see Shon Faye, *The Transgender Issue: An Argument for Justice* (London: Penguin, 2021).

14. See Sonia Corrêa, "Gender Ideology: Tracking Its Origins and Meanings in Current Gender Politics," *Engenderings*, December 11, 2019, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2017/12/11/gender-ideology-tracking-its-origins-and-meanings-in-current-gender-politics; Tuba Kancı, Buşra Çelik, Yavuz Bülent Bekki, and Umutcan Tarcan, "The Anti-gender Movement in Turkey: An Analysis of Its Reciprocal Aspects," *Turk-*

ish Studies 24, no. 5 (October 2023): 882–904; Kalpana Wilson, "Hindu Supremacism, 'Anti-gender' Politics, and Feminist Resistance," *Engenderings*, May 29, 2022, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2023/03/29/narratives-of-transnational-resistance-in-pakistan-and-india/.

15. See Éric Fassin, *State Anti-Intellectualism and the Politics of Gender and Race: Illiberal France and Beyond* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2024).

16. Butler, *Who's Afraid of Gender?*

17. Judith Butler reflects in a recent special issue of *Women's Studies Quarterly* on attacks they faced in Brazil and the ways they have had to navigate threats to their person following "anti-gender" and Zionist mobilizations. See Judith Butler, "What Happened to You in Brazil?', *Women's Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 1–2 (Spring/Summer 2024): 49–66.

18. See Denijal Jegić, "Why is Germany So Viciously Anti-Palestinian?" *Aljazeera*, January 7, 2024, https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/1/7/why-is-germany-so-viciously-anti-palestinian.

19. Niraja Gopal Jayal, "Academic Freedom in India," in *University Autonomy Decline*, ed. Kirsten Roberts Lyer, Ilyias Saliba, and Janika Spannagel (New York: Routledge, 2023): 64–91.

20. See Erzsébet Barát, "Paradoxes of the Right-wing Sexual/Gender Politics in Hungary: Right-wing Populism and the Ban of Gender Studies," in *Paradoxical Right-Wing Sexual Politics in Europe*, ed. Cornelia Möser, Jennifer Ramme, and Judit Takács (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022): 173–99.

21. In their influential book *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant registered the effects of the neoliberal takeover of the public and the commons in the early years of this century, focusing largely on the affective atmosphere that accompanied and epitomized the fraying possibilities of the American Dream. The book's title pointed to "what is haltering, stuttering, and aching about being in the middle of detaching from a waning fantasy of the good life" (263). See Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

22. The project funding ended at the end of March 2024. See Clare Hemmings and Sumi Madhok, "How Are Gender Studies Scholars Resisting Anti-Gender Politics in the UK," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 1–2 (Spring/Summer 2024): 117–22.

23. Clare Hemmings, "The Life and Times of Academic Feminism: Checking the Vital Signs of Women's and Gender Studies," in *The Handbook of Gender and Women's Studies*, ed. Kathy Davis, Marie Evans, and Judith Lorber (London: Sage, 2006): 14–34.

24. Maria do Mar Pereira, "The Importance of being 'Modern' and Foreign: Feminist Studies and the Epistemic Status of Nations," *Signs* 39, no. 3 (Spring 2014): 627–57; Devaki Jain and Pan Rajput, eds., *Narratives from the Women's Studies Family: Recreating Knowledge* (New Dehli: Sage, 2003).

25. Ara Wilson, "Gender Before the Gender Turn," *Diacritics* 49, no. 1 (2021): 13–39.

26. Alyosxa Tudor, "Decolonizing Trans/Gender Studies?: Teaching Gender, Race, and Sexuality in Times of the Rise of the Global Right," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 8, no. 2 (May 2021): 238–56; Jana Cattien, "Antigenderism and White Feminist Reconstructions in Germany," *Signs* 48, no. 4 (Summer 2023): 825–48.

27. Marco Aurelio Máximo Prado, "Anti-gender Ideology and Neo-Liberal State Grammar in Brazil," *Engenderings*, February 6, 2024, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2024/02/06/anti-gender-ideology-and-neo-liberal-state-grammar-in-brazil/.

28. Leticia Sabsay, "Gender(ed) Violence in Neo-Authoritarian Times," *Cultural Dynamics* 35, no. 1–2 (2023): 29–46.

29. See Judith Butler, Éric Fassin, and Joan Wallach Scott, "Pour ne pas en finir avec le <<genre>>: table ronde," *Sociétés et Représentations* 2, no. 24 (2007): 285–306.

30. Notably, the IU faculty voted no confidence by large margins on April 16, 2024 in response to the leadership of the president, Pamela Whitten, Provost Rahul Shrivastav, and Vice Provost for Faculty and Academic Affairs Carrie Docherty—and this was before Whitten called in the state police, who positioned a sniper on the student union building, to break up a pro-Palestine student encampment. See Marissa Meador, "Whitten Rebuked: IU faculty vote no confidence in Whitten, Shrivastav, Doherty," *The Indiana Daily Student*, April 16, 2024, https://www.idsnews.com/article/2024/04/whitten-rebuked-iu-faculty-vote-no-confidence-in-whitten-shrivastav-docherty.

31. For feminist scholarship on the security state, see especially Inderpal Grewal, *Saving the Security State: Exceptional Citizens in Twenty-First Century America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, *Security Theology, Surveillance, and the Politics of Fear* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Lila Abu-Lughod, Rema Hammami, and Nadera Shalboub-Kevorkian, eds., *The Cunning of Gender Violence: Geopolitics and Feminism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023).

32. See Weronica Grzebalska, Eszter Kováts and Andrea Pető, "Gender as Symbolic Glue: How 'Gender' Became an Umbrella Term for the Rejection of the (Neo) liberal Order," *Krytyka Polityczna [Political Critique] and European Alternatives*, January 13, 2017, http://politicalcritique.org/long-read/2017/gender-as-symbolic-glue-how-gender-became-an-umbrella-term-for-the-rejection-of-the-neoliberal-order.

33. For scholarly debates about the PhD in women's studies, see Susan Stanford Friedman, "(Inter)Disciplinarity and the Question of the Women's Studies Ph.D.," *Feminist Studies* 24, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 301–25; Ann B. Shteir, "The Women's Studies Ph.D.: A Report from the Field," *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 25, no. 1–2 (Spring-Summer 1997): 388–403; Sally Kitch, "Ph.D. Programs and the Research Mission of Women's Studies: The Case for Interdisciplinarity," *Feminist Studies* 29, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 435–47. More recently, see Jigna Desai and Elizabeth A. Wilson, "A Report on the Academic Job Market in Gender, Women's, Sexuality, Feminist, and Queer Studies, 2006–2018," *Signs* 48, no. 3 (Spring 2023): 709–40.

34. See Katherine Costello, "Christine Delphy, an Anti-essentialist TERF: Materialist Feminism and the Affective Legacies of the MLF," *DiGeSt—Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies* 10, no. 2 (2023): 65–80; and for a similar discussion on the legacies of Monique Wittig see Blase A. Provitola, "TERF or Transfeminist Avant la Lettre?: Monique Wittig's Complex Legacy in Trans Studies," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (August 2022): 387–406.

35. Christine Delphy, *Classer, domineer: Qui sont les "autres"?* (Paris: la fabrique, 2008).

36. For more on the trans positions in the work of Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon, see Clare Hemmings, "'But I Thought We'd Already Won That Argument!': 'Anti-Gender' Mobilizations, Affect and Temporality," *Feminist Studies* 48, no. 3 (2022): 594–615.

37. Andrea Long Chu, "Freedom of Sex: The Moral Case for Letting Trans Kids Change Their Bodies," *Intelligencer*, March 11, 2024, https://nymag.com/intelligencer/article/trans-rights-biological-sex-gender-judith-butler.html.

38. Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 64–81.

39. For a generative overview of the relationship between indigenous feminist and transnational feminist work, see Hokulani K. Aikau, Maile Arvin, Mishuana Goeman, and Scott Morgensen, "Indigeneous Feminisms Roundtable," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 36, no. 3 (2015): 84–106; Basuli Deb and Ginetta E. B. Candelario, eds., "Indigenous Feminisms across the World, Part 1," *Meridians* 23, no. 1 (April 2024).

40. There's a large body of feminist and queer work engaged with the specificity of Asian American racialization, including: Leslie Bow, *Racist Love: Asian Abstraction and the Pleasures of Fantasy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022); Anne Anlin Cheng, *Ornamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); and Vivian Huang, *Surface Relations: Queer Forms of Asian American Inscrutability* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022).

41. See Sara Farris and Catherine Rottenberg's great introduction to a special issue on feminism's entanglement with right-wing feminisms: "Introduction: Righting Feminism," *New Formations* 91 (Summer 2017): 5–15.

42. See Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics." *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (January 2003): 11–40; Jared Sexton, "People of Color Blindness: Notes on the Afterlives of Slavery," *Social Text* 103 28, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 31–56.

43. The intersectionality archive is vast, but important discussions of its stakes include the special issue of *Signs* 38, no. 4 (Summer 2013) on "Intersectionality: Theorizing Power, Empowering Theory"; Jennifer C. Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019); Anna Carastathis, "The Concept of Intersectionality in Feminist Theory," *Philosophy Compass* 9/5 (May 2014):

304–14; and Jasbir Puar, "I'd Rather Be A Cyborg Than a Goddess: Becoming Intersectional in Assemblage Theory," *Philosophia* 2, no.1 (2012): 49–66.

44. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "The Politics of Translation," (1992) in *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Venuti (London: Routledge, 2021): 312–30.

45. Sumi Madhok, *Vernacular Rights Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Sumi Madhok, "Anti-imperial Epistemic Justice and Re-making Rights and Justice 'After Rights,'" *The International Journal of Human Rights* (January 2024): 1–23; Rahul Rao, *Out of Time: The Queer Politics of Postcoloniality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

46. For an important recent intervention, see Ashwini Tambe and Milli Thayer, eds., *Transnational Feminist Itineraries: Situating Theory and Activist Practice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).

47. For work that highlights the cynical mobilization of feminist and queer equality claims for Zionist ends, see Sa'ed Atshan, *Queer Palestine and the Empire of Critique* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020); and Walaa Alqaisiya, "Decolonial Queering: The Politics of Being Queer in Palestine," *Journal of Palestinian Studies* 47, no. 3 (May 2018): 29–44. Atshan is also highly critical of progressive analysis of queer Palestinian life primarily through pinkwashing and pinkwatching, however.

48. Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); and Robyn Wiegman, *Object Lessons* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

49. See Robyn Wiegman, "What If? On Lesbian Feminism's Future Now," *SIGNS*, special issue on Lesbian Studies Now, forthcoming.

50. Claire Thurlow makes the important point that anti-trans feminists themselves have made a clever shift from "TERF" to "gender critical" as a way of framing their own position as neutral. See Claire Thurlow, "From TERF to Gender Critical: A Telling Genealogy?" *Sexualities* 27, no. 4 (June 2024): 962–78.

51. The universal appeal of "sexual violence feminism" was part of the argument in Clare Hemmings, "Resisting Popular Feminisms: Gender, Sexuality and the Lure of the Modern," *Gender Place and Culture* 25, no. 7 (July 2018): 963–77.

52. Lamble examines the propagandist exceptionalizing of the rare occasions where a trans person is responsible for violence in this context. See Lamble, "Sexual Peril and Dangerous Others: The Moral Economies of the Trans Prisoner Policy Debates in England and Wales," *Sexualities*, September 20, 2023 (online first), https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/13634607231201735.

53. The Cass Report into mental and physical health care provision for gender nonconforming youth in the UK critiques hasty provision of puberty blockers for young people, while making scant mention of the harm done to those same young people by transphobic virulence or, importantly, the increased likelihood of no care at all. Its impact on trans healthcare is likely to be monumental. See Dr. Hilary Cass, "In-

dependent Review of Gender Identity Services for Children and Young People," *The Cass Review*, April 2024, https://cass.independent-review.uk/home/publications/final-report/.

54. On these issues, see Ruin, "Discussing Transnormativities through Transfeminism: Fifth Note," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 3, no. 1–2 (May 2016): 202–11; Quincy Meyers, "Strange Tensions: Legacies of the Colonial Racial History of Trans Identities and Intersex Subjectivities," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 2 (May 2022): 199–210; Cole Rizki, "Trans-, Translation, Transnational," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 8, no. 4 (November 2021): 532–36.

55. Robyn Wiegman, "Feminism and the Impasse of Whiteness; or, Who's Afraid of Rachel Doležal?," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 122, no. 3 (July 2023): 453–83.

56. Emily Owens, "Doing Laundry with the TERF," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 122, no. 3 (July 2023): 549–65.

57. Eva Cherniavsky, *Neocitizenship: Political Culture After Democracy* (New York: NYU Press, 2017).

58. Quoted from private conversation between Wiegman and Bose, 2020.

59. See Sheldon George, "The Pleasure of Hating: A Critical Introduction to the Idea of Racism as Enjoyment," Lynch School of Education, YouTube video, September 17, 2020, 1:28:00, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zYkK912iUbY.

60. Clare Hemmings, "Invoking Affect: Cultural Theory and the Ontological Turn," *Cultural Studies* 19, no. 5 (August 2005): 548–67.

61. Lawrence Grossberg, for instance, gives narrative and first-person subjectivity to emotion, and intensity and atmosphere to affect. Sianne Ngai's well-known work is interested in moments when the clarity of this distinction breaks down—that is, when emotions are more impersonal than personal or when the intensity of affect has narrative yield—which is why she turns to what she calls "ugly feelings" and the "suspended agency" that characterizes them. See Lawrence Grossberg, "Affect's Future: Rediscovering the Virtual in the Actual," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010): 309–38; Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

62. The final chapter in Clare Hemmings's *Why Stories Matter* explores the importance of feminist attention to the "unspeakable."

63. Clare Hemmings, "Affective Solidarity: Feminist Reflexivity and Political Transformation," *Feminist Theory* 13, no. 2 (August 2012): 147–61.

64. See the "Rage" special issue of *Signs* 46, no. 4 (Summer 2021) edited by Carla Kaplan, Sarah Haley, and Durba Mitra.

65. See especially Stuart Hall, *Essential Essays Volume 1: Foundations of Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018); Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, [1976] 1985).

66. See Brian Massumi's chapters on "Fear" and "The Future Birth of an Affective Fact," in *Ontopower: War, Powers, and the State of Perception* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015): 171–87, and 189–205.

67. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Axiomatic," *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 1–63; as well the discussion of ignorance and knowledge in Clare Hemmings, "When Mitterand Was a Faggot: Reading Ignorance and Pleasure in Eve Sedgwick's 'Axiomatic,'" *Post 45*, May 15, 2020, https://post45.org/2020/05/when-m-mitterrand-was-a-faggot-reading-ignorance-and-pleasure-in-eve-sedgwicks-axiomatic/.

68. Nadia Abu El-Haj, "'We Know Well, but All the Same . . .' Factual Truths, Historical Narratives, and the Work of Disavowal," *History of the Present* 13, no. 2 (October 2023): 245–64. On disavowal, see also Alenka Zupančič, "The End of Ideology, the Ideology of the End," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 119, no. 4 (October 2020): 833–44, and "Dead Ends," Public lecture presented at the Gauss Seminars in Criticism, Princeton University, NJ, April 19, 2022. Video, 1:53:43, https://humanities.princeton.edu/2022/05/03/video-gauss-seminars-in-criticism-features-philosopher-alenka-zupancic-%EF%BF%BC/.

69. El-Haj, "'We Know Well,'" 245.

70. Donald E. Pease, Jr., "Settler Liberalism," *boundary 2* Anniversary Conference, Dartmouth College, Hanover NH, YouTube video, April 2022, 58:00, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AQl4piQXgYo.

71. See Jo Spence, *Putting Myself in the Picture: A Political, Personal, and Photographic Autobiography* (London: Camden Press, 1986); Carolyn Kay Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987); Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* (New York: Verso, 2002).

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74. Anna Kornbluh, *Immediacy: Or: The Style of Too Late Capitalism* (New York: Verso Books, 2024).

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82. Thomas Yingling, *AIDS and the National Body*, ed. Robyn Wiegman (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).

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