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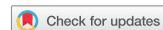
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## The feminist frontier: on trans and feminism

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### ABSTRACT

Against a back-drop of ongoing hostility between sections of feminism towards trans communities, and particularly feminist antagonism towards trans women, this paper explores the relationship between feminism and transgender. Through the use of original case study material, gathered by virtual methods, the paper explores events that have occurred since the millennium that are used to highlight particular epistemological and political tensions between feminism and trans. Central themes running through the case studies include the constitution of 'woman', the policing of feminist identities and spaces, and questions of bodily autonomy. In conclusion, the paper stresses the importance of rejecting trans-exclusionary feminism and of foregrounding the links between feminism and transgender as a key social justice project of our time.

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### Introduction

In 'I am a feminist but: Transgender, Men, Women and Feminism' (Hines, 2005), I examined the relationship between trans masculinity, femininity and feminism. Drawing on empirical research conducted between 2000–2004<sup>1</sup>, the paper considered how trans<sup>2</sup> men and women articulated their experiences of second wave<sup>3</sup> feminism and explored their relationship to contemporary feminist communities. The majority of trans male participants spoke about their involvement in feminist and/or lesbian communities and, particularly, within queer subcultures, before and /or during transition. Yet they largely viewed feminist communities of the 1980s and 1990s as socially and politically problematic; speaking of instances where their masculine identities were challenged. These men spoke of their continued involvement within feminist politics and queer communities, and located contemporary feminism (now of a more than decade ago) as a less hostile personal and political space. Many of the trans women interviewed also found themselves rejected by feminist communities during the 1980s and 1990s, which refused to accept their female identity. Nonetheless, most of these women aligned themselves with feminist politics and sought to construct gendered expressions in contrast to stereotypical models of femininity. I concluded the paper by suggesting that feminism was highly relevant for an understanding of gender dynamics as illuminated by the stories of trans people and argued for a comprehensive incorporation of trans experiences into future gendered analyses.

Over the last decade, however, the optimism of this piece may be questioned by sustained antagonism from sections of feminism towards trans people, and, especially, towards trans women. I suggest that related factors in what, arguably, are an increasingly hostile relationship, connect to the growing visibility of trans movements, a strengthened framework of rights for trans people, prominent positions

in media and culture now enjoyed by some feminists with anti-trans perspectives, and the ever-more central role of social media within social movements. With these points in mind, this paper explores the present relationship between feminist and trans theory and activism, focusing particularly on the role of social media in these disputes.

The paper begins by exploring distinct feminist perspectives on transgender; mapping out the key area of contention as that of gendered authenticity, or the question of what, or who, constitutes 'woman'. Here, I also consider the emergence, meanings and contestations of the term 'trans exclusionary radical feminism' (TERF), which, since its inception in 2008, has become an established yet controversial part of the lexicon of feminist and trans movements. The next section sets out its means of data collection and analysis, and addresses the use of digital methodologies. Subsequent parts of the paper address central areas of debate between feminism and transgender through case study material. The case studies focus on events that have occurred since the millennium and are used to highlight particular epistemological and political tensions. In conclusion, the paper stresses the importance of rejecting trans-exclusionary feminism and foregrounding the links between feminism and transgender as a key social justice project of our time.

### What makes a woman?

The relationship between feminist theory and transgender has a complex history. Illustrating the intersections of feminist theory, politics and community space, the place of trans people within feminism has long been disputed. The stance of what has recently become to be known as a 'TERF' (trans-exclusionary radical feminist) perspective is evident in the much cited 1979 book by Janice Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire*. Raymond's claim is that gender is an expression of biological sex, the latter of which is chromosomally dependent. Moreover, she stresses the impossibility of changing chromosomal sex. From this premise, gender and sex are locked into each other and secured at birth. This leaves Raymond to read gender transition from male to female<sup>4</sup> as a male practice, devised by a patriarchal medical system in order to construct subservient women. From Raymond's position, trans women are not, nor can they ever become, women.

As I have argued elsewhere (2005, 2014), Raymond's work crafted a specific feminist perspective on trans femininity that has been extremely difficult to dispel in both feminist writing and activism. Moreover, as the case studies explored later in the paper indicate, questions about gendered authenticity, or 'realness' remain at the hub of feminist debates around transgender. Within the academy, feminist academic Shelia Jeffreys (6, 2014) continues to reinforce Raymond's position about the fixity of sex and gender, fiercely denying the gender identities and expressions of trans women and men. Similarly, Germaine Greer (1994) has written from a feminist perspective on the intrinsic relationship between biology and womanhood and, as will be explored later in the paper, continues to challenge trans women's self identities from this perspective. Trans scholars and activists including Carol Riddell (1996), Sandy Stone (1996) and Julia Serano (2007, 2013), amongst others, have written on the ways in which Raymond's book impacted on feminist communities in the 1970s and 1980s, creating divisions that have been hard to heal. Moreover, these writers have spoken about the personal impact of *The Transsexual Empire* as it impeded their personal safety, damaged their careers and split communities. Central to these conflicts is the notion of authenticity – of who is, or can be, considered to be a 'woman'. From a feminist position such as Raymond's, one cannot *become* a woman, since the characteristics of womanhood are fixed at birth (through chromosomes) and strengthened by life experience (through gender socialization and experiences of gender discrimination). Raymond is overt: 'the man who undergoes sex conversion is *not* female' (Raymond, 1979, p. 10 italics in original).

I do not wish to suggest that Raymond was the initiator of feminist hostility to trans women. As Sandy Stone (1996) has described, much of Raymond's text came out of, and focused upon, existing debates about the presence of trans women in 'women's' spaces – in this instance, of Stone herself as sound engineer in the 1970s Californian women's music collective 'Olivia Records'. Founded in 1973, the collective made and promoted women's music. Living together and pooling money, the collective

established itself as a central figure in lesbian feminist 1970s US culture. As Carol Riddell suggests, 'Raymond's book did not 'invent' anti-transsexual prejudice, but it did more to justify and perpetuate it than perhaps any other book ever written' (1996, p. 131). Illustrating the divisive effects of Raymond's work on feminist communities in the 1970s, trans researcher and activist Cristan Williams writes:

I've done several interviews around the trans caricatures Janice Raymond created for the TERF community to go after. [...] These radical feminist institutions – the 73 Conference, Olivia Records – they were trans-inclusive [...]. Thus far TERFs like Raymond have gotten away with creating this false narrative about how their Radical Feminist spaces were being invaded by violent trans women and it's just not the case.

(Williams, 2014)

What is interesting in this narrative is not only further contextualization of early anti-transgender feminism, but Williams' point that many of these feminist spaces were *not* hostile towards trans women. Williams' narrative indicates not only the long-held tensions between sections of feminist and trans communities, but concurrent histories of solidarity. In a recent interview with the online journal *Transadvocate* titled 'TERF hate and Sandy Stone', Stone uses the term 'TERF' as she recalls the meeting that prompted her to leave the Olivia Records collective after protest about her presence from other feminists: 'The TERFs refused to stop disrupting the meeting unless I left the room'. I wish to depart from the content of Stone's narrative – the context and the politics of the hostility – to address her employment of 'TERF'. Stone uses the term once towards the end of the interview. In contrast, her interviewer, Cristan Williams, uses the term in their opening question: 'Can you tell me how you first became aware of the TERF movement?' (Williams, 2014) and utilizes it in numerous subsequent questions. I suggest that culturally for Williams – a trans activist and researcher from an earlier generation to Stone – 'TERF' is a customary expression. My conjecture here is not that Williams uses the term to problematically lead Stone but, rather, that Stone takes up the word because it maps so closely onto her experience to enable a strong linguistic fit. Ontologically and epistemologically it works to narrate the power relations at stake produced through discursive struggles around gendered authenticity and the tenure of feminism.

As suggested in an interview between two feminist activists for online news journal *TransAdvocate*, the term 'TERF' appears to have been first used in a US-based feminist blog in 2008:

C.W: From what I can see, yours is the earliest use [...]

T: L [...] and I are pretty sure that we started using trans-exclusionary radfem (TERF) activists as a descriptive term in our own chats a while before I used it in that post.

(Williams, 2014)

The term 'TERF' quickly spread to other trans and feminist blogs (Williams, 2014) and now is established in everyday feminist speech. Other feminists, however, have contested the term, viewing it as 'hyperbolic, misleading, and ultimately defamatory' (Williams, 2014). Still, the first user is clear that this was not the case: 'It was not meant to be insulting. It was meant to be a deliberately technically neutral description of an activist grouping' (Williams, 2014). Moreover, the original user sought to distinguish between strands of radical feminism in terms of their views on transgender:

We wanted a way to distinguish TERFs from other radfems with whom we engaged who were trans\*-positive/neutral, because we had several years of history of engaging productively/substantively with non-TERF radfems, and then suddenly TERF comments/posts seemed to be erupting in RadFem spaces where they threadjacked dozens of discussions, and there was a great deal of general frustration about that.

(Williams, 2014)

'TERF' developed to delineate current political battles around gendered self-determination. In addition to describing a particular feminist perspective, the term works to attach this perspective to a distinct branch of radical feminism. As illustrated in the earlier quote from Stone, however, the term is not only used in the present tense; there 'TERF' is used to decode power relations in past feminist cultures.

The positioning of 'woman' at the nexus of the feminist project enabled second wave feminism to define its political goals and demarcate its political community. Following the theorization of gender roles as hierarchical, feminist cultures emerged as sites of resistance. A universal understanding of 'woman' (as distinct from 'man') was soon to fracture, however, as the constitution of the feminist subject

was called into question. Working class and black feminists, in particular, challenged the capabilities of a largely middle class, white movement to articulate and organize around their interests. The recognition of 'difference', for example, in relation to race, class, sexuality, age and embodiment, thus led to the development of more complex models of feminist analysis throughout the 1990s (Hines, 2014). Here, we can see the emergence of conceptual critiques of an anti-transgender feminist perspective, which bonded gender and sex. By focusing on 'difference' as politically productive, feminist scholars such as Amber Hollibaugh (1989), Gayle Rubin (1989) and Carol Vance (1984) wrote against a biologically determined model of gender and sexuality. The theorization of difference was also at the heart of strands of feminist theory that were influenced by post-structuralist thought. Reflecting an increasingly plural feminism, Jane Flax for example, argued that 'none of us can speak for 'woman' because no such person exists except within a specific set of (already gendered) relations-to 'man' and to many concrete and different women' (Flax, 1997, p. 178). Most notably, Judith Butler's critique of a sex/gender model provided feminist theory with further tools through which to analyze not only the socially constructed basis of gender, but that of sex itself:

The presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it. When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one.

(Butler, 1990, p. 6, italics in original)

Multiple gendered identities and experiences were thus addressed by feminist scholars throughout the 1990s. The writing of trans activists, of course, was also central to challenging anti-transgender feminism. During the 1990s, Leslie Feinberg (1996), Henry Rubin (1996), Sandy Stone (1996), Jack Halberstam (1998) and Susan Stryker (1998) and, in the millennium, Emi Koyami (2003) and Julia Sorano (2007, 2013), offered direct critiques of the rejection of trans people from feminism. This work was also important in drawing out intersecting areas of concern between trans theory and feminism, particularly around issues of the body.

An understanding of the body as central to second-wave feminism, for example, around health and reproductive rights and sexual harassment and violence, meant that the female body became not just a political issue, but a site of feminist politics in and of itself. While during the 1970s and 1980s, the insistence that one must have a female body to be a feminist was employed to dispute the position of cis<sup>5</sup> men within feminism, more recently it has been used to question the place of trans people, and especially trans women, within feminist communities. This led to trans activist and academic Stephen Whittle's line of questioning: 'How can feminism accept men with women's bodies (or is that women with men's bodies)?' (Whittle, 1996). Here, Henry Rubin's work is helpful to consider a feminist identity that is unfixed to the body. Rubin proposes an 'action paradigm' in which feminist identity arises out of political commitment rather than embodiment: 'Womanhood' is no longer a necessary, nor sufficient qualification for feminist identity. A feminist is one who acts in concert with feminist ideals' (Rubin, 1989, p. 308). Subsequently, analyses of embodiment may be developed without essentialist connotations. Rubin illustrates how embodiment may be employed dialectically to enable a feminist approach that can take account of 'differently located bodies which appear similar in form' (Rubin, 1989, p. 308). This may allow, for example, 'a way of knowing that can provide me(n) with a feminist viewpoint, and that is not generated to out of a woman's experience of her body. Instead, it is generated out of subjectively located struggle' (Rubin, 1989, p. 308). Nevertheless, almost a decade on, Whittle's question continues to haunt the relationship between feminism and transgender.

Conflicts around how a woman's body are constituted, or who has the authority to take up the identity of feminist, work their way to and fro, across and between, at least five decades of feminist thought and practice. Debates around community belonging – about inclusion and exclusion – have thus been ever-present since feminism's second wave. From the conflicts at *Olivia Records* in the 1970s, through to clashes about the presence of trans women at *Michigan Womyn's Music Festival* in the 1990s, to tensions about the role of trans women in feminist spaces in the 2000s, ontological disputes have

cut through feminist cultures. In the present, these exertions are articulated through the language of 'TERF', though, as I have sought to address in this section of the paper, their epistemological effects have a long precedence. At both theoretical and political levels, anti-transgender feminism has never gone unchallenged. Yet neither has it ever departed these spheres. What is more, as the case studies in the following sections of the paper indicate, hostility to the self-determination of gender identity appears to strengthen as trans people gain increased citizenship rights. Additionally, as I also move on to examine, feminist hostility towards trans women is particularly evident, in the UK, amongst feminist writers with a strong profile and is made ever more virulent through the use of social media.

## Digital methodology

Though acknowledging the importance of the digital to identity formation and expression, it has been suggested that sociologists have been relatively slow to engage with digital media for research purposes (Daniels and Feagin, 2011; Lupton, 2012). Social media tools are particularly relevant for research exploring issues of identity and community as these mediums are widely used by individuals and community activists from minority groups (Stryker, 2013). Whittle foregrounds social media as a significant resource for trans community-building, suggesting that the development of home computers and the growth of the internet have brought dramatic shifts to transgender communities; bringing together what was previously a '[...] geographically dispersed, diverse trans community [...]' (Whittle 1996, p. xii).

There now exists a wealth of web-based material on trans mailing lists, discussion forums, chat rooms and individual vlogs and blogs, which detail opinions and experiences of trans people globally. Individually and collectively, trans people also have a high profile on social networking sites. In their paper, 'Trans Media Moments' Marty Fink and Quinn Miller present findings from their two year study of trans people's use of the social media platform Tumblr, suggesting that 'for transgender, transsexual, genderqueer, and gender nonconforming people, emergent media technologies offer new outlets for self-representation' (2014, p. 611).

Analyzing social media for this project enabled access to significant and topical debate within feminist and trans communities. This allowed the consideration of the collective voices of trans people, and the analysis of issues of importance to trans individuals and members of trans social movements in the UK over a selected time period. A mapping exercise was conducted across different social media including *Facebook, Myspace, Reddit, Tumblr, Twitter and Whatsapp*. This focused on the frequency of related posts and the amount of subsequent traffic generated, the number of posts relating to feminist debates about transgender and vice versa, and the extent to which these posts attracted responses. The search terms 'feminism', 'feminist', 'terf', 'trans', 'trans women', 'transgender', 'transition' and 'transsexual' were used to measure traffic. Across the social media platforms, approximately 50 accounts were followed for a six-month period and around 1000 posts analyzed from these.

As Carolin Gerlitz and Bernhard Rieder suggest, social media platforms 'broaden the grammars of action' (2013, p. 347) for social researchers. Social media offers not only text 'but links, follows, mentions, likes, tags and retweets, which broaden material and activities available for analysis' (Thielmann, et al., 2012). Subsequently, an additional range of digital media, such as vlogs and blogs, were also analyzed, as were comment sections of on-line news and discussion sites. This gave access to more in-depth discussion on relevant debates and enabled links to off-line media such as print or broadcast journalism. This was important since debate frequently arose as a result of commentary from high profile feminist writers or journalists in both on and off-line media, meaning that debate in on and off-line spaces, or social and traditional media, was not so clearly delineated. Resonating with of scholars such as Katie Davis, (2012), Jessica Ringrose et al. (2013) and Danah Boyd (2014) I found that there was much slippage between on and off line media. Moreover, as is evident in the case studies, key players are often the same people in both 'new' and 'traditional' media. Content analysis was applied to digital materials in order to focus on patterns and flow of, and responses to, communication (Krippendorff, 2004).

Subsequent parts of the paper explore debates about feminism and transgender through case studies. Case studies very usefully show repeat practices and the formulation of broader phenomenon

(Platt, 1992; Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004; Hines, 2006). Each of the case studies in this paper marks a moment since the millennium when issues of debate were of particular significance in terms of the amount of coverage generated on social media, and, often, subsequent coverage in national media.

### The Paranoia of gender deception: *Dyke March London*

The first case study relates to an event that occurred on the 21st of June 2014. Initial analysis is taken from a blog written by the central figure four days after the event. A prominent trans activist accepted an invitation to speak at *Dyke March London*, an event to increase lesbian visibility that is held each year in a number of countries world-wide. As the speaker took the stage, a group of anti-trans feminist activists began to shout to drown out her speech. They held banners titled 'Why Should Lesbians Worship the Penis?', 'We Know Male Violence When We See It' and 'No Platform to Misogyny', and handed out leaflets to the assembled marchers. The leaflet begins with the word 'Sisters' in large bold text followed by an exclamation mark. The speaker, the leaflet declares, is 'a trans activist who identifies as a lesbian'. The leaflet, addressed to the event organizers reads:

By inviting a misogynist, ant-feminist, lesbian-hating man to speak for us, Dyke March London is contributing to lesbian invisibility, the taking over by men of lesbian spaces, creating a March hostile to lesbians, enforcing the idea that penis is female and that lesbians should accept it, demonising women who stand up to it

Some social media activity against the choice of speaker was evident in the days leading up to the event. A Twitter post on 18th June 2014, read: 'expressing my support of protest against #dykemarchlondon male speakers'. The next day a post from another tweeter read: '[...] Anyone would think they had an aversion to actual dykes #dykemarchlondon #dykemarch' followed minutes later with a post from a new poster: 'Why for 3 years now has #dykemarchlondon had male keynote speakers? this is erasure and its infuriating'. On the morning of the March, a post read: '#Solidarity with all dykes at #DykeMarchLondon today A bittersweet event for female-loving-females as it's being colonised by men #DykeMarch'. Also on the 21st June, @WomenCanSee posted a meme<sup>6</sup>. The text '#DykeMarchLondon Brought to you by men: Authorised by men: Spoken by men' was surrounded by men's symbols, with a woman's symbol placed next to the text marked through with a large red cross. Both the organizers of the March and members of trans and allied communities kept a low social media presence on the hashtag DykeMarchLondon, though on the day of the event, the speaker posted a link to her speech on Twitter; a section of which I quote below:

[...] It's amazing to be here, to be surrounded by so many inspirational women. Being invited to speak here is extremely humbling, and I'm a bit nervous, so I hope you'll bear with me. [...] There are those who hold the view that because of certain aspects of my biology, I do not, and can never, truly qualify as a lesbian. There are those who feel this very strongly. Some of them are active in lesbian and queer women's spaces.

Here, the speaker directly addresses the issue of contestation as discussed throughout this paper – the refutation of her gender by other members of feminist and lesbian communities. Moreover, the denial of her gendered identity dovetails into the denial of her sexual identity: if she is not seen as a woman, she cannot be seen as a lesbian.

In organizing through the name 'Actual Dykes', the group opposed to the choice of speaker, positioned themselves counter to her lesbian identity. The notion of 'deception' has long run through feminist denunciations of transgender. If female self-identity is dismissed, one must be 'pretending' to be a woman. This maps on to an alarming pattern of what are referred to in the media as cases of gender 'fraud' in the UK<sup>7</sup>, where people have been convicted of concealing their gender from lovers (see Sharpe, 2015; Whittle, 2013). According to Elisabeth Gross, in such instances, the law does not seek 'not to protect sexual autonomy against fraudulent solicitation of sex, but rather to protect gender norms and compulsory heterosexuality' (2009, p. 165). These matters are not purely didactic; rather they bring the significant material effects of imprisonment. Moreover, the protection of gender and sexual norms that fuel the panic of 'gender fraud', can, literally, be a matter of life and death. In her memoir *Trans*, Juliet Jacques (2016) speaks of a wave of violence and murder facing trans women, and particularly trans women of colour: 'I saw', she writes, 'that for many people around the world expressing themselves as

they wished meant risking death' (2016, p. 63). As the next section of the paper indicates, challenges to the gender identities of trans women and pronouncements of gender deception are ever-more present in debates about public toilet use and notions of 'safe space'.

### Debating safe-space: From *Toiletgate* to *No Unexpected Penises*

The second case study relates to an event that took place at *Pride London*<sup>8</sup> in June 2008. Initial analysis of the case is gathered from a blog account written by the central figure the following day. Whilst on the March, a trans woman went to the designated Pride toilets at Trafalgar Square. A Pride steward informed her that she could not use the women's toilets and that she, and other trans women, should use the disabled toilets. On her blog, the woman says, 'we made a collective fuss' (Nicholls, 2008). The steward, she writes, used their radio to inform a colleague 'we're being attacked by a mob of trannies'. A police officer, who was also a LGBT liaison officer, told the woman that if she wanted to use the woman's toilet, she needed to show her Gender Recognition Certificate<sup>9</sup>. The woman, who had actually been involved in the drafting of the Gender Recognition Act (GRA), told the officer that toilet use did not feature in the GRA: 'it did not take away the rights that had been there before'. Still, the woman was denied access to the female toilet.

The problematic of gendered public toilets is not restricted to this instance. As Dara Blumenthal suggests: 'Public toilets are places where individual identity is put to the test through experiences of fear, anxiety, shame, and embarrassment, yet also places where we shore up, confirm, and check the status of our gendered identities' (2014, p. 1). In the UK, the 'toilet issue' is debated in relation to equalities and diversity policy; the NUS, for example, has argued successfully for gender neutral facilities on campuses, while the House of Commons Speaker, John Bercow is currently consulting on how to make the newly refurbished Commons a more 'gender neutral space', with toilet facilities key to recommendations. In the US, the 'bathroom problem' is debated by State and frequently proves contentious; thus *Time Magazine* recently covered the issue, describing it as 'the latest civil rights fight' (Steinmetz, 2015). Recalling the struggles of civil rights, disability and women's movements around segregation of, and access to, public space, Steinmetz quotes prominent US trans campaigner Janet Mock as stating that public toilet use is 'the great equalizer for all of us' (Steinmetz, 2015). These questions indicate how gendered identity and embodiment are managed, negotiated and resisted through the on-going mundane processes and everyday spaces of life.

The right of trans women to use women's public toilets has been at the centre of feminist debate around transgender, bringing issues of everyday gendered embodied experience and regulation to the fore. As well as the Pride incident discussed above, this is further highlighted through an analysis of the 2014 *Twitter* hashtag #NoUnexpectedPenises. The hashtag first appeared on *Twitter* in June 2014 amidst on-going debate within feminist communities about the place of trans women in female toilets, as well as spaces such as women's refuges, health services and prisons. Talking to other people on *Twitter* about women only spaces, UK journalist and high profile feminist activist Sarah Ditum posted of the: 'necessity of excluding penised individuals from some women-only spaces' (3 June 2014). In reply, another UK feminist with a strong media profile tweeted: '@Sarah Ditum I love you and agree with you. It is my right NOT to have penises around me if I choose #NoUnexpectedPenises. The hashtag was subsequently used 2046 times over three days by feminist activists to reinforce Ditum's original statement. Moreover, there was a proliferation of supporting posts from feminists who did not use this specific hashtag. The hashtag quickly became a forum whereby women posted experiences of sexual harassment or assault in public places, such as on the street, in swimming pools or toilets, thereby repeatedly drawing a correlation between the use of public space by trans women and sexual violence. The presence of trans women in 'women's' spaces is thus aligned with violence against women, and, moreover, as Alison Phipps argues, with rape:

The penis is the key object here, 'stuck' to trans women through an invasive and violent obsession with their surgical status, but also imagined as a separate entity which is itself responsible for sexual violence rather than being, as Serano reminds us, merely someone's genital organ (2013, p. 31).

(Phipps, 2016, p. 311)

As discussed in earlier parts of this paper, feminist refusal to acknowledge trans women as women is not restricted to public toilet space. Nor is it a recent occurrence, as the aforementioned instances of trans exclusion in feminist cultural spaces in the decades of the 1970s and 1980s indicate. Rather, sections of feminism have sustained their rejection of the self-identities of trans women. In 1996, for example, prominent feminist writer and academic Germaine Greer publically opposed a trans woman's membership of an all women's college at Cambridge University where she taught. Greer's anti-feminist rhetoric has continued. In a chapter titled 'Pantomime Dames' in her book *Whole Woman*, Greer addresses the debate about the place of trans women in women's spaces as such: 'When he forces his way into the few private spaces women may enjoy and shouts down their objections, and bombards the women who will not accept him with threats and hate mail, he does as rapists have always done.' (Greer, 1994, p. 102). Here, trans women are not only misrepresented as men<sup>10</sup>, but are aligned with the very worst of men. The threat of violence against women is enacted through 'gender fraud'. As Phipps states, 'this politics of fear uses the language of victimisation and emotional triggers to great effect [...]' (Phipps, 2016, p. 312).

Over the last decade Greer has been unrelenting in her standpoint. In a speech at Cambridge University in 2015, Greer asserted that trans women are not women because they do not have vaginas. Her statement led to a petition by Cardiff University's Women's Officer when she was invited to speak later that year. In turn, this snowballed in traditional and social media. Tweets both supporting and refuting Cardiff University's petition against Greer's talk were in the thousands and most UK broadsheet newspaper covered the story. When asked to qualify her views in an interview with presenter Kirsty Walk on BBC *Newsnight*, Greer repeated her earlier sentiments, stating that '[...] I think that a great many women don't think that post-operative MtF transsexual people look like or sound like or behave like women but they daren't say so'. This is one example of the ways in which anti-transgender feminism has moved from a marginal sub-cultural position to enter a more mainstream and high profile feminist constituent. Similarly, writing in *The Times* Jenni Murray, presenter on the BBC Radio Four programme 'Woman's Hour' has challenged the identities of trans women as 'real women' (2017). Author and journalist Julie Bindel offers another instance of a high profile feminist who has continued to deny the identities of trans women and who has continually positioned trans women as potential perpetrators of violence against women:

A trans-sexual 'woman' will always be a biological male. A male-to-female transsexual serving a prison sentence for manslaughter and rape won the right to be relocated to a women's jail. Her lawyers argued that her rights were being violated by being unable to live in her role as a woman in a men's jail. Large numbers of female prisoners have experienced childhood abuse and rape and will fail to appreciate the reasons behind a biological man living among them, particularly one who still has the penis with which he raped a woman.

(Bindel, 2009)

Bindel's line of thought mirrors that of the protagonists in the case studies discussed previously and has been defended by other celebrated feminist writers and journalists. In her article 'Julie Bindel's Dangerous Transphobia', in *The Guardian*, C.L.Minou brings to light the ways in which Bindel's thinking stands counter to the feminist analysis she applies to all other topics. For Bindel, in other aspects, gender is malleable and socially constructed, biology is unfixed, the struggle for bodily autonomy is key for all women, and misogyny is a central feminist issue (Minou, 2010). Minou continues:

Indeed, what is astonishing about Bindel's writing on transsexuals [...] is how often it resembles the diatribes of anti-gay bigots: the disregard of our own voices, the disbelief that transness is anything but a degeneracy, and the general air of condescension and paternalism. Gays and lesbians have long known that such diatribes are not merely 'offensive,' but dangerous – as is transphobic writing like Bindel's, and for the same reason: they support social attitudes that have often proven deadly for trans people.

(Minou, 2010)

Thus, Bindel's public platform, like that of Greer's, has been contested by other feminists and trans people. Her nomination for 'Journalist of the Year' by LGBT<sup>11</sup> organisation *Stonewall* in 2008, for example,

led to protests and, as the next section of the paper will explore, she has since been included in the National Union of Students (NUS) 'No Platforming' policy.

### The politics of speech: no-platforming

In recent years, feminist debates about transgender have affected broader political and media discussions through which notions of 'safety', 'free speech' and 'censorship' are counter posed in discussions about 'no-platforming'. The term 'no platform' can be traced back to Left politics in the 1970s when Left affiliated groups sought to prevent far-right groups, such as 'The National Front', from organizing in public spaces. The NUS similarly developed its no-platform policy in 1974 to prevent far-right groups demonstrating on campuses. It stated that 'individuals or members of organisations or groups identified by the Democratic Procedures Committee as holding racist or fascist views may stand for election to any NUS position, or attend or speak at any NUS function or conference. Furthermore, officers, committee members, or trustees may not share a platform with any racist or fascist'. Within feminist debates about transgender, the term 'no platforming' has become common-place in recent years. In 2011, the NUS GLBT conference voted to extend the NUS policy to include Julie Bindel. Germaine Greer has also been included in NUS no-platform policy. Such decisions are upheld on grounds of protecting students from emotional harm, in line with NUS 'safe space' policy. Bindle's views, the conference argued, could incite hatred towards and exclusion of our trans students. In response, Bindle, like Greer, used her access to mainstream media to denounce the decision, arguing that she had been censored and that her right of 'free speech' had been violated. No-platforming in these instances is frequently pitted against the democratic practice of 'debate'. Writing in support of Bindel, *Guardian* and *New Statesman* writer Sarah Ditum thus states: 'A tool that was once intended to protect democracy from undemocratic movements has become a weapon used by the undemocratic against democracy' (Ditum, 2014). Yet, as Ahmed's (2012) work shows, it is those who have the greatest levels of cultural and material capital who have the highest access to public platforms. Still, the language of censorship is invoked; an invocation that obscures levels of structural power (Ahmed, 2012; Phipps, 2016).

Like Greer, Bindle repeatedly heightens public controversy in defending her original position, which, in turn, leads to further media coverage. Talking to online current affairs magazine *Spiked*, for example, Bindel stated: 'I'm transphobic, of course, because I suggest that men with beards and penises shouting 'shut up, you transphobe' at women, 'you've misgendered<sup>12</sup> me', might be a bit *Nineteen Eighty-Four*' (Hulme, 2015). Thus, Bindel's rhetoric is explicit in accomplishing exactly that which she has been critiqued for. Similarly, in talking about US celebratory Caitlyn Jenner on BBC's *Newnight*, Greer stated: 'Just because you lop off your dick and where a dress, it doesn't make you a woman' (Greer, *Newsnight*, 2015). Later the same week, Greer intensified her point when speaking to Victoria Derbyshire from the BBC; saying: 'I've asked my doctor to give me long ears and liver spots and I'm going to wear a brown coat but that won't turn me into a fucking cocker spanie'. Greer's comments led to a flurry of activity on traditional and social media both in condemnation and support. In terms of the latter, Greer's comments were honed in on by social media posts which overlaid the text 'I am a woman' on a range of inanimate objects, thus mocking the identities of trans women. Such instances seamlessly illustrate the cyclical nature of social media debate and its intersecting relationship with off-line events, as drawn out in this paper. On being interviewed on *BBC News* about Greer's comments, actress Rebecca Root remarked that this is 'something I would expect from the gutter press not from someone with such an academic standing' (BBC, 2015). Root's point is significant in focusing attention on the social and cultural capital inhabited by high profile feminist academics and journalists who populate anti-transgender discourse as evidenced by each of the case studies in this paper.

### Conclusions

This paper has drawn on virtual material to explore the contemporary relationship between feminism and transgender. It has considered the volatile temperament of feminist political discourse as it produces

knowledge claims about who constitutes a female or feminist subject. I have argued that, despite links being forged between many sections of feminist and trans communities, there is a strong branch of anti-transgender sentiment running through contemporary feminist discourse. Moreover, this strain of feminism is particularly reflected in the work of leading feminist journalists writing for Left-leaning media, and amplified through the use of social media. While anti-transgender feminists may be in a minority, they have a high level of social, cultural and economic capital. It is, I believe, vital to counter this tendency in order to avoid the continuation of narratives in which, as Cressida Heyes writes, “trans-liberation’ and ‘feminism’ have often been cast as opposing movements (2003, p. 1095)

As the first section of this paper has addressed, anti-transgender feminism has a long history of denying the identities of trans women through recourse to the fixity of biological sex. However, a different, though no less problematic, slant on the sex/gender distinction is currently in play. In recent years, the language of anti-transgender feminism is articulated through a distinction between ‘female’ and ‘woman’. In contrast to the direct rejection of trans women of traditional anti-transgender feminism, many current feminist commentators separate these concepts in refuting gendered authenticity. The argument is as follows: trans women may be ‘women’ because they occupy that social role, however, they are not ‘female’ as they do not have the requisite chromosomal make-up. Thus, whilst nodding to self-definition and maintaining the feminist analysis of ‘gender’ as socially constructed, ‘sex’ is deferentially positioned to regulate gendered belonging. The challenge to the sex/gender binary as developed by numerous feminist and trans scholars, which was addressed in the first section of this paper, is negated in the current feminist narration of biological ‘fact’. Ignored too is the stress placed on the organic diversity of ‘sex’ in the work of feminist biologists such as Anne Fausto Sterling (1985, 2000, 2012) and Joan Roughgarden (2004). Rather than engaging with the productive diversity of nature, or heeding Roughgarden’s creative call to ‘affirm diversity as one of our nation’s defining principles’ (2004, p. 1), many liberal feminist writers and activists offer a reductive model of biology. This enacts a regressive nature/culture divide to position trans women outside of feminist concerns and distance them from feminist cultures and spaces.

At a time when trans people are gaining increased legal rights and social visibility, cultures of trans exclusionary feminism appear to be strident. As indicated through the case study material in this paper, an area of acute disquiet concerns the place of trans women within ‘women’s’ spaces. Long inscribed feminist treatises of bodily autonomy are forsaken as feminists query other women’s genitals and rebuff their hormonal and chromosomal make-up in the policing of feminist space. Moreover, reductive models of biology and restrictive understandings of the sex/gender distinction are articulated in defence of this feminist position. Such conduct is defended through recourse to women’s ‘safety’ and proclamations of censorship are declared when these views are challenged.

My analysis suggests that the surveillance and the regulation of the female body through the notion of female authenticity is intensifying in present times. These exclusionary practices have profound material impact. In addition to working to philosophically Other, a social group, these ‘other’ bodies become bodies to fear. Further, as Sara Ahmed (2012) suggests, it is bodies who may well ‘pass’ that become *the* bodies that are fetishized as bodies of fear. As the case study analysis for this paper suggests, an emphasis on the link between the ‘sexed’ body and the identity and experience of ‘woman’, not only continues to be reinstated in attempts to regulate the boundaries of feminism, but is routinely recalled to reinstate the trans body as the body of fear.

The separation of bodies in public space is the cornerstone of segregation policy and has long been practiced to regulate bodies in relation to race, especially, but also gender, age, class disability and sexuality. These practices have been vehemently challenged by social justice movements. Moreover, public scrutiny of the bodies of black women, women athletes and of intersex people through ‘sex verification’ practices has a long history, which feminist writers and activists have importantly challenged. I suggest, however, that a current wave of embodied segregation and sex verification is in operation as some feminists police the bodies of others in their movements. While this may sound hyperbolic, it is important to remember the role of first wave white middle-class feminists in eugenic movements (Mancel and Hibberd, 1998; Moss et al., 2015). The search for embodied ‘purity’, then, has

deep and unpleasant roots within feminism. Trans and feminist activists and writers, and their allies, have countered anti-transgender feminism through public debate, scholarship and policy recommendations. Nevertheless, the views of anti-transgender feminists have become further entrenched and the public airing of trans-exclusionary discourse more widespread. At the end of a recent BBC *Newsnight* programme 'Is transgender the new civil rights frontier?', featuring Sarah Ditum and activist, musician and writer CN Lester, Emily Maitlis turned to Sarah Ditum and said: 'There is a danger isn't there, that you will look back and say a revolution was happening and you were on the wrong side, that you didn't realize that this was a civil rights movement? [...]' (Maitlis, 2016). I concur that bodily autonomy and self-determination of gender are, indeed, basic civil rights.

In exploring how issues of identity and embodiment have played out within feminism in recent years, this paper has highlighted the influential role of social media in contemporary political debate. Online dynamics often heighten tensions that are then debated off-line, leading to further media coverage and entrenchment of position both on and off-line. Online abuse is now receiving significant social and political attention following threats against high profile female commentators such as academic Mary Beard, feminist writer and activist Caroline Criado-Perez, MP Stella Creasy, and, indeed, Sarah Ditum herself. As Emma A. Jane (2012) argues, however, the impact of online abuse, which she terms 'e-bile', has often been negated in academic circles. In an important appeal for scholarship to take on-line misogyny seriously, Jane points to the ways in which abuse is disproportionately targeted at women. Additionally, the nature of abuse targeted at women, she argues, is different: it is often focused on the victim's appearance and is highly sexualized. As this paper has illustrated, trans women are frequently the victims of such misogynic on and off – line abuse. Moreover, as I have examined, the focus and tone of the abuse is focused on the body, with its affects intrinsically embodied. Yet, the perpetrators are frequently not only women themselves, but women who are also victims of misogynist on-line abuse. To stress: not only is gendered, sexual and embodied abuse against trans women not taken seriously within high profile sections of feminist cultures, high profile feminists themselves often propagate the abuse. Ruminating on this paradox leads back to the question of gendered authenticity and the 'sexed' body – to the question of who is (or is not) a woman? To be blunt, the abuse of trans women is not considered to be a feminist issue within some sections of feminism because trans women are not considered to be women.

The tensions between feminism and transgender discussed in this paper run through Jacqueline's Rose's (2016) deliberation on trans narrative, 'Who do you think you are?'. Though the strains on managing 'livable lives' (Butler, 2006) for trans people are at the fore of the piece, Rose manages to close on a hopeful note: 'Perhaps, even though it doesn't always look this way on the ground, trans activists will also – just – be in a position to advance what so often seems impossible: a political movement that tells it how it uniquely is, without separating one struggle for equality and human dignity from all the rest' (2016, p. 13).<sup>13</sup> While Rose's vision is inspiring, I add a caveat – that anti-transgender feminism be explicitly recognized by social justice movements as a discursive and material practice that is in breach of the goals of equality and dignity. Indeed, one that runs counter to the ability to fulfil a livable life or, often, a life at all.

## Notes

1. The term 'transgender' is used in this paper to address a range of gender diverse identities and practices including, though not limited to, trans men, trans women and non-binary people.
2. The term 'trans' is used as shorthand for 'transgender' and covers a range of gender identities under this umbrella.
3. I use this term in relation to feminist politics from 1960s–1990s, though I recognize the problematic of using the metaphor of waves to discuss feminism – see Hemmings, 2011.
4. Though Jeffrey's (1997) feminist critique of transgender includes trans men, in the main, feminist critiques have addressed trans women.
5. The term 'cis' is short for 'cisgender', a term that describes people whose gender corresponds with the sex that they were assigned at birth. People who do not identify as trans are cis.
6. A 'meme' is a catchphrase, concept or idea which spreads from person to person on the internet.
7. Since 2012 four people in the UK have been convicted of sexual assault under the Sexual Offences Act (2013) in relation to cases of 'gender fraud'.

8. 'Pride London' is the UK's largest annual lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender gathering.
9. In 2004, The UK 'Gender Recognition Act' (GRA) enabled some trans people to change their birth certificates and to marry in their acquired gender. A 'Gender Recognition Certificate' (GRC) is granted to people who are successfully approved by a 'Gender Recognition Panel' (GRP). The current process has been subject to much critique from trans organizations (See Author, 2013) and is under-review.
10. Known as 'misgendering'.
11. 'LGBT' is the acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender.
12. To 'misgender' is use incorrect gendered pronouns.
13. Since the publication of Rose's (2016) essay, letters of reply to LRB have been published by leading feminist writers and activists that reinstate an anti-transgender position of denying the identities of trans women as women – and so the chain of controversy begins anew.

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