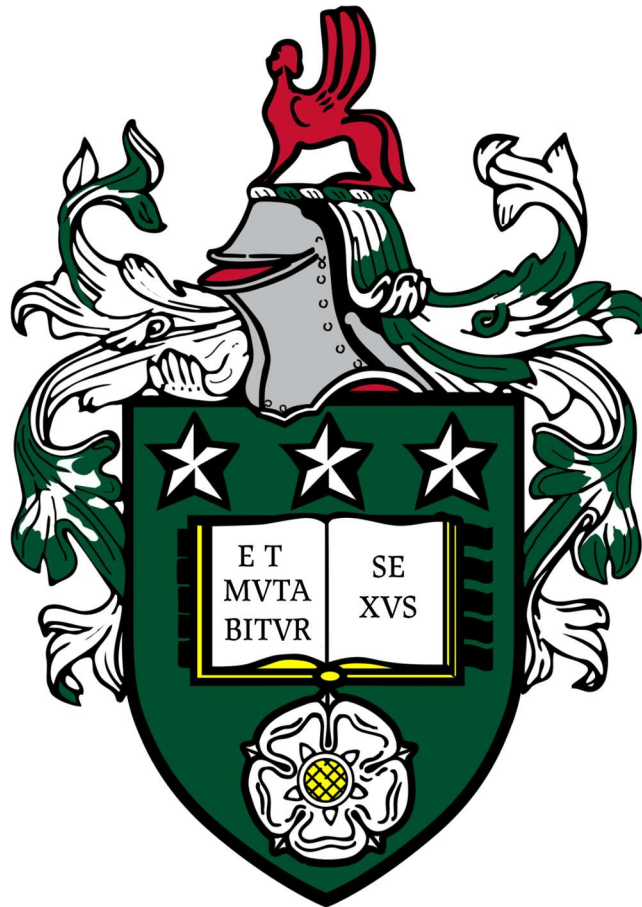


Gender-critical Ideology and Transphobia in Transnational Exchange

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Abstract

This thesis identifies common strategies used within and exchanged between self-described ‘gender-critical’ movements in the UK and Germany over the past decade. By doing so, it illustrates how these strategies allow gender-critical argumentation to enter public discourse and be transmitted transnationally. In the introduction, I briefly genealogise and historicise the discursive employment of ‘biological’ sex, a concept crucial to gender-critical thought. Examining the social milieu in which sex categories develop allows me to underline and problematise the rigidity of sex classification systems. Consequently, I present alternative models of sex/gender difference, highlighting the mutual necessity of women’s and trans liberation, in opposition to the mutual exclusivity of these projects proposed within gender-critical thought.

In chapter one, I address how the overstatement of harm in Stock’s *Material Girls* leads to the escalation of the conflict between the gender-critical movement and trans people. I then reconfigure the position of vulnerability adopted by gender-critical feminists through a transfeminist, intersectional reframing. Lastly, I consider the influence this overstatement of harm has on the reception of *Material Girls* in Germany.

In chapter two, I explore how free speech and debate narratives are strategically employed to reanimate transphobic arguments. I discuss how perceived closure around the meaning of transphobia constructs a form of hegemonic trans-inclusivity in the minds of gender-critical actors. I then demonstrate how ideological/institutional capture narratives are used to rationalise this perceived hegemony, and further, how this is portrayed as a transnational phenomenon.

In chapter three, I address the erasure of trans perspectives within gender-critical literature that focusses solely on unrepresentative subpopulations within the trans community, such as trans criminals, constructing a dangerously misrepresentative image of trans people. Finally, I examine how this focus forces the German gender-critical movement to reach transnationally for evidence of its claims, establishing and reinforcing transnational networks of knowledge exchange.

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Introduction

To live as a trans person in the UK is to be at the pinch point of two contiguous spheres of hardship; the personal, wherein the struggle of transitioning, of altering one's body and/or mind in pursuit of a desired gendered result, both takes a great personal toll and produces incomparable joy and satisfaction, alongside the public (political) sphere, where we are said to be everything, everywhere, all at once. We are characterised as bleeding-heart liberals, too fragile to survive life's harsh realities, whilst simultaneously representing a grave and imminent danger to women, to feminism, or to the fabric of reality itself. Any public discussion of measures intended to liberate trans people from personal struggle is accompanied by intense public (political) backlash, often exercised through what has self-consciously been termed 'gender-critical' thought – an ideological opposition to structural recognition and liberation of gender-variant people, particularly those desiring proximity to womanhood or femaleness. Advanced as a purportedly 'feminist' intervention, the gender-critical cause has found mainstream uptake within UK media discourse, resulting in widespread adoption of the view that the expansion of trans liberation and women's liberation are mutually incompatible aims, and further, that activists for trans liberation and feminists are mutually exclusive groups. In Germany, a comparatively small gender-critical contingent has developed outside of mainstream feminist circles. In this thesis, I aim to challenge the assumption of incompatibility between women's and trans liberation through a feminist critique of gender-critical argumentation in transnational exchange between the UK and Germany.

In opposition to gender-critical feminism, which seeks to further entrench the binarily configured, immutable separation between sexed/gendered bodies, I adopt a radically transfeminist position: a position suffused with the understanding that the liberation of trans people can only be secured by a move beyond "limited forms of social inclusion and legal rights, which operate as a mode of encapsulation" (Van der Drift & Raha, 2020, p.13). Transfeminism of this kind embraces all forms of gendered identification, wherein the consenting adoption of any such identity replaces practices of forced inclusion into intelligible gendered categories. As such, it argues for structural change allowing all kind of bodies in all kinds of circumstances to live free from "the imperative to be 'proper' in the eyes of the state" (Van der Drift & Raha, 2020, p.14) – that necessity to encapsulate one's 'difference' within limited visible categories of diversity. Beyond critiquing gender-critical argumentation, this thesis aims to take a transfeminist understanding of oppression as structural encapsulation both to point towards intersectionality as a key tool in understanding the oppression of trans people, and to signpost alternative focusses in supporting diverse forms of gendered living. While much of this thesis focusses on the experiences and oppression of trans women and

transfeminine people specifically, this is often a result of the outsized focus on such people within the gender-critical discourses I critique – where possible, I aim to go beyond advocating for ‘inclusion’ of trans people and instead point towards solutions which may liberate all trans and non-binary people both along and outside of the spectrum of gender identity lying between ‘man’ and ‘woman’

In pursuit of protecting and privileging cisgender ‘forms of living’, the UK’s gender-critical project invests itself in transnational networks and alliances to restrict legal, medical, and social support of trans people. The exchange of gender-critical ideas and argumentation between national contexts, and thus the development of gender-critical knowledge networks, is crucial in expanding the influence of their anti-trans project. While theories of transnationalism, given the emergent and developing state of this research area, are not universally defined (Tedeschi, Vorobeva & Jauhiainen, 2022, p.615), my work understands individuals, organisations and networks as dense sets of relations involved in the transnational transmission and reinterpretation of knowledge based on Stone, Porto de Oliveira and Pal’s distinction between these entities (2020, p.5). I further demonstrate that, in the specific case of gender-critical knowledge exchange between the UK and German national contexts, the line between these relations is often blurred to legitimise and mainstream the gender-critical project. As a result, I aim to highlight both the transfer of gender-critical rhetoric and argumentation from the UK to Germany, alongside the production of both national and transnational gender-critical networks.

In achieving these research aims, this thesis grounds itself in gender-critical texts. One of the most prominent and recognisable figures of the British gender-critical project is philosopher and writer Kathleen Stock. Since the announcement of the public consultation on gender self-identification in 2015, Stock has been publicly critical of proposals for simplifying the process of changing one’s legal gender and of campaigns for trans liberation in general. She has written extensively in both academic and public settings in support of gender-critical argumentation and has, according to Zanghellini, “developed the fullest gender-critical case against trans inclusion” (2020, p.2). Since Zanghellini’s article critiquing the philosophical basis of Stock’s work was published in 2020, Stock’s book *Material Girls: Why Reality Matters for Feminism* was published – first in English in 2021, and subsequently in German in 2022. The book represents the culmination and refinement of arguments made by Stock against trans inclusion throughout her career, and as such, will be the main target of analysis within my research. Other prominent figures in the gender-critical movement have certainly made a significant impact on the nature and direction of anti-trans discourse in the UK, for example

Helen Joyce's 2021 book *'Trans: When Ideology Meets Reality'*. However, Stock's training and reputation as an academic philosopher grant her theoretical contributions noteworthy influence and uptake by other gender-critical feminists – for example, her earlier academic focus on the philosophy of fiction can appear to grant credibility to her personal theorising of trans identity as a 'legal fiction' (Stock, 2021, pp.179-211). While an important aim of this work is to critique gender-critical argumentation, I also intend to examine the transnational influence and role of UK gender-critical thought: the transnational reach Stock's book has obtained through translation is, therefore, relevant. It allows for a transnational analysis of how the comparatively small German gender-critical movement responds to strategies employed by "the best in gender-critical feminism" (Zanghellini, 2020, p.2). In short, Stock's work represents a particularly rich vein of analysis for this thesis specifically, given her influential position within UK gender-critical thought - stemming from her academic reputation - and the transnational context of the publication of *Material Girls*. In the German-language context, the 2022 book *Transsexualität (Transsexuality)* by Alice Schwarzer and Chantal Louis will be a significant part of my archive. The book collects and streamlines Schwarzer and Louis's gender-critical, anti-trans arguments (though with some smaller contributions by other authors) and represents a rich contemporary source of German gender-critical thought.

To critique gender-critical thought, this thesis spans three common axes of argumentative strategy deployed within the gender-critical movement. In chapter one, I examine claims that in an effort to allow for recognition of and support for trans people, particularly within medical contexts, 'biological sex' is being uncritically erased as a tool of categorisation. Following an initial critical genealogy of sex, I discuss the overstatement of harm within gender-critical thought, demonstrating how the implementation of various trans-liberatory measures is wrongly perceived as harmful to women. This serves as the basis of a theoretical analysis of power dynamics in gender-critical thought which allow for the escalation of normative conflict to abuse, following theoretical work on abuse and conflict resolution by author and activist Sarah Schulman (2016). Lastly, given her position as a leader in UK gender-critical thought, as well as the recent German-language publication of *Material Girls*, I discuss the effect of Stock's overstatement of harm when gender-critical argumentation is amplified transnationally between the UK and Germany. Based on an analysis of German-language reviews of *Material Girls*, I demonstrate that UK gender-critical discourse is held up as an important source of experience and knowledge for German gender-critical movement building.

In chapter two, I challenge the gender-critical deployment of free speech and debate narratives, demonstrating how perceived limits on speech are used to reanimate transphobic argumentation,

based on Gavan Titley's analysis of the deployment of free speech narratives in racist discourses (2020). I examine how Schwarzer and Louis's espousal of the dangers associated with the perceived erosion of free speech is used to defend transphobic rhetoric and practices. Following this, I problematise debate narratives, and the structure of 'debate' itself, through an intersectional critique of power in public discourse, demonstrating that the unequal attribution of authority to those with structural power disadvantages marginalised women, including those of trans status. In the second section, I contextualise institutional capture narratives as a method of rationalising backlash to gender-critical thought, based on an analysis of gender-critical activist Joanna Williams's report titled *The Corrosive Impact of Gender Ideology*. In doing so, I demonstrate how such posturing deflects attention away from the national network of gender-critical organisations and individuals whose influence in mainstreaming anti-trans rhetoric within UK news media has been substantial. I close this chapter with a case study of an instance of free speech narratives manifesting within German gender-critical discourse. By identifying common language, rhetorical devices and lines of argument drawn directly from the UK's gender-critical project, I demonstrate how these are effectively deployed in a specifically German context.

In chapter three, I address the erasure of trans perspectives within gender-critical thought – how discussion of unrepresentative subpopulations within the trans community, for example trans criminals, distorts perceptions of transness and constructs a dangerously misrepresentative image of trans people. Based on Stock's proposed solutions to the perceived friction between trans liberation and women's safety in carceral contexts, I demonstrate that her shallow and exclusionary understanding of intersectionality works to obscure how the risks to women's safety present within the criminal justice system also apply to the trans population. Following this, I examine Chantal Louis' work on the same topic in *Transsexualität*, demonstrating how the disproportionate focus on a minority group (trans criminals) within a minority group (trans people) forces gender-critical authors to reach into other national contexts for evidence of their claims. Lastly, I demonstrate how transnational networks of gender-critical organisations and individuals in Germany and the UK work to minimise the perception of support for trans liberation and overstate that of gender-critical feminism.

Throughout this thesis, I primarily critical employ discourse analysis (see Fairclough, 1995) in analysing and reconfiguring the power dynamic between the gender-critical project and trans people along with some closer analysis of specific gender-critical texts. This approach allows me to most comprehensively critique the ideology of the anti-trans, gender-critical project through an

examination of the language use and rhetorical strategies of gender-critical authors. As this subject is necessarily contemporary and anti-trans, gender-critical talking-points continually proliferate through the UK's news media, an approach primarily centring critical discourse analysis provides crucial insight into the power structures at play within these talking-points. Through closer analysis of certain gender-critical texts, the research retains a textual grounding allowing for analysis of how anti-trans argumentation is rationalised within the gender-critical movement as feminist advocacy. As a result of the contemporaneity of this discourse, this thesis draws upon a wide breadth of (primarily online) resources from news stories to social media posts, often produced within gender-critical networks. Peer-reviewed data on some specific topics, given that much of this anti-trans discourse is still evolving, is unavailable – a need for further research has been signalled where this is the case. In other areas, however, research undertaken by members of the trans community themselves proves to be the most relevant source of analysis. Given that this thesis demonstrates in its third chapter how gender-critical discourse works to erase trans perspectives, I draw from trans voices wherever possible to amplify the work of those for whom anti-trans rhetoric poses the most serious threat.

A Critical Genealogy of Biological Sex

To the gender-critical project, 'biological sex' defines subjects as exactly the sum of their parts. Whether conceived of as chromosomally- or endocrinologically-rooted, or based perhaps in other primary or secondary sexed characteristics, 'biological sex', not gender, is said to define one's membership of the binary categories 'man' and 'woman', and crucially, held to be innate and immutable. Hines traces the conceptual separation of sex, as biological, and gender, as socially-reproduced, to second wave feminist thought in the 1960s and 70s: for the purpose of arguing against the assumption that societal subjugation of women was a result of innate, sexual inferiority, feminists took an 'anti-essentialist position', wherein 'sex' was conceptualised as fixed and biologically rooted, arising pre-discursively, while gender became a changeable, culturally constructed social classification (Hines, 2020, p.702). This is not to argue that other movements for women's liberation had never challenged the assumption that societal subjugation of women was a result of innate, sexual inferiority. Indeed, decolonial feminists have demonstrated that before the export of the 'modern [colonial] gender system', that which sees 'male' and 'female' as separate, binary, hierarchical classifications, many non-Western societies conceived of sex and gender entirely differently (Lugones, 2008). Additionally, intervention from feminist philosophers such as Christine Delphy (1984) and Judith Butler (1990) has posited that sex, as well as gender, is socially constructed. Rather, Hines' observation draws a through-line from Western second-wave feminist thought to the re-emergence of essentialist views on sex and gender in anti-trans discourses within the contemporary feminist landscape: "the argument that sex arrives from biology has haunted feminist politics around trans issues in the 21st century" (2020, p.703).

As noted by Smithson Swain, the perception that it is "grounded in science" ascribes 'biological sex' a sense of objectivity that risks rendering the concept itself unquestionable (2020). This status as "objective and unquestionable can lead it to be weaponized as a justification for transphobic oppression" (Smithson Swain, 2020). An example of this lies in gender-critical positioning of trans women's bodies as physically threatening to cis women, wherein trans women are rendered as *really, objectively* male, allowing the threat they pose to the binary model of sex to be contained. In this brief genealogy, I present an alternative understanding of biological sex, one which permeates the rest of the thesis, as a discursively produced, classificatory tool which resists simplistic categorisation, thus creating space for trans people to complicate, reject and cross sex categories. What follows is an analysis of a series of contexts in which criteria for sex classification were similarly

constrained (or constituted entirely differently), demonstrating that criteria for determining an individual's sex are significantly impacted by cultural preconceptions.

The phenomenon of restricting criteria for sex classification is no modern invention. Alice Dreger demonstrates this in her research of late 19th and early 20th century British and French attitudes towards people we would now label as intersex: people with non-normative reproductive or sexual anatomy. Dreger's book, *Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex*, discusses how the 'doubtful' sex status of patients with intersex conditions was considered by doctors to be a medical and moral problem that, along with causing problems over the designation of 'true sex', could lead to undesirable, that is, homosexual behaviour. The risk of homosexual behaviour could only be conceived of through an understanding that these intersex patients in fact had a 'true' sex which was obscured by disordered sexual development or abnormal anatomy¹. With intersex people positioned as a moral threat, the medical man became "the appropriate arbiter of truth" who must "do what he could, with theory and practice to solve hermaphroditism" (1998, p.75). In practice, this took the shape of doctors evolving increasingly strict and complex definitions of what it meant to be 'hermaphroditic', thus constraining many intersex patients to accepted binary categories, male or female. Whether based on external anatomical, gonadal, or hormonal constructions of sex difference though, these increasingly complex definitions inevitably failed to contain and account for the continuum of biologies displayed by intersex people. The study therefore demonstrates an example, not of binary sex arising from biology itself, but of binary sex being created (in subjects that previously transcended binary sexual categorisation) through the implementation of progressively restrictive *social* classificatory criteria.

Asserting the presence of 'true sex' assumes that biological sex is a stable, immutable category. While the constitution of sex categories has not always been stable in Western cultures, researchers applying post-colonial frameworks to the connection between biology and power relations have demonstrated "the idea that biology is destiny – or, better still, destiny is biology has been a staple of Western thought for centuries" (Oyěwùmí, 1997, p.1. in Hines, 2020, pp.700-701). This supposed intrinsic connection between biology and destiny grounds the gender-critical belief that sex is

¹ This categorisation of 'true sex' has a contemporary manifestation in the form of 'sport sex' in modern top-level international sport (Karkazis, 2019), restricting access to gendered sporting categories based on increasingly strict, often arbitrary, criteria. Such restrictions continue to be employed by sports associations to exclude trans participation (UK Athletics, 2023).

immutable. However, many non-Western cultures conceive of sex categories entirely differently. For example, Christine Helliwell's anthropological fieldwork in Indonesian Borneo demonstrates that the local Gerai community construct power relations not in terms of sex, but based on the ideal of "diri", designating an individual's role in rice production (2000, p.799). Female and male sexual organs in the Gerai community "are explicitly conceptualised as the same", with the only difference between the two understood in terms of location, i.e., females' sexual organs are situated inside the body and males' are situated outside the body. This sameness of sex results in the perception that neither sexual configuration is more capable of violence nor more violable than the other, in stark contrast to modern gendered conceptualisations of sexual organs we see in the West. In gender-critical thought specifically, the perceived 'maleness' of trans women, retained even in transition, presents an inherent safety risk within women-only spaces. As Schilt and Westbrook argue, concerns about access to these spaces should be understood as "penis panics" (2015, p.27). The trans woman, in her assumed 'maleness', comes to stand for nothing more than a phallus symbolically penetrating the sanctity of the female space, and her association with sexual criminality is assured. In Gerai society however, 'maleness' lacks this association with power: the Gerai have therefore formed a society wherein sexual violence is so unthinkable, there is no documented case of rape occurring and no word to describe the act. This demonstrates that the cultural milieu in which subjects develop heavily influence perceptions of sexed bodies. The perceived capabilities of sexed bodies arise not solely from biology, but also from social pre-conceptions.

The above examples come together to present an alternative understanding of sex, not as a pre-discursive characteristic arriving solely from biology, but as a socially-constructed tool of categorisation constituted through the mobilisation of already gendered perceptions. This observation mimics the conclusions of 'social constructionist' feminist philosophers such as Monique Wittig, Christine Delphy and, most famously, Judith Butler. Wittig asserts that sex categories are simply an abstraction: a discursive regime which classifies physical features into 'male' and 'female' to satisfy economic necessities outlined by heterosexuality (1992). While sex may be taken as an immediate or 'sensible' given, it is better understood as "an 'imaginary formation', which reinterprets physical features [. . .] through the network of relationships in which they are perceived" (Wittig, 1992, p.12). Butler too explains that "gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which 'sexed nature' or 'a natural sex' is produced and established as 'pre-discursive'" (1990, p.10). The implications of these assertions in feminist thought have been the conception that sex classifications can themselves be transgressed and deconstructed, allowing us to "contemplate there being simply anatomical sexual differences which are not given any social significance or symbolic

value.” (Delphy, 1984, p.52). These interventions by social constructionist feminists have been fundamental in producing feminisms which are explicitly inclusive to trans and non-binary people. They have also seen important uptake within transfeminism – the feminist approach that is informed by trans experiences and politics.

Social constructionism and essentialism are, however, not necessarily mutually exclusive. Various individual strands of feminism employ aspects of both theories at once as conceptual tools. For example, while social constructionist theories of gender have seen widespread praise and development within transfeminism, some prominent transfeminists, for example Julia Serano, argue that social constructionism cannot fully account for the existence of all “exceptional gender expression” (2007, p.98). Instead, Serano promotes an *intrinsic inclination model* of sex which draws together gender essentialism with social constructionism by stating that gender identity (labelled ‘subconscious sex’), gender expression and sexuality are separate inclinations emerging from complex interactions between social and internal factors. In doing so, she does not simply retrace sex essentialist argumentation. Rather, in Serano’s model, ‘biological sex’ (a person’s anatomy) carries no ‘essence’ whatsoever and can be altered to align with one’s other inclinations, granting trans people freedom from the assumption that biology is destiny. Trans and non-binary people who feel that their physical sex is misaligned with their subconscious sex have the option of medical transition, whereas those who do not conceive of their identities as anatomically-contingent need not seek medical transition to still be considered valid within the constraints of Serano’s model. It seems then that the line between sex/gender essentialism and social constructionism is not so clear-cut. As such, this research avoids relying solely on any single understanding of gender/sex as the basis for analysis. Instead, I intend to critique gender-critical feminism by recognising the diverse ways in which trans people relate to their own identities and bodies, and for the ways that the gender-critical conceptualisation of sex seeks to constrain this diversity.

Chapter One: Sex Matters

Social constructionism and Essentialism in Gender-critical Thought

The argument of *Material Girls* depends upon the fundamental belief espoused in the book's third chapter: "Why Does Sex Matter?" (Stock, 2021, pp.76-108). The belief that biological sexual dimorphism matters underpins Stock's gender-critical position. The subtitle of her book, "Why *reality matters* to feminism?", implies that biological sexual dimorphism defines reality. Her need to assert this then demonstrates that, in her opinion, the belief that sex matters to, or 'makes up' reality is a belief under attack. In Adam Briggles's review of *Material Girls*, he demonstrates the usefulness of analysing the 'mood' of Stock's writing. In this context, mood refers to "the feeling tone out of which we encounter reality" (Briggles, 2021, p.53). It is our preconception orienting us "toward a subject, enabling the preconditions for meaning" (Briggles, 2021, p.53). In *Material Girls*, the author's mood is "dark and fearful" (Briggles, 2021, p.53), one of impending negative consequences and anxiety. If sex as a biological reality is really under attack though, who is the attacker? Who are these deniers of reality? How is this reality constituted? Stock constructs several combatants throughout her writing – "trans activists" (Stock, 2021, p.44), UK LGBT charity organisations (Stock, 2021, p.44), social-constructionist (so-called 'blank-slate') feminists (Stock, 2021, p.78) – though the thread that connects them is their advocacy for trans liberation, often because many members of these groups are trans themselves. While Stock extends brief lip service to compassion towards trans people, explaining that we "deserve laws and policies that properly protect [trans people] from discrimination and violence" (Stock, 2021, p.10), readers come away from *Material Girls* having been exposed to a fearful mood and rhetoric. In her glowing review of *Material Girls* in the Evening Standard, Stella O'Malley says the book "feels radical – and even slightly dangerous" (2021) while Emma Duncan's titles her review in The Times, "The ideas that frighten the trans bullies" (2021). Stock's foreboding mood constructs trans people as a powerful enemy, tearing at the very fabric of reality on which feminism is built and undermining the efforts of generations of feminist thinkers. Trans liberation is positioned as a great new threat to women's safety.

In this chapter, I examine claims that the category of sex is being uncritically 'erased' from fields where Stock believes it is necessarily employed, particularly in the field of medicine. I begin by briefly analysing Stock's position on, and portrayal of, social constructionism and essentialism, so as to demonstrate how the assumed importance of biological sex operates within these theories. Following this, I examine how Stock overstates the harm caused by deemphasising biological sex in various contexts. This serves as the basis of a theoretical analysis of power dynamics in gender-

critical thought which allow for the escalation of normative conflict to abuse. I focus particularly on how performances of hegemonic femininity, based in cisgender status, allow gender-critical feminists to position themselves as victimised by the expansion and potential destabilisation of sex categories. Lastly, given her position as a leader in gender-critical thought, as well as the recent German-language publication of *Material Girls*, I discuss the effect that Stock's overstatement of harm has when gender-critical argumentation is amplified transnationally between the UK and Germany. Based on an analysis of German-language reviews of *Material Girls*, I demonstrate that UK gender-critical discourse is held up as an important source of experience and knowledge for German gender-critical movement building.

To begin, I will summarise how *Material Girls* portrays debates between sex/gender essentialism and social constructionism, particularly with regards to the author's own stated positionality. As discussed earlier, the separation of the concepts of gender and sex in the 1980s acted as an important tool for second-wave feminists in their critique of bio-essentialism, and in *Material Girls*, Stock acknowledges that growing up in a culture influenced by this separation pre-disposed her to the thinking that biological differences between the sexes are the cause of distinct trends typically associated with men and women, or indeed, males and females. Stock explains:

There seem to be a host of obvious differences between males and females potentially affecting their respective trajectories through life. [. . .] Suicide is much more common in males, self-harm in females. Males are much more likely to have an alcohol problem. Females are more likely to suffer eating disorders and depression. (2021, p.77)

These are measurable phenomena illustrating some clear statistical difference between the groups 'males' and 'females', though Stock laments that "unfortunately [. . .] the listing of such trends isn't enough to demonstrate to everyone that sex should be discussed" (Stock, 2021, p.78) in contexts where it may not immediately be perceived as relevant. However, to take one example from the list, in the report from the Office for National Statistics from which she sourced the fact that suicide is much more common in (especially young) males, there is no linguistic separation between the terms 'male' and 'female' and 'man' and 'woman'. Rather, both semantic pairs are used somewhat interchangeably throughout (ONS, 2019). For this to be proof of the importance of biological sex as a discussion point, one must already understand all of these terms as biologically rooted. Therefore, the report only acts as proof of the claim that more males/men commit suicide than females/women; further study would be required to prove whether the root cause is innate or socially (re)produced. Though she proclaims her intention to "steer clear" of the constructed debate

between essentialists and social constructionists (2021, p.40), Stock also states that it is 'unfortunate' (2021, p.78) that the above 'evidence' is not enough to convince social constructionists of the beliefs that act as the basis of gender/sex essentialism. With this assertion, she both allies herself with her imagined faction of essentialists, and implies to the average reader that social constructionism represents a kind of theoretical overanalysis.

One of the social constructionists Stock addresses directly is academic Chloe Taylor. Taylor's paper 'Foucault, Feminism and Sex Crimes' (2009, pp.1-25) Stock describes as the "low-point" of the feminist approach that seeks to downplay and ignore the effects of biological sexual dimorphism on social phenomena (2021, p.78). The paper problematises the assumption that sexual dimorphism is pre-discursively significant for identity formation in *every* culture, as it may be in the modern West, drawing heavily from Helliwell's, "'It's only a Penis': Rape, Feminism and Difference". Taylor theorises that "the construction of an adversarial and biologically grounded male/female dichotomy [as is present in the modern West is] the cause of rape" (2009, p.17) given the existence of rape-free societies where this biological dichotomy is not present. She goes further to suggest that rape-prevention measures which prop up this gendered construction of male bodies as dangerous and female bodies as sexually vulnerable, such as women-run rape crisis centres and engaging women in self-defence training, "may only perpetuate the problem they seek to solve" (Taylor, 2009, p.17). Stock, however, seems uninterested in engaging with Taylor's work, rejecting Taylor's conclusions with the assertion that "Frankly, this is mad." (2021, p.78). This outright rejection is justified through a misrepresentative presentation of Taylor's argument that provides none of the above context and shifts the subject of Taylor's claim. Rather than suggesting that rape-crisis centres *as they are currently structured* may be unintentionally reinscribing a social construction of gendered bodies as respectively aggressive or violable, Stock writes as if Taylor's work argues that *all* rape crisis centres are *themselves* the cause of rape. This portrayal serves to paint Taylor's endorsement of the social constructionist view of gender, and by extension the study of 'gender identity theory' in general, as both logically unsound and potentially dangerous if widely endorsed, since "attempting to alleviate a socially produced phenomenon doesn't normally 'cause' it in any way the empirically informed social sciences would recognise" (Stock, 2021, p.78). With this, Stock positions the study of gender as a social construction as 'empirically uninformed'.

Through consistent references to "the mysterious thing known as 'gender'" which "gripped public consciousness, strongly influencing UK and international institutions, [. . .] causing protests and even violence" (Stock, 2021, p.1), she constructs an imagined wave of uncritical, dangerous gender-

identity theorists and trans activists dogmatically accepting an under-researched theory with potentially detrimental consequences. She constructs an enemy – an enemy that subjected her to “a campaign of harassment” in her workplace, attacks through “threatening communications, unannounced demos of masked men [. . .], posters, graffiti and flares” (Stock, 2021, p.viii). The image of abuse here is difficult to shake, and so we should examine the effect of constructing the abusive image of gender identity theorists. To what extent is the abuser/victim narrative present here important to Stock’s stated aim of providing an intellectual “fight” against gender identity theory, (Stock, 2021, pp.9-10) and most importantly, whose reality does this configuration of abuser and victim reflect?

The Overstatement of Harm in Gender-critical Thought

Narratives of abuse are discussed at all levels from the intimate to the institutional in Sarah Schulman’s 2016 book *Conflict Is Not Abuse* which addresses a noticeable tendency across this discursive continuum to conflate the experience of *normative conflict* with *abuse*. When one individual or group refuses to “change [their] stories to integrate other people’s known *reasons* and illuminate their unknown ones”, normative conflicts become impasses (Schulman, 2016, p.20, emphasis in original). However, through an escalation from *normative conflict* to *abuse*, “the mere fact of the other person’s difference is misrepresented as an assault” which then “justifies our cruelty and relinquishes our responsibility to engage” (Schulman, 2016, p.21). In other words, this escalation is mediated through the *overstatement of harm*. In this section, I demonstrate how Stock overstates the harm caused by the deemphasising of sex as a classificatory tool in order to demonise any proposal for trans liberation.

In the context of Stock’s *Material Girls*, the escalation of the conflict between gender-critical feminists and activists for trans liberation is mediated primarily through the overstatement of harm towards women, specifically cis women. We see this most plainly through Stock’s writing about the (theoretical) negative repercussions of sex no longer being discussed in medical contexts:

There is no harm in naming sex in medical contexts; more importantly, there is harm in not doing so. For one thing, children will stop learning about it and this will cause them confusion, both in the present and later on. Equally, if you make it culturally taboo for doctors to talk about sex, they won’t be as quick to see its relevance in disease, pain management and drug administration.

(2021, p.82)

The first potential harm raised here concerns the education of children on biological sexual difference. Ignoring for a moment the fact that no supporting evidence is provided to corroborate the claim that not naming sex in medical contexts confuses children, it is difficult to ascertain what relevance medical contexts have to do with children's education in the first place. The Department for Education's (DfE) compulsory relationships and sex education (RSE) curriculum in England expressly includes the discussion of "physical and emotional changes" (DfE, 2019, p.35) to the adolescent body at primary school level, expanding further to encompass "the main changes which take place in males and females, and the implications for emotional and physical health" in secondary school (DfE, 2019, p.38). The intent is to enable pupils to "develop the language they use to talk about their bodies" and "understand where normal variations in emotions and physical complaints end and health and wellbeing issues begin" (DfE, 2019, p.35). In this regard, initially avoiding the naming of biological sex in medical contexts and focussing on anatomical description may allow trans children to better express their understanding of their situation without the use of stigmatised labels, while cis children can still use the learned labels 'male' and 'female' as they desire. Certainly, various organisations have called for expanded resources and content within RSE (see NSPCC, 2022 or Stonewall, 2017), however this context goes far beyond Stock's brief, uncritical comment about confusing children, clearly intended to associate the deemphasising of sex with harm to children.

Stock's second claim relates to an earlier discussion about sexual dimorphism and its relation to patterns of disease:

In childhood, girls are more susceptible than boys to neural tube defects, scoliosis and congenital dislocation of the hip. Boys are more susceptible to asthma, autism, stuttering and pyloric stenosis. Later in life, females have greater susceptibility to multiple sclerosis, while males who get it have worse disease progression. More males than females have cardiovascular disease in their lifetimes, but females get it at a higher rate after menopause. [. . .] In short, sex can affect disease susceptibility, progression and outcomes. (Stock, 2021, pp.79-80)

Here too, there are a number of complications to the straightforward conclusion Stock presents that sex impacts disease susceptibility. Firstly, gendered social expectations heavily impact diagnostic processes and criteria. As reported by the UK's National Autistic Society, "because of stereotyped ideas about what autism looks like and who can be autistic, many autistic women and girls struggle to get a diagnosis, receive a diagnosis late in life or are misdiagnosed with conditions other than

autism” (2023). As a result, the assumption that boys are innately ‘more susceptible’ to autism is thrown into question.

In addition, Stock’s flat presentation of the binary categories ‘males’ and ‘females’ (and indeed, ‘boys’ and ‘girls’) discourages reflection on any real complications to this model. For example, transgender people’s biology is often more complex than a simple male/female binary can describe (e.g. a transgender woman/man on hormone replacement therapy with endocrinologically female/male hormone patterns). While an earlier chapter of the book discusses complications to understandings of sex, here all complexity is lost. These distinctions are important though as research suggests that despite *chromosomal sex* being responsible for the fact that more ‘girls’ than ‘boys’ experience neural tube defects, scoliosis, and congenital dislocation of the hip (Ober, Loisel & Gilad, 2008), it is differing *SSH (sex steroid hormone) patterns* that result in sexually dimorphic risk profiles of cardiovascular disease (Choi & McLaughlin, 2008). These SSH patterns can be altered through transgender hormone replacement therapy to lie within the ranges statistically associated with our cisgender equivalents.² While it would be fruitful to discuss the risks of cardiovascular disease in the transgender population here, current studies on the topic are limited and no consensus has been formed (Connelly & Delles, 2021). Some studies have demonstrated increased risks of cardiovascular disease in transgender people more generally, though the current accepted explanation for this is ‘minority stress theory’, i.e. that discriminatory social systems lead to high stress levels in minority populations, resulting in higher rates of stress-related disease (Streed Jr. et al., 2021, p.138). Even here then, Stock’s evidence for the intrinsic biological ‘reality’ of sex is interwoven with social systems of gender. Trans people seeking medical transition complicate Stock’s stable model of binary sexual dimorphism by existing outside of it; to simply reduce, for example, a trans woman with endocrinologically female hormone patterns and female-presenting secondary sex characteristics to ‘biologically male’ obscures the complex reality of sex, rather than illuminating it.

Serano identifies that the reduction of sex difference down to uncomplicated characteristics (as is present in Stock’s work) is essentialist thinking, in that asserting our hypothetical trans woman is ‘biologically male’ relies on the presumption that “each sex category has an underlying ‘essence’ that makes them what they are” (2017, p.2). This becomes clearer in Stock’s analysis of sex and sexual orientation, wherein she declares that a cisgender woman dating a passing and “post-

² This applies in a similar way to people with intersex conditions who necessarily transcend binary biological categorisation. In these cases, following diagnostic criteria designed for ‘male’ or ‘female’ bodies may obscure, not illuminate, important disease risk factors.

surgery” trans woman being called a lesbian relationship “stretches existing concepts [of sexuality] to their limits” (2021, p.94). In Stock’s opinion, since the trans woman’s body is “actually male, no matter what it looks like” (2021, p.94), there is a valid case to be made that this relationship should not be called ‘lesbian’ at all, despite the many biological factors that differentiate her body from that of a typical person assigned male at birth, simply because these features are non-endogenous. This assumes that the label ‘lesbian’ is employed as a biological category: in practice, trans lesbians have always been part of lesbian communities, organisations and movements, and according to LGBT charity *Just Like Us*, 96% of lesbians are supportive of trans people, more than any other demographic (2023). In any case though, Stock’s arguments that ‘natural’ sex classification should only account for endogenous features are entirely arbitrary. As we’ve seen, medical transition can change a person’s biological sexual make-up in most ways that matter outside of one’s genotype, and it is difficult to justify why (in Stock’s words) a “gorgeous” and “feminine” trans woman’s differing risks of encountering some genetic diseases impacts her wife’s identity as a lesbian.

Interestingly though, Stock’s suggestion that (transitioning) trans people’s non-normative biologies expose limits and weaknesses in the language we use to describe concepts of sexuality is shared by Serano, though for her the problem is the labels ‘male’ and ‘female’ themselves:

While the terms ‘male’ and ‘female’ have some utility, we should not view them as strictly dichotomous or mutually exclusive. Rather, ‘female’ and ‘male’ are best thought of as umbrella terms that describe groupings of people (or animals) who generally share many of the same traits, albeit with considerable variability and some exceptions. (Serano, 2017).

In this model, space is made for complications of biology, either endogenous or exogenous; for the existence of sexual typologies between and outside of the normative sexual binary, and for movement across sexual categories. These categories are “multifaceted, variable, and somewhat malleable” (Serano, 2017). This less rigid definition of sex does not erase the importance of sex, given this importance is often what causes many trans people to seek gender-affirmative care in the first place: medical transition is not sought through ignoring the impact of biological sex, but rather navigating its complex effects. Instead, through this meaningful redefinition, the concrete and immutable nature of sex is disrupted in search of the mechanisms lying behind the simplistic labels ‘male’ and ‘female’. In short, it is essentialist beliefs about sex that are challenged, not the existence of biological sexual dimorphism itself.

With this in mind, the most fundamental problem with Stock's presentation of the issue of deemphasising sex is that she portrays the questioning of the relevance of sex in particular linguistic contexts as a demand for unreasonable and blanket change. This is best illustrated through the example she provides of the period-tracking app 'Clue', which issued a statement in 2016 on accessibility and gendered language. (LaVigne & Kennelly, 2017). The statement acknowledges the limits of labels we use to categorise people by sex and gender. Stock critiques Clue's assertion that "using the word 'female' or 'female-bodied' is offensive to some. It's seen as dehumanising or still too gendered" (LaVigne & Kennelly, 2017), asking "why should it seem dehumanising to refer to our sex or to our biological basis more generally?" (Stock, 2021, p.82). One answer may be that the non-binary people assigned female at birth (AFAB) and trans men who would take issue with the label 'female' may not feel that it represents their biology in any meaningful way for the reasons discussed earlier. Given that Stock's stated aim with this book is to entirely reject 'gender identity' as a classificatory tool, her counterargument that we "should not confuse this with saying that humans are *only* biological organisms" seems disingenuous as the model of sexual dimorphism she presents would leave trans men and AFAB non-binary people with no meaningful label distinguishing them from cisgender women. Stock makes the argument in this same paragraph that "talking about 'non-prostate owners' and 'menstruators', etc., is scarcely less dehumanising than talking about 'females'" (2021, p.82). However, she fails to mention that Clue's statement *also* addresses this issue only one line later:

Using the word "female" or "female-bodied" is offensive to some. It's seen as dehumanizing or still too gendered. Calling our users "people who menstruate" is also often inaccurate, because Clue's users don't necessarily always have a period (menarche, pregnancy, menopause, birth control). We've sometimes said "uterus-havers" or "people with uteruses," but we've received feedback that this offends people who believe it reduces their life experience to one body part or bodily function.

(LaVigne & Kennelly, 2017)

To present her comments on Clue's statement without reference to the varied viewpoints incorporated and evaluated throughout gives the impression that the complexities of human biology are being dogmatically ignored rather than engaged with. In reality, the statement highlights the extensive input invited and responded to in consultations with their users. Stock later argues that Clue's efforts to deemphasise sex-related terminology are based on the distorted thinking that our biology is not (at least partially) constitutive of our identity as humans and individuals, though this can be disproven by reading the statement in its entirety. Much of the language they suggest to refer to the area they serve relates to biology – firstly "female health", then "reproductive health",

then “menstrual cycle health” (LaVigne & Kennelly, 2017). In any case, the article eventually settles on the use of ‘female health’ as it is deemed to best represent Clue’s area of expertise and is less likely to inadvertently confuse people whose first language is not English. In the app itself, Clue never employs the terms “women” or “female” anyway, in an effort to improve scientific accuracy and limit ambiguity for all users. The outcome of their investigation prioritises informational accuracy on the platform itself (once users have already been onboarded) while maintaining the importance of clarity in communications outside of the application, yet Stock paints the company’s strategy as suboptimal because she cannot personally understand the discomfort some users report in response to gendered labels. Put simply, Stock’s complaint is that Clue has taken seriously the testimony of its trans users and formulated policy with inclusivity in mind.

Conflict, Abuse and Power Dynamics in Gender-critical Thought

In discussing Stock’s use of the ‘sex matters’ trope, I have demonstrated that any harm predicted to result from the deemphasising of sex in medical contexts is hugely overstated or misrepresented. In many of Stock’s own examples of areas where sex is being erased, it continues to be referenced due to concerns about potential ambiguities in communication strategies. Any alternatives of understanding she provides fail to account for the fact that many trans people complicate dimorphic understandings of sex; labelling us as simply male or female ignores complexities in the disease risk-profiles which she herself uses as the foundation of her argument for the importance of sex. This all combines with the oppositional language used throughout the book to construct trans activists not as individuals and groups seeking systemic change to foster the liberation of trans people, but rather as a nebulous destructive force attempting to overthrow the category ‘woman’ as a meaningful classification, uncritically undoing decades of feminist intervention and thus invoking a kind of fear response in readers. Working from a statement by the gender-critical former Chief Executive of the British Pregnancy Advisory Service (an independent UK abortion provider), Ann Furedi, Stock claims that “some healthcare providers are under pressure to remove references to women from their communications” (2021, p.83). Stock bolsters this oppositional configuration of gender-critical feminists and trans activists through uncritical reporting of Furedi’s words:

Trans activists seem to want an abortion-care environment that takes all reference to women out of the frame. They want literature rewritten so as not to refer to women, they want us to not describe BPAS as a women’s healthcare service, or abortion as an issue that relates to women’s rights and reproductive freedom. (2021, p.83)

Suggestions for changes in communication that would limit gendered references are misrepresented as active attempts to erase women – to ‘rewrite literature’ in a way that threatens women’s access to abortion-care services. The reduction of the parties involved simply to ‘us’ vs. ‘them’, particularly in the structure “they want us to”, constructs an image of resistance on the side of the gender-critical project against those trans activist aggressors. This resistance is portrayed as heroic in nature: Furedi explains that “It is tempting to not make it an issue and comply” (2021, p.83) with the term ‘comply’ used as if calls for trans liberation are forms of top-down oppression. This narrative also serves to represent calls for trans-inclusive language as an all-or-nothing situation, whereby the use of gendered terms is either completely eliminated or remains entirely. Strategies that could only *limit* the use of gendered language deemed unnecessary, or where specific language focussing on a patient’s individual biology is more accurate, for example once the patients are already onboarded and the potential for miscommunications diminishes as with Clue in 2017, are unthinkable; the situation has become abstracted into an issue of ideologies and thus compromises like this are not possible. Since trans activists are viewed as a powerful lobby, ‘compromise’ is not ‘compromise’ at all, but capitulation. Resisting these calls for change is constructed as not only understandable, but righteous.

I argue that constructing the power dynamic between trans activists and gender-critical feminists in this way is a necessary facet of framing trans activism as abusive. Quoting Catherine Hodes, Schulman explains that “differentiating between *Power Struggle* and *Power Over* [. . .] is the difference between Conflict and Abuse. Abuse is Power Over and Conflict is Power Struggle” (2016, p.58). Both Furedi and Stock push the narrative that activists for trans liberation exhibit Power Over gender-critical women, and over women in general, by creating an environment where any reference to biological ‘reality’ puts speakers at risk of accusations of transphobia (discussed further in chapter two). This supposedly leads to confusion and ambiguity in communications between healthcare providers and women of lower socio-economic or education status. Trans liberation is painted as a project endorsed by and for those members of society whose personal socio-economic situations allow for a level of social mobility: “disregard for the interests of people of lower socio-economic status or education is not unusual within modern trans activism” (Stock, 2021, p.83). This is a particularly unfair assessment of trans liberation movements, given that what little data we have concerning poverty and trans status points to a positive correlation between the two factors: trans charity and advocacy organisation Gendered Intelligence states that in 2018 “60% of trans people [in the UK] earned less than £20,000 per year” (Living Wage Foundation, 2022). What is important to note, however, is the association of trans activism with significant economic capability, painting it as an upper-class frivolity. Activism for trans liberation becomes an abstract project

wielding socio-economic privilege against oppressed women, while the gender-critical movement's unwillingness to integrate the unique needs of trans people into their feminist viewpoint is positioned as righteous resistance. Any call to seek alternatives of understanding and solutions that advance (public) safety and autonomy for all is rejected. The conflict need not be resolved as it is no longer simply conflict, but abuse, specifically by 'trans activists' (and by extension, trans people) of gender-critical feminists. The fact that trans people destabilise the fixed categories of sex/gender on which their feminism is based need not be reckoned with at all. The gender-critical world view persists unaltered, and the status-quo remains untouched.

Serano describes in *Whipping Girl* the phenomenon of 'gender anxiety': that is, the negative response expressed when one encounters an individual who undermines the convictions/beliefs one has about gender and sexuality. When these beliefs about are so firmly held that one is convinced they are more valid than those of others, Serano describes this as 'gender entitlement' (2007, pp.89-90). Gender-entitled beliefs produce gender anxiety in various contexts. For example, some 'binary' trans people hold the gender-entitled belief that identifying with the binary model of gender is superior (perhaps, more 'real') than identifying outside of it. This manifests as gender anxiety directed at those 'non-binary' trans people whose identity is neither strongly male nor female. Gender-critical feminists hold the gender-entitled belief that one's anatomy inescapably restricts one's identity. Their resistance to changing these beliefs, and therefore the transphobia they exhibit, is based in gender anxiety. It is fear that the very real issues still affecting women will be ignored if the oppressive binary structure of sex is problematised. However, this demonstrates a misunderstanding of how social identities intersect. Schulman examines the socio-political expression of this individual anxiety and fear in addressing the label 'gay'. She notes the transition of 'gay' from "a severely oppressed, once broad category of people to the more recent phenomenon of select sexual minority sectors getting access to the state's punishment apparatus, often based in whiteness, citizenship, normalizing family roles, and HIV negativity" (2016, p.18). Newly acquired protections for gay people can encourage those groups whose identity is not subjugated along other axes of oppression (for example, by being a person of colour, lacking citizenship or being HIV positive) to "identify with the supremacy of the state" (Schulman, 2016, p.18). The improved (though not entirely equal) situation of these select gay people allows them, as "formerly subordinated" and "traumatised groups", to move from the position of oppressed to oppressor (Schulman, 2016, p.18). It is not difficult to imagine how this thread of analysis may also apply to the category 'woman', wherein the modern perception of acceptable, intelligible womanhood is based in the category's intersections with whiteness, citizenship, and among others, cisgender status. The

trajectory from oppressed to oppressor through these intersections can result in select women identifying with the power of the state (the oppressor). When this transition goes unacknowledged, and groups or individuals fail to recognise the position of privilege afforded to them, this “leads to the newly acquired power to punish rather than to the self-transformation necessary to resolve conflict and produce justice” (Schulman, 2016, p.18). That gender-critical feminism excludes trans people from its definitions of womanhood and manhood constructs both entities as a weapon of exclusion as opposed to neutral categories or, in the case of womanhood, a label that defines its members as oppressed on the basis of their membership.

This acknowledgement of internal power relations within the category ‘woman’ demonstrates powerful connections between gender-critical feminists’ defence of dimorphic gender models and investment in whiteness. In *When White Women Cry*, Mamta Motwani Accapadi discusses the tension that arises when race and gender intersect, assigning the white woman a “dual oppressor/oppressed identity” in that while she is a member of an oppressed group based on gender, she experiences privilege based on race (2007, p.208). Quoting Phyllis Marynick Palmer, she states that for white women, “their privilege is based on accepting the image of goodness, which is powerlessness” (1983, p.159), based on historical perceptions of white women as the foundation of purity and virtue. It is also the case that perceptions of the cis woman as ‘natural’ lead to a similar association with purity, and by contrast, of trans women as unnatural; for evidence of this, we need only recall Stock’s delineation of sex through endogenous and non-endogenous characteristics. As Accapadi states, “powerlessness informs the nature of White womanhood” and “White privilege throughout history positions a White woman’s reality as the universal norm of womanhood” (2007, 209), thus powerlessness becomes a necessary facet of womanhood unless the category of ‘woman’ is destabilised, and intersections of race and cisgender status can be critically examined. The heart of gender-critical feminism then, is the inability to visualise ‘woman’ as having the power to oppress based on a facet of her own womanhood, resulting in the tendency to construct any threat to this stable model as the exercising of ‘Power Over’.

This is not to say that whiteness is a prerequisite characteristic for the holding of gender-critical feminist beliefs. Rather, the intersection between whiteness and womanhood allows for the instantiation of what Collins labels a ‘hegemonic femininity’: a performance of womanhood which accesses relative privilege through axes of domination beyond gender, such as race, class, and age (see 2004). These various axes form a “matrix of domination” on which those ‘dual oppressor/oppressed identities’ can be described as “intermediate positions”. As noted by Hamilton

et al., most intelligible locations in this matrix “are intermediate in this way, but the primarily privileged locations of those who can at least partially instantiate hegemonic femininities are particularly consequential” (2019, p.326). Hamilton et al. offer the conceptual ‘femininity premium’ to describe “the wide array of personal benefits that flow to women who can approximate culturally valued performances of femininity that are . . . raced, classed, and [hetero]sexualized” (2019, p.334). Cisgender women too occupy the advantaged side of the cis/trans binary and are thus eligible for a femininity premium in the form of protection; just as “the purity and respectability associated with white womanhood is to be defended” (2019, p.327), so too is the purity and respectability of cis womanhood by positioning trans women’s anatomy as a threat. The perception that the cis woman occupies a position of biological purity necessarily rendering her powerless allows her to claim victimhood when this perceived biological purity is made unstable by the expansion of the category ‘woman’ to include trans women. We see this premium of protection in the British news media discourse around trans women and bathrooms; individual gender-critical women leverage their investment in hegemonic femininity (conferred upon them by nature of their cisgender status) to achieve outsized representation in national media discourse. The ‘concerns’ of gender-critical women are granted a national platform, while transgender women who dispute the validity of these ‘concerns’ can be written off as ignorant of *real* women’s perspectives. By way of example, while claiming to have been a victim of cancel culture since she expressed gender-critical beliefs, Stock has had no fewer than 18 interviews and articles published discussing those same beliefs since *Material Girls* was released, according to her own website (Stock, 2023). As Hamilton et al. say of the outsized platform offered to white women over black women, “they can be cruel, nasty, rude, or simply inconsiderate and then use their tears or discomfort to silence the objections of those in less powerful positions” (2019, p.327).

It should be acknowledged, however, that analytical frameworks like this one can be marred by binary thinking, even where we recognise the importance of ‘axes’ and ‘spectra’ between extreme positions. The limitations of this binary thinking are perhaps made most obvious when considering how medical transition allows for movement along this axis of domination lying between the extreme positions ‘man’ and ‘woman’, or ‘male’ and ‘female’ – acknowledging my own positionality within this matrix proves conceptually useful. I began medically transitioning a year ago at time of writing, and only began feeling comfortable labelling myself ‘woman’ within the last few months. While I certainly experienced privileges associated with *manhood* prior to medical transition, my feminine gender expression precluded me from access to privileges associated with *masculinity*. During my medical transition, while I began to stop publicly reading as ‘male’, and thus stopped

receiving gendered treatment and privileges associated with manhood, I also rarely read as 'female'. Societal associations of femaleness with femininity combined with the tendency to limit sexed categories to the male/female binary to exclude my body from an intelligible expression of femininity (outside of queer spaces). For a time then, transphobia itself produced a 'non-binary body' that I myself did not lay claim to. Only as my body (and behaviour) slowly became more aligned with culturally intelligible notions of femaleness was my expression of femininity viewed positively, and my 'claim' to womanhood accepted socially. Medical transition did not instantly flip a switch, allowing others to instantly read my body as female: the same applies to processes of social transition. There is a messy temporal aspect to transition that places the transitioning person in difficult, potentially traumatic, and generally culturally unintelligible gendered positions. During that particularly vulnerable time, the compassion and solidarity of other women, both cis and trans, was crucial in granting the time and space for exploration and development of my identity. This same compassion and solidarity, in my view, is what fuels understandings of intersectional feminism. I recognise, for example, that my transition produces another instance of white womanhood, and as it progresses, I am more able to instantiate the form of hegemonic femininity made available to white women. Acknowledging my own movement between the binary positions 'male' and 'female', and my own whiteness, allows for continuous self-reflective work described earlier by Schulman: self-reflection leading to the "self-transformation necessary to resolve conflict and produce justice" (2016, p.18).

In conclusion, the gender-critical feminist position from which Stock argues rests on the performance of a hegemonic femininity based in cisgender status. This performance allows gender-critical feminists to position themselves as victimised by the expansion and potential destabilisation of sex categories, which they believe are (and should remain) both dimorphic and derived from biology. These beliefs are 'gender-entitled' in that they are assumed to be more 'real' than the conceptions many trans people have about sex and gender, and thus the gender-critical claim to victimhood can be seen as an expression of what Serano would label 'gender anxiety'. Taking on the victim position configures the conflict between trans activists and gender-critical feminists as one in which the former has the capacity to wield *Power Over* the latter. From this position, gender-critical feminists (including Stock) overstate the harm caused by trans-inclusive policies that deemphasise biological sex in many contexts. The result is a portrayal of the trans liberation movement as abusive and threatening to women. Biological sex, then, is said to constitute reality itself, failing to recognise how this move reinforces the notion of biology as destiny which has subjugated racial and sexual

minorities throughout history. Thus, trans activists (and by extension, trans people in general) who conceive of sex differently are labelled deniers of reality.

Transnational Implications

While these depictions of biological sex as reality and trans activism as an abusive threat are central to Stock's work (and critical to the British gender-critical project more generally), they also have important transnational implications. Significantly, the critical reception of the German-language version of *Material Girls*, published in April 2022, presents a unique opportunity for analysis. Of the eighteen articles (at time of writing) since *Material Girls* was published highlighted on Stock's website (2023), five were published in German-speaking media outlets (with six more in non-English languages). In the months following the book's publication, several German-speaking national news media outlets published reviews. The Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ), a centre-right German daily newspaper often positioning itself as a national paper of record, published a glowing assessment of *Material Girls* by Patrick Bahners, drawing comparison with Alice Schwarzer's *Transsexualität* (discussed further in chapter two). Petra Gehring's review in Die Zeit, a centrist-liberal weekly national newspaper of record, while not entirely positive in its assessment of the text, nonetheless emphasises the banality of Stock's interventions: "The book is not a scandalous text" – "Das Buch ist kein Skandaltext" (2022). Gehring reiterates that Stock defers to a sense of realism, necessary for combatting the perceived dogmatic uptake of identity politics within English academia. Bahners too claims in FAZ that *Material Girls* represents a "return to realism in the gender debate" – "Rückwendung zum Realismus in der Geschlechterdebatte" - which aims to combat uncritical affirmation of gender identities (2022). In other words, Stock's framing of gender-critical appeals to the importance of biological sex is used by German journalists to signal a rejection of gender-identity politics. This poses the question, how are gender-critical arguments developed in the UK received transnationally? What follows is an analysis of Gehring and Bahners' reviews of *Material Girls*, demonstrating the development and proliferation of gender-critical argumentation transnationally. Through this closer analysis, I will explore the how the transnational aspect of this argumentation is itself used to escalate a conflict between trans people and gender-critical feminists.

Gehring's review concerns itself primarily with Stock's work on theoretical models of gender, focussing particularly on the categorisation of trans women. She reiterates a number of Stock's conclusions, beginning with her rejection of gender as a solely "felt" characteristic. Gehring concedes that an individual's gender/sex is changeable, however changing gender/sex by

‘identifying’ as another gender is labelled a fiction (2022). Instead, she encourages the disentangling of what it means to have felt (“geföhlt”) identification with a gender and to have become (“geworden”) a gender, since “the weight of the experience of gender socialisation makes a woman a woman” – “das Gewicht einer durchlebten Geschlechtersozialisation macht sehr wohl aus einer Frau eine Frau” (Gehring, 2022). In this way, she cautions against Stock’s rejection of social constructionism by claiming that the defining factor of an individual’s gender is one’s socialisation into the gendered classifications of man or woman. Crucially though, this gendered socialisation cannot be stripped away through self-identification or re-acquired afterwards - “nachträglich angeeignet” (Gehring, 2022). Thus, even through transition, trans women cannot become women, but rather become part of another non-binary sexed category. This construction of sex/gender poses several questions: what would the internal gendered socialisation of trans people (who are necessarily non-binary under this model) look like? How can this account for the various entirely different gendered self-conceptions held by trans people? Most critically though, how is Gehring’s designation of trans women as part of a separate third sex category, as opposed to simply an intersectional sub-category of ‘woman’, rationalised and not seen as arbitrary?

The answer to the latter question lies in Gehring’s uptake of Stock’s exploration of gender and power. Gehring states that trans womanhood does not by extension grant the right to ignore power relations between men and women – there are “Realitäten” which cannot be ignored by simply ‘identifying’ as a woman (Gehring, 2022). For this reason, Gehring argues, it is problematic to allow trans women, especially those she labels “still physically male” - “physisch noch männlich” (2022) - into women’s prisons or shelters, echoing the same rhetoric and argumentation used by Stock. This implies that trans women retain some form of male privilege or power whether they choose to medically transition or not. The question here is of course, how is this privilege/power conferred to trans women? And how does it manifest? Trans people in Germany and the UK experience statistically higher risks of violence, discrimination, and harassment than any other gender/sexual minority group (Bayrakdar & King, 2021, pp.163-164). According to a US study, both transgender men and women experience violent and sexual victimisation at between four and five times the rates of our cisgender counterparts (Flores et al., 2021, p.729). If privilege/power is retained because of socialisation, why does the Living Wage Foundation report that trans people, particularly trans women, often cannot access traditional forms of employment and are thus overrepresented in sex work? (Living Wage Foundation, 2022). In German-speaking countries, for example, 5.9% of trans people reported being engaged in sex work in 2020 (TransCare Hamburg, 2020). A 2015 report also found that transfeminine people were twice as likely as transmasculine people to have participated

in sex work (Fitzgerald, Patterson & Hickey), heavily suggesting that the systemic misogyny pushing socio-economically disadvantaged cis women into the sex trade extends to trans women. Serano coined the term “transmisogyny” to describe such multiplicative instances of misogyny and transphobia (2007, p.15), though this too is only part of a wider matrix of systemic subjugation: the same 2015 report highlights that the percentage of black trans people who have participated in sex work is almost four times higher than the percentage for trans people overall (Fitzgerald, Patterson & Hickey). This all combines to paint an image not of privilege and power retained by trans women by nature of their socialisation or biology, but of social disadvantage mediated through various axes of discrimination.

The validity of trans manhood is also undermined as part of Gehring’s brief commentary on gender and power. Aside from her main argument about the potential dangers of allowing trans women into women’s spaces, Gehring also states that it is not always appropriate (“adäquat”) to value trans men as men, particularly when this grants them access to male privilege instead of abolishing such privileges altogether (2022). While a commonly understood feminist goal is the abolition of misogynistic systems which privilege manhood and masculinity above womanhood and femininity, this is rarely coupled with the assumption that it is necessary to claim that *cis* men are actually not men at all. Instead, it demonstrates a bias against trans men, whose manhood is deemed revocable at any time: the result of the transphobic assumption that trans manhood is less stable, and ultimately less ‘real’, than that of cis men. Gehring’s statement also exposes inconsistencies in her conception of how power is conferred onto gendered subjects. The very fact that trans men are capable of being granted male privilege in the first place demonstrates that the power relations she addressed earlier are not based in biology or initial socialisation, but social recognition; when trans men are recognised as men, they experience male privilege. In the same vein, when trans women are recognised as women, they become subject to systems of misogyny (and are granted access to hegemonic femininity should they meet its requirements). The work of abolishing these unequal systems remains necessary, and crucially, trans perspectives must inform that work, since many trans people are capable of occupying intermediate positions within them.

Gehring’s review consistently emphasises the importance of realism – “Realismus”, “Realitäten” – that should ground discussions of queer and trans issues in ‘well-founded arguments’ (2022). She reports Stock’s description of a climate shift towards ‘identity politics’ in English academia (2022), reinscribing Stock’s portrayal of an overwhelming wave of gender identity theorists without questioning whether the ‘reality’ portrayed in Stock’s analysis is at odds with the ‘reality’ described

by others. The result is that Gehring reiterates similar potential harms to Stock: harms which were already overstated in the source material. For example, the belief that ‘physically male’ trans women pose a wide-reaching threat to cis women in prisons and shelters, or that the incorporation of trans perspectives into feminism ‘changes the subject’ – “das Thema wechseln” – thus drawing attention away from other feminist projects (Gehring, 2022). She pontificates about the feminist project falling prey to ‘male dominated lobbying groups’ – “männlich geprägten Lobbygruppen” (Gehring, 2022) – though it is unclear whether this is in reference to wider LGBTQ+ organisations, or specifically to trans-led organisations where the ‘males’ in question are actually trans women. This description of the English context imagines the gender-critical project as a defensive line against the advancement of an ideology which is ‘apparently widespread’ – “offenbar weitverbreitet” (Gehring, 2022) – at English universities. Gehring’s review, and particularly her recommendation that Stock’s book is necessary reading for all (2022), represents a warning against the same occurring in Germany. Thus, UK gender-critical discourse is made to matter within this particular German context as a source of crucial knowledge and experience, allowing German gender-critical feminists to learn from perceived mistakes made in the UK.

It is important, then, to acknowledge the political context of Gehring’s comments. Proposed laws simplifying the process of changing legal gender in Germany, voted down once before in 2021, were tabled again in June, 2022, in the form of the *Selbstbestimmungsgesetz* (self-ID law) following the election of the *Ampelkoalition* - the coalition of the Social Democratic Party of Germany, the Free Democratic Party, and Alliance 90/The Greens. The increased attention this brought to the trans community has coincided with an increased backlash against trans liberation, and with increased vitriol directed towards the few trans people in Germany with public profiles. By way of example, ‘Bündnis 90/Die Grünen’ (Green Party) MP and trans woman Tessa Ganserer explained that “malice, ridicule and hate have followed me since my coming out” - “Häme, Spott und Hass, das begleitet mich seit meinem Coming-out” (Goncalves, 2022). Both before and immediately following the 2021 election, Ganserer was the subject of a German gender-critical hate campaign pejoratively labelling her “Die Quotenfrau” (The Quota Woman, EMMA, 2022). The *Frauenquote* refers to the proportion of seats in the German Bundestag parties must fill with women. In an opinion article listing Ganserer’s deadname and recounting details of her transition, gender-critical feminist publication EMMA argued that her candidacy was illegitimate as she had decided against changing her legal gender before running as a woman, amplifying the objections of gender-critical initiative *Geschlecht Zählt* (Gender Counts, EMMA, 2022). Ganserer’s decision against changing legal gender is, however, itself a political statement: in an interview, she described the current requirement to go before a

judge to prove one's identity as humiliating – "entwürdigend" (Baur, 2021). As such, she intends to change legal gender only once the new *Selbstbestimmungsgesetz* proposal is passed, simplifying the process for others across Germany.

Ganserer's legal situation is a specifically German one: the result of friction between women's inclusion policies and outdated gender recognition legislation only possible in the German context. However, the reasoning behind the backlash to Ganserer's appointment stems from English gender-critical thought. In Gehring's review of *Material Girls*, she lists several cases in which trans women should not be considered women taken directly from Stock's writing - women's bathrooms and prisons among others. Gehring expands upon Stock's list though, stating that in the context of equality measures or women's quotas, it would be problematic to value trans women as women (2022) – a clear and direct reference to the widely publicised story of Tessa Ganserer. This addition demonstrates that the same transphobic reasoning circulated in response to common sticking points in English-speaking discourse can also be applied broad-brush in German-speaking discourse. Another example of this transnational transfer of reasoning can be found in Patrick Bahnners' review of *Material Girls* for FAZ. Bahnners supports Stock's claim that it is factually incorrect to describe sex as 'assigned' ("zugewiesen") at birth by medical professionals, instead claiming that sex is 'established' ("festgestellt") (2022). This distinction clarifies Bahnners' beliefs that sex categories arise from biology, and are fixed and stable by nature – the same beliefs which underpin Stock's gender-critical ideology. Bahnners then states that the linguistic function of describing sex as 'assigned' at birth is to allow for the assumption that sex categories are arbitrary and potentially changeable, thereby paving the way for projects such as the *Selbstbestimmungsgesetz* (2022). This is framed negatively, though again, what is important to notice is the redeployment of Stock's UK-based argumentation here in the German context.

To conclude, when reading these reviews together, it is clear that both texts reproduce the same fearful 'mood' present in the source material by describing various impending negative consequences of the cultural uptake of gender-identity theory. In the German context though, the very fact that this discourse is applied transnationally exacerbates this mood by implying that the perceived overthrowing of 'reality' was already successful elsewhere. When discussing Stock's anxiety around the changing language of sex, Bahnners describes her fears as 'well founded' – "gut begründet" (2022). Gehring goes as far as to describe the advance of gender-related policies in England that push protections and equality for women 'under the table' (2022). Altogether, an image forms of conflict in England between gender-identity theory, associated with 'fiction', and

gender-critical feminism, associated with 'reality'. The result is that, at least in the English context, this is a conflict which 'reality' has lost, or at least where 'reality' has been lost. In Germany though, where the *Selbstbestimmungsgesetz* is presently under consideration, there is potential for the gender-critical project to halt, hinder or otherwise limit the scope of these measures in the name of protecting women. Gehring presents the story of Tessa Ganserer to invoke images of trans women occupying women's positions in quotas, coded as solely for cis women, for this very reason. Despite Stock's claims of potential risks being overstated as demonstrated earlier in this chapter, these risks are reproduced and expanded upon in both German-language reviews.

In seeking the liberation of trans people though, it is often not enough to identify that gender-critical arguments overstate or invent harms to escalate the conflict between the gender-critical project and trans people. Once arguments are debunked, contrasting evidence is presented, and falsifications are exposed, what remains in gender-critical discourse? If the harms to women presented by gender-critical activists in response to the expansion of trans rights are overstated or fabricated entirely, why are we still having this conversation? The next chapter answers this question through an exploration of free speech and debate narratives in gender-critical argumentation. The supposed value of 'debating' trans rights is raised by gender-critical feminists in order to ensure that trans liberation can never be fully stabilised outside of an endlessly defensive position. I posit that this valorisation of 'debate' surrounding trans rights is strategically employed to meaningfully expand the scope of what is deemed 'acceptable' rhetoric, and to reanimate transphobic assumptions under the guise of *just asking questions*.

Chapter Two: Just Asking Questions?

When no argument is left to prop up transphobic rhetoric, what often remains in gender-critical writings is an appeal to freedom of speech and the inherent virtue of ‘debate’. Once trans people have eloquently expressed the material harm caused by gender-critical argumentation, the terms begin to shift: not to defend gender-critical reasoning, but to defend the circuitous continuation of the ‘debate’ in itself. To quote Natalie Wynn, trans woman and self-proclaimed ex-philosopher, “you know what you’re saying is indefensible, so you defend your right to say it” (*Contrapoints*, 2022, 7:34-7:40). In a telling pre-emptive section of the introduction to *Material Girls* titled “In defence of debate”, Stock stresses that she poses only an intellectual challenge to gender identity theory (2021, pp.40-43). Unfortunately, these purely intellectual concerns about the viability of gender identity theory’s explanations for the existence of trans people seem to force Stock to act outside the theoretical realm – action clearly intended to limit the freedoms of trans people. For example, during the UK Parliament’s oral evidence session on the December 9th, 2020, Stock (along with Professors Rosa Freedman and Alice Sullivan) submitted a report to the Women’s and Equalities Committee (WEC), attempting to demonstrate trans women’s higher risk of violent and sexual criminality when compared with cis women (2020). This evidence specifically was debunked in separate reports submitted by Dr Ruth Pearce (2020) and Professor Alex Sharpe (2020) during the very same evidence session. Regardless, while the WEC later made recommendations for updates to the GRA allowing for a system of self-ID, the Government rejected this call for sweeping changes, referencing the intensity of “debate” around the issue (UK Parliament, 2022, p.3). The positioning of trans issues as an intellectual debate ignores, unintentionally or otherwise, that trans people’s safety, freedoms, and access to life-saving healthcare are at stake.

In this chapter, I pose several critical questions: firstly, why is the perceived necessity of public debate and unlimited freedom of speech so commonly espoused in relation to trans issues? Following Gavan Titley’s work on the same question in relation to racist discourses, I examine Alice Schwarzer and Chantal Louis’s 2022 book *Transsexualität* among other texts to determine how accusations of transphobia are viewed within the gender-critical movement as restrictive of free speech. Given Schwarzer’s prominence within German feminism, recognising the influence of gender-critical argumentation developed in the UK context in *Transsexualität* is crucial for demonstrating the transnational exchange of these ideas. I also turn to Stock’s career outside of *Material Girls* as I problematise the structure of ‘debate’, drawing attention to how the uneven distribution of authority within debate disadvantages marginalised women. Secondly, I ask how gender-critical activists rationalise the backlash to their anti-trans rhetoric. Here, I explore the

impact of institutional capture narratives through examination of Joanna Williams's *The Corrosive Impact of Gender Ideology*. As part of my analysis, I demonstrate the presence of an interconnected network of gender-critical activists affiliated with alternative news outlets, lending disproportionate influence and discursive power to the movement. Finally, I question how the insistence on free speech and debate common in UK gender-critical thought manifests transnationally in the German gender-critical movement? Through an analysis of the output of a small group of German scientists in alternative news media sites, and the backlash they received as a result, I identify common language, rhetorical devices and lines of argumentation drawn from UK gender-critical discourse, demonstrating how they can be effectively redeployed in a specifically German context.

The Deployment of Free Speech and Debate Narratives in Gender-critical Thought

In his book *Is Free Speech Racist?*, Gavan Titley questions the tendency to defer to free speech narratives in relation to racist speech, examining the concept of 'closure' as it applies to definitions of racism - his pan-European approach here is particularly apt for application across the UK and German contexts. In Western societies generally considering themselves 'postracial', wherein racism is cast as something that we have collectively overcome, "racialised knowledge, artefacts and discourses continually resurface, as potentially innocent, as test cases of public toleration, across sites and genres of expression" (2020, p.22). It is important to note that since racialised knowledge re-emerges through the lens of disinterested enquiry, "anti-racism's insistence on certain forms of closure is increasingly presented as a threat to free speech" (2020, p.22). For this reason, free speech and debate narratives disproportionately centre on issues of race and racism: on what cannot be said for fear of being labelled 'racist'. The assumption that we live in a 'postracial' society necessarily assumes racism espoused or acted upon in the modern day is "irrational" and an "individual failing", further necessitating that the burden of proving an expression *is racist* "falls on those levelling the *accusation*" (Titley, 2020, p.37, italics in original). Following the rationale of postracialism, that race and racism are to be stably understood as things of the past, an accusation of racist behaviour is tantamount to an accusation of "moral degeneracy" (Pitcher, 2009, p.13, in Titley, 2020, p.37). As Titley explains, any anti-racist attempt to "capture how racism changes historically, to describe and oppose its shifting political expressions" presents "a moral hazard for open enquiry" (2020, p.37). As a result, nuanced, historically informed anti-racist perspectives are perceived as restricting public discussion and limiting free speech.

A similar view of accusations of transphobia as restrictive of public debate is commonly raised by those in the gender-critical movement. Kathleen Stock, for example, described how protests against

her gender-critical views led to her resignation in an interview with the BBC's Woman's Hour. She discusses her colleagues levelling accusations of transphobia, resulting in a poster campaign by the student body to remove her from her post as Professor of Philosophy (Woman's Hour, 2021, 02:06-03:39). Accusations of transphobia, in Stock's view, limit the exploration of ideas around trans issues, which is then portrayed as a threat to women's safety. This assertion demonstrates conceptual similarities between both racism and transphobia's relation to narratives of free speech, though it is not to conflate the two: racism and transphobia have different (though sometimes interconnected) histories, expressions, and practices which are important to acknowledge. Instead, this analysis demonstrates a significant component in labelling the *naming of transphobia* as restrictive of public debate. If the presumption of a postracial landscape, of being 'over' racism, leads to the positioning of historically-informed anti-racist political action as limiting free speech, is the same true of attempts to capture the shifting political expressions of transphobia?

To various extents, a similar assumption to the one operating in 'postracial' dynamics can be found propping up free speech narratives in defence of various bigotries. As a result of advances against, for example, common manifestations of misogyny, homophobia and ableism, there are things that can 'no longer be said' without expected backlash – expressions lying within widely agreed, *closed* definitions of these bigotries. Narratives of free speech are captured by various movements (particularly on the far-right, as Titley highlights) to "create space for racist speech as a beleaguered expression of liberty" (2020, p.24). I would suggest that this same reasoning applies more widely: not just to racism, but to other bigoted forms of speech, including but not limited to misogyny, homophobia, ableism and crucially, transphobia. The value of free speech in these forms is expressed through claims to what Titley labels "'taboo' truth", that is, "a truth rendered unfree by the official hegemony of anti-racism" (2020, p.24). Again, while this is certainly true for racist speech, this same dynamic operates in gender-critical, transphobic argumentation. For example, in Bahners' review of *Material Girls*, the article closes with a rhetorical question asking:

Wer will ernsthaft glauben, „peer pressure“ und Körperbilder aus dem Internet wirkten nie mit, wenn eine Zwölfjährige sich Pubertätsblocker spritzen lassen möchte, und das Mädchen höre bloß auf seine innere Stimme? (2022)

(Who seriously wants to believe that 'peer pressure' and body images from the internet never had an impact when a twelve-year-old girl wants to have puberty blockers injected, and she only listens to her inner voice?, my translation)

Bahners' meaning is clear: since more trans adolescents are AFAB than AMAB, these AFAB adolescents must be confusing feelings of body dysmorphia (induced by gendered beauty standards) for feelings of gender dysphoria or dissatisfaction with their gender/sex. This assumption, sometimes called the 'Rapid Onset Gender Dysphoria' or ROGD hypothesis, has been debunked countless times, most recently by Turban et al. in the US context (2022, p.53). In addition, data from a large-scale German survey suggests that in Germany, there are actually more AMAB than AFAB trans people (Pöge et al, 2022, p.55). While it is important to stress that Bahners' claims are contradicted by currently available data, it is most vital to emphasise that transphobic theories of ROGD and social contagion are presented as the same kind of 'taboo truths' identified by Titley: supposedly 'common-sense' beliefs rendered unfree by the official hegemony of trans-inclusivity.

For these reasons, I posit that the perceived hegemony of trans-inclusivity (countering transphobia) is a transitive property generated by the perceived 'pastness', the closure, of other bigotries. The perception common to the UK and Germany that, for example, racism, homophobia and ableism are 'things of the past' creates an impression that the same applies broad-brush to other named forms of bigotry. Many gender-critical actors recognise and problematise or outright reject this very notion in an attempt to ensure that excluding trans people remains an intelligible, acceptable option in various contexts. One such individual is Alice Schwarzer – infamously controversial author and present gender-critical activist who has long positioned herself as the voice of German feminism. In her 2022 book, *Transsexualität*, co-written by EMMA editor Chantal Louis, Schwarzer speaks of "orchestrated hate campaigns" by "fanatics" against perceived "trans-haters" – "orchestrierte Hetzkampagnen" von "FanatikerInnen" gegen "Trans-hasserinnen" (2022, p.16). Campaigners for trans liberation are represented as "ideologues trying to enforce a ban on speaking" – "diese IdeologInnen versuchen, ein Sprechverbot zu erzwingen" (Schwarzer, 2022, p.16) – illustrating another discursive link between limits on free speech and perceived hegemonic trans inclusivity³. Importantly though, Schwarzer distinguishes the "queer movement", presumably inclusive of all non-trans identities encompassed under an LGBTQ+ umbrella, from the "trans movement" (2022, pp.12-13). She constructs the queer movement as cognisant of the fluidity of gender, while trans activists are described as adhering solely to traditional binary labels, demanding to know:

³ Schwarzer makes partial use of the 'Binnen-I' – a non-standard German linguistic convention wherein a capital 'I' is used within words, indicating gender-neutrality. The use of this convention has become part of the contentious discourse about gender-equality in written German. Crucially, Schwarzer only uses the Binnen-I to refer to non-gender-critical parties, for example, the 'FanatikerInnen' and 'IdeologInnen' above. Members of the gender-critical movement are referred to using the standard convention for groups of women, i.e. 'Trans-hasserinnen'. This decision both associates the movement for trans liberation with a controversial linguistic convention, and secondly, implies that the gender-critical movement consists solely of concerned women.

Bist du ('in Wahrheit') eine Frau oder ein Mann? Du musst dich entscheiden! (2022, p.13).

(Are you ('truly') a woman or a man? You need to decide!, my translation)

This forced delineation between 'queer' and 'trans' initially appears arbitrary and unrepresentative of how queer liberation movements actually operate, however following her chain of reasoning demonstrates meaningful conclusions. In Schwarzer's view, queer (particularly gender non-conforming) people deserve the right to be free of prejudices stemming from gender-binarism (2022, p.12). However, this only extends to queer people who accept their sex as innate and unchangeable, or otherwise do not seek to transition. Most trans people destabilise these assumptions and thus, the liberation of trans people must be rendered debatable in gender-critical discourse and separated from that of queer people more generally. Any closure around what it means to be transphobic is challenged: a key component in the discursive process allowing for even the most widely-debunked, conspiratorial transphobic arguments to be redeployed in the name of feminist concern. For example, Schwarzer briefly discusses how the hegemony of trans-inclusivity extends into the realm of politics, wherein the Green Party advocates for "an almost unlimited tolerance in trans politics" – "eine quasi unbegrenzte 'Toleranz' in der Transpolitik" (2022, p.17). However, she continues, this tolerance does not apply to the gender-critical movement who are "defamed as anti-trans" – "als 'transfeindlich' diffamiert" (2022, p.17). The labelling of a person as 'anti-trans', the naming of transphobia, shuts down debate in Schwarzer's view. As a result, blanket tolerance of all trans-affirmative viewpoints must be rejected, specifically in the name of preventing young women from transitioning to escape the oppressive effects of misogyny, supposedly resulting in "healthy bodies being mutilated and made ill for life" – "gesunde Körper werden so verstümmelt und lebenslang krank gemacht" (2022, p.17). Schwarzer's insistence on freeing up speech is utilised to reanimate long-debunked transphobic arguments about social contagion.

Later in *Transsexualität*, author Chantal Louis addresses another perceived limit on speech, this time in the context of UK psychotherapeutic intervention. She draws attention to an article concerning Sue Evans, a psychotherapist previously employed by the UK's Tavistock Gender Identity Development Service (GIDS) until 2019, discussing her treatment of trans youth, quoting the following passage:

When you work in the area of gender dysphoria you begin to see that many of these children have other areas of concern or difficulty, such as depression, autism, trauma, childhood abuse, internalised homophobia, relationship difficulties, social isolation and so on (Hurst, 2019).

Louis quotes this in German as “Viele dieser Kinder haben eigentlich andere Probleme wie Depressionen, Autismus, ein erlittenes Trauma durch sexuellen Missbrauch oder internalisierte Homophobie. Doch diese Faktoren werden nicht in Betracht gezogen“ (Louis, 2022, p.38). Interestingly, the last part of the quote, translated into English as “But these factors are not taken into account” is not present in the original article and appears to have been added by Louis in translation. The phrase “childhood abuse” is also translated as “sexueller Missbrauch”, incorrectly limiting ‘abuse’ to a solely sexual practice. One of Evans’s colleagues, Kirsty Entwistle, expressed similar concerns to Louis in a self-published open letter earlier the same year, explaining that GIDS clinicians feel anxious about the possibility being labelled transphobic by colleagues for raising concerns about the potential for wrongful gender dysphoria diagnoses (2019). What is crucial to notice is that in both cases, gender dysphoria is positioned as a manifestation of various other issues, ignoring the possibility that gender dysphoria could itself be the cause of other comorbid psychological conditions. A 2013 study also explains that “gender variant children and adolescents may experience abuse by peers and teachers, as well as parents and caregivers” (Firth, p.297), again reversing the dynamic posed by both Evans and Entwistle: a trans child’s gender variance can itself lead to abuse from the child’s caregivers.

As mentioned in the study, all cases are complex and as such, young patients with gender dysphoria should be granted the “opportunity to explore the influence and meaning of their adverse childhood experiences on their social and psychological development” (Firth, 2013, p.297). In the above articles however, both Evans and Entwistle claim that this kind of psychotherapeutic investigation is no longer possible. Sue Evans’ husband, Marcus Evans, spoke out on this apparent issue in 2021 at a conference convened to market their co-authored book, *Gender Dysphoria - A Therapeutic Model for Working With Children*. Mallory Moore, a trans activist in attendance, reported that the couple consistently attacked the affirmative model of trans healthcare and gave no suggestions for “criteria they would consider sufficient to come to the conclusion that a trans patient really was in fact trans” (2021). Marcus Evans also claimed that the *Memorandum of Understanding on Conversion Therapy*, a document signed by the vast majority of UK organisations in the field of psychological health, “was preventing legitimate psychotherapeutic investigation” into patients with gender dysphoria (Moore, 2021). As Moore highlights, this assertion is incorrect: the memorandum explicitly states that for

these patients, “there may be grounds for exploring therapeutic options to help them live more comfortably with it, reduce their distress and reach a greater degree of self-acceptance” (MOU2, 2019, p.2). The document serves only to prohibit therapeutic intervention seeking to ‘correct’, ‘reverse’ or otherwise suppress the expression of an individual’s gender-diverse identity.

The assumption that a person’s trans or gender-diverse identity can be reversed or ‘corrected’ relies on cissexist beliefs. Cissexism, defined in Julia Serano’s 2007 book *Whipping Girl*, is the belief that trans people’s identified genders are in some way inferior to, or less authentic than, those of cis people (Serano, 2007, p.12). While Marcus Evans did not explicitly advocate for gender-identity conversion practices, the same cissexist assumptions exercised in so-called ‘reparative’ conversion therapies operate within his claims. For example, Moore quotes Evans’s argument that supporting trans patients’ self-knowledge is akin to “colluding with anorexics drive to starve themselves” (2021); gender variance here is considered an undesirable symptom of comorbid psychological disorders, if not a psychological disorder in itself. This would necessitate that clinicians act as investigators of patients’ claims of trans identity. A patient cannot simply *be* trans, rather, clinicians should locate the root of a person’s gender variance and help them to *overcome* it: a process exactly akin to conversion therapy in all but name. Freedom of speech narratives are here brought down from the abstract discursive realm to a specific clinical context. Marcus Evans asserted that clinicians employing the ‘reparative’ model, as opposed to the affirmative model, face a “difficult” and “political” situation (Moore, 2021). The perceived hegemony of trans-inclusivity is, again, the culprit: to quote Sue Evans, it is “difficult” for clinicians to resolve a patient’s gender-dysphoria by reversing their trans identity “if your institution is in the grips of a kind of policy that only uses the affirmative approach” (Moore, 2021). In essence then, free speech narratives are used here as a defence of conversion therapy practices.

While free speech narratives are certainly crucial to Schwarzer and Louis’s analysis, they also serve as a powerful rallying cry within anti-trans movements. The assertion that women, through accusations of transphobia, are being silenced by a powerful political entity has encouraged members of the gender-critical movement to organise transnationally behind the now infamous slogan, ‘Let Women Speak’. Popularised by the UK group Standing for Women, led by speaker Kellie-Jay Keen, demonstrations have taken place as part of a so-called ‘world tour’, cropping up across the UK and abroad with the stated intention of “creating space in which women can speak” (Standing for Women, 2023). In practice, these rallies are platforms for explicitly anti-trans bigotry, while any women with pro-trans views are forbidden from participation. In Australia, a rally outside the

Parliament House in Melbourne attracted members of the gender-critical movement, along with a group of neo-Nazis, chanting “white power” and proudly displaying a banner reading “Destroy Paedo Freaks” (Martin, 2023). While Keen distanced herself from the neo-Nazis and denounced their involvement, the group “explicitly claimed their presence was in support of her campaign” (Martin, 2023). The transphobic rhetoric espoused at ‘Let Women Speak’ rallies, rhetoric that attracted neo-Nazis in common cause, directly impacts the trans community. Following Keen’s event in Auckland, New Zealand, independent analytics organisation The Disinformation Project reported “a massive increase in the level of online hatred directed at the trans community”, including “extraordinarily violent” content and vitriol that “could be described as genocidal” (Cardwell, 2023). Under the guise of free speech for women, violent transphobia is offered a legitimising platform: the ‘Let Women Speak’ World Tour website quotes Keen’s assertion that “Extreme actions require extreme language” (Standing for Women, 2023). The slogan ‘Let Women Speak’ in this context is not an assertion that all women should be allowed to express their opinion (trans-positive perspectives are not provided a platform at these events), but that transphobic speech should not be policed, no matter how damaging.

On Authority: Problematizing ‘Debate’ in Gender-critical Thought

The deference to free speech manifests in different ways within different factions of the UK anti-trans movement. Keen’s rhetoric and ideology may be ‘gender-critical’, and explicitly transphobic, but she rejects the label ‘feminist’ outright (Keen, 2023). Those who oppose trans liberation in the name of (a certain kind of) feminism, however, for example Kathleen Stock, employ structurally similar free speech narratives, though with speech characterised as open intellectual ‘debate’. If trans people engaged with gender-critical ideas in rational, open debate, so the thinking goes, the most cohesive theories and ideas would form a consensus – the proverbial cream rising to the top. Stock has taken part in several formalised debates operating under this assumption – for example, on November 17th, 2022, she participated in a formal debate at Cambridge Union arguing for “the right to offend” (2022). In these formalised debates, ideas are presented and elaborated with the specific aim of convincing participants to cast votes for a particular ‘winning’ side. By way of their very structure, formalised debates generate the impression of a democratic process by which ideas and doctrines are adopted by debate societies. Similar impressions are generated by the far more nebulous concept of ‘open debate’ operating within public discourse – after all, the trans ‘debate’ does not (usually) take place in resplendent chambers lined with oil paintings. Instead, when trans issues are put ‘up for debate’, trans people and our allies must struggle to be heard in the public arena where a simulacrum of the formalised debate structure manifests: the gender-critical

movement and trans liberation movement present the opposing ideas, and the voting system is supplanted by the jury of public opinion. In this section, I problematise 'debate' as a structure for producing knowledge by underlining how authority is unevenly distributed in ways which disadvantage marginalised women. I demonstrate how systems of oppression function to delegitimise experiential perspectives commonly held by minority women by critiquing the necessity of 'debate' in both formalised and informal public contexts.

Those who engage in debate necessarily have knowledge about the subject at hand. To be coherent and successful within the structure of debate, a participant must present logically consistent, rational arguments supporting their position. Conceptions of rationality, however, are coloured by gendered biases semantically associating men (and masculinity) with reason and rationality and women (and femininity) with emotion (Pavco-Giaccia et al., 2019, p.11). In formalised debate environments, these biases result in women being less likely to 'win' debates against men; while data in the UK context is unavailable, a US study of high school debates showed that debate teams containing girls were 10-17.1% less likely to win against all-male opponents (Yi & Nie, 2020, p.2). The results demonstrate the impact of unconscious bias - associations of masculinity with reason grant men a form of assumed epistemic authority (that is, authority arising from knowledge of a subject) not equally granted to women.

When discussing the 'trans debate' however, womanhood itself is often central to the arguments on the table. As a result, those with stable claims to womanhood are also assumed to have epistemic authority. When a gender-critical cis woman wades into the mire of the 'trans debate', be it in the form of a tabloid opinion article or a published book, her position as a cisgender woman, her claim to womanhood and the label 'woman', is stable - so stable in fact that it appears not to be a claim at all, but a pre-discursive fact. The cisgender woman is a woman precisely because she has always been so (and following gender-critical argumentation, because her biology has always made her so). The position of the trans woman however, her claim to womanhood and the label 'woman', is the very question these debates seek to answer. The transgender woman only becomes a woman once the 'trans debate' resolves that she is so. For now, as this endless debate continues within public discourse, even when trans women advocate for themselves as women, they do so from a disadvantaged position. The cisgender woman's assumed epistemic authority in this context is an instance of what Cousens labels 'speaker authority' – an informal and non-positional authority afforded to a person based on their membership to a privileged social group, i.e. cisgender people (2023, p.472). This speaker authority allows cis women to affect permissibility conditions for speech

(Cousens, 2023, p.474), in this case, rendering the delegitimisation of trans womanhood acceptable. Trans people who engage with the debate on these terms must constantly reaffirm their identity, gender, and occasionally even their personhood, often against interlocutors whose stable claims to gendered identity means they have little to lose. Debate of this kind is often won even before any argument is presented.

It should be noted though that oppressive systems of this kind are not restricted to acting only once 'debate' has begun. Rather, they are fundamental in selecting which voices are even capable of participating. UK journalists, authors, and philosophers publishing articles 'debating' trans issues are most often cisgender. In the realm of formalised debate, when trans issues are *on* the table, trans people are rarely *at* the table. When Stock was invited to the Oxford Union on May 30th, 2023, to discuss trans issues, the event centred squarely on her book along with her own experience of the backlash received since its publication (OxfordUnion, 2023). She was given the opportunity to discuss her own theories of gender and where trans people fit into them, while the most prominent trans voice in the room was that of a non-binary protester who glued themselves to the floor in hopes of drawing attention back towards the harm that debating the rights of trans people does (Cobham, 2023). In *Against White Feminism*, Rafia Zakaria discusses the imbalance within feminism wherein those feminist 'experts', those who "write about feminism, lead feminist organisations and make feminist policy in the Western world", are primarily "white and middle-class" (Zakaria, 2022, p.4). In other words, our feminist 'pundits' (to borrow a term from Zakaria) producing feminism within the cultural imaginary are often capable of instantiating hegemonic femininities through axes of domination beyond gender. Zakaria highlights "the functional dichotomy between expertise and experience", wherein knowledge arising from formal expertise is valued higher than knowledge gained through lived experience (Zakaria, 2022, p.8). Since access to this formal expertise is "unevenly distributed in favour of middle-class white people, this emphasis on expertise becomes a kind of gatekeeping of power that locks out people of colour, as well as working-class people, migrants and many other groups" (Zakaria, 2022, p.8). As Stock, a cis feminist, sits above and attempts to ignore the protests of a trans feminist, all while theorising about the identity formation of trans people, it is difficult to imagine a more prescient manifestation the preferential valuation of expertise over experience in action.

The introduction of a different kind of authority into this space, then – one founded in lived experience which these 'experts' may not share – is seen as a threat to the legitimacy of their own

contribution to women's rights, as if feminist thought and praxis is a zero-sum game (Zakaria, 2022, p.8).

As a result, gender-critical feminists decry this alternative form of feminist authority as an attempt to silence and undermine the feminist project, demanding debate in order to preserve the preferential valuation of expertise-based authority. Experiential perspectives held by trans and non-binary people, often messy with subjectivity, are devalued, despite their complex journeys of gendered expression allowing for insights not typically available to cisgender subjects. The experiences of trans and non-binary people of colour are devalued further; as Zakaria highlights, trauma experienced by non-white people of marginalised genders is often assumed to simply be a symptom of “their unfeminist culture” (2022, p.5). White victimhood is however “portrayed as an aberration, a glitch, and not a reflection of wider trends or values in white culture” (Zakaria, 2022, p.5). Thus, the importance of centring, platforming, and learning from these subjects who most frequently come up against institutional inequality in producing feminist justice cannot be overstated. The gender-critical demand for debate should consequently be seen, not as an attempt to sincerely explore feminist theories of identity formation, but rather to delegitimise the experiential perspectives of minority subjects.

Fundamentally, through calls for debate of trans issues and by specifically purporting to ‘let women speak’, the gender-critical movement lays claim to the opinions of all (cisgender) women. In accord with Stock, Schwarzer and Louis among others, the assertion that women need to be allowed to speak suggests that accusations of transphobia explicitly limit women’s speech. The underlying assumption remains that women in both national contexts are so intimidated by the hegemony of trans-inclusivity that critiquing measures promoting trans liberation in any way represents a moral hazard. The following section will explore how this fear is rationalised within the gender-critical movement through narratives of ideological and institutional capture.

Institutional/Ideological Capture Narratives in Gender-critical Thought

Narratives of institutional or ideological capture arise commonly in UK gender-critical discussions of free speech to answer the question of where the perceived hegemony of trans-inclusivity *actually* stems from. They render practical the rather abstract, nebulous sense that trans activists, and trans people, have somehow gained outsized socio-political influence in the UK: anti-trans viewpoints are restricted, and thus free speech is curtailed, because purportedly independent organisations and institutions have been overrun (literally ‘captured’) by those who hold trans-positive views. A 2020

report by Joanna Williams of the UK think-tank Civitas, titled *The Corrosive Impact of Transgender Ideology*, devotes much of its length to discussing the supposed “ideological capture” of UK institutions by “the transgender movement” which “has proved to be phenomenally successful” (p.64). The success of this movement in liberating trans people can, in Williams’ view, be partially attributed to a strategic political sleight-of-hand - that is, the supposedly recent adjunct of the ‘T’ to an apparently pre-existing LGB movement, allowing “access to already established networks and funding” (Williams, 2020, p.65). What follows is a critique of the fundamentally ahistorical assertion that trans people parasitically attached themselves to an established LGB movement.

Trans and gender non-conforming people existed within historical sexual liberation movements long before the modern labels used to describe trans people were developed. In most cases, these movements have advocated for, and on behalf of, a wide spectrum of queer identities not limited solely to those centred around same-sex attraction. In early 20th century Berlin, sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld’s fieldwork reveals a vast queer subculture of non-normative sexual identities, from gay men and lesbians to trans men and women, neatly encompassed under Hirschfeld’s label, “das dritte Geschlecht” or “the third sex” (Hirschfeld, 2017, p.14). Hirschfeld, himself a gay man, wrote accounts of individuals whose legal gender was at odds with the way they and others recognised themselves, for example, a trans man politely dubbed “Miss X” (Hirschfeld, 2017, p.19). Later in his career, Hirschfeld’s activism on behalf of the queer community encouraged his development of the *Institut für Sexualwissenschaft* – the Institute for Sexual Research – where the entire ‘third sex’ community was represented (Herrn, 2023). Here, Hirschfeld offered pioneering surgeries and hormone treatments to members of the community who needed them (people who would, in today’s terminology, be called ‘trans’), allowing for medical transition to be considered an option long before a distinction between gender and sexuality had been fully conceptualised. This historically trans-inclusive movement, however, arose entirely within the German national context and has no (known) UK equivalent – after all, the institute and much of the third sex community eventually fell victim to the rise of the Nazi regime. In light of these early fascist attempts to censor and erase advocacy for LGBTQ+ liberation, it is vital to recognise that various sexual liberation movements, even in their earliest iterations, and notably in Germany, fought not for Gs and Ls and Bs as select sexual minority groups, but for queerness in all its forms.

In various more recent historical contexts the world over, particularly harsh social climates for trans and gender-nonconforming people resulted in those communities initiating events of queer resistance. For example, during the 1969 Stonewall riots in New York, before violent resistance

broke out, arrests could only be justified against patrons who refused to provide identification to officers, or any patrons dressed in clothing deemed not to conform to that person's (perceived) gender. Patrons dressed in gender-variant clothing were taken by female officers into the bathroom to have their genitals inspected in line with New York state's public morality laws, effectively targeting trans and gender-non-conforming people (Cervini, 2020, p.299), resulting in "trans women, drag queens, and street youth" leading the fight against the abusive officers in a powerful act of rebellion (2020, p.301). Three years earlier, a riot took place in the San Francisco neighbourhood 'Tenderloin' at Compton's cafeteria. Susan Stryker writes that Tenderloin's trans sex workers who 'worked the streets', labelled 'street queens', were often subject to violent, sexual assault and harassment at the hands of police officers (Stryker, 2008, p.67). When the police (at the behest of Compton's cafeteria management) attempted to forcibly remove one of the queens from the venue, "she unexpectedly threw her coffee in his face . . . and a melee erupted" (Stryker, 2008, p.64). The result was a night of "general havoc" as trans women, drag queens, and Tenderloin's wider queer community levied violent resistance against over-policing with important positive impacts on police treatment of San Franciscan queer people (Stryker, 2008, p.65). In the UK, 4 years prior to the establishment of the Gay Liberation Front in 1970 as the primary political movement for LGBT liberation ('gay' was used to refer to the wider umbrella of LGBT identities), the Beaumont Society was founded as a group specifically for transvestites and transsexuals (2018). The society organised the UK's first trans research conference on March 16th and 17th 1974 at the University of Leeds - experts in "gender identity research" gave papers on gender and sexuality, stalls sold large-size women's shoes, a documentary film titled "The Queen" was screened, and the night concluded with a midnight "disco dance" (WYQS, 2023).

As these early instances of queer activism demonstrate, from violent resistance to research and knowledge dissemination, campaigns for the liberation of LGB people have also regularly arisen with, not without, the T. This ahistorical assertion pervading Williams' report should instead be seen as the strategic division of sexual minorities whose oppression has always been justified under an umbrella of non-normative sexual expression: an attempt to assure readers that Williams' critique of trans identity does not arise from bigotry against LGBT people. This both contributes to the construction of gender-critical critique as 'reasoned' and encourages LGB people, who are statistically most likely to support proposals advancing trans liberation (Just Like Us, 2023), to see trans people as a threat to any hard-won equality they may only have tentatively achieved. Blame for the increased threat to the freedoms and safety of LGBT people is therefore placed on trans

people, and deflected away from the gender-critical project, whose activism is the reason why these freedoms are rendered debatable in the UK in the first place.

Beyond this division between LGB and T drawn in Williams' report is another "distinction between transgenderism and transgender individuals" (2020, p.1): rather than directly condemning the behaviour (or existence) of trans people, Williams claims solely to be critical of an abstract 'transgenderist' belief system that "challenges sex-based rights and actively promotes the idea that a person's gender identity has no connection to their anatomy" (2020, p.1). This self-same distinction is drawn by Stock in *Material Girls*, wherein the stated target of her ire is "gender identity theory", not simply trans people (2021, pp.40-43). Schwarzer too can claim to support the queer community while critiquing 'trans ideology' (Schwarzer & Louis, 2022, p.12), despite queer and trans activists ostensibly being the same people.⁴ Narratives of ideological capture thus provide the gender-critical project with a convenient, internally consistent way to discount evidence contradicting gender-critical narratives "as the product of a political ideology and transgender subversion" (Moore, 2021).

This ascribes to narratives of 'institutional capture' a distinctly conspiratorial bent. Trans researcher Lee Leveille documented the rise of conspiratorial transphobia, particularly in the US context, in his *TAnon* series. Riffing on, and drawing a thread through from, far-right conspiracy group QAnon, Leveille describes an ideology "centered on a supposed globalist establishment targeting children in schools and in the doctor's office to make them trans" (2021). The abstract depiction of this globalist establishment resembles antisemitic conspiratorial thinking – a rhetorical connection demonstrated by Lorber and Greenesmith in 2021. Proponents of far-right conspiracy beliefs (typically centring antisemitic argumentation) are, it seems, drawn to anti-trans, gender-critical rhetoric. Recent research undertaken by activist Ada Blockadia in February 2023, for example, concretely identifies social media interaction networks between clusters of accounts held by far-right and gender-critical actors. These interactions point towards popular transphobic personalities like Graham Linehan and Kellie Jay-Keen serving as "key far-right entry points into the anti-trans movement" (Blockadia, 2023). Gender-critical ideological capture narratives rely on this kind of conspiratorial transphobia. That UK trans people lack enough meaningful political influence to improve access to trans healthcare or legal gender recognition is self-evident. From the 2020 scrapping of self-ID legislation to the 2023 high court decision that the NHS's disproportionately long wait-times for gender-

⁴ This line of reasoning has historically been deployed against various minorities, perhaps most pertinently in recent memory against the so-called 'gay agenda'. Conservative Christian religious doctrine asked its followers to 'love the sinner and hate the sin' when it came to same-sex attraction, though intrinsic religiosity remained correlated with negative attitudes towards gay men and lesbians (Krull, 2017, pp.99-100).

affirming care cannot be considered unlawful (Sinmaz, 2023), governmental organisations have consistently failed to improve the situation of trans people. As a result, the gender-critical project can do nothing but vaguely gesture towards a powerful hegemony of trans-inclusivity, existing solely in the gender-critical imaginary.

Following this analysis, it is perhaps appropriate to address how deploying ideological capture narratives against the trans community deflects scrutiny away from the disproportionate power held by members of the gender-critical project itself. Williams' report *The Corrosive Impact of Transgender Ideology* in particular ensnares readers in an interconnected web of gender-critical personalities as the same small group of authors and journalists exhaustively reference one another's work, creating an impression of intellectual exchange. Ironically, the extensive influence held by this small group points towards ideological capture *on behalf of these very same gender-critical thinkers*. For example, the work of Heather Brunskell-Evans is quoted no less than 12 times in the report (Williams, 2020). Brunskell-Evans is the co-founder of Women's Declaration International, an anti-trans lobbying group which authored the *Declaration on Women's Sex-Based Rights* – a document explicitly denying that trans people exist (WDI, 2023). Outside of the WDI, Brunskell-Evans writes gender-critical columns for alternative news platforms like Spiked – an outlet with a strongly anti-trans lean - by whom Joanna Williams is also employed (Spiked, 2023). During 2022, as Williams took on Spiked's education editor role, her colleague Jo Bartosch wrote three articles referencing the work of Stephanie Davies-Arai – the founder of anti-trans group *Transgender Trend*. Davies-Arai is quoted 28 times in Williams' Civitas report (2020), mostly in the form of personal testimony from interviews with Williams, though occasionally through reference to her co-authored 2019 book, *Transgender Children: A Discussion*, itself published by Civitas (Young & Davies-Arai, 2019). Other Spiked contributors, such as chief political writer Brendan O'Neill, also have work referenced in Williams' report. O'Neill's podcast 'The Brendan O'Neill Show' (on Spiked's YouTube channel), heavily features gender-critical guests with episodes starring Joanna Williams, Graham Linehan, Kathleen Stock and Kellie-Jay Keen among others. Keen herself acts as a case study and spokesperson for the gender-critical Fair Cop campaign: a small group of 7 individuals who believe that police forces are systemically censorious of gender-critical views. Other members of Fair Cop are collectively referenced 13 times in Williams' report, while Keen is quoted a further 6 times (Williams, 2020). Civitas itself is based at 55 Tufton Street – a London address housing the offices of several climate science denial lobby groups, as well as an office of gender-critical campaign organisation LGB Alliance (Stone & Hurley, 2022), for whom Kathleen Stock was appointed a trustee in 2021 (LGB Alliance, 2023). Frank Furedi, husband of Ann Furedi who was interviewed by Stock for

Material Girls, is a regular contributor to Spiked. Their son, Jacob Furedi, is currently deputy editor at Unherd: another publication with a consistently gender-critical output. By all accounts, the small number of UK writers and activists who make up the gender-critical movement have demonstrably achieved and wielded precisely the “disproportionate influence” they falsely attribute to trans activists (Williams, 2020, p.65).

Through ‘alternative’ news media organisations such as Spiked and Unherd, along with those based outside of the UK like Australian outlet Quillette, the gender-critical project weaponises this “disproportionate influence” (Williams, 2020, p.65). That these outlets prioritise a notion of ‘freedom of speech’ above all is no coincidence; Spiked’s editorial position declares its blanket support of “freedom of speech with no ifs or buts” (Spiked, 2023), Unherd claims to “provide a platform for otherwise unheard ideas, people and places” (Unherd, 2023), while Quillette tags 192 of its articles under the label ‘free speech’ (Quillette, 2023). Free speech continually manifests as the platforming of anti-trans rhetoric. The two UK-based outlets, Spiked and Unherd, both host pages collating anti-trans stories labelled the ‘Transgender Archive’: Spiked’s contains the hundreds of anti-trans articles it has produced since the start of 2023, while Unherd’s page of the same name boasts a further 20+ articles published within the same timeframe (2023). Quillette, has recently switched from hosting anti-trans articles under the tag ‘Transgenderism’ to simply ‘Transgender’, where another equally sizable selection of anti-trans articles are archived (2023). In these archives, not one article reflecting positively on trans people from any of the 3 publications is present. Instead, they have primarily acted as vessels for the distribution of UK gender-critical rhetoric. This clear bias in reporting, however, is an inevitable result of the gender-critical conceptualisation of free speech running in tandem with narratives of ideological capture; reasonable resistance expressed by institutions and the public to transphobic rhetoric is conceptualised as top-down censorship by those ‘captured by trans ideology’. Given that trans liberation is conceived of as debatable, and debates should have two opposing positions, the gender-critical project bolsters their opposing position through ‘free speech’ news outlets. The bias in reporting can then be rationalised as a way to even perceived odds in the discursive landscape, or the presentation of an underserved side of the ‘debate’.

This model of distributing anti-trans rhetoric through the lens of free speech and debate discourse regularly crosses transnational boundaries. When anti-trans free speech discourses arise in Germany, the influence of the UK gender-critical movement is clear and demonstrable. In the next section, I illustrate this influence through a brief case study of one such instance, drawing attention

to the various direct and indirect channels through which gender-critical rhetoric and arguments filter into German discourse.

Transnational Implications

On June 1st, 2022, five academics published an article in German national daily newspaper Die Welt titled “Wie ARD und ZDF unsere Kinder indoktrinieren” – “How the ARD (Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten der Bundesrepublik Deutschland) and ZDF (Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen) are indoctrinating our children” (Hümpel et al.). The article raises the proverbial alarm about educational programming produced by German public broadcasting organisations concerning topics of gender and sexuality, perceived to “ignore biological facts” – “biologische Fakten [bleiben] unberücksichtigt” – and create a “distorted picture of reality” – “fußendes Zerrbild der Realität” (Hümpel et al., 2022). Alongside the article was a 50-page dossier titled “Ideologie statt Biologie im ÖRR” – “Ideology instead of biology in the ÖRR (Öffentlich-rechtlicher Rundfunk)” – serving as evidence of harm done in the name of trans-inclusive educational programming (Galuschka et al. 2022). The dossier’s entries, each by an individual author, repeat critiques many times over and often rely on argumentative and rhetorical devices developed within the UK anti-trans movement. What follows is an analysis of the free speech narratives deployed by the authors as the story proliferated through the German media, beginning with the dossier itself. While it is not within the scope of this thesis to critique every claim made in the document, it is useful to analyse the language used in an example entry, drawing attention to various similarities with UK gender-critical feminist rhetoric. For this purpose, I examine the first entry by biologist Rieke Hümpel, critiquing the programme *Sendung mit der Maus: Aus Erik wird Katja*.

On air since 1971, *Sendung mit der Maus* – The Programme with the Mouse – is one of Germany’s most iconic children’s ‘edutainment’ programmes (Potthast, 2023). The episode critiqued by Hümpel uses the story of trans woman Katja to explain trans identity in the simplest possible terms. Before Katja’s transition, the program had interviewed her for another story about living as a homeless person in Germany. This follow-up program investigated Katja’s life after securing housing for the first time in 20 years, allowing her to reflect and begin the administrative processes of transition which were impossible without a permanent address. Hümpel’s primary concern with the program’s content is that, when discussing Katja’s new identity, womanhood is reduced to clothing choices: „Katja zieht gerne Röcke und Kleiner an. Jeder soll sehen, dass sie eine Frau ist” – “Katya likes to wear skirts and dresses. Everyone should see that she is a woman” (WDR, 2022, 00:09:49-00:09:55).

Her critique stems from the fact this conceptualisation of gender is rooted heavily in gender roles (Galuschka et al. 2022, p.6). It is worth remembering, however, that this program was aimed at young children for whom gendered clothing may be a useful and easily understood form of shorthand. A transfeminist reading of this content would likely draw equal critical attention to the reduction of gender transition to a superficial change of costume. Referring to clothing choices as demonstrations of womanhood or manhood is far from a nuanced explanation of how gender is developed and expressed, however producers likely deemed ease of communication to an audience of children a higher priority than such conceptual complexity.

The original article in Die Welt also specifically declares that *Sendung mit der Maus* distorts reality through “widerlegbaren Falschaussagen” – “refutable false statements” (Hümpel et al., 2022). I ask, however: does the program make any statements about gender and sex in the first place? Certainly, Katja is explained to be a transgender woman, implying that crossing the boundary between ‘man’ and ‘woman’ must be possible, though identity formation and gender itself is never explicitly addressed within the program’s text. Rather, Katja’s assertion of her own trans womanhood is critiqued as a falsification in itself since, to Hümpel, womanhood arises only from (normative female) biology. This is evidenced this through reference to the German dictionary *Duden*:

Der Duden definiert Frauen als erwachsene Personen weiblichen Geschlechts, und das weibliche Geschlecht, im Einklang mit der Biologie [...], als das gebärfähige Geschlecht. Dazu gehört „Katja“ nicht. Die Aussage der Sendung ist also falsch (Galuschka et al. 2022, p.6).

(Duden defines women as adult persons of the female sex, and the female sex, in accordance with biology, as the sex capable of childbearing. This does not include ‘Katja’. The statement of the programme is therefore wrong, my translation).

This is perhaps the most demonstrable echo of UK gender-critical rhetoric within Hümpel’s analysis; dictionary definitions of womanhood are often deployed by the gender-critical project, emphasising the conceptual simplicity of phrases like ‘adult human female’ in English or ‘erwachsene Personen weiblichen Geschlechts’ in German. In the English-speaking context for example, gender-critical feminist Julie Bindel produced a documentary titled ‘Adult Human Female’, while Kellie-Jay Keen has consistently used the phrasing as a tagline, selling ‘Adult Human Female’ merchandise on her podcast in front of an ‘Adult Human Female’ flag (Kellie-Jay Keen, 2023). Defining womanhood in this way creates the impression that feminism complicating these categories is engaging in unnecessary, academic overanalysis. By deferring to the dictionary, Hümpel endorses an overly

simplistic, exclusionary definition of womanhood configured solely in binary terms based on a particular view of biological sex. In essence, Hümpel launders a purely semantic argument through reference to the ‘simplicity’ of biology, all while the dossier repeatedly stresses the authors’ backgrounds as biologists, thereby presenting a veneer of academic integrity.

Based on the dossier’s content, it seems clear that the authors have marked out an ideological position on trans issues bearing similarities to that of the UK’s gender-critical movement and, crucially, the Die Welt article defends this position through narratives of ideological and institutional capture. The article employs the term “indoktrinieren” (*to indoctrinate*) to declare that “eine bedrohliche Agenda” (“a threatening agenda”) has been implemented, aiming to re-educate children without parental consent (Hümpel et al., 2022). The potential for harm to children is made clear:

*Die Öffentlichkeit muss die Augen aufmachen. Es kann nicht angehen, dass eine kleine Anzahl von Aktivist*innen mit ihrer „woken“ Trans-Ideologie den ÖRR unterwandert, Falschdarstellungen als vermeintlichen Stand der Wissenschaft verbreitet und das Leben von Kindern und Jugendlichen nachhaltig beschädigt. (Hümpel et al., 2022)*

(The public must open its eyes. It is not acceptable that a small number of activists infiltrate the ÖRR with their “woke” trans ideology, spread misrepresentations as the supposed state of science and cause lasting damage to the lives of children and young people, my translation)

The argumentative devices deployed within the gender-critical movements in the UK and Germany are, it seems, the same. Trans identity is simultaneously painted as a popular fad, and dangerously powerful wave of ideological posturing, all while remaining a minority position. The “Trend-Thema ‘trans’” (“the trendy topic of ‘trans’”) has supposedly infiltrated German public life in many of the same ways it has in the UK (Hümpel et al., 2022). Rhetorical similarity, however, is not the only demonstrable link between these movements. Hümpel explains that their work was also supported by the “Schwulen- und Lesben-Interessenvertretung LGB Alliance” – “the gay and lesbian advocacy group LGB Alliance” (Hümpel et al., 2022). Following backlash to the Die Welt article in the German news media, one of the co-authors, Uwe Steinhoff, published an English-language article in Quillette titled *Gender Ideology Comes to Germany*. The piece again references the LGB Alliance as a supporter (Steinhoff, 2022). On LGB Alliance Deutschland’s website, the organisation explicitly claims to be “following the example of Great Britain” – “nach dem Vorbild Großbritanniens” (2023). The German gender-critical appeal, it seems, is built upon rhetorical strategies employed by the comparatively successful UK gender-critical movement.

As a result of their similar ideological standpoints then, free speech and institutional capture narratives carry the same important rhetorical purpose of attempting to legitimise the anti-trans (gender-critical) position in Germany and the UK. Steinhoff draws attention to a particular incident wherein another co-author of the *Die Welt* article, Marie-Luise Vollbrecht, had a lecture at Humboldt University's 'Long Night of Science' cancelled due to pressure from a queer activist group (Steinhoff, 2022). Vollbrecht has since spoken at a *LetWomenSpeak* World Tour rally in Vienna in 2023, decrying the castration of children and following on from UK organiser Kellie-Jay Keen (Keen, 2023, 00:09:55-00:17:15). Steinhoff claims that Vollbrecht's lecture attempted solely to explain "why there are only two biological sexes" (Steinhoff, 2022). This position, echoing the position taken in the dossier, is not seen as "tied up with phobic attitudes toward homosexuals and trans people" in either context – the authors are, in Steinhoff's words, simply encouraging people to acknowledge the "real world of biology" (Steinhoff, 2022). In fact, Steinhoff recalls the positive response from a "network of transsexuals" known as *Transsexualität-NGS* (Transsexuality - Neuro-genital Syndrome) who "explicitly reject faddish gender ideology", viewing transness as both a psychiatric syndrome and a "birth defect" – "Geburtsfehler" (*Transsexualität-NGS*, 2023). Closer inspection, however, demonstrates that this 'network' seems to be run entirely by one anonymous individual. Without this context though, Steinhoff's 'evidence' comes together to reinforce a powerful institutional capture narrative; public networks producing empirically unsupported content marketed towards children, academics having presentations cancelled if they mention biological sex, all while trans people themselves remain unsupportive of these actions.

Just as in the UK however, free speech and institutional capture narratives become a focus within gender-critical argumentation to deflect attention away from the outsized media influence and attempts to silence opposing views actioned by the gender-critical movement itself. For example, Steinhoff declares that activist group *akj Berlin*, who responded to the announcement of Marie-Luise Vollbrecht's presentation at Humboldt University, were attempting to "shut down debate on sex and gender" (2022). However, their statement made no case for her presentation to be cancelled. Instead, they called for protest and noted that Vollbrecht's lecture was not incorporated in a way which allowed for a counter-opinion to be presented (*akj Berlin*, 2022). Given that her position represents a "marginal opinion in biology today" – "heute auch in der Biologie eine Randmeinung darstellt" (*akj Berlin*, 2022) – this request for counter-arguments follows the same logic that values 'debate' in discourse around trans issues. Considering Steinhoff's own demands for "debate on sex and gender" (Steinhoff, 2022), *akj Berlin's* statement should hardly be seen as radical. Going further

though, Steinhoff endorses comparisons made between the actions of akj Berlin and the 1933 Nazi book burnings at Bebelplatz (where akj Berlin's faculty is located), describing this as a great "irony" (Steinhoff, 2022). The fundamental difference that akj Berlin advocated *on behalf of* an oppressed group, and not *against* them, seems to have gone unnoticed. Perhaps a more applicable 'irony' found here is that Magnus Hirschfeld's *Institut für Sexualwissenschaft*, the first ever centre to perform research on human sexuality and trans identities, was the very "first place to be raided in the Nazi attack against books" (Bauer, 2014, p.18). On May 10th, 1933, four days after the initial raid, almost the entire contents of the institute's library of books, research papers and questionnaires pertaining to LGBTQ+ identity were removed and burned at Bebelplatz (Herrn, 2023). Then, just as now, the dissemination of knowledge which could lead to improved freedoms for and understanding of sexual minorities is undermined by opponents of sexual liberation movements.

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that concern for freedom of speech manifests within gender-critical movements to ensure the continued permissibility of anti-trans rhetoric, just as racist movements use free speech narratives to reanimate and render acceptable racist speech. Pushback against anti-trans rhetoric is characterised as limiting the expression of gender-critical opinions, rationalised as the result of institutional or ideological capture by the trans liberation movement. These narratives are used against trans people to deflect attention away from the outsized media influence held by the gender-critical movement both in the UK and Germany. As a German anti-trans, gender-critical movement continues to grow, conspiratorial transphobia (in the form of ideological capture narratives) will only become more commonplace as tensions between trans-exclusionary and trans-inclusionary groups become more pronounced. Indeed, within the German *Querdenker* ("contrarian", or more literally, "lateral thinking") scene, a conspiratorial social movement originally organised around opposition to lockdowns and vaccines during the pandemic, transphobic narratives are commonplace manifestations of anti-establishment thought; sociologist Villa Braslavsky explains that the subject of trans identity is seen within the movement as another method of control by a secret elite (Reveland & Gensing, 2023). Crucially, in pursuit of this trans-exclusionary agenda, the gender-critical movement must only *portray* trans people through their own, gender-critical lens. Directly engaging with a breadth of trans people, considering their viewpoints and lived experiences, would undermine the construction of hegemony of trans-inclusivity that is so vital to the anti-trans political project. In the final chapter then, I will discuss the 'erasure' of trans people in the discourse centring upon them: the strategic omission of certain personal and theoretical perspectives from gender-critical literature in pursuit of demonising the trans community. As gender-critical authors attempt to conjure the image of the trans person, and in

particular the trans woman, among readers, I question, which trans people do they allow to contribute to such an image?

Chapter Three: The Vanishing Point

The Erasure of Trans Perspectives in Gender-critical Thought

In much of the anti-trans literature this thesis addresses, trans people are rarely granted the privilege of appearing as wholly formed subjects. Instead, if trans people are acknowledged at all, it is often through references to smaller subsets of individuals within the community, extrapolated outwards to mischaracterise trans people at large. A particular example of this comes within the gender-critical focus on trans criminals; disproportionate focus is drawn towards criminality within the trans community, often putting individual cases ‘on display’ as an example of potential dangers predicted to occur as a result of trans liberation. When trans women are granted access to women’s spaces, so the thinking goes, the most vulnerable and marginalised (cis) women are the most likely to be victimised. Stock’s feminist solution in *Material Girls* is a turn towards intersectionality. In presenting this solution however, she continues to erase trans perspectives and potential risks to trans and non-binary people by precluding trans women from inclusion within her intersectional framework. In this chapter, I discuss how the gender-critical focus on trans criminals erases trans perspectives and actively undermines the understanding of intersectionality presented by Stock. Following this, I illustrate that this limited focus forces gender-critical authors in Germany to look transnationally, often to the UK, for evidence of their claims. As the presence of trans-inclusive feminism in Germany is minimised through the erasure of trans and trans-positive perspectives, I demonstrate the effect of transnational networks and alliances on the disproportionate presence of German gender-critical feminism.

As Stock begins to argue the cause for being ‘more intersectional’ within feminism, she draws attention to the actions of a single trans criminal as evidence of the collective cultural blindness to the risks that trans inclusion poses to vulnerable cisgender women. Karen White, a trans woman and convicted paedophile, assaulted two women while held in Wakefield women’s prison in 2018. Following the assaults, White was transferred to HM Prison Leeds, “a category B men’s prison” (Parveen, 2018). Jenny-Anne Bishop, spokesperson for trans activist group Transforum, pointed out that under guidelines at the time, White’s case for placement into a women’s prison should have been reviewed by both the preliminary “local transgender case board made up of prison managers and psychologists”, along with a “complex case board” for prisoners at risk of harming themselves or others (Parveen, 2018). White’s case, however, was only reviewed by the local case board, leading Bishop to believe that the system failed to consider her offending history when the placement decision was made (Parveen, 2018). Stock labels this an example of “nominal ‘inclusivity’” being prioritised over women’s safety (2021, p.266), however as Bishop noted, the evidence seems to

point instead towards White's placement being a result of institutional negligence within the prison system. The guidelines certainly allow for trans people to be remanded in a prison matching their gender, though not if this would risk the safety of other prisoners (Beard, 2018, p.10). In White's case, these guidelines were overlooked. Stock's assertion that White's placement in a women's prison was the result of a blind drive towards uncritical trans inclusion is therefore entirely speculative: a consequence of the gender-critical belief in public institutions being captured by trans activists.

Following this case, Bishop argued that stories like White's "are still rare", despite the fact that "no system is perfect" (Parveen, 2018). Ever since, available data appears to support this claim; since the government introduced minimum requirements for the care and management of transgender prisoners in 2019, no physical or sexual assaults have been committed by trans prisoners in women's estates (Wheeler, 2023). By associating trans women with sexual criminality, however, gender-critical rhetoric has had profound effects on the treatment of trans women within the prison system; in October 2022, despite the aforementioned data demonstrating the proper functioning of the current gender allocation system, UK Justice Secretary Dominic Raab announced that all trans women with 'male' genitalia would no longer be held in women's estates (MoJ, HMPPS & Raab, 2023). The government's policy announcement described this as a "common-sense" policy change, balancing "the needs of women in custody, while we continue to ensure that transgender prisoners are supported" (MoJ, HMPPS & Raab, 2023). Along the same rhetorical lines as in gender-critical thought, the groups 'women' and 'transgender prisoners' (primarily trans women since trans men and non-binary people are not mentioned in the announcement) are functionally separated.

Under this updated allocation system, whether a trans woman is convicted for sexual criminality or for shoplifting, she is treated as an equally nefarious 'danger' to women as a result of her anatomy. If a trans woman has a penis, the implication is that she retains the theoretical capacity to violate through penetration. Trans women who have no intention of obtaining 'bottom' surgery, or who remain on years-long NHS waiting lists, must be held in the male estate, where their risk of sexual assault skyrockets. This perceived capacity for violation can be nullified only by providing the trans woman with surgery, transforming the penis into a vagina – that which violates into that which is violated. Only then can the trans woman herself be considered *at risk* of male sexual criminality and transferred to a women's estate. The system therefore presents various implications, posing questions of consistency and safety: does sexual criminality arise primarily from phenotypically 'male' genitalia? Are cisgender women with histories of sexual violence against women to be held in

women's estates, or separate facilities? If those separate facilities are available to cisgender women, why are they *only* available to cisgender women? On the other side of this biological binary, are bodies with penises not themselves violable? When a cisgender man or trans woman is raped in a male prison estate, should this be seen as an unfortunate consequence of a system in working order? Eleven trans women in men's prison estates reported a sexual assault in 2019 (Shaw, 2020). Given that only 163 trans people (a total comprising both trans men and women) were in prison in the UK that year (Shaw, 2020), is placing trans women in men's prisons not a tacit acceptance that the sexual violation of trans women in custody by cisgender men is simply a matter of course?

In the discourse surrounding trans prisoners, it is critical to notice that the trans woman, as a sexual predator and a risk to be appropriately assessed, comes to stand for the trans community as a whole. In the year prior to March 2022, 181 trans prisoners were held in male estates (Wheeler, 2023), the vast majority of whom are transgender women, who are at significantly increased risk of sexual violence as discussed earlier. By contrast, "there were 6 transgender women in female establishments" (Wheeler, 2023). When the gender-critical movement brings attention to trans criminals, all focus is placed on these trans women in women's estates: a category comprising a single-digit number of individuals in the UK. In most cases, gender-critical analysis is mediated through a few case studies, if not the actions of a single individual. That trans women are many times more likely to themselves be victims of sexual assault is ignored, or even denied, in service of constructing an image of trans women as predatory. This ensures that any 'balanced' discourse weighs the 'inevitable' risks to cis women those trans women pose: these are 'common sense' policy changes, after all. These perceived risks, then, are based on an imagined wave of trans women in women's prison estates, a category that actually comprises only a small percentage of the number of incarcerated trans people, itself a tiny percentage of the number of trans people in the general population.

Stock raises the Karen White case as an example of the risks of 'inclusivity' for only five lines before shifting the subject towards gender-neutral facilities. Quoting a report in *The Times* in 2018, Stock explains that of the "134 complaints of sexual misconduct in council-owned sports centre and swimming pool changing rooms the previous year", 120 took place in unisex changing rooms (2021). That this statistic immediately follows a discussion of the Karen White case creates strong associations between these points, despite *The Times's* data not indicating that any of these 120 incidents were perpetrated by trans women (Gilligan, 2018). Regardless, Stock uses this fact to condemn "government organisations, rushing to indicate self-identification as the official means of

entry into women-only spaces” (2021, p.267). This conclusion is, however, entirely unfounded: gender segregated facilities (both men’s and women’s facilities, not simply ‘women-only spaces’) only accounted for 14 of the 134 reported incidents in The Times’ data. Restricting access to women-only facilities by sex assigned at birth, instead of perceived gender as is the case at present, would only affect trans and gender-nonconforming people. Given that 98% of people prosecuted for rape in England and Wales are men (Rape Crisis, 2023), it seems that, again, the gender-critical project is advocating against trans women’s freedoms due to the actions of cisgender men.

Trans advocacy organisation TransLucent on the other hand, published a statement in January 2023, acknowledging the importance of providing gender-neutral facilities for non-binary people, while firmly recognising that gender-neutral facilities also pose greater risks to women than women-only bathrooms. As a result, they argue that separate female, male, gender-neutral (and disabled) facilities should be made available wherever possible. The same position is taken by Stonewall (2022). In both of these cases, it is outlined that trans people should retain access to whichever gendered facility they feel is most suitable, acknowledging for example that female toilets “ensure the safety of both cisgender and trans women” (TransLucent, 2023). Stock, however, frames risks to women solely as risks to *cisgender* women:

“[Mainstream feminists] have been left unable properly to explain why, internationally, half the population in a given culture might be disproportionately subject to specific experiences like rape, sexual slavery, female genital mutilation, honour killing, female infanticide, banishment to menstrual huts, surrogacy tourism or death by stoning for the act of adultery. Clue: it’s not possession of a female gender identity” (Stock, 2022).

This claim excludes trans women from womanhood based on the belief that trans women do not experience the effects of patriarchal/misogynistic violence, at least to the same extent as women. This obscures truths about the victimisation of all trans people (including trans women). What follows is a brief rebuttal of Stock’s claims – a correction of the proverbial record – preceding a transfeminist reframing of Stock’s appeal to intersectionality.

While data on trans victims of sexual violence is rarely collected in the UK, the 2015 US Transgender Survey found that 37% of transgender women experience sexual assault in their lifetimes (James et al., 2016, p.205). For transgender men, the rates were 51%. (James et al., 2016, p.205). These high rates of victimisation signify that systems of transphobia and misogyny are acting to *increase* the

prevalence of sexual violence against all trans people, compared to the whole population's baseline. These nuances are overlooked in Stock's analysis in order to claim that only possession of typical female genitalia results in increased victimisation when it is clear that complex social factors, *including gender identity*, are also at play.

Going further, Stock's implication that only sex assigned at birth contributes to "honour killings" erases cases like that of Iraqi trans woman Doski Azad, killed by her estranged brother in 2022. Azad's death was widely reported as a transphobic "honour killing" (Dehghan, 2022); her willingness to publicly live as a woman, *her female gender identity*, was what motivated the murder. An IranWire report two years earlier examined the killings of trans man Siavash and trans woman Mahsa, whose names are only partially listed to protect those associated with the cases and whose murders were also described as "honour killings" (Dehkordi, 2020). Initial reporting of Siavash's murder listed him under his deadname and sex at birth at the behest of the rest of his family members (Dehkordi, 2020). Even in death, then, transphobia continues to operate to ensure that their trans status is erased from public knowledge. This erasure is, then, self-perpetuating: few cases of this kind are likely to be widely acknowledged as the trans status of the victims can be intentionally obscured or erased once the victims' bodies are in the ground. When gender-critical feminists then make the claim that only cisgender women are subjected to this kind of violence, they participate in this same phenomenon of erasure, ensuring that these cases remain outside of the public consciousness.

Lastly, when it comes to sex slavery and trafficking, transphobic systems operate in a similar way to erase trans victims, thereby contributing to the perception that trans people are simply not vulnerable in the same way as cisgender women. Data on the subject of trans people in sex slavery is not collected in the UK or Germany, despite a German report stressing in 2009 that "little attention has been paid to this subject" (Follmar-Otto & Rabe, p.20). Reporting undertaken by GBH in Massachusetts and across the US, however, suggests that "trans female youth, who were identified as male at birth, face the highest risk of becoming victims of the sex trade" (Martin & McKim, 2021). Reporting from Peruvian outlet Ojo Publico in 2019 labels trans women and girls the "unseen victims of human trafficking" (Vega, 2019). In this environment, the full extent of the sex trafficking of trans women is impossible to understand; strictly binary gender registration systems used for government record-keeping do not allow for victims' trans status to be acknowledged in order for appropriate care to be provided. One trans victim claimed that the police have "done nothing, absolutely nothing" (Vega, 2019). Again, the erasure of trans female victims of sex trafficking becomes a cyclical

phenomenon; widespread transphobic beliefs lead the police to disbelieve or simply ignore trans victims, and since record systems only hold data based on sex assigned at birth, the trafficking of trans women is never identified as a problem in the first place. Thus, the increased rate of victimisation by sex trafficking of trans women in poorer communities internationally goes unrecognised.

As is clear from the above examples, in her appeal to intersectionality, Stock obscures how a person's trans status subjects them to the effects of various complex systems of oppression. In an attempt to control perceived (or potential) criminal activity at the hands of trans people, Stock fails to analyse linked forms of oppression and their effects on gender-based violence. She fails to question how institutions employed in the handling of violence and criminality, those that comprise the criminal justice system, act to disadvantage the most marginalised communities. Davis et al. labelled this failure the "carceral co-optation" of feminism, based on Mimi Kim's analysis of the "carceral creep" within 1990s feminism: the conservative focus on controlling 'crime' transforms feminist anti-violence advocacy into deference to state intervention and the expansion of the criminal justice system (2022, pp.105-110). They argue:

Issues of racial injustice, sexual exploitation, pernicious state violence, and the analysis of linked forms of oppression [are rendered] incompatible with an emerging conceptualization of gender violence [which relies] exclusively on gender essentialism (Davis et al., 2022, p.106).

Intersectionality itself, in Stock's work, is moulded into another weapon of exclusion and erasure: trans activists supposedly ignore the 'reality' that measures promoting trans inclusion worsen the effects of misogynistic violence against the most vulnerable women. Insisting that trans women be excluded allows her to ignore that trans women are themselves vulnerable women, and that the vulnerability of trans people of all kinds results in similarly unacceptable rates of victimisation by cisgender men, especially when incarcerated.

Certain forms of violence against women do indeed stem from possession of typical cis female genitalia (i.e., female genital mutilation), however one would be hard-pressed to find a feminist organisation advocating for trans liberation without also condemning such acts of violence. I would argue, in fact, that movements for trans liberation and intersectional feminist movements often inform one another's strategic focusses, advocate for the same effective solutions and are, in some

cases, one and the same. In Stock's portrayal on the other hand, intersectionality is depleted of its illuminatory power:

20 per cent of the UK women's prison population is BAME, as compared to 11.9 per cent of the population generally. In 2018, 3262 out of 7745 women entering women's prisons were recorded as being of no fixed abode on arrival. Seven in ten women in prison report being victims of domestic violence in the past [...]. Yet in 2015 the mainstream feminist establishment turned a blind eye to the admission of trans women with convictions for violence, some without any medical intervention or GRCs, into the female prison estate alongside these intensely vulnerable women (Stock, 2022, pp.265-266).

Holding trans female prisoners with convictions for violence alongside other vulnerable, mostly non-violent female prisoners is identified as problematic, though this logic would also surely require cisgender female prisoners with convictions for violence to be held separately. The gender-critical feminist policy position Stock presents, that of holding trans women in alternative facilities, is also unlikely to resolve any of the systematic problems she lists. The disproportionately high incarceration rates for example, of women of colour, of homeless women, and of female victims of domestic violence (groups that necessarily include trans women) are simply the backdrop to a trans-exclusionary argument. The analytical framework of intersectionality, however, allows us to identify the impact of oppressive societal systems, such as the prison system, on these vulnerable groups and propose alternative solutions to the problem of violence. Angela Davis has advocated for abolitionist feminism, moving beyond the criminal justice system towards a community-focused approach to reducing violence and harm to marginalised people (see Davis et al., 2022). Transfeminists like Shon Faye, in problematising the prison system's treatment of trans people, have drawn on the work of abolitionist feminists to envision a society radically transformed through intersectional analysis, acknowledging the harmful, interlocking effects of oppressive systems on cis and trans people alike: "a society in which prisons are not needed" (Faye, 2021, p.188). A thorough articulation of transfeminist approaches to abolitionist feminism is beyond the scope of this project, though it is vital to recognise that the truths about the oppression of marginalised women, that gender-critical feminists like Stock leave unquestioned, have long been problematised by abolitionist feminists and transfeminists alike.

To conclude, Stock's selective turn towards intersectionality fails to justify the solutions for which it advocates. In presenting the gender-critical solution to violence against incarcerated marginalised

women, that of erasing trans identity altogether and holding all prisoners by sex assigned at birth, she evades any responsibility to resolve the problems that the complexities of gender expose within the prison system. As Stock gestures towards individual cases of trans criminality in hopes of demonising trans women as prone to acts of sexual violence, cis men continue to perpetrate most violence against women, trans women included. As a result, the focus on trans people within discourses concerning sexual violence against women should be recognised as bigotry, and this becomes particularly clear when considering how this discourse operates transnationally. In the next section, I analyse the third chapter of *Transsexualität, Der Verschwinden der Frauen - The disappearance [potentially, the erasure] of women* (Louis, 2022, p.45-61). Written by Chantal Louis, the chapter presents an argument following an almost identical structure and line-of-thinking to Stock's. In analysing similarities in their focusses and argumentation, and examining how Louis collates evidence from international contexts (particularly the UK), I demonstrate how the gender-critical erasure of trans perspectives is crucial in problematising the forthcoming *Selbstbestimmungsgesetz*. Following this, I examine how transnational networks of anti-trans and gender-critical organisations between Germany, the UK, and other national contexts work to minimise the presence of support for trans liberation, while over-inflating the presence of support for their own gender-critical cause.

Transnational Implications

In *Das Verschwinden der Frauen*, Louis argues, among other things, that steps towards trans liberation negatively impact women's safety through granting men access to women's spaces. 'Men' here is to be understood as inclusive of trans women:

Für die betroffenen Frauen existiert ebenfalls eine sehr reale Gefahr: die, dass sexuell übergriffige Männer – ob transsexuell oder nicht – die Möglichkeit des Geschlechtswechsels qua Selbstdefinition nutzen, um in geschützte Frauenräume [...] einzudringen (Louis, 2022, p.49).

For the women affected, there exists a real danger: that of sexually abusive men – whether transsexual or not – having the opportunity to change gender through self-identification in order to invade women's protected spaces.

Here, Louis combines two separate arguments against trans women's access to women's spaces: firstly, that 'men' will abuse self-ID legislation to access women's spaces and assault women, and secondly, that some trans women have committed sexual assault against cis women. Her analysis exactly mirrors Stock's argumentative framework from *Material Girls*: trans criminality is introduced

before the discussion shifts to statistics surrounding sexual assault by cis men. In Stock's work, this acts to blur any clear delineation between the two arguments, associating trans women with an epidemic of sexual assault against women. This framing allows her to retain plausible deniability from accusations of anti-trans bigotry by claiming that her primary concern is the danger posed by cis men. After all, at no point did she claim that *all* trans women pose a risk of sexual assault to cis women. Of course, we need only recall the debunked report about trans women's criminality submitted by Stock to the Women's and Equalities Committee in 2020 to demonstrate her belief that trans women *do* pose such a danger. Louis, however, does not conceal her belief that trans women should be best described as 'transsexual men' who are, thus, just as dangerous as any cis man. This is notable given that Stock and Louis pull their information from the exact same sources; first providing three individual examples of trans criminals used as a framing device for the chapter (Daniel Merager, Jessica Yaniv, and again, Karen White), followed by an overview of the Karen White case specifically (2022, p.47), and finally a shift towards discussion of attacks in unisex toilets. Even here, she draws on the exact same *The Times* study as Stock (2022, p.48). Whether these similarities are purely coincidental or otherwise, recognising the intent of this argumentative strategy is crucial.

In Germany, at time of writing, the government is implementing self-ID legislation which would remove many roadblocks preventing trans people from changing their legal gender. Louis and Schwarzer's opposition to this legislation is laid out as the primary reason for producing their book (Schwarzer & Louis, 2022, p.2). It is this context in which those three cases of sexual criminality perpetrated by trans women in women-only spaces are discussed, and it is this context in which Louis argues that trans women are simply transsexual men: men who experience an undefined form of 'transsexuality', presumed to be some form of 'sexual' affliction. While this kind of rhetoric is likely to influence some cis women's perception of trans women, I question how these arguments concerning women-only spaces have any bearing on the simplification of the process by which a person's legal gender can be changed. In most societies across the world, inclusive of both the UK and Germany, trans women have always accessed women's spaces simply by self-identifying as women since access to these spaces is rarely policed through any other system. Women need not present formal verification of their gender or sex to access women-only spaces, and as such, the proposed *Selbstbestimmungsgesetz* would not affect any (trans or cis) person's right to access women-only spaces. It follows that it would do nothing to impact cis or trans women's safety in public spaces, neither negatively nor positively – both groups of women will remain able to access women's spaces just as before. Sexual assault will remain illegal in the same way as at present, and sexually abusive men will unfortunately continue to cross legal and moral boundaries to harm and

sexually abuse women. A legal claim to a female gender identity, whether fraudulently obtained or otherwise, will still not protect any person who is committing or has committed a sexually violent crime in a gendered facility. In Argentina, self-ID legislation was passed in 2012, and ever since, no increase in violence against women has been reported: the head of the UN Women's programme against gender-based violence within Argentina explained that "no-one has all the information, but violence (by trans people) [...] isn't a problem that data shows" (Anarte, 2022). Thus, for the gender-critical project to succeed in quashing the proposed *Selbstbestimmungsgesetz*, it is crucial to blur the line between trans women and cis men, associating trans women (who would remain able to access women's spaces) with men, especially sexually abusive men. The connection between self-ID legislation and stories of sex crimes perpetrated by trans women or cis men in gendered spaces is a kind of artificial contiguity, manufactured to associate the effects of self-ID legislation with increased risks to (cisgender) women.

The transnational transmission of this discourse is used to bolster the gender-critical viewpoint. While the UK context is particularly discursively prominent due to the sheer quantity of material produced by the UK's news media on trans women committing acts of (sexual) violence, Louis's examples of trans criminals are also drawn from other regions internationally – Jessica Yaniv is Canadian and Darren Merager was convicted in the United States. For lack of hard-hitting, exemplary evidence available in the German context, gender-critical activists there are forced to reach internationally, where these stories are sensationalised within an already trans-hostile media environment, for proof of their claims of widespread danger posed by trans criminals. This is then framed as a reason for the urgency of this discourse. These international examples of trans criminality purportedly show the extent of the problem: a supposed pandemic of transgender violence against women, as opposed to the desperate deployment of whatever scant evidence can be cobbled together in support of an anti-trans cause. The fact that gender-critical discussions of trans sex criminals across the world return to the same few names goes uninterrogated. Recognising this fact, however, demonstrates that the disproportionate focus on specifically trans perpetrators of sexual violence obscures the extent of the problem of violence against women. Even as time and again, the primary perpetrators of violence against women are shown to be cis men, and trans women are shown to be significantly more likely to be victims of violence than perpetrators, the gender-critical movement continues to make trans people the focus of this discourse. In Germany, for example, the latest figures made available in 2019 by the *Bundeskriminalamt*, the Federal Office of Criminal Investigation, demonstrate that 8095 of the 8189 cases of rape and sexual assault recorded that year were committed by men (2020). Given this fact, the German gender-critical

movement's constant reference to the single-digit number of cases *outside* the German national context must be recontextualised not as feminist concern for women's safety, but rather as obsession with and demonisation of trans people.

While stories of trans criminality are a particularly telling example, the gender-critical commitment to the erasure of trans, and trans-positive, perspectives in Germany, necessitates the constant import of various discourses from outside of Germany in order to advocate for the relevance of a German gender-critical movement. For example, as Louis argues that women are being erased within the feminist project, she reaches to the UK for prominent examples of cis women criticised for their gender-critical beliefs – one of whom is Kathleen Stock. In describing Stock's work in *Material Girls*, Louis describes its transphobic argument as a commonly held belief:

Sie kritisiert wie andere, dass biologische Männer, die sich 'als Frauen definieren', Zugang zu geschützten Frauenräumen haben sollten (Louis, 2022, p.58)

(Like others, she criticises the fact that biological men who 'identify as women' should have access to protected women's spaces , my translation)

In this way, the transphobic extent and intention of gender-critical argumentation is minimised. By stressing that Stock's beliefs are shared by many others, Louis positions the gender-critical viewpoint as a reasoned, uncontroversial feminist perspective. The very fact, however, that it was necessary to reach to the UK context for concrete examples of this form of anti-trans feminism demonstrates that there are, perhaps, fewer committed gender-critical feminists than Louis implies. In Germany, the gender-critical feminist project has obtained significantly less mainstream acceptance: nationally recognised feminist organisations such as the Deutscher Frauenrat (2023), the Deutscher Frauenring (2023), and ADEFRA (2023) have all explicitly declared their trans-inclusive feminist approaches. In the paragraph following her assertion that many feminists subscribe to this gender-critical perspective, Louis describes an "Open Letter Concerning Transphobia in Philosophy" (Philosophy Transphobia Letter, 2021) produced in response to Stock's work, signed by 600 lecturers of whom some, Louis stresses, were German. Widespread opposition to gender-critical anti-trans thought, particularly in Germany, is not understood as a rejection of these beliefs and an embrace of trans liberation, but rather as the encroachment of foreign trans-inclusive feminist attitudes into Germany: a kind of transnational manifestation of conspiratorial transphobia wherein the anti-trans position is conceived of as the natural state of things.

As this conspiratorial transphobia is deployed transnationally, it leads not only to the erasure of trans perspectives, but to the erasure of any form of trans-inclusionary allyship, through misrepresenting gender-critical, anti-trans feminism as a majority feminist belief. When Louis asserts that “cancel culture in the name of trans-activism has now also made its way into Germany” – “Auch in Deutschland hat die Cancel-Culture im Namen des Transaktivismus inzwischen Einzug gehalten” (2022, p.59) – she discusses the backlash to the 2021 *Lesbenfrühlingstreffen* held in Bremen as an example. The *Lesbenfrühlingstreffen* is a long-running annual meeting of lesbian activists based in Germany. Invitees in 2021 included UK lesbian activist and anti-trans feminist Angela Wild, founder of anti-trans lesbian advocacy group *Get the L Out*, who was to deliver workshops addressing what Louis describes as the highly problematic consequences of trans-activism (2022, p.59). Other contributions from, for example, German activist Gunda Schumann and Australian writer Susan Hawthorne were also widely condemned as transphobic for describing gender-affirming surgeries as mutilation (Schirrmeister, 2021), and for describing trans women as men (Schulze, 2021). Writing in 2022, this information is available to Louis, yet this crucial context goes unmentioned. The event’s stated intention was to highlight “a diversity of women, their love, their lives, their work and their history” (LFT2021, 2021), though it would appear that this did not extend to trans women, whose womanhood was to be questioned and maligned, likely resulting in trans women’s self-exclusion from the event. As a result, organisations began pulling financial support and expressing criticism in solidarity with the trans community. Louis lists both Bremen’s Women’s Senator and the Magnus-Hirschfeld Gesellschaft, an LGBTQ+ advocacy organisation, as entities who withdrew support (2022, pp.59-60), though many other organisations followed suit: Schirrmeister reported that almost all well-known German LGBTQ+ and several lesbian-specific advocacy groups, including those with slots in the program, pulled out of the conference (2021). To argue for her gender-critical position, Louis rationalises general feminist rejection of gender-critical, anti-trans reasoning as the erasure of women. She ignores that the gender-critical position is deeply unpopular in Germany, particularly within the LGBTQ+ community where solidarity with trans people is consistently shown by organisations and individuals alike. Support for trans liberation is, in this way, erased within gender-critical thought.

The overstatement of support for the gender-critical cause is of particular note given the clear transnational networks constructed by the gender-critical movement across the UK and Germany to give the impression of vast public endorsement. Louis explains that “like in Great Britain” – “wie in Großbritannien” – women have shown their opposition to trans liberation through the formation of “initiatives like ‘Fair Play für Frauen’ and ‘Geschlecht zählt’” - “Initiativen wie ‘Fair Play für Frauen’

und ‘Geschlecht zählt’” (2022, p.60). Both of these initiatives take their names from equivalent, though not formally affiliated, organisations in the UK: Fair Play for Women and Sex Matters. As Louis briefly discusses the intent of these initiatives, it is never addressed that *Geschlecht Zählt* has only one member, Hilde Schwathe (Lobbyregister, 2023). Fair Play für Frauen, on the other hand, describes itself as “eine unabhängige und parteiübergreifende Gruppe von Frauen und unterstützenden Männern” (Fairplay Für Frauen, 2023) - “an independent and cross-party group of women and supportive men” - though the only publicly visibly member of the group is the editor of the group’s online presence, Eva Engelken (Fairplay Für Frauen, 2023). Engelken also runs the self-titled website *Eva Engelken* (2023), which published the dossier by Galuschka et al. analysed in chapter two.

While Fair Play für Frauen’s membership figures are not publicly available, its sister organisation, Arbeitskreis Geschlechtsbasierte Rechte der Frau (Sex-based Rights of Women Working Group) is a lobbying group with only 15 members as of May 1st, 2023 (Lobbyregister, 2023). These are two of six groups within the umbrella organisation, FrauenAktionsBündnis (FAB) whose sole stated intention is to oppose the adoption of the *Selbstbestimmungsgesetz* (FAB, 2023). Among these six organisations are the organising team of the 2021 *Lesbenfrühlingstreffen*, the UK-based anti-trans lobbying group WDI (mentioned in chapter two), and TransTeens Sorge Berechtigt (FAB, 2023), or Trans Teens Concern is Justified – an initiative defining itself as an ‘interest group’ despite having only one member, David Allison (Lobbyregister, 2023). Allison is described by Louis in this chapter as the man who ran for election to his local green party chapter while performatively self-identifying as a woman (2022, pp.60-61) – an action drawing praise in the form of an EMMA article, also written by Louis (2021).

The TransTeens Sorge Berechtigt website links to the English-language project Post-Trans, run by “two female detransitioners from Belgium and Germany”, Elie and Nele (Post Trans, 2023). An interview with Nele, Elie and another detransitioner, undertaken again by Louis, comprises the 7th chapter of *Transsexualität* (2022, pp.89-105). Post-Trans published a booklet concerning detransition in 2021 which, while offering some practical information for detransitioners, also advocates for further gate-keeping of trans healthcare in the form of “more screening and more therapy” (Post Trans, p.26), despite both of these already being in place in the UK and Germany. The creation of the booklet was “made possible” by Stephanie Davies-Arai, founder of UK anti-trans lobby group TransgenderTrend, and Dr J. William Malone, founder of US non-profit Society For Evidence-Based Gender Medicine, or SEGEM (Post Trans, 2023, p.6). According to the Yale School of

Medicine, the SEGM is a “small group of repeat players in anti-trans activities” with “limited (or no) scientific qualifications related to the study of medical treatment of transgender people” (2022). Far from the wide-spread, grass-roots support of anti-trans measures in Germany supposed by Louis, this evidence instead points towards the artificial inflation of the presence of German anti-trans feminism through a small network of activists capitalising on the efforts of gender-critical movements in other national contexts, particularly the UK.

Conclusions

Throughout this thesis, I have demonstrated that gender-critical feminism, in rejecting trans people and trans perspectives, fails also to liberate women from structural oppression. Based on an intersectional understanding of trans status as one of many factors within a matrix of domination, I have shown that dismantling the systems which oppress people of marginalised genders does not threaten the freedoms and protections in place for women at present. Rather, I have signalled the mutual benefit to all marginalised people, particularly those marginalised along multiple axes of oppression, of the de-escalation of this discourse – a de-escalation manifesting through opposition to the misrepresentation of trans-liberatory activism as a top-down project aiming to oppress cis women, and through recognition that the liberation of all women and trans people are mutually beneficial goals within a transfeminist framework. When opposition to the gender-critical project by activists for trans liberation is no longer framed as abusive, the conflict that remains turns out to be based on an imagined threat to women posed by trans people: a conflict between the gender-critical project and its own self-constructed ‘enemy’. The gender-critical refusal to recognise this fact is what earns such a project the label ‘anti-trans’. In opposing the advancement of anti-trans ideologies, we must oppose the framing of power dynamics between cis women and trans people as necessarily a case of Power Over – a framing that also passes transnationally as a result of its simplistic terms. As the UK gender-critical project achieves success in its goal of rejecting trans liberation on the basis of perceived threats to women, it should be recognised that these strategies are likely to see further uptake by anti-trans movements in other national contexts.

I have also demonstrated how free speech and debate narratives are tied up in the systematic oppression of marginalised people. As authority is subjectively assigned in line with cultural preconceptions, and positions of authority are structurally less accessible to marginalised people, the ‘debate’ surrounding trans people’s liberation sets up trans people to fail. The tendency within the gender-critical project to resort to arguments about freedom of speech should instead be seen as an expression of conspiratorial transphobia, manifesting through narratives of ideological capture, and depicting trans people as the wielders of some poorly-defined hegemonic power. Viewed through a transfeminist lens, heavily informed by the experiences of UK and German trans people, these narratives of ideological capture are revealed to be a deflective strategy. Attention is directed away from the demonstrable power and influence obtained by the gender-critical project itself through their own publications, as well as alternative news media platforms, and towards the trans community and the solidarity of our allies. Given that both the German and UK gender-critical movements take similar ideological standpoints, free speech and institutional capture narratives

hold the similarly vital rhetorical power to legitimise the anti-trans position in both national contexts.

As the gender-critical movement continues to oppose the liberation of their imagined trans menace, it is crucial that the perspectives of the vast majority of trans people are erased in favour of amplifying those few trans people whose actions complement the aims of the anti-trans project, for example, trans criminals. Intersectionality is often deployed within gender-critical argumentation as a way to portray any drive towards trans liberation as particularly dangerous to marginalised women, who are essentially 'wheeled out' to be portrayed as victims, without critical examination of how the oppression of these multiplicatively marginalised women can be reasonably combatted. The oppression of women marginalised in ways beyond gender is simply accepted as the current state of things, and the oppression of trans women, and trans people more generally, goes entirely ignored. A transfeminist framework viewing oppression as a function of societal systems, capable of disadvantaging and violating the multiplicatively marginalised, is better equipped to oppose such oppression. In the case of criminality, transfeminists, in line with abolitionist feminists, have highlighted that the criminal justice system should not be seen as corrupted by white supremacy and heteropatriarchy, but rather as a medium through which white supremacy and heteropatriarchy act both on and within society. The drive to protect women from violence through deference to state intervention has produced a system which disproportionately subjugates and violates marginalised people of all kinds. This observation points towards an area for further consideration: in recognising that mainstream feminist politics has struggled to question the assumption that "of course, the state should 'protect women'" (Davis et al., 2022, p.107), leading to the emergence and deepening of carcerality, is it adequate for trans liberation movements to defer to the state and its punitive, carceral solutions in seeking protection for trans people? A transfeminist approach should therefore challenge the assumption that 'of course, the state should protect trans people'.

When the perspectives of trans people and our allies are erased within gender-critical literature, the presence of anti-trans, gender-critical feminism is overemphasised in its place. There is a particular transnational element to this phenomenon, demonstrated within this thesis as the development of a transnational network of influence between the UK and Germany. Through the exchange of strategy and continued references made to gender-critical individuals and organisations in the UK, the German gender-critical project legitimises its cause, and signals the urgency of their own gender-critical intervention. As such, the already well-established UK gender-critical movement allows the UK to be viewed as an exporter of transphobia. This provokes, however, a further question for

analysis: why has the German gender-critical movement remained a (relatively) fringe project? This thesis has signposted the unique German history of sexology (see Hirschfeld, 2017), and though a historical analysis was beyond the scope of this project, perhaps future research could draw transnational comparisons with UK sexological history (see Weeks, 2016) to contextualise German resistance to anti-trans movements. Additionally, this thesis has focussed *solely* on the UK and German contexts, presenting further opportunities for analysis: as networks of transnational knowledge become increasingly easy to develop in the era of social media, when barriers to the production of knowledge have dramatically decreased in magnitude, how much of the current international presence of reactionary anti-trans backlash is a result of transnational exchange? In answering both of these further questions, however, the necessity of a transnational approach in opposing anti-trans movements is made clear.

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