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Is Sadism Popular With TERFs? A Chat With An Ex-Gendercrit

By Rani Baker

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Abstract

BY Rani Baker @destroyed4com4t Let's get this out of the way: deep down, I believe everyone is earnestly trying to do things that are right and protect things that they value. I mean, I kinda have to believe this on some level to keep functioning. I don't subscribe to the idea of good and evil or [...]

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Let's get this out of the way: deep down, I believe everyone is earnestly trying to do things that are right and protect things that they value.

I mean, I kinda have to believe this on some level to keep functioning. I don't subscribe to the idea of good and evil or social struggles that have a clear cut hero and villain. Life is complicated and fluid, and the "right thing" isn't always clear.

I'm fascinated with narratives where people have a significant change of heart. I recently had a chat

with Aoife, who has spent a few years associating with the gender-critical/trans-exclusive radical feminist movement due to disillusionment with modern trans activism, but ultimately found the countermovement toxic and draining in its own way.

#RadFem: A social media term/tag used to identify internet trolls who usually claim a “radical feminist” identity, but apparently have little understanding of radical feminist theory outside of the very specific sex essentialist pontifications of Raymond, Jeffreys, and Daly. Generally, so-called #RadFems compensate for this lack of theoretical understanding with sometimes obsessive ad hominem attacks and appeals to biologism and sex essentialism in the name of a “radical feminism”. This version of “radical feminist” discourse is practically indistinguishable from anti-trans hate coming from anti-LGBTQI hate groups. Indeed, #RadFems not infrequently share anti-trans content from, and work with these hate groups and other far-right anti-feminist groups, as long as the content is anti-trans.

“RadFem” was originally a shortened form of “radical feminist” and is still used by some trans inclusive radical feminists who seek to reclaim the term.

Sex Essentialism: In short, sex essentialism is a tautology that seeks to construct ontology through reductivism. It is the belief that there is a specific essence, that if found to be present, causes an entire body to be either male or female. The appealed to essence can be asserted social habits learned through socialization, spirit energy or emotion, or phenotype or genotype attribute.

Sex Essentialist Feminism (SEF): A set of beliefs, views, morals and ethics, asserted to be “feminist” in nature, built upon sex essentialist theories.

Sex Essentialist Theorists (SET): Groups ranging from right-wing religious movements to TERFs who use sex essentialism as part of a central organizing belief, view, moral and/or ethic.

TERF: Trans Exclusionary #RadFem. A term used to identify those individuals who sympathize with and support a brand of “radical feminism” that is so rooted in sex essentialism and its resulting biologism, it actively campaigns against the existence, equality and/or inclusion of trans people. The term appears to have been popularized in 2008 by a cisgender feminist on a blog called FinallyFeminism101.

Rani: Thank you very much for responding, I’m excited to get to talk to you about this so intimately.

Aoife: Feeling is mutual. Sincere thanks back as well, Rani.

Truth be told, we’ve exchanged dialogue in the past ... positive and negative. Even very negative at times. I am certainly to blame much in part for the latter; and I am sorry to you. Yet here we are, chatting again! Only because you offered me (in trusting openness) this opportunity, with neither prescription nor restriction on topic and tone of my responses. Very rarely do I get the chance to just informally and calmly share my point of view, believe me. And likewise, I offer much thanks to Cristan Williams, for sharing her platform, and for her editorial patience. I’ve been, in various ways, withdrawn. My estranged father recently passed away. And the subject of transgender or trans or gender, the whole lot- well, that was the Primary Cause as to why we were estranged. It’s something that in my life will never be resolved. Emotionally distraught as I’ve been, working through it all . . . gender was the last thing I wanted to write or think about.

However, I’m not retreating. Aside from biological family, I reckon I’ve annoyed almost everyone as

well at this stage. “So be it.” The controversies are a result of my words and actions. But to be clear I’m not speaking for other trans people: I’ve made that presumptuous mistake too often in the past. That was wrong, and I apologize for that, really. My point of view is mine alone, obviously. Just like any other trans woman, I’m working this out as best I can, after my own fashion, according to my self-made errors, injuries, and farewells through the course of my verbose explorations. Call me independent.

To close off this preamble . . . a particular note for those only reading me to get their hackles up: what exactly is it that I represent to you that I’ve earned your consistent attention? The people who most despise me are, bizarrely, some of my most loyal readers? It’s mad. Why? Other than some purposeful self-vexation through hate-reading as a kind of masochism? In that respect, I suppose, any outspoken trans woman - no matter how irrelevant -- always seem to represent some kind of sinful predicament that offends one political bent or another. Too bad.

Like it or not, profound transformations are right now taking place that have already dislodged archaic certitudes about sex, society, and the categorization of the body. In short, the trans rights movement is winning.

Rani: While my engagement with gendercrit folks is largely considered on one “side” of the discussion, I have also admitted some empathy with the movement and at least the surface goals (which I have to assume are intentionally vague). I almost attended the first New Narratives (a gender-critical trans woman-specific political group) meeting in Portland, not as a protester or a disruptor, but as someone that wanted a chance to discuss these topics without the smokescreen of internet anonymity and hyperbole. What would you say the ratio is of genuine empathy and concern for other gender nonconforming folks and belief that gendercrit holds answers, versus the advantage of using academic rhetoric and internet anonymity as a cudgel against other trans folks they consider less authentic than themselves?

Aoife: Ahhh -- “Less authentic”: the bugle call of putting people in their “place” based on vague criteria and moving goal posts! Yeah, I’ve played that game.

First, I think the term ‘gender critical’ has totally fallen out of favor and has already become irrelevant, both to the anti-trans rights movements as well as queer positive rhetoric. Sissies criticize. Real radicals abolish. “Gender critical” never took off, as such. Didn’t have the right linguistic freestyle flavoring of moral absolutism and radical intransigence. “Abolish gender” has become the preferred rallying cry. Jargon comes and goes very quickly here!

However, ‘gender critical’ functioned (very briefly) as a skeptical rejoinder to the claims that “gender identity” had been, without analytical examination, dogmatically inserted into all aspects of our social lives as an undeniable truth-claim. You are who you say you are. This, as we know, is in conflict with biological determinism, or sex-essentialism, which upholds generalized standards of maleness and femaleness, inculcated over time as static models emerging out of a natural law. Biology pre-establishes a perpetual Male and Female, two dichotomous constants that are materially enacted by the body itself (regardless of our conscious reflections on our embodiment.) Sex is matter: gender is invention and imagination, the trinkets and shackles of oppression, and certainly nothing substantial enough to justify an “identity”. I think many gender critical people fancy they don’t “have” a gender identity - yet to claim lack of gender identity is still to posture a kind of identity. Meanwhile, the very matter of

matter itself, and the naturalization of matter, is increasingly being blurred and distorted.

The gender abolitionist position arose vigorously from 1970s feminist analysis (particularly lesbian feminists), who argued power and sexism were embodied predicaments, in which “gender” shoves people into social locations based on patriarchal expectations. They don’t “criticize” gender as a kind of conversational interrogation - they want to abolish gender, which will inevitably require some kind of massive overthrow of the social order. In such a political analysis, trans women or “transwomen” are universally male, and whatever enactment of “femininity”, the “feminine”, or the replication of the true female form through patriarchal pharmacology are direct appropriations of the female as sexed universal. In short, trans women have absolutely nothing to offer actual women in terms of feminist revolt, and in fact distort and derail the cause.

That would make being a gender abolitionist/trans embodied individual (GATE) in a wickedly impossible predicament. What exactly are they proposing to accomplish?

Other than a few hit pieces or some twitter conflict? Nothing. This, to my mind, is why there was no New Narratives 2. What more could be said from a dissipating middle ground of quicksand that GATEs tread, sinking further with every ideological stretch they make? The short-lived and totally ineffectual project Gender Apostates likewise collapsed. The SETs saw it as a lead-balloon intervention, of males in dresses diluting true radical feminism. Of men in makeup more likely to occlude feminist analysis than augment it. And, as the record shows, Gender Apostates failed to find a committed group of cis women, of trans-masculine, or detransitioned trans folk: the very groups who claim to be erased from the conversation that gender critical seeks to bring into the conversation. Even sympathetic, big-name “moderate” media writers were rarely directly supportive of the project - why risk the radical base of their audience by co-authoring with ladyfacers? Michelle Goldberg’s article on gendercrit, far from forwarding conversation, just led to more confusion: “Wait, they have F-passports, go around presenting as women with female names, but say they’re male?” This was by far the most common response I read to Goldberg’s interviews.

In short, the gendercrit movement’s moment strolled in circles with an uncertain inertia, and no direction to turn. r/gendercrit is little more than an insult forum with tautologies: “trans women take selfies; some narcissists take selfies therefore, all trans women are narcissists.” Same with tumblr. Twitter. Facebook. The voices of “gender abolition” in social media are largely hectoring brays of targeted insults and denigration, all on the anonymous.

Gender abolitionism wants a world without gender, and therefore transgender people, in it. That’s the political objective: no more trans.

Thus, is “gender abolitionism” an ethically accountable system, rejecting yet possessed of compassion for transgender people . . . perhaps in a “love the sinner, hate the sin” sense? Varies by the individual, of course. (And whatever is most politically opportunistic at any given time.) Sure, there are gender abolitionists (GA) who are great mates with GATEs. Some distantly sympathize with trans women. What I notice about the ‘sympathy’, however, is an admixture of pity and intrigue for the ramifications of our existence. Is it ‘compassionate’ to assess all trans woman as emotionally traumatized by-products of masculinist gender agendas, hapless puppets to gender therapists and victims of Father Knows Best medicine?

Because the compassion fades right f'ing quickly before the abolitionist strategic design for the future. Abolitionists, by ideological default, must condemn transition as a reckless, untested aberration for the confused and selfish; and so SRS is always mutilation. And, predictably, the attacks go straight for trans health care, since treatment for the "defect" of gender dysphoria is a clumsy, misogynist intervention at the individual level. Collectively, trans health care equals the phallo-pharmaceutical destruction of womankind.

So -- being 'compassionate' in a clinical sense, sure -- yet being selective in who gets that compassion, on what terms . . . pronoun cherry-picking, appointing "right-thinking" trans women, sticking to the same researchers and eliding over a very broad scholarly conversation about sex and gender in society . . . it's not compassionate to be telling a young trans woman preparing for her SRS that she's about to become a Living-Wound of permanent defilement. That seems like a pretty shitty kind of bully, really. Not what they say - what they do.

Let me rethink of it this way . . . what I mostly saw as "compassion" was pathos; and as for the cudgel? We've all been hit by the cudgel. Blame, punishment, condemnation ... anytime, any place, any reason. I'm not denying poignant individual friendships exist between individual GA feminists and trans women. Nor would I deny the outright tokenism and exploitation of the "TERF pet". It happens.

Kind interactions can often slide into confrontations, with peer pressure and group think ensuring the GATE doesn't step out of line. Because in their view the most compassionate thing to tell a GATE is to destransition! Thus, at a certain point, 'compassion' or 'cudgel' are not readily distinguishable amidst a political vanguard possessed of an extreme gender-scepticism. The trans person, attempting to hold gender abolitionist views, is a glaring paradox. How does one experientially benefit daily from the civic and social accommodations that trans activism has won for us, yet denounce or discredit the principles and civil rights issues that led to these accommodations?

The cudgel isn't just to "bash" a trans woman for liking skirts or having long hair (those fetishists!). Their cudgel is primarily a gavel: the resounding echo of judgment, the oakwood bang of guilty-as-proven-trans. There is a sadism in that: the beating down of another, the yucky other - and the reckless glee with which some of the TERFs take in such pugilism that is well documented and disturbing. They want us to hurt for being who we are - that's a sociopathy deeper than politics.

Rani: Do you have thoughts over the seeming preoccupation amongst gendercrits with poring over the self-reflection and political discourse of trans women over het-performing/gender-conforming (even toxically so) men? See also: their willingness to align themselves with and applaud screeds by vehemently anti-feminist folks like Robert McCain, Gavin McInnes, Kevin Williamson, etc as long as they throw a few t-slurs in their articles?

Aoife: The "pouring over" (stalking, creeping, data collecting, invasive background searches) is frightening to witness, disturbing to experience. We also see "the pouring over" most directly expressed in the vicious daily exchanges, especially on twitter, between gender abolitionist trans women against "the wrong trans". Theatre of cruelty, driven by name-searching and hashtag monitoring.

No political change but profound personal hurt. And often it's one trans woman (the abolitionist) against another (the identarian). Why so much trans on trans targeting? Because, at the end of the day, a "gender critical" trans woman can only serve one real purpose, if required - to attack trans

ideology as a trans person. It's a kind of on-call duty: TERF accused of transphobia, intervene as trans woman to deny and offer character testimony. It has led to these bizarre situation of having TERFs cite with gusto this "TW who agrees with me!" . . . even though said person citing could care less, and is in fact probably disgusted by, the actual trans woman behind the essay. And will say as much at nearest chance.

As I became disillusioned with gender politics on all sides, I was most profoundly disconcerted to see the overlap - and increasingly outright collaboration - between some sex essentialist feminists, gender abolitionist trans women, and the evangelical right wing. Why do they all get along? Because, at some level of perverse collaboration, they concur entirely on a lot of things about the essential nature of sex. They see male and female as discrete categories, permanently and unalterably divided by axes of difference.

Instead of considering new markers of difference, they regress to a consensus standard, based on incomplete assumptions standardized as the norm and the normal. Thus you see some (not all) TERFs celebrating bathroom laws, and evangelical advocacy groups quoting TERF blogs with approval to make the same point: pee according to whatever assignment that cursory examination of your outer body at birth that was indexed as data of your entrance into the social scheme. You are what you were before you were born. So why is anyone surprised that sex essentialism inevitably leads to a queue of guardians, protectors, overseers, and the mighty arm to protect the womanfolk? They share a belief in conversion therapy for trans, and the same "man up" and "own your masculinity" or other advisories that sound like leftover PE lesson shouted by a coach?

In the genital-metrics of gender abolitionism, and its pathetic psychoanalysis of trans etiologies . . . a cigar is never just a cigar for a trans woman. A penis is always a trans woman.

In my encounters, sex essentialism, as a critique of trans woman validity, often betrays a naïve Freudianism at its basis: All (every single one of us!) transwomen are motivated by a predetermined libido: we "act" because of embedded causal relations to the penis; and our "actions" are thus psychosexual performances (without any agency) of lust, horniness, frustration, and so forth (release the Id!) In the sex-essentialist model of trans women, the entire trans phenomenon is solely about desire, lust, and the triumph of the male orgasm over female self-determination. That's it. That's the paradigm. The entirety of our lives' menageries are reduced to a routine physical function, one that somehow becomes the cornerstone of our entire psyche and its productivity in the world. And every abolitionist is a moral authoritarian ready to call out gendercrimes.

I think of the Good Will Hunting scene when Will, with pedantic arrogance, takes a look at Sean's painting hanging in his office. Without a pause of respect for trauma and personhood of the artist, Will launches into some fetid psychoanalysis based on a presumptive glimpse. Trans women are like that - semi-complete canvasses to diagnose and disparage. Trans women are permanently exhibit A. Vulnerability. Trans women are soft, easy targets. We, because of systemic disadvantages in ways cis people simply do not experience, are much less likely to have the resources to be able to fight back or respond. It's simply bullying: target the weak. Just dispense with complex argument and go for the affect of radicalism: public vivisection for the gender criminals.

You'd think such dehumanizing and denigrating dismissals of entire communities of people as nothing

more than fetish-automatons would immediately be called out as reductionist bigotry. And, in an increasing number of circles - indeed the majority by far - that's exactly what gender abolitionism is recognized for. A masterplan not to dismantle gender as ideology and material affect, but to deny "transition" or self-determination as crimes against the ministry of truth. The rhetorical cudgel swings wildly and insensitively - "feeling" is weakness, and so you'll hear the dismissal of the profound hurt and damage caused by these "debates".

Rani: How often have you ever witnessed any sort of reconsideration of these prevalent tactics? I remember myself seeing a post on, maybe "Stop Trans Chauvinism" (?) that was an impassioned plea that aligning with the homophobic far-right might not be the best tactic for a woman-centered movement, but not much else, and even that seems to have been ignored. Do they ever display remorse or cognitive dissonance for cross-referencing anti-feminist doxxing forums or 4chan pages chock full of homophobic slurs or, as mentioned before, signal boosting the work of anti-feminists and homophobic religious-right folk?

Aoife: Rarely. "Reconsideration" of actions towards trans people as unnecessarily vicious is immediately equated with backtracking - leading to immediate repercussions from the Collective. Only tough boots, no crybabies! And the enemy of their enemy is their ... well, perhaps not friend, but certainly convenient acquaintances.

One incident I observed recently: a popular, prominent gender critical TW shut down her blog because her blog posts after SRS - which express the panorama of psychosomatic responses anyone might feel after such a major corporeal adjustment - were being seized upon to demonize "transition" as a fool's errand. She wrote in plain self-reflection about the costs and benefits of her personal decision, but explicitly stated that TERFs should not capitalize on her pain and frustration as retweetable digs at the "poor young man" who "realized too late he went to far". She begged them not to cite her, to pass about her words as the hot potato of trans regret, to take her experience as a handy-case to show why young people should be denied trans health care. They didn't respect her boundaries or requests - and now her blog is in lockdown.

She asked the TERFs to stop referring to her blog, to deploying her as a handy "case in point" - and none of her boundaries in this regard were respected.

Far from 'reconsideration', there seems to be no consideration at all! Just a cloistered, parochial reactionary hostility. For example - the gobsmacking twitter exchange during the HB2 debate, in which various sex-essentialists couldn't decide amongst themselves if it were a good piece of legislation or not. There was absolutely no consensus amongst them, regardless of the fact that toilet-regulation is an inevitable result of a physicalism that assigns civil-status based on genitals. And unbearably foolish results soon follow:

"Oh, I didn't check the site. Only read the petition" - the confused politics of genital dialectics in one exchange, right there. Here is a SET twitter activist inviting another SET twitter activist to sign an anti-trans petition . . . because get tehtwanz! . . . regardless of driving traffic, hits, advert hits, and revenue dividends to LifeSite News. "Only read the petition" ... which just so happened to be written and sponsored by militant, patriarchal lobbyists. "Waitasec, did I just give my IP and name to a statement that also denounces homosexuality and women who wear trousers? Whoops."

Whatever. As long as a trans woman gets kicked. This is myopic politics of the worst sort - that is to say, bigotry for bigotries' sake. We see it in the insistence on using our prior (and no longer legal) names; in pronoun application (correct as carrot, incorrect as stick); and in disgusting and unseemly tunnel-crawls to find "before" pictures and other errata. Point to any trans woman and reduce her to a template, throw around some first year psych jargon ... but always the undercurrent of a really ... hateful ... projection onto trans women. It doesn't take long to manifest. And bigotry seeks agreement: "Trans women are men! We are so right! Yes we are right!" Not arguments, just reiterated insults based upon the premise of us as broken, maniacal, and fiendishly sexualized cretins.

Rani: I know how that goes.

Aoife: It's the same discursive sphere in which "TERF" is a slur but "deluded womanfaced tranny living with a vagi-gouge" is descriptive. I know: I dealt and received my shares of the pointless viciousness. And it changed nothing. Absolutely pointless.

In my case, I grew so weary and tired of the pain, anger, and hate having the pretense of "debate" and "liberation" about what was, whether they like it or not, a non-issue in my life. I live as a woman and am received as such: this is confirmed for me through encountering other people every day, and how they interact with me. And yet I was logging online to argue myself out of the very benefits and processes that saved my life?

So I'll be clear on this, and it's important to me to say: I did not so much a change of heart . . . if anything, 'twas a change of disposition. I no longer want any part, any more, in attacking other trans women, in seeking to undermine urgently needed health care for youth, or of increasing the trauma and depression of marginalized trans people who are, quite literally, scraping the world for reasons to hope. I'm tired of the cruelty, all right? Not because I'm a fake nun or sweetniceaoife or whatever. No. I'm just tired of hate, and I don't want it in my life. Many, many of the people who cited my writings, who flagged my name in the air only when convenient, are actually very hateful people. Nasty, inhumane, and without any recourse to decent standards of behavior. They agree with my dead father: I'm not really a woman. And yet every day I wake up and exactly that, in all of the ways that matter to me and my autonomy in the world, and the rights my nation grants.

Rani: I have a bit of history myself with struggling to reconcile radical feminist views on trans lives with my own struggle with gender dysphoria. I've probably mentioned a billion times being pressured to detransition by a longtime boyfriend that I considered (and still consider, honestly) really brilliant and well-versed on TERF rhetoric... while also being a verbally abusive alcoholic. It was a difficult time for me. How common and/or intensive was the pressure to detransition and/or reconsider or leave your primary relationship within the ranks of the gendercrits?

Aoife: Let me say how sorry I am to hear that: the intimate directness with which your partner combined abusive behavior of you as an individual was strategically combined with an assault on your legitimacy (your existential worthiness) as a trans woman. The symbiosis of personal attack with "impersonal theory" is a sham: the "impersonal theory", spinning in abstraction, wants to manifest its legitimacy in verifiable ways. Very easy to spot the awful plain rage is at the core of their very discourse. There are a lot of people tweeting angrily from tiny villages, manipulating trans women made digitally accessible through the internet. Personal? Political? "Theory" becomes a vicious personal attack in the same way

that “negative reinforcement” becomes a 120v shock delivered by a Milgram Machine.

Perhaps there is a shame/grace sensation of public humiliation that comes from “self-flagellating” (I’m quoting a recent gendercrit tweet, by the way - her very words) - the GATE - the aproia, the wicked other, the hypocrite of gender betrayal.

In sex essentialist politics, detransition thus represents the only real redemption for the trans person by enacting the cultural sacrifice of personhood, medical care, and ultimately patriarchy. The only legitimate way out of that aporia, “the wicked other”, impossible middle ground, or whatever you have it ... of being a “gender abolitionist transsexual”. It’s undeniably clear that Janice Raymond (a Catholic nun, interesting) + Daly (Catholic and feminist theologian who was on the payroll for most of her life from a Jesuit-run institution). [Insert comment on radical feminists with Catholic fetishes.] Yeah, Catholicism in anti-trans writers - I could write a chapter or two on that. But Raymond and Daly’s arguments are plain: transition, the pretense to “change” sex, is inherently a moral evil.

Detransition is a personally difficult decision that is entirely up to the individual. And it’s also an extremely poignant clickbait realpolitik: the more Walter Heyers, the more detransitioned trans women - the more “evidence” Raymondian feminists acquire in lieu of actual designs for what gender abolitionism will entail, exactly.

For their part, “the Righteous Detransitioner” persona - I can think of two of them unconvincingly pontificating about “the balance” and “freedom” found in signing the blood-oath online: “I solemnly swear to never be a Ladyface every again.” The penitent reveals his sins to the gender-abolished judiciary.

No mistake about it: the relentless pressure on GATEs to detransition is a deliberate agenda: “You know you’re a man, so man up and be a man, because you’re a man. You’re not a woman and never will be. So make the heroic decision.” Go to a ‘Gay Convert’ conference and hear the same: The call to maleness without masculinity through that same bullshit language of “honour”, “truth”, and “courageous sacrifice”? This is deliberately hurting people in the name of a score card: how many of them can we “convert”? This is conversion therapy through recursive bullying. That leverage of psychological manipulation, often played out as real time headfucks in twitter exchanges between gendercrit trans women and anonymous twitter TERFs. The young and newly transitioned are most vulnerable. And that is shameful. Honest to God, what kind person feels they have the right to dispense xyz medical advice via 140 characters to thousands-miles away strangers, ones who are in obvious distress? It’s actually a really, really sick sort of thing to do to someone: invoke their despair to sanctify your position.

Detransition is sometimes chosen, sometimes forced upon a trans person. But for many of us detransition is like Room 101: the worst things you can imagine ... to surrender the hard achievement ... to revert back to a physical and social state that had, previously, been unbearable but now ostensibly endurable because of a book someone wrote forty years ago. In TERF chess, the trans token-pawns are easily exchanged. . . for position, or for profit . . . or just to see one less awkwardly dangling tr*nny piece removed from the board. But if you are a male ally to sex essentialist radical feminism - that’s the only move you are permitted: to be exchanged.

Rani: Feel free to skip this one, but I can’t pretend I don’t want a few juicy details out of ya: So, without naming names, I’m personally aware of about five gendercrit trans folks that either had a

history of or continue to actually participate in a lot of the kink/fetish activities they accuse and/or shame trans women outside the movement for. I assume there must be more. Without naming names, how prevalent would you say it is, and do you think they find rationalization by aligning themselves with the movement somehow? Side question: do you think there is an element of fetishistic sadism to the behavior of certain gendercrits?

Sidenote: It's been recognized by a lot of folks (myself included) who have spent time poking at the gendercrit movement that there is a distinct psychological self-harm element to engaging with these types. Was wondering if there may be a counterpart to the folks that embraced it.

Aoife: Me with juicy details? I'm sorry to disappoint! But as someone interested in psychoanalysis, sure I won't skip the question ;). But really what I've observed is what I see in most trans women: private tears, unspoken frustrations, pressing predicaments.

Names don't need naming. As you mention, several gendercrit trans women have written extensively on their personal SM kinkplay, with far more detail than one would wish to read. Some openly post graphic pictures of needle and edge play, bloodworking, extreme corporal punishment. Is masochism a repeating theme? Yes, I would say so.

I don't just mean ball-gags and spankings - the physical masochism may very well be linked to a psychosexual vulnerability (likely a result from the traumatic adolescence so many of us go through) that creates internal patterns of self-chastisement and public humiliation. These patterns can become so deeply rehearsed that they function as erotic needs or psychiatric yearnings for attention and validation. Self-harm, low self-esteem, internalized transphobia - undeniably common traits for queers having to endure and survive in a systematically hostile infrastructure that denies and belittles trans people on every level. Converting that frustration into a communal loathing, out of which new political affiliations can be fashioned: it's a tempting chance to find reassurance in the comfort of a group. And perhaps SM theatrical fantasies are played out, unconsciously, in weird top/bottom world where the most militant and heartless radicals go after the trans woman - mistress to pet - where chastisement must be followed by repentance and begging for forgiveness. You know the story. It looks like any other mild scene of discipline and punish and psychologically TERFs play it out every time they "demand" a trans woman account for herself, especially ones who claim to be "trans critical".

What I find strange is the crypto-fetishism of gender abolitionists who, for "research and argument", write four part/8,000 word blog posts, full of naughty imagery and salacious details about masochism and the pleasure/pain dialectic . . . there was one blog, I kid you not, that produced something the size of an honours thesis full of libidinal projection and sublimation. She linked me repeatedly, citing my interest in Dominican spirituality as proof I have fantasies of being a torturer during The Inquisition. It's laughable. And this person spends a lot more time daydreaming, writing, and contemplating (for research purposes only, I'm sure) kink than I do. But they are inoculated from sex-crimes by virtue of professing the Right Feminism as a microcosmic psychodrama.

But that's what you get when you live in social media incubators for an ideology that thinks it has escaped ideology: "everyone else is sick but me." Or "everyone else is sick, but I have the cure. Do this if you agree with me? We agree. Agreement is agreed. Hugs! You're the best! You're the cleverest!" This kind of love-bombing that goes on twitter a part of that SM vibe as well - a hug after the

berating.

Rani: One last (maybe) question. You mentioned the idea of gender critical trans women “performing the evidence [#]RadFems want to see”. See also your line about “male in the tweets, female in the streets” (which I love by the way). I’ve mentioned before in my writing similar observations to my youth growing up in a Southern Charismatic church, where parishioners would loudly declare their sins in front of the church begging the pastor to be forgiven. One would notice repeat performers that would confess to ever more extravagant and humiliating (and possibly imagined) sins, perhaps partially addicted to the spectacle of the evangelical performance. How fair would you consider that comparison?

Aoife: I’m not informed enough to wager an analogy, but I understand what you’re getting at. “Male in the tweets; female in the streets” was, well, my realization as to my harmful cognitive/corporeal dissonance that arises from a gap between the lived and the described. It’s an unhealthy, unproductive kind of self-denial that, over the long term, can interfere with post-transition subject formation, self-concept, and self-esteem. You have to admit: gendercrit TW tend to write and tweet the same things over, and over, and over . . . it is a kind of performance, no doubt mindful of maintaining “approval” (however tenuous) with the Correct Feminists. And of course they feel guilt for this hypocrisy, this “cheat” code for living as a woman but still claiming the abolitionist perspective. Public guilt is a personal passion play of self-identity as non-determined as well as a means of satisfying inner questions of uncertainty and self-doubt. “I’m feeling bad because I’m doing something bad. How bad am I? Let me tell you. And here’s another selfie of how hot I now look as a woman, even though I’m a man.”

Total cul-de-sac.

Bottom line . . . in my estimation, this is the row: are M and F adaptive, sociobiological concepts that have changed and shifted historically in meaning. Or are M-ness and F-ness universal, material consistencies with (insert essential biological criteria list) as necessary if/must definitional attributes. And on this we are now full-on hitting the limits of outdated models. Not exactly known for defending the trans community, and in fact more known as allies to sex essentialism - in fact, I’ve noted that Alice Dreger, Anne Fausto-Sterling, and Rebecca Jordan-Young has outright called for an end to the state regulating and codifying sex as a personal attribute.

There’s no reversing it: the posthuman challenge is upon us. The previous humanist idealization of naturalized states, based loosely on an errata of attributes - with the sole criteria based on capacity to reproduce or not -- are no longer beyond questioning and critique. You simply cannot have a full account of sex or gender as automatic social processes. The algorithms of allocations are breaking down, not being reconfirmed. And transgender people are the major factor in this reevaluation.

To be personal: I know that I am not the only trans person to feel an aching identification with Lal: a creation of possessed of self-awareness and self-actualization, assigned gender-neutral, featured in a particularly compelling examination on the interiority/exteriority of gender, as seen on Star Trek: The Next Generation.

Lal, by their own reckoning, understands that being “non-gendered” is not better than being “gendered”. And Lal, well aware of how gender/species will affect positionality and interpretation in social dynamics, is given the autonomy to select their own gender, should she want one. There is personal choice that will preconfigure, to some extent, her interactions with the rest of the crew.

It's not that preposterous. I'm reminded of a recent Lacanian lecture I attended where the speaker spoke of the future as "a chacun son sexe": to each one's sex, "beyond the assigned certainty and beyond the prescribed uncertainty." Lal represents a currently unattainable fantasy of total-molecular sex (or non-sex) determination. But she nonetheless anticipates the very conundrum that trans people encounter by coming out. "This is who I am - not as you intended me to be."

The rise of trans rights coincided brilliantly with larger access and usage of the internet. Shit websites about, but good information got out there. Trans people found each other. Talked. Connected. "Hey, I'm really, truly not alone." I remember the moment. Hey - I can really do this! Outside: possibility. Inside: necessity. My two hugest, kept-me-up-at-night worries about transition: sly, backroom excommunication from my family; dissolution of job options and academic bullying. Both came true: no-contact stipulation existing between myself and ex-family; dropped out of academia, gave up my dream of a prof, and working hard to start a new career.

Activists and researchers from all angles are in a rush to find the most contemporary interpretation of transgender ... that is, the cis explanation of the trans. In the meantime, trans people are saying - your research, your hypothesis, newspaper articles ... that's your social capital . . . and what we have alone is this: our lives. I don't know what "gender abolition" will look like - the abolitionists will tell us, the abolished, of course. But who's listening?

At enormous risk - people with an extraordinary range of personal and social diversity are coming out. (Just look at the pair of us, Rani! I'm glad to reconnect and consider you a friend. But I'm sure you'd agree if I'd say we're two entirely different people in so many ways. I mean, complete opposites quite often on many accounts! And that's perfectly fine obviously. Expected even, since there is no one kind of trans person or one kind of trans experience. What we share is our trans womanhood: ones that are irreducible to presuppositions and predictable outcomes . . . ones worthy of respect, acknowledgement, and civil dignity. All around us is, at the very least, an undeniable hope: that trans people are alive - have lived, are living, will live.

You're speaking out. I'm speaking out. And more. More! Trans lives are improved and are improving. Mine, thank God, among them. The issues will always perplex me; but I'm content in who I've become.

As for my personal, unique contribution to that. Whatever that is "worth" doesn't matter, really - because it's mine alone.

Rani is the frontperson of Destroyed For Comfort, Managing Editor of Harlot Media, gamedev of alt-game titles like Never Go To Work and retro game enthusiast. Probably writing about something pop culture related. Once had a Tumblr post reach 40,000 notes. Has a reputation, for good or bad.

Aoife blogs at aoifeschatology.com with opinions to irritate the entire gender spectrum . . . free of charge. Usually thinking about theology, bodies, and the positive changes she's now making in her life.

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