

Why they ALWAYS talk bathrooms

By Cristan Williams

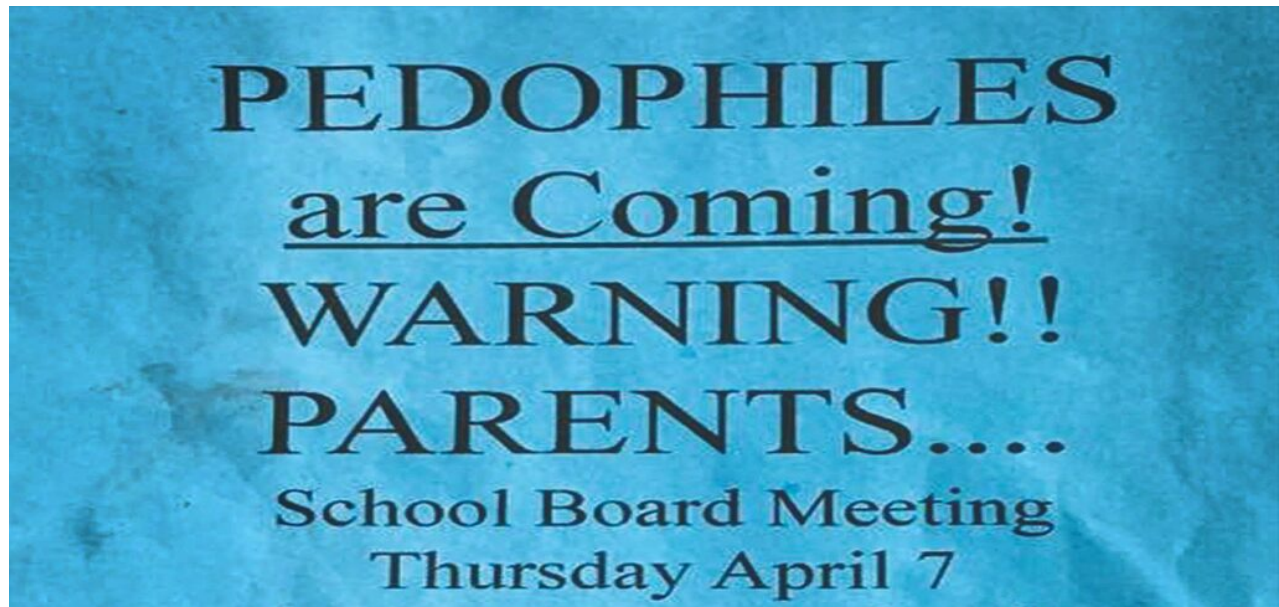
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Abstract

The TransAdvocate produced a short documentary to examine the political right's propensity to focus on bathrooms when it comes to trans equality. The reality is, the political right always focuses on bathrooms, privacy, and sexual safety concerns when taking a stand against equality, no matter the oppressed population. This documentary examines, from a historical perspective, [...]

Article



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Podcast Extra Transcript

In Illinois, one of the states that joined North Carolina in suing the Obama Administration for the special right to target trans school children for segregation from cis students, held a rally for anti-trans activists who called themselves "Citizens for Child Safety." There, they distributed fliers warning that unless trans and cis students were segregated cis children could be:

“forcibly exposed!”

“sexually harassed!”

“traumatized!”

“sexually molested!”

During the rally, the group’s co-founder Danny Holliday told the crowd that the “leaders” of the trans rights movement were pedophiles who enjoyed having sexual intercourse with animals.

Political discourse situated around the minority use of bathrooms has featured significantly in numerous social equality struggles, from the fight to preserve racist Jim Crow laws to the sexist battle to keep the Equal Rights Amendment -known as the E.R.A.- from being ratified.

Rhetorical themes featuring bathrooms, privacy, and safety concerns are integral aspects of a specific and identifiable political dialectic used to incite, promote, and sustain the fear that an oppressed group may well rape, molest, harass or infect the majority group should equality between the two groups come to pass.

In contemporary times, this political dialectic featured prominently in narratives supporting North Carolina’s law mandating that transgender people who’ve not been able to amend their birth certificate use the restroom assigned to them at birth rather than the restroom that matches their transitioned status, irrespective of legal identification or phenotype.

Proponents of laws like North Carolina’s so-called “bathroom bill” assert that these laws are needed to ensure that

A.) the privacy of cis people is respected;

B.) without these laws, rapists will dress in drag to molest little girls in the restroom; and,

C.) trans people are perverts and pedophiles who need to be prevented from accessing women’s restrooms.

In doing research for an article about so-called “bathroom bills,” I came across the work of Dr. Gillian Frank, a visiting fellow at Princeton University. I reached out to Dr. Frank to help me better understand the ways in which the very discourse currently focused upon the trans community was used against other marginalized groups throughout American history. What follows is my interview with Dr. Frank.

Cristan Williams: I ran across your work while doing research for an article that I’m writing that examines the ways in which political discourse situated around the end of desegregation, the adoption of the Equal Rights Amendment, and equality for people who are HIV+ and LGBT often sound strikingly similar. In fact, the discourse sounds so similar that it sometimes sounds as if these anti-equality movements are somehow using the same political playbook. Your work examines this discursive phenomenon. Would you please talk about how you came to research the tendency of diverse anti-equality groups to often use strikingly similar political discourse?

Gillian Frank: When I was casting around for dissertation topics in grad-school, I began looking at the ways in which conservatives sought to express sexual norms during and after the so-called “sexual

revolution” of the 1960s and 70s. I kept bumping up against how conservatives used child protection language to repudiate what they viewed as ‘sexually deviant’ practices whether it was within gay liberation or second wave feminism. And so, I thought, “Okay, that’s interesting. Why are they always talking about some sort of sexual threat to children?”

As I began digging into Anita Bryant’s 1977 anti-gay crusade, I noticed that her anti-gay activism coincided with anti-feminist and anti-integration social movements. I thought to myself, “Why are they talking about race in the exact same way as they’re talking about gay rights, feminism, and the ERA?” These movements, I quickly realized, were not compartmentalized. Conservatives moved between these movements and deployed similar child protection language. It was something of a revelation for me that a lot of the anti-gay and anti-feminist activists had deep roots in the anti-integration movement. So, that led me to look backwards in history. I found that the child protection rhetoric had been an effective tool in neutralizing the equality claims for a number of marginalized groups. I learned that conservative rhetoric that invites Americans to “protect our children from sexual violence” is often a smokescreen used to obscure discussions of social inequality.

Williams: What is your take on the recent rally in Illinois wherein anti-trans equality activists claimed that trans school children pose a sexual threat to cis school children? Do you find that the way anti-trans activists talk about trans children is somewhat similar the political rhetoric used against other marginalized groups?

Frank: The way sexuality is used to demarcate the difference of the other and to marginalize the other is a widespread phenomenon with deep historical roots. In terms of the recent rally against transgender children, the language of these anti-trans activists is incredibly stock. They depict trans school children as pedophiles, as likely to engage in bestiality, as likely to participate in group sex. It’s the overblown moral panic language of, “it’s not only this, but it’s that”. It’s the argument that one thing leads to the other that sexual or gender variance is a slippery slope. For these anti-trans people, it’s not only that trans children are bad, it’s that they’re going to try to have sex with your children; it’s not only that, but then they’re going to molest your barnyard animals and domestic pets and, not only will they engage in these solo acts of sexual perversion, then they’ll engage in group sex!

As I said, they’re shifting the conversation away from the inequality trans school children face. Instead, they’re rendering any recognition of this inequality as a sexual threat to cis children. These are paranoid fantasies. It’s that somehow these children will invade the intimate spaces cis people inhabit; it’s the argument that these intimate spaces will be invaded if other groups -in this case, trans school children- are dignified.

The basic message is that the existence of trans school children represents a general lack of morality. The bestiality language has been part of anti-gay discourse for decades and the pedophilia rhetoric dates back at least to the 1920s and 1930s for gay men, if not earlier. These are long-standing anti-gay tropes. Now, the really strange thing going on in the quotes from that rally is that there is the assumption that because the child is trans -that is, the child is aware of their gender dysphoria- that awareness somehow sexualizes them for these anti-trans activists. I find that to be a really strange and interesting leap they’re making. While, in actuality, a child having an awareness of their gender dysphoria isn’t about sexuality, for these anti-trans children activists, there’s somehow a coupling of gender identity and sexual desire so that, if a child is aware of their gender identity, they

must somehow be hypersexualized and therefore dangerous.

The logical leaps that these anti-trans activists are making within the political spear are so long and convoluted, it's worth noting. For them, a desire to be honest about one's gender identity is to mark oneself as being over-sexualized. They believe these children are wolves in sheep's clothing. It's quite strange when you parse out the twisted way they're viewing trans children.

Williams: In your paper you wrote about the historicity of the "Save Our Children" narrative. Would you talk more about that?

Frank: Stigmatizing people by labeling them as sexually dangerous is a practice that goes back hundreds and hundreds of years. In the United States, marginalized and despised groups were regularly depicted as sexual threats. Communists, gays and lesbians, African Americans, Mexicans all were stigmatized in this way.

Whites resisting Reconstruction in the southern United States deployed a powerful trope that black men were sexually predacious. They did so in order to rationalize controlling and marginalizing newly freed and enfranchised African American men. The idea that black men were rapists who desired white women undergirded lynching, which was a form of domestic terrorism used to control and disempower the African American population.

By the time we got to the Civil Rights era, the argument was this: if we get rid of Jim Crow laws and allow blacks to use the same public facilities as whites, miscegenation will take place. "Their" boys will want to marry "our" daughters. "Their" boys will want to have sex with "our" daughters. "Their" boys will want to rape "our" daughters.

This narrative, which states that disempowered minorities deserve to be disempowered because they are sexually violent, has become a template for conservative activists. Again, the function that this narrative performs is that it's a pivot away from having to address basic questions of dignity, equality, and enfranchisement by describing a certain group as sexually dangerous, violent, in need of regulation and policing. To call a group sexually threatening is to justify the any regulation and violence inflicted upon them. That's the template: social equality for marginal groups leads to sexual violence against the dominant group. Therefore, the marginal group must remain marginalized.

This became a basic architecture -a basic political language- that was transposed onto other anti-equality efforts, from the opposition to the ERA to gay rights. These anti-equality movements were oftentimes comprised of the same people, modeling the same rhetoric off each other.

Williams: Why, in your opinion, do anti-equality political groups find these arguments so useful?

Frank: They use these arguments because it's incredibly effective rhetoric. I mean, who's going to speak against, as they would frame it, the best interests of the children? Who's going to choose dangerous minority groups over their own children? For marginalized groups seeking equality, responding to this rhetoric has been a challenge. Not only do you have to make your case for equality, you have to spend time telling people that you're not a threat to their children. A triangulation takes place so that you have to assert your normalcy and respectability while also trying to prove that you're not a sexual threat.

Williams: Would you talk about the ways in which anti-equality groups politically construct themselves to be victims of marginalized groups?

Frank: Anti-equality movements position themselves in that way because it's a powerful narrative: "We're the victims here! What about our rights? What about our ability to live how we want?" This offers an inverted image of actual power relationships. Here, the majority presents themselves as vulnerable to the whims of the minority. Some anti-equality activists really believe this rhetoric while others are just using it as a political strategy. Conservatives have been very good at portraying themselves as the victims of social reform. When conservative politicians and opportunistic religious and social movement leaders frame their social groups as endangered by the empowerment of minorities, they're able to rally supporters and raise funds. By demonizing minorities as sexually violent, these same dominant groups are able to renounce any moral obligation to protect minority groups' equality and dignity. It's a mechanism that allows you to dismiss the marginalized in our society and to inoculate yourself from humanizing them.

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