LET US BE FREE FROM "ACADEMENTIA"

Seamos libres de la "academencia"

Laura Favaro

lfavaro@bournemouth.ac.uk

Bournemouth University - Reino Unido

Abstract

"Survivor of *academentia*" is how one former lecturer in sociology described herself when I interviewed her for my ethnography of academia. In particular, the research was exploring the "gender wars", namely the disputes around sex and gender that have escalated dramatically since the mid-2010s in Britain and increasingly also in many other countries. This article builds on feminist and other critical uses of the term *academentia* with original insights from interview and document data about the detrimental impact of queer theory and politics. The hope is to stimulate further inquiry into the push towards *queering* at universities, and beyond, as well as into the connections between the transgender and mad movements.

Keywords: gender wars, feminism, queer, transgender, mad studies, university.

Resumen

"Superviviente de la *academencia*" es como se describió a sí misma una exprofesora de sociología cuando la entrevisté para mi etnografía del mundo académico. En particular, la investigación exploraba las "guerras del género", es decir, las disputas en torno al sexo y el género que se han intensificado drásticamente desde mediados de la década de 2010 en Gran Bretaña y cada vez más también en muchos otros países. Este artículo se edifica sobre usos feministas y otros usos críticos del término *academencia* con aportaciones originales derivadas de entrevistas y documentos acerca del impacto perjudicial de la teoría y las políticas queer. Se espera suscitar más indagación sobre el impulso hacia el *queering* en las universidades, además de otros ámbitos, así como sobre las conexiones entre los movimientos transgénero y loco.

Palabras clave: guerras del género, feminismo, queer, transgénero, estudios locos, universidad.

1. Introduction[1]

It drives me insane. It drives me mad.
(Interviewee, "gender wars" in academia project)

Only two years after the media celebrated 2015 as "the year trans finally went mainstream" (Welsh, 2015), a number of British commentators began to express concerns about a "cultural backlash" and a "moral panic" (Barker, 2017), quickly followed by widespread talk of how the "Gender debate sparks bitter divide among trans and feminist groups" (Cotter and Hitchcock, 2019). For others, the launch in 2018 of the UK government's public consultation into the Reform of the Gender Recognition Act 2004, including whether to allow for self-declaration of legal sex, prompted a much broader "culture war" comparable only to Brexit (Strudwick, 2018)[2]. Manifestations of what is often known as the "gender wars" subsequently exploded in growing numbers of countries worldwide, cutting across the spheres of politics, law, social policy, education, healthcare, sport, and more.

Most visible, persistent and trenchant were the tensions between transgender and some women's rights groups, as well as, seemingly, within feminism itself, leading to high levels of polarisation not just in activist but also in academic spaces. Particularly notable was the drastic change in academic discourse on sex and gender, in addition to codes of professional conduct. At first primarily in English academia, from the mid-2010s onwards there were increasing testimonies pointing to "a worrying pattern of intimidation and silencing of [...] feminists critical of the sex industry and of some demands made by trans activists", accompanied by calls for universities to "affirm their support for the basic principles of democratic political exchange" (Campbell *et al*., 2015)[3]. In contrast, others dismissed these claims about a silencing of feminists in academia not only as giving "false impressions" but even as a "mechanism of power" (Ahmed, 2015).

It is against this backdrop that the gap in empirical research on the "gender wars" became increasingly conspicuous, and which I sought to address with an ethnographic study of academia. From the very conception of the project in 2016, warnings that the field was far too risky to investigate, not least for a junior scholar, were constant, as were predictions that it would lead to the end of my career, in addition to abuse online or worse. But this only corroborated my sense that something deeply problematic was taking place, and that there was a pressing need to shed light—empirically—on the "gender wars" in academia. As I entered the field in 2020, many previously

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[2] The level of feminist resistance to transgender politics has led to Britain being dubbed as "TERF Island".
[3] See also Sullivan and Suissa (2019) and Fazackerley (2020), together with earlier warnings in Jeffreys (2012) and Hanisch *et al*. (2013).

enthusiastic supporters of my work vanished from sight, as did the usual invitations to collaborate, speak or apply for jobs. In the safety of the interview space, many would ask whether I was not "terrified" to conduct the research, seeing that the climate around this issue was unprecedentedly "toxic", "hostile" and "vitriolic".

This was precisely the nature of some of the responses to my first report on my findings in September 2022, published in the form of an article for *Times Higher Education* entitled «Researchers are wounded in academia's gender wars». Drawing on interview and document data, the article outlined the main orientations in the dispute. These were on the whole in opposition, and I put forward the usefulness of differentiating between feminism and "genderism". For the former, as the article explained:

> "There is a clear difference between 'sex', which refers to biological categories that are binary and immutable, and 'gender', which describes the roles, behaviours and attributes that a given culture deems appropriate for people by virtue of their sex. Recognising this difference is important because, as well as constraining both sexes, gender serves to justify the subordination of females. This group of academics also noted that their perspective was, until recently, largely shared across feminism, as well as within many academic disciplines." (Favaro, 2022)

For the avoidance of doubt: the political subject of feminism is women (and girls), understood as a sex class**,** and the aim is to liberate them from patriarchal systems, which are considered to be partly rooted in men's interest in controlling their reproductive capacities. Therefore, feminism, a centuries-old movement, recognises that sex is a biological reality that matters in certain contexts[4], while striving to abolish the socially constructed mechanism that functions to naturalise, enforce and perpetuate the subordination of female people to male people, that is, gender (or what before the 1970s was referred to as sex roles and stereotypes, among other terms[5]).

On the other hand, genderism is a much more recent—queer theory-inflected—movement that is sex-critical and pro-gender. Its political subject encompasses all those (who feel) subjected to gender oppression: a phrase that is redefined to mean lack of individual choice and external affirmation relating to a person's "gender identity". This is a term that came to replace "psychological sex" (Wilson, 2021) as part of the theories pioneered in the 1950s and 1960s by psychologists, sexologists and others in medicine and academia working with what was then called hermaphrodites (infants in particular), transsexuals, and others including "sissy boys" (e.g. Green*,* 1987; Money, 1973; Stoller, 1968). The core concept in genderism, together with its associated clinical model of "gender affirmation", is rejected by feminists as lacking scientific basis, and as constituting instead a

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[4] Not just politically for the women's movement but also for purposes that range from healthcare to policymaking to data collection and much more. See, for example, human-rights charity *Sex Matters* (https://sex-matters.org/). and feminist organisation *Women's Declaration International* (https://www.womensdeclaration.com/en/).

[5] For discussions of different and shifting uses of the term gender, see Cameron (2016) and Wilson (2021)*.*

sexist, homophobic and harmful experiment, especially when it comes to children (e.g. Brunskell-Evans and Moore, 2018*; Moore and Brunskell-Evans, 2019)*[6].

Infused with a new, seemingly progressive, cultural life by queer theory (Cameron, 2016), the term gender identity is used in my data to describe a sense of oneself as a woman, a man, both, neither, or something else, which is internal, hence "not visible to others"[7], and which can change. Nonetheless, the concept is prioritised over sex, which in genderism is understood as a social fiction (notably of colonialism), a malleable biological spectrum, paradoxically both or, simply, a "transphobic dog-whistle". Gender is also understood in different ways: as socially or discursively constructed (performative model); as an inseparable combination of biological, psychological and social elements (biopsychosocial model); or, to a much lesser extent, as innate subjectivity, evoking notions of sexed brains (psychobiologist model). Adding to the conceptual confusion, the word is at times used as a synonym for gender identity.

On the whole, gender is valued as a source of diversity, pleasure and creativity, indeed as a "vast and wonderful landscape" (Iantaffi and Barker, 2017: 60). What genderism problematises is "naming and assigning categories", considered to be "the ultimate exercise in power"[8]. In line with queer theory, it is argued that the oppression of "any group"—both past and present—"is ultimately attributable to binary thinking" (Marinucci, 2010: 109). Anyone who identifies as transgender is regarded as an oppressed subject of systems of power, not least colonialism, capitalism, and purportedly associated ideologies such as cisgenderism[9]. These individuals are celebrated as "authentically divine" or as "the superheroes of our time"[10], with attendant calls to flaunt with pride the scars or "battle wounds"[11] from their elective irreversible surgeries, including to remove healthy tissue and organs.

My article additionally outlined general patterns in the dynamics of the "gender wars" in academia, arguing that "a culture of discrimination, silencing and fear has taken hold across universities" (Favaro, 2022). Reporting on the experiences of academics with feminist, genderist and "middle ground" views, the article showed that this toxic environment had been generated by those supportive of genderism, directed at those who disagree with—or raise any critical questions about-

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[6] See also the organisation *Transgender Trend: No Child is Born in the Wrong Body*. Available at: https://www.transgendertrend.com/ [03/05/2024].
[7] "Gender Diversity Terminology". Available at: https://studentaffairs.psu.edu/csgd/explore-lgbtq-resources/identity-based/gender-terms [03/05/2024].
[8] Twitter thread by writer Flavia Dzodan (2020) available at: https://threadreaderapp.com/thread/1269530880458067969.html [13/05/2024].
[9] Cisgenderism is a term used to refer critically to ideas that limit "what it means to be male/female, or to be a woman, to the biological sex someone is born with" (Peel and Newman, 2020: 16), which are viewed as "*fundamental* to the enactment of whiteness within a global colonial context" (Hunter, 2020: 5; emphasis in original).
[10] Screenshot of Instagram post by transgender charity *Gendered Intelligence* (2020) available at: https://www.bayswatersupport.org.uk/a-history-of-affirmation/ [03/05/2024].
[11] As described by global poster child of transgender, Jazz Jennings (in Merrett, 2020).

any of its tenets. This predominantly affects women, with feminists in particular being actively persecuted[12].

«Researchers are wounded in academia's gender wars» received extensive public and private support, including from several research participants, as well as many other academics beyond who expressed gratitude for visibilising what they corroborated was a reality in academia today in Britain and elsewhere. This positive response was matched, however, by a backlash from those supportive of genderism. Public reactions included a colleague who identifies as a transgender woman describing the article on Twitter as an "attack piece on trans people", and condemning our employer for giving ethical approval to my project, as allegedly it "clearly intended to cause harm"[13]. Some interviewees disclosed their participation in order to express regret at taking part in the research, "having read the press article", and to issue apologies to "the trans people who will be harmed as a result" of my "article aiming to legitimise discrimination and hate"[14]. Others with no association whatsoever with the research called for an end to my career, or for "the retraction of the research findings, but also censure for the researchers [sic]"[15]. Still others made complaints to my (then) workplace.

These reactions were consistent with the patterns identified in the "gender wars" project, whose findings also pointed to a broader detrimental impact of queer theory and politics in academia (and beyond), which this article begins to consider. To explore the *queering*[16] of academia, it brings together the interviews previously analysed with an extended document dataset. Overall, the discussion that follows is inspired by, and builds on, the concept of "academentia", which, after outlining the methodology in the next section, I introduce in relation to feminist thought and the research findings. The article provides additional insights into the dynamics of the current "gender wars", which are then contextualised with a discussion of the "sex wars" towards the end of the last century. An exploration of the rise to prominence of queer theory leads me to consider a range of associated fields, including porn studies, transgender studies and mad studies, alongside the connections between their tenets and tendencies. The following section critically raises the question of "what is next". By way of conclusion, I return to *academentia* as a useful concept, this time in relation to contemporary critiques of *neoliberalisation* processes, contributing additional questions for future, more systematic, scholarly inquiry.

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[12] Consider, for example, the collective creation of an all-female list "to accuse non-compliant professors of hate crime", a smear campaign orchestrated by a trans-identifying male lecturer at Goldsmiths, University of London (Bannerman, 2018). See also footnote 25 below on the term TERF.
[13] Screenshot available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MmDZm36imEo [02/05/2024].
[14] See appendix in Favaro and Özkırımlı (2024).
[15] Original tweet available at: https://twitter.com/nkalamb/status/1570733079286906880 [02/05/2024].
[16] The book *Queer: A Graphic History* explains that the word queer is used as a noun, an adjective and, particularly, a verb (Barker and Scheele, 2016).

2. Researching academia

You want to open a can of worms, and good luck with that.
(Interviewee, "gender wars" in academia project)

In March 2020 I began my postdoctoral project on the "gender wars", with a particular focus on feminism and academia in England. Research objectives pertained to shedding light on the following areas: Content, history and groups; Manifestations, dynamics and impact; Individual perspectives and experiences; Reasons for its emergence and specific expressions; Potential avenues for ways forward. An ethnographic approach was selected due to its suitability when seeking holistic, in-depth and contextualised insights into meaning, experience and practice within a particular social or cultural group (Skeggs, 2001; Kramer and Adams, 2017). In addition to its focus on cultural patterning and critical interpretation, ethnographic research is "particularly useful for gaining understandings of the dynamics underlying conflict situations" (Adams, 2012: 343). Moreover, I was able to maximise fieldwork by conducting an "at-home ethnography", where I was thus an observing participant—rather than a participant-observer—of naturally occurring events in the cultural setting under study (Alvesson, 2009). That is, my understandings both of the "gender wars" and life in academia more generally are additionally informed by my own everyday experiences at work[17]. The following techniques were employed to generate data:

- *Field notes and research diary writings*. These recorded field-oriented activity, including informal communications and my own experiences throughout the various stages of the project.

- *Document review*. This was ongoing but principally involved academic publications in gender studies across different perspectives or approaches, and was complemented by a non-systematic review of campaigning, journalistic and other relevant materials such as policy documents. The subsequent, extended exploration of the push towards the queering of academia led me to create an additional substantial dataset comprising academic works in associated fields, particularly mad studies.

- *Social media analysis*. Data consisted of field notes alongside a retrieved sample of representative and otherwise significant tweets. These mostly derived from an eighteen-month non-participant observation from 2020 to 2021 of public Twitter accounts held by key players

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[17] This was particularly useful given the restrictions to in-person contact during the COVID-19 pandemic, which, among other things, involved a decreased reliance on data valued by ethnographers such as "corridor talk" (Pereira, 2017).

in the "gender wars".

- Initial analysis of the document and social media data informed the *semi-structured interviews* described below.

- Findings from the qualitative data informed the development of an *online mixed survey* questionnaire examining views and experiences regarding the "gender wars", as well as working conditions and censorship in academia more generally. Representative samples of social scientists working at universities in England and Ireland were invited to complete the survey, and over 600 responses were collected in June-July 2022.

- Finally, the research also used a *case study* approach to the academic event «Feminist Dilemmas, Feminist Hope?», which will be discussed in the next section. Evidence gathered included documents, Tweets, videos, informal conversations and formal interviews.

The interviews aimed to explore different perspectives and experiences regarding the "gender wars" among academics working at universities in England who self-defined as feminist and whose research and/or teaching related to gender studies (broadly understood). From October 2020 to December 2021, fifty-one semi-structured interviews averaging 1 hour 20 minutes in length were conducted via the online video platform Zoom, with the exception of three telephone interviews[18]. From my perception, the sex of all but one participant was female. Participants self-reported as female (primarily), woman, cis woman, non-trans or a combination thereof, except for the following: androgynous (1); non-binary trans (1); queer non-binary (1); queer woman (1); trans masculine non-binary (1); trans woman (1).

At the time of the interview, participants were based at twenty-seven different universities across England, apart from six participants who were key players but had either retired or left academia, along with six other key informants such as journal editors who were based at universities in Wales, Scotland, New Zealand, and, in three cases, the US. Included in the final sample were acting editors and/or editorial board members at fourteen peer-reviewed journals in feminist, gender and/or sexuality studies. Reflecting my interest in those with greater influence in academic institutions and cultures, thirty-five interviewees held posts at senior lecturer/associate professor level and above.

Three participant categories were created to assist recruitment of a diverse sample in terms of perspectives and experiences[19]. The first two comprised individuals whose views were publicly available, for example through their academic work or (public) social media engagement, as supportive of what at the time I heuristically called gender affirmative (GA) and gender critical (GC) feminism. A third category was reserved for those who had—to the best of my knowledge—never

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[18] Prior to the start of the study, ethical approval was obtained from the Sociology Research Ethics Committee at City, University of London.
[19] Albeit within the limitations posed by the method (and available resources), some of which were addressed with the survey that followed.

publicly expressed views regarding the dispute. As discussed in the introduction, upon analysis of the data I renamed the two main orientations as genderism and feminism, respectively. Many of those in the "unknown" category described their views as somewhere "in the middle". No participant put forth or named a discrete, alternative, position.

The different final numbers within each of the recruitment categories, namely GA (20), GC (14) and Unknown (16), correspond to the differing moments when sufficient information or understanding was considered to have been obtained, rather than reflecting the ease of recruitment. On the contrary, recruiting individuals categorised as GA was considerably more challenging. Some explicitly refused to take part in the research because it was an open sociological inquiry[20] rather than a pro-transgender advocacy project, or because the sample did not exclude those with "gender critical" views, deemed by one potential participant to entail an "eugenicist approach to transness".

Interviewees were invited to customise their modality of participation. Two did not wish to be recorded, one of whom identified as transgender, and the other as non-binary, with the latter withdrawing from the study some time after the interview (hence no longer included in the final sample). The other forty-nine interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed with permission. Almost all in the GA and Unknown recruitment categories opted for anonymisation in outputs, while ten interviewees in the GC category preferred to be named. These decisions are respected in the discussion that follows.

3. Introducing *academentia*

"Survivor of *academentia*" is how one interviewee for my research on academia's "gender wars" described herself. This was Julia Long, a lesbian radical feminist, activist, and author of *Anti-Porn: The Resurgence of Anti-Pornography Feminism* (2012). Formerly a lecturer in sociology, at the time of the interview Long was no longer working in the sector. When explaining her decision to leave, she emphasised "the politics of the elimination of radical feminist voices from academia", and more generally the "really stultifying atmosphere".

Epitomising these politics and atmosphere is the incident that took place in 2019 at an event run by City, University of London to launch its Gender & Sexualities Research Centre and to celebrate thirty years of the Feminist and Women's Studies Association (UK & Ireland)[21]. Over ten of the academics I interviewed had been at this event, holding different roles and perspectives.

Julia Long had attended the event as a member of the audience. In response to her comments during the Q&A period, she was subjected to an aggressive and physically intimidating reaction from an academic who identifies as a woman, sociologist Ruth Pearce. Following this, as the organisers

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[20] I entered the field with genuine sociological curiosity, as well as a willingness to change my own views.
[21] The word "women" has since been removed from the name, a decision agreed at that very event.

explained in a public statement: "The majority of the audience left the lecture theatre in protest at this attack whilst security was brought in to remove the person responsible"[22].

The person removed was not Pearce. It was Long. On top of the "very aggressive male harassment", which included "shouting in my face", she was then made to walk through a crowd of academics "all whooping and saying 'shame' and jeering and cheering that we were leaving". Her companion, Sheila Jeffreys, a former professor of political science and long-standing lesbian feminist scholar and activist, similarly recalled how "all turned against us raising their fists and chanting". "I have never come across anything like that before", she observed, "to walk the plank through all of these people screaming". "It was frightening", Jeffreys added[23].

"What did it feel like when academic after academic, at a Feminist and Women's Studies conference, told her how nasty a scum she was?", feminist writer and campaigner Raquel Rosario Sánchez (2019) would later ask. In our interview, notwithstanding the abuse she suffered, Long pointed to the significance of what took place in terms of providing a "rare moment of clarity" about the "level of delusion" and anti-feminism in academia today.

The above account of events was corroborated by the other interviewees that were there, including those supportive of genderism. These academics framed their actions "as an act of solidarity with the trans and non-binary community". "You need to be accountable for the things that you say" was the statement of an academic with a role at an organisation involved in the event. "I had no trouble excluding them", one journal editor told me. In her opinion, "universities are not democratic spaces".

"Very defensive and rightly so" was how another genderist interviewee described Pearce's reaction. However, when asked what Long had said, in contrast to the feminist interviewees, those supportive of the genderist perspective struggled to offer tangible recollections. What is more, some admitted to not even knowing on the actual day. "I said, 'it's interesting to hear about all this anti-feminist backlash'", Long recounted during our interview, "it was something like, 'but I'm surprised you haven't mentioned the most obvious one, which is the phenomenon of men pretending to be women and taking over feminism'".

"In light of this event", announced the organisers, "both the FSA and the GSRC will create a code of conduct in order to try to prevent this from happening again". The event was entitled «Feminist Dilemmas, Feminist Hope?», so the issue raised by Long could not have been more relevant. In what retrospectively can only be read as doublespeak, the event had been publicised as follows: "We want to speak particularly to ideas of making space for feminism in the academy"[24]. "It was fascinating to watch. Almost the entire room just turned on this person", related an interviewee

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[22] "Statement re: 16 October 'Feminist Dilemmas, Feminist Hope' event", *Feminist Studies Association and Gender & Sexualities Research Centre* (2019). Available at: https://the-fsa.co.uk/2019/10/22/fwsa-and-gsrc-joint-statement-feminist-dilemmas-feminist-hope-event/ [21/02/2024].
[23] See also her recollections of the event in Jeffreys (2020).
[24] "FWSA AGM 2019 and FWSA's 30th Anniversary Celebration (joint event with City, University of London's Gender and Sexualities Research Centre)", *Feminist & Women's Studies Association* (2019). Available at: http://fwsablog.org.uk/fwsa-events-2019/ [21/02/2024].

involved in the event during our interview. "It was fascinating to see", she clarified, in the sense that a clear message was sent (to feminists): "you don't belong here anymore".

The term *academentia* was coined by another lesbian radical feminist scholar, the late professor Mary Daly, to capture the stultification of the mind in patriarchal education (Daly with Madsen, 2000). In 1974, when asked about problems that women were facing in academia at the time, Daly (with Dezell) responded that, with respect to the Women's Movement, "every attempt to co-opt and destroy it will be made", adding: "This is especially true in universities".

4. The "gender wars"

Julia Long's phrase—survivor of *academentia*—stayed with me because it powerfully captures what I have documented and experienced in the field. It points to the exodus of female academics with feminist views from gender studies due to persecution, for self-preservation or to escape "scholarship that is Thought Police", as one interviewee put it. It brings to mind those who claim to hold middle ground positions feeling "anxious", "depressed", "frightened", "alienated", and in a state of scholarly paralysis.

One senior scholar in psychology with views she described as "in the middle" compared the environment that genderists have created at universities to authoritarian regimes and their policing of thought and speech. Evoking this, one sociologist said: "are there things that I could write? Yes. Do I think that they could make a difference, that they could offer something? Yes. Will I write about it? No". She went on to declare: "I'm too scared. I'm too scared". Even speaking freely in a research interview that would later be anonymised was a cause for concern. "Because when you say certain words", I was told, "you're on a slippery slope to TERFdom"[25]. "And you don't want to be associated with that, but you want to point out the complexity. So, that's why I'm stuck", she clarified.

But it was those supportive of the genderist position in particular who had difficulties discussing the issues involved in the "gender wars". This included providing their own definitions of sex and gender. "It's difficult" because "I don't have clarity of thought", explained one journal editor. Observing her "own inabilities to defend what I think is right, or to justify it", an experienced media

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[25] The acronym TERF stands for "trans-exclusionary radical feminist". The term is widely rejected by those to whom it refers, namely feminists, notwithstanding some recent defiant appropriations in grassroots activism and online (where there is merchandise on offer with messages such as "TERF is the new punk" or "TERFology: Believe in reality"). First, it fails as a descriptor. The feminist movement includes all women, regardless of their identifications (as "transgender men" or any other label). Furthermore, those that TERF purports to describe represent a range of perspectives, not only those of radical feminism. Second, it is "a word that has come to signify a modern witch […] imposed on women to shut them up, bully them, condemn them, smear them, humiliate them, and dismiss them. But more than that: it is a threat" (Murphy, 2017). The term is often used alongside threats of and calls for violence, including death and rape. See, for example, the website "documenting the abuse, harassment and misogyny of transgender identity politics": https://terfisaslur.com [02/05/2024].

studies scholar told me that she was relying on her "instinctive politics", in addition to the assumption that those she is guided by "do understand all of the complexities". "I know I'm on the right side", declared a late-career academic in education, similarly acknowledging that this was not after having reflected upon the issues but rather "somehow intuitively". "You've got to be for your team and toe the party line", she also told me, besides noting the absence of "honest conversations" among genderists.

For some genderist academics, it was the fact that they did not have a personal experience of identifying as transgender that prevented them from interrogating the concepts or issues as would be expected (seeing that their academic expertise is precisely the study of gender). "What is trans? How do you understand it?", I asked one interviewee with a role at a relevant academic organisation. "I use a queer theory perspective", she responded. For her, this means using "trans as an inclusive category" while "recognising my own position as a cis woman", which entails "trying very hard to stay in my own lane". Her priority was to be a good political ally, and a central part of this is policing her own speech to avoid causing any sort of "harm" to "trans folk". I asked another interviewee about reconciling her queer approach with her support for the idea that gender is an innate identity or essence. She responded: "it's difficult, because I am a woman, and I was assigned woman at birth"; and then said: "but I can tell you, in my politics, that if a student or anyone came to me and said, 'I am a woman', I'd be like, 'cool'".

In other words, not all personal experiences carry the same weight in *academentia*, an androcentric psychosociality where political activism overrides knowledge production. In another case, one editor explained the acceptance of the concept of gender identity (as innate) in the journal she leads—despite radically opposing its express anti-essentialist position—in terms of: "strategies, political strategies".

"There are gaps in my knowledge", observed a sociologist, "because I am focused on protecting the students […] or supporting the friends that I have who are trans". Central to this is the avoidance of encounters with academic interrogations or the "intellectualising" of sex and gender. An interviewee who identified as "non-binary trans" condemned academics who consider "robust intellectual debate as appropriate". Feminist ideas especially are a form of epistemic or symbolic violence against those who identify as transgender, I was repeatedly told by genderist academics, who at the same time were strikingly ignorant with respect to the nature of such ideas (Favaro, 2022, 2023). This was unsurprising given their refusal to debate with—or even read—those with divergent views, opting instead to remain within their "echo chamber", as they described it.

"We need to step back from expecting to find the right answer", another journal editor told me when discussing her support for medical interventions on children, which she acknowledged "have long-term impacts". According to her, "what we need to do is to be kind to people" (who identify as transgender), rather than aim at "finding the solution around things" from an intellectual or scientific point of view. Perhaps this is an easy enough task for someone in thrall to conceptual nihilism. "How do you understand gender?", I asked, and her response was: "but I don't. I'm a post-structuralist, so I

don't understand gender". She went on: "I don't understand any of the words I use per se". Further to the mechanism of reversal[26], the emptying of meaning from language is crucial to the operation of genderism, facilitating obfuscation and (thus) manipulation.

In essence, for genderist interviewees, when it comes to dealing with transgender, as one interviewee put it: "it's a matter of politics, not of scholarly elucidation". Instead of fulfilling their roles as researchers and educators, many academics prioritise ensuring that the desire of those who identify as transgender is "affirmed by the rest of the world", as urged by Judith Butler (2014). Revered and reviled in equal measure, the UC Berkeley Distinguished Professor was perceived by interviewees as a key piece of a puzzle that spans decades.

5. The "sex wars"

In many ways the current "gender wars" are a continuation of the "sex wars" of the 1980s: a clash between feminism and the "new sexual movement" for the "erotic justice" of "sexual radicals", "sexual dissidents", "erotic minorities" or "exotically sexed individuals", as described by Gayle Rubin in what is widely considered the founding text of queer theory. Her essay «Thinking Sex» called for a new "theory and politics specific to sexuality", rejecting feminist perspectives in this area as "misleading and often irrelevant" (Rubin, 1984: 170). Moreover, the feminist critique of sadomasochism, transsexuality, prostitution, pornography and "cross-generational activities" was decried as rooted in "a very conservative sexual morality" or "erotic chauvinism" that has commonalities with racist ideologies and ultimately offers "less a sexology than a demonology" (Rubin, 1984: 166). The essay condemned an alleged "anti-porn fascism" and "child porn panic", together with the stigmatisation of paedophiles[27]. Feminists could continue to study gender, Rubin (1984: 172) suggested, but "progressives" now had an alternative, radical and exciting theory with which to "update their sexual educations".

A few years later, another seminal text in queer theory, *Gender Trouble*, proposed that the "construct called 'sex'" might be "as culturally constructed as gender", which would therefore mean that there is "no distinction at all" between the two (Butler, 1990: 7). Another key feminist concept, that of patriarchy, was also challenged, as was "the notion of a generally shared conception of 'women'", which Butler (1990: 4) lamented was proving "much more difficult to displace". Fast forward thirty years, and Butler, who now uses they/them pronouns, claims to have never known what

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[26] See the concept of "patriarchal reversals" in Rycenga and Barufaldi (2017).
[27] See also the writings of Rubin's collaborator, Patrick Califia (known as Pat prior to identifying as a transgender man), another key actor in the "sex wars". Califia (1992) condemned feminism as a "social-purity movement", extensively critiqued the so-called "kiddy-porn panic" and age-of-consent laws, and supported paedophiles, also labelled as "boy-lovers" and "girl-lovers".

a woman is, but does know that "the TERFs" are "an excuse for a narrow and hateful project" (2023) and must be prevented from speaking in the name of the mainstream (with Ferber, 2020). The abolitionist position of the "feminist police" is rejected on the grounds that gender is a "domain of pleasure for many people" (Butler, 2014).

There was no shortage of critique[28], or warnings about what would come. "'Women' are being deconstructed out of existence", wrote Stevi Jackson in 1992. "This may earn kudos within male-dominated academia", the now Emeritus Professor also observed, "but it plays into the hands of those who […] have no interest in women's liberation" (Jackson, 1992: 148). For many feminists it was evident that the rapid rise to prominence of queer theory was facilitated by the corporatisation—which involved a re-masculinisation—of the university, along with the broader anti-feminist backlash (Jeffreys, 2020).

The gradual suffocation of feminism in academia was reflected in the shift from women's studies to gender studies, which institutions valued as "less feminist, more respectable and less threatening" as well as "more inclusive" (Jackson, 2016). The (new) field not only now included men as objects of study but also centred on a theory inspired by "the post-structuralist boys who came to the rescue", particularly the late Michel Foucault, with their associated politics "founded upon a traditional masculine notion of sexual freedom" (Jeffreys, 2003: 35, 33). *Unpacking Queer Politics* equally problematised Rubin's "ploy to insulate sexual practice from feminist discussion" and "Butler's determination to hang on to gender" (Ibid.: 30, 40). In explaining this, Jeffreys (2003) pointed to their self-declared investment in butch/femme and sadomasochism[29].

In another feminist critique of Butler, the 1999 essay «The Professor of Parody» condemned how "a sense of public commitment" towards "lasting material or institutional change" to end the suffering of the most oppressed groups was replaced by an elitist and narcissistic focus on personal self-presentation that reduces political resistance to verbal and symbolic gestures, and which, moreover, eroticises the alleged immovability of power structures: "What a bore equality is! No bondage, no delight". Regarding Butler's writing style, Martha Nussbaum (1999) argued that "obscurity fills the void left by an absence of a real complexity of thought and argument". It also serves to create "an aura of importance". Indeed, Butler's imagined reader is "remarkably docile", requiring little in the form of clear explanations or robust rationale. Echoing the dynamics observed in my interviews with genderist academics, Nussbaum (1999) concluded: "Mystification as well as hierarchy are the tools of her practice".

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[28] For an academic critique of queer theory at the time outside of feminism, see Oakes (1995).

[29] Like Jeffreys (2003), Wilkinson and Kitzinger (1996: 380) problematised the "continuing fascination with violence and degradation", and more generally the queer celebration of practices that are not just characteristically patriarchal but also heterosexual. Beyond the damage to women as a whole, there was concern about the detrimental impact on lesbians resulting from the queer embrace of "queer heterosexuals" and how "the biological sex of sexual partners is dismissed in favour of gender as performance" (Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1996: 378). Decades later, the pressuring of lesbians to engage sexually with transgender-identifying males is such that it has reached the mainstream national news (Lowbridge, 2022).

6. Queering academia

The queer approach thrived with the consolidation of the "neoliberal academy" (Gill and Donaghue, 2016), offering a veneer of intellectual sophistication, political rebellion and exciting sexiness while reproducing the dominant ideologies of the time – not least fierce individualism, ever-expanding marketisation and antipathy towards feminism. "Outside the academy, too, queer has caught the public imagination in a way feminism never has", observed Sue Wilkinson and Celia Kitzinger in 1996. "The enthusiastic appropriation of queer in both academic and popular contexts", they further wrote in «The Queer Backlash», "might lead one to be suspicious" (Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1996: 379). Even some sympathetic scholars, such as David Halperin (2003: 341), observed that "there is something odd, suspiciously odd, about the rapidity with which queer theory […] has been embraced by, canonised by, and absorbed into our (largely heterosexual) institutions of knowledge". In turn, Teresa de Lauretis (1994: 297), credited with coining "queer theory" in 1990 to serve as the title of a conference at the University of California, Santa Cruz, just three years later renounced it as "a conceptually vacuous creature of the publishing industry".

Queer theory would often come to be perceived as an "upgraded" version of feminism, when in fact it was "centrally antagonistic" to it (Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1996: 379) and erased its very political subject. Consider the statement made by a genderist interviewee: "I feel strongly that feminist theory isn't about women". This journal editor clarified: "I draw from people like Judith Butler". Another important aspect of the "flight from feminism" that queer theory entailed was the "re-privatisation and de-politisation [sic] of personal life" (Bar On, 1992: 55, 56). At first this primarily concerned the domain of sexuality, but with the emergence of transgender studies in the 1990s (Stryker and Whittle, 2006), the reprivatisation of gender soon followed with equal determination. Resurfacing as a personal identity rather than a patriarchal system, gender was now equally "off limits for political analysis" (Jeffreys, 2003: 30). From the 2010s onwards, and with escalating force, feminism would come to be persecuted at universities on account of allegedly being not just outdated or, moreover, bigoted, but supportive of nothing less than a "genocidal project", as the interviewee who identified as a trans woman put it. Leading authors would openly declare their intent to "dispel" or "eliminate" the feminist perspective on gender, arguing that it "runs counter to the ability to fulfil a livable life or, often, a life at all" (Hines, 2019: 155) or that it aims to "eliminate people" (Ahmed, 2015).

Porn studies is another field that developed on the back of the success of queer theory. A journal article entitled «The Queer Heart of Porn Studies» explains the similarities as follows: "Both epistemological projects are deeply indebted to Foucauldian thought, poststructuralist methodologies, and unabashed interest in perversion. Both emerged in dissent to and reconfiguration of second-wave feminism, both share an objective to denaturalise sex" (Stadler, 2018: 170). Both additionally involve the eroticisation of women's oppression, which again takes us back to transgender: "Sissy porn did

make me trans", declares Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Andrea Long Chu about a genre consisting of men being "forced to wear makeup, wear lingerie, and perform acts of sexual submission" (2019: 76)*, also known as "forced feminisation porn" (2018: 1).

Examples of links between adult male transgender identifications and pornography (Gluck, 2023), along with the fetishisation of women's subordination more generally (Jeffreys, 2014), are easy to find, including in academic contexts[30]. Several US universities have invited Chu (2018: 5) to disseminate the following message: "Getting fucked makes you a woman because fucked is what a woman is". For Grace Lavery (2019), a female-identifying Berkeley professor: "There is something about being treated like shit by men that feels like affirmation itself, like a cry of delight". One final example is the "fantasy" that drove the "desire to be female" of Julia Serano (2007), an influential author and former researcher at Berkeley: "being sold into sex slavery and having strange men take advantage of me". "It is about turning the humiliation you feel into pleasure, transforming the loss of male privilege into the best fuck ever", Serano (2007) further wrote in what is hailed as a "transfeminist" manifesto and a foundational text in transgender politics.

Meanwhile, it is increasingly difficult to articulate a feminist analysis of prostitution, let alone pornography, as sexual exploitation symptomatic of the subjugation of women in patriarchal systems. Academic discussions on these issues, in contrast, largely revolve around desire, choice and self-determination, that is, the same individualistic, market-friendly and androcentric principles that inform the genderist approach to transgender[31]. Equally, there are repudiations of the feminist perspective as an attack on members of the queer community, namely "sex workers", or for prioritising female victims over their traffickers and pimps, who are reframed as "people who facilitate their travel and work" (Phipps, 2020: 148)*. Much like TERFs police the borders of womanhood, Alison Phipps (2020: 155) contends, "anti-trafficking is border policing". The professor of sociology explains how "Feminists see the [sex] industry as a pillar of patriarchy" and consider that "sex cannot be changed or traversed" (Ibid.: 141). For Phipps (2020: 135), these positions demonstrate "political whiteness" and ultimately a "necropolitical desire for annihilation".

Other forms of "policing" or "enforcement" of borders condemned by some queer theorists involve the categories of adult-child[32], or "those whose eroticism transgresses generational boundaries" (Rubin, 1984: 151). In 1996, feminist sociologist Liz Kelly raised concerns about the use of the term "intergenerational sex", for instance in Rubin's work, speaking of a deliberate attempt "to disguise the power differentials involved". She also observed the "resurgence of the label

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[30] See journal articles published in *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly:* https://read.dukeupress.edu/tsq [02/05/2024].

[31] In fact, coexisting with TERF is the slur SWERF, which stands for "sex-worker exclusionary radical feminist". More recently, queer author Sophie Lewis (2017a) has coined "Surrogate-Exclusionary Radical Feminist" (SERF) to oppose the feminist analysis of the practice as reproductive exploitation and child trafficking, in favour of the queering of embodiment, sex, kinship and work (see also Lewis, 2017b).

[32] One book aiming to "encourage what could be described as a 'queering' of childhood" explained how by the mid-2000s there was an "expanding body of research queering childhood sexualities", and how this involved disrupting "the sedimented generational binary of child/adult" (Renold*, 2005: 8-9; see also Dyer, 2017).

'paedophile'", in particular to refer to "a specific, and minority, 'sexual orientation'", alongside its broader framing within a "sexual freedom position". Kelly (1996) considered this a "self-serving construction" that had provided those who "seek to justify their wish to abuse" greater possibilities for political organising and "even to seek the status of an 'oppressed sexual minority'". According to Kelly (1996), this (re)framing "acts as a useful distraction to both the widespread sexualisation of children, and girls in particular, in western cultures and the prevalence of sexual abuse", besides being indicative of "resistance to feminist analysis".

"Queer is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers*", explains David Halperin (1995: 62; emphasis in original). His book *Saint Foucault* further clarifies that it "is not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative", which is "available to anyone who is or feels marginalised because of his or her sexual practices" (Halperin, 1995: 62). Further to the (thus inevitable) inclusion of individuals within the (ever-expanding) community of "erotic dissidents", "nonconformists" and "miscellaneous perverts"[33], paedophilia apologism follows logically—conceptually and politically speaking—from the queer impetus to challenge social norms or boundaries without concrete guiding value systems, goals or principles (Cameron and Scanlon, 2010) beyond "permanent rebellion" (Seidman, 1994: 173). The defence of child sexual abuse was explicit in a number of seminal and other influential texts, and it is also present in some contemporary queer literature[34], which tends to favour the "less-stigmatising umbrella term" of "minor attracted persons" (MAPs) (Walker and Panfil, 2017: 38). According to one paper in *Critical Criminology*: "Minor attraction is a sexual orientation" (Walker and Panfil, 2017: 37). From the point of view of a "queered criminology", the authors argue, "MAPs" are like "other folks with non-normative sexual identities" and "can be considered a queer population" (Walker and Panfil, 2017: 38).

There is little critical discussion of these developments in academic contexts, where queer theory is hegemonic. By contrast, within the new wave of feminism (Jeffreys, 2020) there are growing attempts to raise awareness about this resurgent movement of child abuse apologism, alongside increasing assertions that there are "undeniable links" with "gender ideology", both past and present, as observed for instance in the campaigning for the "transitioning of children" (Bindel, 2023). Concerns about safeguarding are central to the mounting feminist resistance to the queering of

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[33] Rubin (1984: 172) explained: "I use the term 'pervert' as a shorthand for all the stigmatised sexual orientations".

[34] By no means it is implied that all queer theorists would agree with this position, or indeed that it is exclusive to queer theory/politics. In academia, the field of sexology is worth a mention in this regard. One particularly infamous and relevant case is that of "fuckologist"—as he self-defined—John Money, cited above in relation to the origins of the concept of gender identity and the "affirmative" medical approach. He has been accused of being "pro-paedophilia", and even a "child abuser" himself in relation to his "experiments" (Slatz, 2022), leading some to argue that: "Paedophilia, from the beginning, has been an integral component of the theory and practice of transgenderism" (Donnini, 2021). More sympathetic accounts observe his "ambivalence to paedophilia" and how his career was "beset by ethical controversy" (Downing *et al.*, 2014; see also Janssen, 2017). For a contemporary example, see the *Archives of Sexual Behavior* paper on "improving attitudes and reducing stigmatisation toward […] people with paedophilic sexual interests" (Harper *et al.*, 2022: 945).

childhood, as manifested in other spreading practices such as "drag queen storytime", also critiqued as regressive and misogynistic, as well as a form of indoctrination into queer tenets and "porn culture" (Bartosch, 2020; Bindel, 2022; Cormier, 2022). Conversely, these developments are being sanctioned—indeed, to a large extent, instigated—within academia. For example, one paper in the journal *Curriculum Inquiry* argues for "drag pedagogy" and a "camp curriculum" in early childhood education as a "model for learning […] how to *live queerly*", as it notes that this "counters dominant thinking about child development" (Keenan and Hot Mess, 2020: 444; emphasis in original). Another in *Global Studies of Childhood* explains that according to the queer perspective "normative theories of childhood development"—alongside the "rhetoric of innocence"—constitute "violence" against "queer futurity" with a colonial legacy, hence the "recent attempts to meld the fields of childhood studies and queer studies" (Dyer, 2017: 291, 290). Similarly, an article in the journal *Sociology* by a queer theorist and a "gender identity therapist" advocating "transgender education" in primary schools contests the "discourses" that "children are 'innocent' and in need of protection, that caution must be exercised in exposing them to the subversive" (Morgan and Taylor, 2019: 31).

The queering of childhood involves the call "to break as many rules as possible", along with "a preparatory introduction to alternate modes of kinship", which deviate from "reproductive futurity" and the family (Keenan and Hot Mess, 2020: 448, 455). It also entails a push for "bodily autonomy", emphasised apropos sexuality and most visibly regarding medical interventions associated with "affirmation" of transgender identifications (which will indeed hamper "reproductive futurity"). For instance, the transgender organisation Gendered Intelligence ran a campaign entitled Bodily Autonomy for Every Body—BÆB in short and pronounced as "babe"—advocating medical interventions including for children under 16 years of age[35]. Another illustration comes from a Trans Health Manifesto[36] demanding access to "hormones & blockers at any age", along with "mandatory education, written & taught entirely by trans people, at all educational stages" (starting at nursery). "We are all self-medicating", informs the manifesto, which additionally declares: "We are not too ill, too disabled, too anxious, too depressed, too psychotic, too Mad [or] too young [to] make decisions about our bodies".

One feminist interviewee working in the field of early childhood education described these queering efforts as "unsettling" and "a red flag". She also pointed out that the "affirmative" model conflicts with well-established theories of child development. Yet, she told me: "I would not want to get involved in that debate". She explained: "You're going up against potentially a whole field of people who would see it as transphobic […] It would just be too terrifying for me […] It would take a very brave academic to go against the grain in early childhood education". Several other interviewees across various fields of expertise expressed concerns about the "affirmative" medical approach to children identifying as transgender, not least due to the high risk of irreversible harms,

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[35] "Bodily Autonomy for Every Body (BÆB) campaign", *Gendered Intelligence* (2020-2021). Available at: https://genderedintelligence.co.uk/campaigns/baeb.html [10/12/2023].
[36] "Trans Health Manifesto", *Edinburgh Action for Trans Health* (2017). Available at: https://www.tumblr.com/edinburghath/163521055802/trans-health-manifesto [10/12/2023].

but also on the understanding that the model is informed not by the wellbeing of children or the scientific evidence but by misogynistic, homophobic and financial interests.

Those who positioned themselves as "in the middle" by and large also expressed concerns about "what is happening with children", notably with respect to "rushing into things that can't be changed", but were "afraid to open their mouths" over accusations of transphobia, peer ostracism, job loss, online abuse or physical violence. One such interviewee said the following regarding the phenomenon of girls identifying as boys: "They can be trans. It could also be, though, simply sexism [...] It could also be homophobia". She continued: "And all I want is that we have a debate about all three things and that I can say these things without being accused of being transphobic". "I would even be afraid of saying that in a lecture theatre", she remarked, and went on:

> "I just don't feel safe. It makes me so emotional. [Upset] I came to academia because I wanted to… I don't know why I'm crying right now, but it feels so alienating because it should be about discussing and exchanging ideas, and it's not. It's not in our context. And it's not just alienating, it's also incredibly anxiety provoking because I don't want to lose my job. I don't want to put my kids at risk. I know they could be put at risk. And I don't have extreme views at all." (Interviewee, "gender wars" in academia project)

More generally, in academia today it is difficult to raise concerns around the queering of childhood without being associated with "think of the children" rhetoric, which is not only dismissed disdainfully as conservative but also denounced as fundamentally anti-queer. Consider, moreover, the proposition in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* that "*queerness* names the side of those *not* 'fighting for the children'" (Edelman, 2004: 3; emphasis in original). Lee Edelman (2004: 29) also made the following appeal to "the queer": "Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we're collectively terrorised". In addition, there is now a persistent charge of "political whiteness". "The defence of (cis) heterosexual white women and children is fundamental to contemporary global colonial racial formation" (Hunter, 2020: 5), declares one paper in the journal *feminists@law* advocating resistance against this "anxiously defensive culture". And there is more: yet another manifestation of colonialism is the very defence of sanity, contends the growing body of literature explored next.

7. Mad studies

Queer studies also inspired—and shares a vision with—mad studies: an emergent field "pioneered by Mad people *within* academia" (Spandler and Barker, 2016; emphasis in original) that aims to produce "mad knowledge" in "defence of madness" (Rashed, 2019) and ultimately in search of "mad futures" (Aho, Ben-Moshe and Hilton, 2017*)*. The word mad is reclaimed politically to

describe "the group of us considered crazy or deemed ill by sanists" (Fabris, 2013: 139). As was also done with queer, along with others like fat and crip (Mills and Sanchez, 2023), negative connotations are subverted, with allies of the movement being labelled "mad positive" (Church, 2013). One central aspect of this "activist scholarship" is challenging "sanist prejudices" and epistemic injustice against "psychic diversity", which are posited as indissociable from "colonial violence" (e.g. LeFrançois, Menzies and Reaume, 2013). Indeed, the liberation from "sane supremacy" is considered to also involve "the end of colonial domination" (Johnk and Khan, 2019: 35).

One paper in the *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* denounces the "sane-centricity" of higher education institutions, which "demand civility, and reasoned and rational orderedness" (Procknow, 2019: 517). In this manner, these "sanestitutions" might work for "unidimensional phonies" but are coercive for "students in crazed states of mind", argues the author, who writes as "a psychiatric consumer diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder", and whose "psychotic 'Other'" is an "anti-sane ideologue" with "violent rhetoric" (Ibid.: 515, 514, 511, 518).

The mad studies classroom "centres mad knowledge and is informed by mad positivity" (Snyder *et al.*, 2019: 496). One central aim is to "engender student unlearning" (Ibid.: 497). Another is "enlisting them as allies", which involves an expectation to "educate themselves" about their "sane privilege" (Wolframe, 2013; see also Snyder *et al.*, 2019).

According to an article calling for "the maddening of social work", processes of knowledge production established by "sanist" logics and paradigms must be disrupted (Cranford and LeFrançois, 2022). "We need mad studies in universities", argue Jennifer Cranford and Brenda LeFrançois (now Bren, with they/them pronouns), "to breakdown [sic] longstanding enlightenment notions of rationality" (2022: 73). It will also help ensure that white European people "remain accountable to the role played by their country in advancing colonialism and imperialism" (Ibid.: 77). In turn, the article «Unlearning through Mad Studies: Disruptive Pedagogical Praxis» advocates the widespread centring of madness across higher education to dismantle "the university space as a sphere of expert knowledge" (Snyder *et al.*, 2019: 497).

As an illustration of what "mad scholarship" (Wolframe, 2013) might look like, consider the article published by the *Canadian Journal of Children's Rights* entitled «Between World Borders» (Tavares, 2019). Applying a mad studies perspective, and inspired by Butler's theory of gender performativity, it advances the notion of "mental performativity" to "carve out mad child subjectivity", in particular concerning children diagnosed with schizophrenia (Tavares, 2019: 26). "I self-identify as mad", writes the author, who condemns "parents who cannot accept as normal their children's performances of voice hearing" (Ibid.: 35, 27). As is the case with queering, attempts to "madden" established knowledge and practice appear to pay particular attention to childhood. Another example is an article by "a queer, mad, neurodivergent, non-binary scholar" in *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* (Davies, 2023: 126). The article argues against developmental psychology and critiques safeguarding procedures by accrediting governing bodies as an exclusion of "mad educators", calling instead for the "maddening" of early childhood education and care (Davies, 2023).

The section entitled "Results; or, whatever you want to call it" features "autobiographical poetic writing", part of which reads as follows: "when i walk in the room madness walks in with me […] i forgot to take my Ritalin. i can't focus […] remember. my. pronouns" (Davies, 2023: 136, 139; spelling and punctuation in original).

"Mad Studies is increasingly being taken up within universities, often within existing departments, such as disability studies, sociology, social work, or humanities", celebrates the *International Mad Studies Journal*[37], which is "proudly majority mad-identified"[38]. "The massification of higher education" has facilitated this development, suggest professor Helen Spandler (they/she) and former senior lecturer Meg-John Barker (they/them), "as has the user/survivor/mad (and LGBT+) movements", which have "encouraged people to be 'out' about their madness (and sexuality)" (2016). For those unfamiliar with the movement, a 2022 Mad Pride event in London announced: "The lunatics are back in town"[39]. The purpose was to "celebrate our insanity" and send the following message to "sane society": "We're here, we're insane, and we're ready to burn down the system!"

"Mad and Queer Studies have lot of common ground", Spandler and Barker (2016) additionally explain, "especially in terms of challenging existing binaries [and] critiquing prevailing normativities". As seen above, mad studies also has commonalities with critical race theory and decolonial studies, in addition to other (queer-inflected) fields such as crip studies, critical autism studies, asexual studies and fat studies[40]. However, there are particularly close connections with transgender studies and politics – a fact palpably revealed by the similitude in discourse, the frequency of transgender identifications among proponents[41], and their confluence within the new "plurality" movement discussed below.

8. Mad-queer-trans

There are substantial similarities between the transgender and mad movements, including the way in which both prioritise subjective perceptions over objective facts, bluntly detest the "psy" disciplines, push for depathologisation across the board, perceive their political subjects as victims of European colonialism, and are influenced by queer theory and politics. What is more, the two movements are interrelated. A quick search online for gender identity labels—all with their own flags—makes this tangibly evident. Take those under the umbrella term "neurogender". One is

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[37] "What is Mad Studies?" Available at: https://imsj.org/what-is-mad-studies/ [03/02/2024].
[38] "Welcome to the International Mad Studies Journal". Available at: https://imsj.org/ [03/02/2024].
[39] "The Lunatics are Back in Town: Bringing Mad Pride Back", *Freedom* (2022). Available at: https://freedomnews.org.uk/2022/07/01/the-lunatics-are-back-in-town-bringing-mad-pride-back/ [21/02/2024].
[40] For example, see the "theorisation of fat as queer" in White (2012).
[41] Some uses of gender identity pronouns are included in this article to illustrate this phenomenon.

"bordergender" (also known as "borderfluid"): "a fluctuating gender experienced exclusively by people with BPD" (Borderline Personality Disorder). "Cavusgender" is for those with depression, while "skhizeingender" refers to "a gender that is strongly connected to schizophrenia". Another addition to the seemingly endless list is "genderfake", which refers to "feeling that your gender is part of your hallucinations or delusions"[42].

It is "the mutually constitutive character of madness, queerness, and transness" that leads the chapter «Reclaiming the Lunatic Fringe» to call for (more) scholars to use a "mad-queer-trans lens" (Pilling, 2022: 30). One example of work applying such a lens is an article published in the *Journal of Arts and Humanities* on "autoethnographic tales of neuroqueer intimacy" (Trento, 2023: 21). It is written by a "neuroqueer and non-binary individual [who is] seeking intimate, sexual connections [and whose] obsessions include the interspecies sociality of urban animals such as capybaras and raccoons" (Ibid.: 26, 27, 29).

"Perhaps the most notable trans development in recent history has been the emergence of a clear and vocal non-binary movement", declares a chapter from the 2018 book *Trans Britain: Our Journey from the Shadows* (Barker, Vincent and Twist, 2018: 292). One of the authors is Barker, who in *Gender: A Graphic Guide* explains how a non-binary identity can, among other possibilities, be "fluid": changing "over years, months, or the course of the day" (Barker and Scheele, 2019: 122). It can also be "plural": "like having two or more alter egos or personas" (Ibid.: 123).

Central to the mad movement in recent years is "gaining rights, recognition, and pride for those who experience themselves as plural" (Barker, 2020a: 2)[43], namely, those who (claim to) share "the same physical body with other individuals"[44]. The term "relates to gender and sexuality [as well as] the wider queer endeavour", not least with respect to "overlaps between plural and trans/non-binary experience" (Barker, 2020a: 1, 4). Barker, who identifies as "a mad queer person" (2020b), as well as non-binary and plural, additionally explains: "Many (but not all) plural people have selves of different genders, and often ages too" (2020a: 4). Those who "change age back and forth" are labelled "agesliders"[45]. The identity plural also includes those who "identify as species other than human": "Dragons, ordinary housecats, trees, vampires, elves, lionesses, or any other species on Earth or off can be part of a system"[46].

"Depathologising plurality follows similar endeavours in relation to (homo)sexuality, kink, and (trans)gender" (Barker, 2020a: 1), asserts the author of numerous publications, including the *British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy Guide for Good Practice across the Counselling Professions on Gender, Sexual, and Relationship Diversity*[47]. Regarding the link between

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[42] "Neurogender", *Gender Wiki*. Available at: https://gender.fandom.com/wiki/Neurogender [10/02/2024].
[43] See also *Plurality Resource: Online education center by & for Plurals, Multiples, Medians & Many More…* Available at: https://pluralityresource.org/our-movement/ [03/02/2024].
[44] "A Definition of Plurality and Overview of the Community Individuality". Available at: https://pluralityresource.org/plurality-information/ [22/02/2024].
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Available at: https://www.bacp.co.uk/media/18213/gpacp-001-gsrd-interim-update-2023.pdf [01/05/2024].

plurality and sexuality, Barker (2020a: 4) expounds: "One key root into exploring my plurality came when I recognised that a familiar cast of characters showed up in my fantasies". "What began as an exploration into my gender and erotic fantasies, ended up as a much more clear sense of plurality", in particular, "of living in a family of 7" (Barker, 2020b). This comprises "three guys, three lasses, and one non-binary creature" (Barker, 2022: 12). "I'm a system of seven people", Barker (2020b) thus announces, "and hear all their voices". Indeed, the influential author publishes texts involving "a series of conversations between my own plural selves" (Barker, 2022: 5).

9. Queer futurities?

> "Just two of my plural selves shooting the breeze about plurality, no biggie [...]
> James: So dammit here we are again out in the deep fucking waters talking about an experience that a
> lot of people are going to struggle with. As if it wasn't enough to be openly bisexual when everyone
> had a problem with that, and then writing about being non-monogamous in ways that got us in trouble,
> and then trans and non-binary. Do we always have to do this? What the fuck is next?
> Beastie: I think you know the answer to that one. Ah but we love it really, don't we?."
>
> (Barker, 2022: 15)

What next? I agree with "James" about the pertinence of this question. "Age-related self-determination", suggests a journal article by a professor and Associate Pro Vice Chancellor (Peel and Newman, 2020: 21), as part of The Future of Legal Gender project, which received over £500K from the Economic and Social Research Council (UK) (Somerville, 2022). This evokes what seems like a spreading proviso for those wanting a successful career in academia today: *queer or quit*.

What else might be next? Well, there is the "new queer movement" (Theobald, 2017) of "ecosexuality"[48]. The term refers to a "sexual orientation" or "modality of desire" which forms part of a broader project for "a queer futurity" (van den Hengel, 2022). "We make love with the earth", reads the most recent Ecosex Manifesto, "and talk erotically to plants" (Stephens and Sprinkle, 2020). One of the authors is a professor at the University of California Santa Cruz, which hosted a large symposium for audiences consisting of "LGBTQIE folks" and other "sex positive communities"[49], along with sessions on "tree-huggers", "settler sexuality" and "ecosexphobia"[50].

Discussing what she described as a "ridiculous" paper on "queer-identified ecosexuals" that was published by *Feminist Theory*[51], one interviewee who positioned herself as "in the middle" regarding the "gender wars" affirmed that the peer-review process is "compromised". "The hoax

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[48] See Sprinkle and Stephens (2021) and Reed (2019). See also *Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens: The Collaboration website*. Available at: https://sprinklestephens.ucsc.edu/ [05/01/2024].
[49] The letter E refers to "ecosexuals" (see Rappaport, 2017).
[50] "E.A.R.T.H. Lab Presents!" Available at: https://earthlab.ucsc.edu/ecosex-symposium/ [05/01/2024].
[51] See Whitworth (2019).

people are right", she told me[52]. An editor herself, she was critical of the way in which academic journals determine "hot topics of the day" at the same time as others are repudiated as "old, anachronistic, *passé*". This is a "horrible academic machine", she argued, which "completely skews the nature of the knowledge that we produce". And "the trans trend", she explained, "is what sells now".

"I'm with the margins", one late-career academic in development studies told me. She said: "For me, 'women' was the margins, but, actually, it's not the margins anymore". Rather, at present it is those who identify as transgender. "And I'm listening to those voices now", she clarified. Who will be next? Presumably it won't be all those struggling to pay rent or put food on the table. As is the case with women, the poor appear to have been largely relegated to the status of "*passé* topic". It is also far too large a population to be valued politically as "margins", or as "niche" in terms of research. With its focus on marginality and deviance, the queer approach helps academics get ahead in the compulsory race for an external grant or journal publication.

In other words, *queer or quit* fits within the political economy of knowledge production in contemporary academia. Besides, queer is about permanent rebellion in relation to "social organisation as such" (Edelman, 2004: 17), and even "the annihilation of the social order" altogether (Schotten, 2018: 168). That is, there will always be norms to disrupt or boundaries to transgress, or indeed a social order to "annihilate".

What might be next in the roadmap towards "queer futurities"?[53] In 2022 Routledge published a queer manifesto for "dismantling academia" (Breeze and Leigh, 2022: 97). "We demand wages for the work of being queer in the university!", write the authors, who clarify that this includes the work of "documenting and raising complaints about" colleagues with "anti-sex work" or "anti-trans" views (Ibid.: 107, 104). "Pay us", their manifesto further reads, "Every time a pride flag is flown" (Ibid.: 107). Another demand for queers at university: "Every pride month: triple our salaries, immediately transfer all queers to permanent contracts, and half [sic] our workloads" (Ibid.: 108). "Unlimited time off at full pay for any reason whatsoever" is yet another (Ibid.: 109). There is likewise an extensive list of demands for changes on campus, which includes the provision of "safe houses for sex work", "cruising spaces", a "free sex toy library", "bathhouses in every building", "needle exchanges" and "free on-demand self-prescribed medication" (Ibid.: 110). The intentions are clear: "We want, are coming for, and will take unless they are given to us […] We will not negotiate" (Ibid.: 111, 112).

The manifesto also states an intention to run self-defence training and distribute weapons (Breeze and Leigh, 2022), evoking the violent nature of much discourse in transgender activism (Favaro, 2023). More generally, this is in consonance with the queer anti-social project and its politics

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[52] The interviewee was referring to the experiment by James Lindsay, Helen Pluckrose and Peter Boghossian, who "wrote 20 fake papers using fashionable jargon to argue for ridiculous conclusions, and tried to get them placed in high-profile journals in fields including gender studies, queer studies, and fat studies", achieving a high success rate (Mounk, 2018).

[53] See, for example, Zaino and Bell (2023).

of negativity, namely an opposition to "every form of social viability" (Edelman, 2004: 9). Prominent queer scholar Judith Halberstam—now known as Jack—articulated such a project as follows:

> "We must be willing to turn away from the comfort zone of polite exchange in order to embrace a truly political negativity, one that promises, this time, to fail, to make a mess, to fuck shit up, to be loud, unruly, impolite, to breed resentment, to bash back, to speak up and out, to disrupt, assassinate, shock and annihilate." (Halberstam, 2008: 154)

I expect that many would downplay the threat this entails on the grounds of absurdities by a zealot minority with no significant wider impact. This was the very assessment of my postdoctoral research proposal on transgender by a (male) professor back in 2016. It can be easy to miss the signs or even changes around us with the ever-growing pressures of fast-paced academia, as some interviewees told me when discussing the political demands, and successes, in the name of transgender. Others jump on the bandwagon in the quest for self-preservation or out of self-interest. Still others remain quiet in the hope that sanity will prevail, as they watch those who do speak up suffer ostracism, abuse and more. Rare is the month these days when I don't hear about an academic wanting to leave the sector or retire early to escape this—now more literal than ever—lunacy.

10. Concluding remarks

The term *academentia* usefully connects the subjective with the systemic, reminding me of one area of consensus among my interviewees: processes of *neoliberalisation* are resulting in a toxic atmosphere and causing serious detrimental effects across the board. Much has been written about the fast-paced, market- and metrics-oriented cultures of the contemporary university, where on top of generalised job insecurity, academic workers endure excessive workloads and ever-growing scrutiny, pressures and competition. These structural transformations have led to a decline in solidarity (Feldman and Sandoval, 2018), a rise in bullying (Zawadzki and Jensen, 2020), and, more generally, a "psychosocial and somatic catastrophe amongst academics" (Gill and Donaghue, 2016: 91).

In our interview, Lynne Segal observed that the neoliberal university encourages "a climate of fear around saying the wrong thing". She also spoke about a "terrible policing" or "overzealous monitoring" of "political etiquette". "I really feel lucky that I've retired", the Anniversary Professor of Psychology and Gender Studies told me. She mentioned that, at her leaving event at Birkbeck, senior colleagues remarked how "many of us are leaving […] as a strike against all that's happening in universities".

Recently, *academentia* has been used in the context of critiques of university governance today[54]. The term is employed to describe how the takeover of "excessive and manic managerialism" has led to "a state of organisational insanity" that negatively impacts the ability of academic workers to function as scholars and educators, increasingly reduced as they are to "income-generating productivity units" (Kilkauer and Young, 2021; see also Tomaselli, 2021) and customer service providers of the McUniversity (Hayes and Wynyard, 2002). Perhaps the escalating repudiation of empiricism, objectivity and materialism in favour of the pseudo-religious, subjective and idiosyncratic is at least in part a symptom of disenchantment with the McUniversity. Or it might be a manifestation of the therapeutic culture that has recently come to complement the McDonaldisation of universities, where, among other things, "emotions are prioritised over the intellect" (Hayes and Wynyard, 2022: 84) and there is an "invitation to being 'not well'", thus becoming "part of many people's identity*"* (Furedi, 2017)*.* Meanwhile, the assault on sanity intensifies with literal calls to "madden" academia. I dread to think how university policies would adapt to appease the mad movement or a cohort of plural-identifying students and staff.

What we are witnessing more generally—in no unequivocal terms[55]—is the pinnacle of the revolt against the legacy of the Enlightenment. We are witnessing (the ideals of) reason, empiricism, knowledge, debate, consensus and freedom of expression being supplanted with new myths, rituals, notions of souls, holy days, unquestioned divine rights, the desecularisation of institutions, sectarianism, compelled speech, infantilism, and the persecution of infidels and heretics. "The notion of views, opinions, or beliefs makes it seem like we live in some fantasy of the Enlightenment", an interviewee who identified as a trans woman told me when criticising feminists who are pushing back against the tactic of "no debate". Contrary to the "Eurocentric liberal […] impulse for debate and civility and an airing of ideas", "as a Foucauldian" this scholar considers that "truthfulness is the outcome of political struggle". The current persecution of feminists at universities was located as part of "a political battle over an institutional space" by "insurrectionary movements".

<div align="center">***</div>

"Tread carefully", I am advised by concerned colleagues as I explain that I am writing about child sexual abuse apologism among other problematic aspects of queer theory and politics. I have, of course, been here before; and now I know all too well how warranted the warnings were about what could happen if I continued to dig into the "can of worms" that was the "gender wars" in academia (Favaro and Özkırımlı, 2024). "Not all queer theorists", I am told. Well, indubitably; yet as a feminist I am familiar with this discursive move ("not all men") against critical scrutiny to defensively undermine legitimate concerns about embedded or emergent (patriarchal) ideologies or

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[54] It is disappointing that these publications, primarily by male authors, do not acknowledge the feminist origins or previous uses of the term.
[55] See, for example, Cranford and LeFrançois (2022) and Davies (2023).

practices. And I reaffirm what I wrote in the article that so drastically changed my life (Favaro, 2022): "Of course I fear harms to my career and more for instigating, as interviewees repeatedly put it, 'difficult conversations' […] But, at the same time, why would I want to work in academia if I cannot do academic work?"

It is precisely academic work that this article is calling for to counter the untouchable status that queer theory is by and large enjoying – as was the case with the transgender movement until very recently. There is a conspicuous scarcity of academic inquiry into the queering of culture and institutions. This is despite the series of potentially grave implications, which include the dismantlement of child safeguarding and hard-won rights for women, in addition to the basic principles and purposes of academia. As this article has shown, there is no shortage of explicit articulations of these destructive efforts, of the desire for "queer terror" (Schotten, 2018). "To speak out against sanity is to militate against the social fabric that binds societies together", unabashedly recognises an article advocating the "maddening" of higher education (Procknow, 2019: 518). It is high time to speak out with equivalent resolve against this *academentia*.

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