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Lesbian, feminist, TERF: a queer attack on feminist studies

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ABSTRACT

While much has been said about the diversity industry and about transexclusionary radical feminists (TERFs), little has examined their relationship to one another or to academic feminist, queer, and trans studies. This article considers a “queer attack on feminist studies” at our small liberal arts college as a case study for thinking through these relations. A handful of students and diversity staff termed feminist studies faculty TERFs not because of any actual transphobic behavior, but because of our work to question gender systems and ideologies. By examining how some students and diversity office staff alike mobilized the TERF, as well as the ideologies that allow for slippages among the terms “lesbian,” “feminist,” and “TERF,” we outline how the lesbian and the feminist are in danger of becoming permanently reactionary figures. In so doing, we reflect on the relationship between performing diversity work and policing academic studies of gender and sexuality, ultimately arguing that the mobilization of the TERF can function both to further extend the work of the diversity industry and also to call into question academic feminist, queer, and trans studies.

KEYWORDS

TERF;
lesbian feminist;
feminist studies;
moral panic;
diversity industry

There is something about rural New England that evokes horror. Whether it is the 19th century Headless Horseman or 21st century film “Get Out,” it is a place where oft-perfect facades are cracked open to reveal things not being as they seem. So it was that at a small liberal arts college tucked into the green mountains of Vermont, two lesbian professors teaching feminist, queer, and critical race theory were accused of being TERFs, or transexclusionary radical feminists. According to the college’s Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) staff and the few students making these accusations—none of whom had taken their courses, or any other feminist studies courses for that matter—their crime was in their construction of a survey question. Their punishment was to be branded with the scarlet letters of TERF.

In what follows, we examine this queer attack on feminist studies to consider the logics undergirding the mobilization of the figure of the contemporary TERF by DEI staff and students, as well as its potential for disciplining unruly subjects, including, in this case, both feminist scholars and feminist studies. Journalists and scholars alike have commented on the dangers of diversity work (Ahmed, 2007; Newkirk, 2019). As Sara Ahmed argues, such initiatives can function to make historically white institutions appear as if they are diverse by using the presence of nonwhite bodies as a “happy sign” to signal that racism has been overcome (Ahmed, 2007, p. 164). We suggest here that DEI staff used the figure of the TERF to signal that transphobia could also be overcome. Their approach suggested that the eradication of transphobia need not require a re-thinking of dominant ideas about femininities or masculinities—indeed, precisely the roots of transphobia—but did require, in a deeply ironic twist, the disciplining of lesbian feminists who teach about gender as ideology, analytic, and regime.

We suggest that, in this case, the TERF was phantasmatic. This is not to say that the TERF does not exist. Let us be clear: TERFs exist and transphobia is real. Violence against trans people occurs with depressing regularity. Some self-identified feminists are transphobic; a simple search for “gender skeptical” demonstrates how much transexclusionary feminism exists. The grossly disproportionate rate at which trans people, and especially transwomen of color, are murdered speaks to the cultural panic that transness incites. At the same time, it is the figure of the TERF who produces horror in the types of leftist queer feminist academic and activist spaces in which we tend to find ourselves. In the case we discuss here, we suggest that the TERF functioned as a bit of a folk devil. Like all folk devils, the TERF created a moral panic, producing concerns that its profanity would pollute our ostensibly diverse institution. We argue that TERFs as folk devils can function both to further extend the work of the diversity industry and also to call into question academic feminist, queer, and trans studies.

In his now-classic work on folk devils and moral panics, sociologist Stanley Cohen suggests that folk devils are created in three stages: (1) Simplification of the figure in question such that they are easily recognizable, (2) Exaggeration or fabrication of facts, and (3) Anticipation of future engagement in immoral actions (1972). These elements, each of which was present in the case we consider here, are crucial for the pursuit of folk devils to intensify into a broader movement that Cohen describes as a moral panic. Queer theory has long considered the place of such panics in the production of ongoing sexual hierarchies. Gayle Rubin, for instance, points out that “no tactic for stirring up erotic hysteria has been

as reliable as the appeal to protect children” (2006, p. 271). Although not exactly a sex panic, the queer attack on feminist studies did center the student-as-vulnerable-child and positioned feminist lesbian scholars as the source of harm. As Cohen and Ruben make clear, moral panics occur because of real dangers, just not necessarily the danger at the heart of the panic.

In order to avoid creating folk devils ourselves, we want to emphasize that the students publicly shaming feminist studies faculty they considered TERFs did so because they earnestly believed they were making the institution less transphobic. Furthermore, even within the student organizations primarily responsible for critiquing feminist studies, some members resisted characterizations of the department as TERFy. By examining how some students and DEI staff alike mobilized the TERF, as well as the ideologies that allow for slippages among the terms “lesbian,” “feminist,” and “TERF,” we outline how the lesbian and the feminist are in danger of becoming permanently reactionary figures. In so doing, we reflect on the relationship between performing diversity work and policing academic studies of gender and sexuality, ultimately considering how the larger cultural anxieties about lesbians, feminists, and sexism can be mobilized by the diversity industry to shrink possibilities for feminist, queer, and trans inquiry. In this way, a diversity office can incorporate not just institutional imperatives, but also those of student activists to increase institutional control over those deemed difficult or in need of disciplining. Such strange bedfellows are not unusual during moral panics, as Gregory Mitchell shows in his work on sex panics, sporting events, and the strange mix of state, feminist, and religious constituencies willing to come together in the name of the child (2016).

Always already TERFs: a case study

In the Spring of 2019, Carly Thomsen, a feminist and queer studies scholar and coauthor of this article, co-taught a course entitled “Beyond Intersectionality: Developing Anti-Racist and Anti-Capitalist Feminisms” with a colleague in Black studies. As part of the course, the instructors organized a symposium that brought well-known scholars of intersectionality to campus. Prior to the event, we sent out a campus-wide survey about intersectionality. Our primary goal was to gain information regarding how the term circulates in different campus environments so that we could better tailor our opening remarks to our specific context.

The survey began: “What gender do you consider yourself?” Options for answering included: “Man,” “Woman,” “Transgender,” and an

open-ended box titled “Self-Identify.” Respondents could check as many boxes as they desired, write in any gender, or skip the question altogether. Students in the Queers & Allies student group sent the two professors who crafted the survey the following email:

After viewing your survey on the circulation of academic theories, we were disappointed about the first question, dealing with gender identity. While we noted that the option to check multiple terms is present, the inclusion of transgender as an option without including cisgender contributes to the othering of transness while considering cis to be the default. Additionally, including common gender options such as nonbinary and agender as well as the option to write in an answer would be more inclusive.

The faculty responded by offering to have a conversation about the “thought processes and hours of conversation that went into our decisions regarding question design for a quantitative survey,” which included consulting with colleagues who are experts in survey design. There were, we said in our email responses, good methodological and epistemological reasons for the construction of our questions. For instance, including additional (and uncommon) gender categories would have meant that respondents were more likely to be identifiable. In addition, we explained that there are trans studies critiques of the term “cis” (Enke, 2012) and, further, that having a fill-in-the-blank box—which our survey did include, despite students’ claim to the contrary—actually offered greater potential for gender articulation than simply adding additional categories.

We were told that these responses, like our survey questions, were TERF-y. We were told that we “othered” trans students and made them feel un-seen by creating a box labeled “other.” (We actually used the word “self-identify.”) We were told that the wording of the question in which we asked what gender respondents “consider” themselves, rather than what gender they “are” was transphobic. Apparently, people don’t consider themselves a gender; they are a gender. To be clear, this was mostly a whisper campaign. We were not directly called TERFs. We were rarely told these things by the people saying them—just by college staff “supporting” students or by our students who wanted us to know about conversations swirling around us.

From here, a mind-boggling and wildly time-consuming series of meetings unfolded. First, we met with a DEI staff member who handed us a packet that included student affairs’ version of “best practices” for survey design. According to this person, we should have included every possible gender category. We pointed out that this belief approaches gender in a less capacious way than did our survey, in which people could self-identify as they please. We also outlined Finn Enke’s transfeminist critique of “cis,” a term that refers, of course, to “the condition of staying with

birth-assigned sex, or congruence between birth-assigned sex and gender identity” (2012, p. 61). In tracing students’ paradoxical deployment of the term “cis” in feminist studies classrooms, Enke troubles the idea that gender can possibly stay put, be static, or be something one is born with and then lives out simplistically. Feminist, queer, and trans studies rest on the position that gender is, in fact, not simple and, instead, that it is always becoming and unbecoming. Enke goes so far as to say that the ideas driving the circulation of “cis,” “encourage[s] investments in a gender stability that undermines feminist, trans*, queer, and related movements (2012, p. 61). As bad, taking the categories of sex and gender as “natural” (for anyone) rather than as effects of power stabilizes the hierarchical relationship between “cis” and “trans.” We also noted that the idea that one “is” a gender runs counter to the most commonsensical trans studies ideas about gender, including articulations of trans as a “redhot zone of ontological uncertainty” (Eng & Puar, quoting Steinbock, 2020, p. 15). Not so incidentally, it also goes against foundational assumptions of feminist studies, including Judith Butler’s notion of “gender performativity” and her questioning the “metaphysics” of gender whereby one claims to be one (1990).

In short, throughout this meeting, we drew from feminist, queer, and trans studies to show that the survey was in line with commonly accepted approaches within our academic fields of expertise. In response, this white DEI staff suggested that the Black butch lesbian professor in question was “aggressive and defensive” and the white femme queer woman professor was “condescending and harmful,” simultaneously furthering racist stereotypes of angry Black women and sexist stereotypes of uppity feminists. Having been told how to do our jobs by a DEI staff without academic training in critical feminist, queer, trans, or Black studies, we left the meeting disheartened.

The following fall—nearly six months after we sent out the survey—a new LGBTQ affairs staff person arrived on campus. Soon after, she organized a meeting with leaders of LGBTQ student groups, including Queers & Allies, Trans Affinity Group, Queer and Trans People of Color, and the Queer Studies House, for which Thomsen is the highly involved academic advisor. A student who had never met Thomsen commented at the public meeting that Queers & Allies would not partner with students associated with the Queer Studies House because Thomsen and the Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies (GSFS) department to which the house is connected are TERFs. According to students in attendance, GSFS students responded in defense of Thomsen and the GSFS program. The new staff member insinuated that she would take care of this TERFy faculty member and chastised students (including trans students) who

defended GSFS, suggesting that those students were being transphobic themselves.

GSFS students, many of whom are gender non-conforming or trans-identified, responded in various ways. Several students immediately emailed GSFS faculty to request meetings. Students attended individual meetings with this staff member, who had not yet met with GSFS faculty, to suggest that this reading of GSFS was inaccurate. In one of these meetings, this non-trans staff person told a transidentifying GSFS major that “cis people don’t get to decide who is transphobic.” GSFS students also met with the non-GSFS students perpetuating these claims. Queer Studies House residents met with members of other LGBTQ student organizations. GSFS students met with GSFS faculty. GSFS faculty met with one another.

These meetings exhausted everyone involved. GSFS faculty and students decided to host a community conversation and dinner to address the issue collectively. We invited members of all LGBTQ campus organizations. On a campus with 2500 students, approximately twenty-five students attended, as did all GSFS core faculty. Students who had never taken GSFS courses made claims about gender, sexuality, and GSFS, insisting that they knew about gender and sexuality through their lived experiences. They used discourses and ideas that GSFS students had learned to critique in their courses. In response, GSFS students offered feminist and queer ways to think about gender and sexuality, but their ideas were met with resistance rooted in the assumption that to question gender is to be transphobic. As it turned out, the non-GSFS students had no interest in conversing critically about gender or sexuality, a point one transidentified critic of GSFS made clear when they noted that their gender is always challenged and they don’t need any more of that. For this student and others who had not taken GSFS courses, questioning gender systems and ideologies was synonymous with threatening their individual gender.

The following morning, Thomsen’s Queer Critique class met. Some students who had attended the meeting were angry at their fellow students, and others who had heard about the meeting were confused. Students wanted to talk, in part because of Queer Critique’s focus on the “translation” of ideas we discuss in class with those outside of it. Students’ final course projects include, for example, creating board games that translate academic texts into playable formats. In short, a belief in the possibilities of moving queer theory beyond the classroom undergird the course. Was this meeting, and the related conversations swirling around it, evidence for the need for increased “translation” skills, students earnestly asked, or, actually, evidence that the entire pedagogical approach was futile?! As we addressed this question, we discussed the difficulty of “living a feminist life,” to use Sara Ahmed’s phrase, which so often includes talking across

epistemological and political lines (2017). Having started the course with Cathy Cohen's classic "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens," students were primed to recognize in this situation the limits of the identitarian politics against which Cohen writes and that amplify the difficulties of talking across epistemological and political differences. Cohen argues that the radical potential of queer politics has not been realized because too often it "reinforce[s] simple dichotomies between heterosexual and 'everything queer'" (Cohen, 1997, p. 438). This approach, Cohen says, not only makes addressing racism, classism, and sexism within LGBTQ spaces more difficult but also makes it impossible to recognize the ways in which certain heterosexuals—i.e. the so-called "welfare queen"—do not benefit from heteronormativity and might actually occupy a "queer" social location. An ability to articulate such arguments clearly in moments when DEI staff and non-GSFS students were employing ideas that run counter to those of feminist, queer, and trans studies did not, however, result in more generative discussions. It simply made clear to our students and to us the depths of the epistemological clashes between feminist, queer, and trans studies and the diversity industry.

In the days that followed, the saga continued. Without telling anyone, a student from Queers & Allies took rough notes at the meeting and circulated what they incorrectly described as a "transcription" among students and staff. Students who recognized the gross inaccuracies riddling the document shared the document with GSFS faculty. Through this document, we gained additional information regarding what students saw as the problem: the survey's inclusion of the "transgender" category, which was "where the whole Q + A/email conflict began." The transgender option, according to this document, is a "problem" because "transgender is not a gender, and it is othering to trans people to ask them to differentiate themselves." Why, we might ask, would critics demand that agender and nonbinary be added to a survey, but transgender be removed? Moreover, it seems obvious that trans people, like all people, experience the world in relation to their gender and, further, often differentiate themselves as trans. Indeed, such positions motivate a great deal of trans studies and activism.

The circulation of the "transcription" encouraged Essig, a coauthor and the GSFS Department Chair, to contact the supervisor of both DEI staff involved with the case. In yet another meeting, this diversity officer indicated that although the survey may not have been transphobic in and of itself, if some students perceived it as transphobic, then, in essence, it was. In other words, any perception of harm is equivalent to harm itself. No evidence necessary. Throughout this series of encounters, we came to understand that we were labeled TERFs, both individually and

as a department, because our academic discipline questions gender. By this logic, feminist studies faculty can never be outside the figure of the TERF.

There is much to find unnerving here—the elevation of evidence-less claims to truth, DEI staff stepping into academic affairs, and the devaluing of the expertise of feminist studies faculty among students and staff without expertise in the field. Far from simple annoyances, these elements speak to the ways in which moral panics can have real material consequences. In a moment in which Cypress College placed a faculty member “on leave” after a video went viral in which she questions a student’s support of police, it is not hard to imagine this case ending in radically different ways—and especially if the department, led by its Chair, had not rallied behind its faculty. Here, we want to signal two additional issues. First, the claims that lived experience is an uncontested form of knowledge production, which were central to non-GSFS students’ claims, has been widely contested from within feminist, queer, and critical race studies (Scott, 1991; Taiwo 2020). Indeed, as Laura Briggs argues, we do not always have the tools necessary to analyze our own situations (2008). Developing a structural analysis is hard work, and it is the kind of work that happens in feminist studies. Assuming that people automatically have these tools is inaccurate, at best. At worst, this assumption is deeply anti-intellectual and reflective of the kinds of conservative impulses responsible for defunding critical studies in higher education. Second, and perhaps most bizarrely in terms of how experience as evidence circulated in these encounters, only the experiences of students who felt harmed by the survey or faculty’s responses to their conservative critiques of it were taken seriously. That there were far more students passionately defending GSFS than there were critics had little impact. When non-binary and transidentified students talked about their overwhelmingly positive experiences in GSFS, they were told they were suffering from false consciousness. One of these students, a non-binary-identified gender-nonconforming GSFS major, was writing a senior thesis at the time about the gender-affirming labors that non-binary people do in intimate relationships with one another. They emailed Queers & Allies to ask the organization to circulate a call for interviewees. The group’s leaders, with no training in feminist studies, told this GSFS major that their discussion of gender in their request for interviewees was problematic and they would not circulate the call. Of course, those responding knew that this student was completing their thesis under our direction, which made the intellectual work, as well as the student doing it, suspect—despite the fact that their approaches were in line with conventions in feminist, queer, and trans studies. Students’ experiences only mattered insofar as they were rooted in vulnerability and perceptions of harm, as

it was precisely this affective condition that allowed critiques of GSFS to persist.

As we were dealing with the ramifications of responses to our survey question, the Trans Affinity Group sent out a survey that included as the gender categories: male, female, non-binary, t-female, t-male, and other. As a reminder, the four critiques of our survey were that (1) it needed more gender categories (2) it did not include a fill-in-the-blank box and it “othered” students who had to fill in an “other” box (never mind that these positions are contradictory and that both are inaccurate) (3) it should have included the word “cis” and (4) trans is not a gender category and should not have been included. The Trans Affinity Group’s survey included just one additional gender category than we did (non-binary), used the word “other” for the fill-in-the-blank box, did not include the word “cis,” and included trans as a category, but in a way that was less capacious than our approach through which respondents could identify as trans and any other gender category, vs. simply t-female or t-male. In using the terms “male” and “female,” the survey circulated by the Trans Affinity Group also contributes to the idea that the social condition of gender can be understood in biological terms, an idea feminist, queer, and trans studies scholars have readily critiqued. Of course, constructing survey questions around something as complex as sex/gender is really difficult and the failure of the TAG-approved survey to do anything radically different than the survey in question demonstrates this. It does not, however, indicate any transphobia.

The panic: TERFs or intersectionality?

The panic about TERFs in GSFS obscured as much as it revealed. For instance, articulating concrete steps for making the campus less transphobic was not prioritized. Perhaps more revealing, considering the survey’s focus on intersectionality, is that race was brushed over in these conversations. Within our Intersectionality course, we spent the semester having complex conversations about the theory and its applications. We discussed genealogies of Black feminist thought and where intersectionality fit into these genealogies. We worked to identify the contradictory ways in which “intersectionality” discourses circulate in institutional diversity settings, activist spaces, and feminist studies. And, ultimately, through reading about what Jennifer Nash terms the “intersectionality wars,” we noted the limits of commonsensical deployments of the term: that one can possess multiple marginalized identities simultaneously. Scholars writing in the veins of Black feminism and queer of color critique have cautioned against such identity-based applications of intersectionality, suggesting that the focus

on individuals' race, class, gender, and other identity markers too often comes to stand in for a structural analysis of the mechanisms of racism, classism, sexism, and other forms of systemic inequities (Nash, 2008, 2019; Puar, 2007; Thomsen & Finley, 2019; Weigman, 2012).

Such texts and discussions could have helped students and DEI staff think through what it meant that Black students at the aforementioned dinner, who were connected to GSFS, remained unconvinced that the department was the problem that needed to be addressed. The Black students were not surprised, of course, that Black feminist thought was being ignored in a predominantly white and not terribly feminist institution—but the ignoring of race as part of a campaign to label feminist and lesbian scholars TERFs was an interesting sleight of hand, one that simultaneously recentered whiteness and made impossible critical discussions of intersectionality.

At precisely the time of the first meeting with the DEI staff member regarding our survey, their office was circulating a job call for an LGBTQ student affairs position that included intersectionality discourse. The call requested applicants “with an intersectional social justice lens” and with “knowledge of intersectionality and how to support students with multiple marginalized identities.” Moreover, the call asks for

applications from individuals with an understanding of the ways intersecting systems of oppression (e.g., racism, ableism, classism, heterosexism, cissexism, etc.) impact students from various underrepresented communities (e.g., students with disabilities, students of color, queer, transgender, firstgeneration, low-income, international, immigrant, undocumented, tribal and indigenous communities) and with the ability to provide culturally competent and inclusive support services.

It is not surprising that the institutional diversity office uses discourses of intersectionality, or that it does so in ways that ignore contestations around the term. What is surprising is that a posting for an “intersectional” LGBTQ student affairs position never uses the terms “woman” or “sexism,” despite its long laundry lists of “intersecting systems of oppression” and members of “underrepresented communities.” It is also surprising that no DEI staff attended the Beyond Intersectionality symposium, which could have informed their abilities to offer the “culturally competent and inclusive support services” they claim to provide. Arguably, if DEI staff do not recognize the category “woman” and that sexism continues to shape the lives of young women, as well as people of all genders, they are not providing “inclusive” services, just as their approaches could be more “competent” if they recognized the Black feminist genealogies out of which the terms they use emerged and the ongoing contestations around these terms. In short, we want to suggest that the anxieties driving claims that GSFS is TERFy are not disconnected from our organizing an academic

conference that suggested that critical thinking around the somewhat sacred notion of “intersectionality” was crucial for developing anti-racist feminisms. The discomfort with the kinds of critical thinking that happen in feminist studies—which is at the heart of the matter—is precisely what generated attempts to discredit feminist scholars through labeling us TERFs. Of course, making feminists disappear is exactly what this moral panic over TERFs was meant to do.

Kill the feminist, kill the lesbian

The truth is that transness has been and is the object of deep hostility within some marginalized forms of feminism. Skepticism among earlier anti-trans feminists, such as Janice Raymond (1979), about transwomen being “real” women has morphed into JK Rowling’s Twitter feed where she has insisted that transwomen are not women (Gardner, 2020). These ideas are, of course, deplorable, but they are also quite fringe within feminist studies and activism in the US. As trans studies scholar Grace Lavery notes, TERFs are “a minority of a minority of feminists” (Tiffany, 2020). Judith Butler recently articulated a similar point when asked about TERFs in an interview:

I want to first question whether trans-exclusionary feminists are really the same as mainstream feminists... (M)ost feminists support trans rights and oppose all forms of transphobia. So I find it worrisome that suddenly the trans-exclusionary radical feminist position is understood as commonly accepted or even mainstream. I think it is actually a fringe movement that is seeking to speak in the name of the mainstream, and that our responsibility is to refuse to let that happen (Ferber, 2020).

Just as feminist, queer, and trans studies scholars are pushing back against the conflation of TERFs with feminists, so too are feminists beyond the academic sphere. Blogger Viv Smythe, who invented the term TERF, now says it should focus on “separatism” more than “feminism” since “(a) lot of the positions that are presented seem far too essentialist to be adequately described as feminist, let alone radical feminist” (2018).

Such confluences between the TERF and the feminist undergirded the case we examine here, a slippage that allows for “feminism”—not to mention lesbians and women—to become anachronistic. But what is really at stake in refusing to allow all feminists, feminism, and feminist studies to be made a thing of the past vis-a-vis the figure of the TERF? It is not simply that the outright dismissal of feminism’s past requires a re-writing of history or that such re-writings work in the service of progress narratives (Hemmings, 2010). What is at stake in how we remember feminism, including radical feminism, is where we locate the potential for the kinds of critique, unruliness, and activities that can function as forms of social

terror. Mairead Sullivan locates such potential in the radical feminist, the lesbian-as-feminist, who Sullivan notes was rarely transexclusionary. What makes the figure of the radical feminist a site of potential, Sullivan says, is that she refuses the role of the mother. To make this case, Sullivan analyzes early radical feminist texts, including Valerie Solanas' *SCUM Manifesto* (1967) and the less well-known "C.L.I.T. Papers," "to consider the spookiness, indeed the terror, of...the specter of destruction that the figure of the radical feminist contains" (2016, p. 272). Sullivan goes so far as to suggest that the radical feminist—a figure used to stand in for feminism's anachronism—is actually more destructive to the social order than the most beloved contemporary queer figures, including the sinthomosexual, the queer non-reproductive subject disinterested in the future of humanity made famous in Lee Edelman's *No Future* (2004). As Sullivan argues, "By claiming lesbianism as a structural position, rather than simply a personal identity or sexual practice, radical feminism names the threat that women's refusal of reproduction poses to the patriarchal machine, inaugurated and reinforced through the law of the heterosexual nuclear family" (p. 277). It is, as Sullivan suggests, the pairing of lesbian with feminist that strikes fear into the heart of patriarchal cultures and institutions, including ours.

An academic department composed primarily of lesbians is not in and of itself a threat to the patriarchal order, precisely because the non-feminist lesbian has been domesticated as a bride or mother. But the lesbian was once a revolutionary figure. As the Radical Lesbians famously claim in their 1970 manifesto, "A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion." She was, as Valerie Solanis imagined, the kind of outsider who wanted to create a new society by cutting up men. Fifty years later, the lesbian as a radical figure is dead—in part because of the discursive conflation of radical lesbian/feminist and TERF and in part because of queer theory itself. When queer theory created the sinthomosexual as the space of non-reproductive possibilities, Sullivan notes, he was imagined as male. This figure necessarily ignores those who lived in radical and non-reproductive queer ways long before queer theory named the sinthomosexual, including radical lesbians/feminists. Scholars have explored this queer disregard for feminism, noting, that "the feminism against which queer theory defines itself is a feminism reduced almost to caricature: a feminism tied to a concern for gender, bound to a regressive and monotonous binary opposition. That reduction of feminist critique calls for analysis" (Weed & Schor, 1997, p. xi).

We, too, write against such reductions. It is, after all, the radical lesbian who refuses reproduction, disavows the child, and destroys the future. By refusing to mother students produced as fragile, and advocating instead

for the radical potentials of feminist, queer, trans, and Black studies, lesbians became TERFs, feminists became TERFs, and feminist studies became TERFy. These slippages were not accidental. They represent how radical potential is conquered: through creating moral panics that can, in this case, only be solved by the DEI industry.

By constructing students as vulnerable subjects in need of protection, the diversity office set the stage for endless moral panics. The moment a faculty member, especially a woman-identified faculty member, refuses to engage in the work of “mothering,” she risks becoming monstrous. And, as Sullivan urges us to see, nothing is more monstrous than the figure of the radical feminist. In the series of encounters that comprised the case study we discuss here, it became clear that the figure of the lesbian feminist refusing the needs of the child haunted our conversations. The DEI staff insisted that the professors had not taken care of the students’ (read: the child’s) feelings. We had refused to prioritize the feelings of students outside our department who insisted that feminist studies was a problem because we question taken-for-granted ideas about gender and sexuality. In fact, Thomsen overtly refused the role of good mother when, in one meeting, she insisted that “It is not my job to care about the feelings of every student on campus, especially those who aren’t in my classes.” With a look of confusion and contempt on their face, the DEI staff quickly responded, “Well, it is mine.” In this moment, Thomsen found inspiration in the insights of Kyla Wazana Tompkins:

Students come in with a lot of feelings. And of course as minoritarian teachers working in the age of the booming Student Affairs Industrial Complex, we are often expected to manage those feelings. But...managing feelings, particularly as it relates to various forms of injury IS NOT THE JOB OF THE TEACHER. As I tell my students over and over: your intuitions and feelings are what will lead you to original insight but they are not a substitute for thinking and working hard. Rather, they are the end of the psychic thread that you begin to pull at as you develop the ability to summarize and analyze the structures of thought, habits of mind, and analytic forms that undergird critical theory. What it feels like may make a bridge between you and theory and the world around us, but in my classroom we are largely going to model thinking about the last part of the tripartite clause. We are going to move from theory to the world, and not back to you...After all...the point of feminism was not to exacerbate our focus on the individual but rather to shift to structural and systemic thinking (2016).

The DEI industry and what Tompkins calls the Student Affairs Industrial Complex are, of course, close friends. Both have ignored the insights of feminist, queer, trans, and critical race studies that would complicate their assumptions. Both have also produced students as vulnerable subjects, incapable of engaging difficult subjects without trigger warnings, a survey

question without intervention. In doing so, diversity officers produce the rationale for their existence.

The diversity industry will not save us

In *Diversity, Inc: The Failed Promise of a Billion-Dollar Business*, Pamela Newkirk traces the history of the diversity industry and outlines its results. Although academia, Hollywood, and corporate America have “renewed their commitment to diversity, collectively pledging billions of dollars to commission studies, set up training sessions, and hire consultants and czars to oversee diversity programs,” these approaches, Newkirk says, have had little impact (2019, p. 5). She describes the outcomes of this multi-billion dollar industry as “chronically disappointing” (p. 5). Sophia Chen takes up the issue of diversity trainings, in particular, in a recent *Wired* article, in which she asks: Do they work? (2020). Her answer: “A lot of research suggests not.” Chen cites sociologists Frank Dobbin and Alexandra Kalev, who analyzed three decades of data from 829 firms to argue that “the positive effects of diversity training rarely last beyond a day or two, and a number of studies suggest that it can activate bias or spark a backlash.” Considering the “toothlessness” of diversity trainings, Chen asks why the approach is so popular. Newkirk, who calls such trainings “drive-by diversity,” responded: “It’s easy” (Chen, 2020).

This easy approach is on full display at Middlebury, which in the last few years, has hired outside consultants to assess its diversity problems, committed additional resources to address issues of diversity (including hiring the two DEI staff involved in our case), and developed a long list of diversity workshops—despite the fact that research makes clear that the latter, in particular, do not do the work they set out to do. In Chen’s critique of the diversity industry, she notes that some DEI staff continue to believe in the effectiveness of diversity training, especially if they are “ongoing” and “more than a one-off event.” Chen provides as an example of this approach Columbia Professor Felicia Moore Mensah’s semester-long course “designed to help K-12 teachers better support students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds” (2020).

Sustained engagement over time with critical ideas that challenge dominant ideas sounds a lot like what happens in feminist studies classrooms. Student interest in this kind of work recently has blossomed at Middlebury; we now have fifty majors or minors, triple the number from several years ago. In fact, we are one of just two Humanities programs to grow during this period, and the only program to grow to this degree, something notable at a moment when student involvement in the Humanities is waning both at Middlebury and nationwide. Despite this growth, GSFS has lost faculty

lines. At this moment, the two authors of this article are the only tenure-track or tenured faculty members whose lines are primarily in GSFS.

At precisely the same time as we lost faculty lines, the College hired additional DEI staff as part of fulfilling their stated commitments to diversity efforts. How can we make sense of this stated commitment to diversity and expansion of the DEI work on campus alongside the defunding of GSFS, the very department on campus most likely to encourage critical thinking about the topics raised through the DEI machine? We want to suggest that, perhaps ironically, the increased circulation of diversity discourses, workshops, and requirements may make academic work in feminist, queer, trans, and Black studies appear less, rather than more, necessary. Put otherwise, if everyone is considered capable of doing diversity work, why do we need academic expertise? Because feminist studies is often not viewed as a discipline with discipline-specific knowledge (Soderling et al., 2018), the work that feminist studies does is often imagined as synonymous with the kind of diversity work being done in student affairs. At a public meeting, a colleague in Religious Studies suggested, for instance, that GSFS faculty could provide counseling to LGBTQ students. For some, we are too similar to DEI efforts—despite the fact that, as we have shown throughout this article, the forms of inquiry central to feminist, queer, and trans studies often run counter to those of the DEI industry.

Yet, for others, we are too threatening to these same social justice efforts. In fact, in what might seem a bizarre twist, DEI staff and TERFs are aligned in their taking aim at academic feminist studies. In an open letter in 2013, forty-eight self-identified radical feminists note that they are concerned about the rise of “gender theory” within “the academy” because, as they correctly note, feminist studies is a site for upending traditional ideas about gender (“Forbidden,” 2013). While the DEI staff and a few students—bolstered by a broader multibillion dollar diversity industry—deployed the figure of the TERF to frame feminist, queer, and trans studies as anachronistic, and even a site of moral concern, actual self-identified TERFs made academic feminism itself the center of their moral panic. How ironic that real-life TERFs have a better grasp of feminist studies than do DEI staff at our own institution. The TERFs are right: What academic feminism is most guilty of is a refusal of easy answers. That this refusal could be interpreted as our not centering the child/student speaks to the degree to which our conversations were haunted by the figure of the bad mother, the lesbian, the radical feminist. Through being tethered to these ghostly figures, feminist studies professors were transmorgified into TERFs.

Such slippages aren’t new. In fact, moral panics, on the left and right, often center on the child. Consider QAnon’s rapidly expanding “Save the

Children” campaign. Although originally a right-wing conspiracy about a deep state pedophile ring led by Hillary Clinton, it has now convinced people from across the political spectrum that the furniture company Wayfair is selling children and that Netflix is involved in global pedophilic propaganda. This doesn’t mean that child sexual abuse isn’t real. It obviously is. But moral panics about non-existent global pedophile rings obscure the reality of sexual abuse, including that it primarily takes place within one’s own familial networks. In much the same way, attacking lesbian feminists for being TERFs despite any evidence for such claims—other than that their expertise runs counter to more commonsensical understandings of sexuality and gender—makes it more difficult to take on the gendered ideologies that enable transphobia.

Just as we were finishing this article, the evil the DEI industry and earnest students sought to kill off returned. But this time the monster wasn’t imagined TERFS. It was Peter Kreeft, an unapologetic anti-trans and anti-feminist ideologue and professor at Boston College, who was invited to speak on campus by a conservative religious student organization under the guise of the college’s oft-repeated commitment to “free speech.” His visit represents what we already know: transphobia is enabled by anti-feminist positions, and its eradication requires an ability to deconstruct gender ideologies. Positioning scholars who do this work as TERFs works in the service of transphobia. And this is something that should cause all of us to panic.

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