TERF Intimate Publics: Anti-gender Images and Feelings

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Abstract

This article asks: how does trans-exclusionary radical feminism (TERFism) function to create an intimate public that generates a sense of belonging along gendered and racialized lines? Drawing from Judith Butler, I use "fascism" as a conceptual frame while analyzing online images and sentiments of a trans-exclusionary radical feminist (TERF) who belongs to an Australian anti-gender Facebook group. I argue that TERF intimate publics are constituted by feelings of loss and resentment which become alleviated through claiming legitimacy along a "natural" gendered and racialized hierarchy of human worth, through demanding a return of one's "sex-based rights," and through a commitment to victimhood. Generating pride in a perceived endangered identity, this article finds that TERF intimate publics uphold the regulatory norms of cis-heteronormativity and whiteness. This analysis reveals that they offer a space for racist nationalism rooted in cis-hetero-misogyny, a crucial finding as TERFism gains traction in the current political moment.

Keywords: Trans-exclusionary Radical Feminism; TERF; Intimate Publics; Anti-gender Feelings; Images; Cis-heteronormativity; Whiteness

Introduction

On March 18, 2023, a group of about 30 men belonging to Australia's National Socialist Movement, a neo-Nazi organisation reported to be Australia's largest white supremacist group (Printcev 2024) gathered on the steps of Victoria's Parliament House in Australia to support the "Let Women Speak" event led by British self-described women's rights activist Kellie-Jay Keen-Minshull, also known as Posie Parker (Elkin 2023). Dressed in black and holding the Australian flag and a banner which read "Destroy Paedo Freaks," the men stood on the side of Keen-Minshull while performing the Sieg Heil salute to a large group of counter-protesters (Whelan 2023). Of the 100 or so women attending the "Let Women Speak" event, a significant proportion were trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs). The event attracted significant criticism in Australia and abroad, while Keen-Minshull and her supporters distanced themselves from the men, arguing that they had "gate-crashed" the rally (Deeming cited in Karvelas 2023). An alternative theory was that these men were undercover police or trans-rights activists (Wilson 2023). While some of the

women standing by Keen-Minshull decried the neo-Nazis after the event, the neo-Nazis' attendance—although shocking—was hardly surprising. This is because Nazi ideology has historically excluded and expelled trans people from society.[1]

While the "Let Women Speak" event was not an iteration of neo-Nazi ideology, it did create a space where these men could perform their sexual and racial politics. It was possible because the event was platformed on defending an authentic sense of "true womanhood" defined by one's sex assigned at birth. Such platforming is problematic as it triggers a sense of victimhood which reduces women's oppression to a set of chromosomes and sex organs, invisibilising the social and political hierarchies which produce gender inequality (MacKinnon 2023). This reduction defines women by their biology, upholding notions of biological essentialism whereby women are given an innate and universal "fixed essence" (Grosz 2012, 334). Biological essentialism has been used against feminists to reinforce the system of patriarchy as it validates the idea of women's subordination and secondary relation to men (Grosz 2012, 333). In claiming oppression in one's sex assigned at birth, then, the event offered a space for the neo-Nazis to perform their "essential" maleness alongside these women in a complementary/rescuer relation upholding the myth of patriarchy which is glorified in neo-Nazi ideology. This reflects a form of cis-hetero-misogyny whereby the ideologies of cisgenderism, heterosexism, and misogyny are upheld. Cisgenderism is an ideology which denigrates and rejects gender identities which do not align to those assigned at birth (Lennon and Mistler 2014, 63), while heterosexism is a belief system which assumes all individuals to be innately heterosexual (Richardson-Self 2019, 574). Following Richardson-Self (2019, 574), who draws on Manne (2018, 13), misogyny can be described as a "system that polices, punishes, dominates, and condemns those women who are perceived as an enemy or threat to the patriarchy" (Manne 2018, 34). Cis-hetero-misogyny then, as Richardson-Self (2019, 574- 575) defines it, is:

> a property of social systems or environments as a whole, in which sex-, gender-, and orientation-diverse persons, as well as some cis-het women, will tend to face hostility of various kinds because they are sex-, gender-, and orientation-diverse persons in an androcentric, sexually dimorphic, cisgenderist, heterosexist world (i.e. a cis-hetero-patriarchy), who are held to be failing to live up to cis-hetero-patriarchal standards, or

[1] In Nazi Germany, trans people were regularly conflated with homosexuality and were considered demographic threats to the nation. Like homosexuals, many were deported to concentration camps where they were murdered (Giles 2011, 389).

because they actively challenge these standards in some way, including by being visually Other.

While the "Let Women Speak" event created an environment where the neo-Nazis could enact cis-hetero-misogyny through a defence of "true womanhood," in doing so, it inescapably also offered a space for the articulation of racist nationalism. For example, in reducing women to their physical anatomy, the notion of sexual dimorphism is reinforced, which has been saddled with whiteness throughout history to elucidate racial differences and hierarchies (Markowitz 2024, 47). While this reduction renders unintelligible diverse sexed and gendered identities, it leaves the structure of whiteness relatively stable, upholding and reproducing its social and political privilege. Furthermore, in rendering women's anatomy as an asset to be defended, women's reproductive organs become consequentially prized, reducing women to vessels of biological reproduction. This reduction subsequentially creates a space for the neo-Nazis to defend the women at the "Let Women Speak" event on the grounds of them being racially valuable to the development of a pure Australian race, an articulation of racist nationalism through a defence of "true womanhood."

The attendance of the neo-Nazis at Victoria's Parliament House in 2023 highlights how anti-trans sentiment creates a shared ground where fringe and extreme actors can unite across Australia's political spectrum. Anti-trans sentiment has been escalating in Australia in recent years (Kelly 2023). For example, a report published in 2023 by the Trans Justice Project and The Victorian Pride Lobby revealed that one in two trans and gender diverse people had experienced hate or violence in some form in the last twelve months (Kelly 2023). The report also noted an escalation of such incidents on online platforms in the lead-up to the "Let Women Speak" event. In recent years, Australia's online anti-gender movement has been a hotbed for anti-trans sentiment. Re-energising itself after a failed attempt to prevent the legislation of same-sex marriage in 2017, this movement has been successful in mobilisng individuals against the threat of "gender," which captures a range of concerns that counter cis-heteronormativity. In this context, cis-heteronormativity can be defined as "the systemic normalization and material privileging of bodies, identities, and subjectivities that most closely align with white cisgender and heterosexual cultural expectancies" (LeMaster et al. 2019, 367). Cis-heteronormativity is racialized as white, inasmuch as both whiteness and cis-heteronormativity function as default, invisible, and regulatory norms, working to Other those bodies who are non-white, queer, or sexually and gender diverse thus rendering them inauthentic to the dominant white, cis-heteronormative social order. As Susan Stryker (2014, 41) reminds us:

> The caesura, or break, that race introduces into the body politic allows the population to be segmented and selected, enhanced or eliminated, according to biological notions of heritability, degeneracy, foreignness, differentness, or unassimilability—all in the name of "defending" society and making it "pure".

Drawing from Judith Butler (2024), this article uses "fascism" as a conceptual frame to explore the emotions and rhetorical registers of TERF intimate publics. In doing so, it reveals how these intimate publics generate a sense of belonging along gendered and racialized lines and thus create a space for racist nationalism rooted in cis-hetero-misogyny, a crucial finding as TERFism gains traction in the current political moment. Lauren Berlant (2008, 8) describes an "intimate public" as "a porous, affective sense of identification among strangers that promises a certain experience of belonging" through networks of disappointment, sympathy and recognition. By meeting the mediated desires and expectations of the intimate public, they offer a sense of shared belonging through an "attachment to what disappoints" (Berlant 2008, 22). As such, there is a certain homogeneity to an intimate public: they generate "a subjective likeness" (Berlant 2008, 5) and are based on shared norms and values which "engender kinds of insider recognition and cultural self-development" (Berlant 2008, 11).

Fascism is a difficult concept to define due to its contours changing and shifting depending on time and context (Paxton 1998, 1). However, a common theme found across various mobilisations of fascism is the creation of a deviant sexual Other used to strip people of their rights and freedoms (Butler 2024, 8). The goal of othering here is to protect the nation's "pure" citizens and return the nation to its glorified and mythical past (Butler 2024, 8). This past is invariably glorified through the enactment and sustainment of patriarchal gender roles, which place the traditional patriarchal family at its centre while arousing fears towards deviations from it (Stanley 2018, 16). To return the nation to its mythical and glorified past, natural hierarches of human worth are represented as "immutable facts" in the fascist imagination (Stanley 2018, 80). These hierarchies solidify divisions between social groups by stoking fear between them (Stanley 2019, 8). Fear, therefore, is a core emotion of fascism which borders alongside a deep-seated feeling of loss. This loss is mobilised and manipulated into "aggrieved victimhood and exploited to justify past, continuing, or new forms of oppression" (Stanley 2018, 99).

As this article argues, TERF intimate publics are constituted by feelings of loss. This loss is accompanied by a feeling of resentment which is directed towards trans subjects, who are framed as deviant sexual Others and are held responsible for this loss. Displaced onto an

object of blame (the trans subject), these feelings, I argue, become alleviated by claiming legitimacy along a "natural" cisgender hierarchy of human worth which is sexualised as straight and racialized as white, by demanding a return of one's "sex-based rights," and through a commitment to victimhood. TERF intimate publics operate on two parallel tracks. First, they rely upon emotions central to the mobilization of fascism—specifically loss and resentment leading to aggrieved victimhood. Second, they deploy similar rhetorical registers found in fascist politics: they create a deviant sexual Other to protect the nation's "pure" citizens and advocate for a return to a glorified, mythical past. In practical terms, this means reducing the category of "woman" to chromosomes and sex organs—a move that reinforces racial differences and hierarchies while obscuring the social and political realities of female oppression. This is not to argue that TERFs are fascists, but that TERF intimate publics offer a space for racist nationalism rooted in cis-hetero-misogyny, a crucial finding as TERFism gains traction in the current political moment.

The data used and analyzed for this article were gathered from an Australian anti-gender Facebook group, Binary Australia. Binary Australia is arguably Australia's largest anti-gender organisation. Binary Australia emerged in 2017 as a rebranding of Marriage Alliance, a leading lobbying group that had campaigned against same-sex marriage. The organization now focuses on opposing what it calls the threat of "gender" and actively campaigns against the advancement of trans and gender diverse rights (Duffy 2018). It is most active on Facebook, where it communicates to its approximately 90,000 followers daily through the posting of various images.

I use two images posted by Binary Australia to argue that these images create TERF intimate publics where personal feelings of loss and resentment can be mobilised and displaced onto a public criticism of "gender," represented through the figure of the trans subject framed as a deviant sexual Other. To analyze these images, I use the sentiments of Emily, a self-identified TERF who is a member of Binary Australia. Although this article focuses on the sentiments of one participant interviewed for a broader PhD project on anti-gender politics in Australia, Emily's sentiments mirror those of many other participants. As such, of the twenty participants interviewed for this project, five identified themselves as TERFs. These TERFs consistently expressed a sense of victimhood due to the purported loss of their "sex-based rights." Additionally, all argued that trans women were not really women but were either mentally ill, deceived, or deliberately appropriating gender for deceptive or nefarious purposes. All participants therefore defended a "natural" cisgender hierarchy of human worth, which, as will be argued, is sexualised as straight and racialized as

white; thus, their sentiments uphold the regulatory norms of cis-heteronormativity and whiteness. Emily's sentiments therefore not only connect to a larger pattern of how TERFs feel about "gender," but they also point to the emotions and rhetorical registers which are required to belong and identify as a TERF in Australia today.

Emily's interview was conducted through the video communication platform Zoom in May, 2023. I had prepared broad topics to discuss with Emily before the interview, and questions were semi-structured, participant-led, and open-ended, encouraging Emily to share her thoughts, feelings, and understandings of "gender" and the trans community with me. I adopted a phenomenological approach to interviewing, which focused on the participant's description of events and their experiences with the phenomenon under investigation. This approach takes an impartial and non-directive stance and is focused on studying "what it is like as we find-ourselves-being-in-relation-with others… and other things" (Vagle 2018, 20). It therefore allows for an investigation of how participants understand their lived experiences and the meanings they make from those experiences (Seidman 2019, 16).

This approach was suited to the research objective as it allowed for an investigation of the participants' perceived relationship between themselves and trans individuals and the anti-gender image, as well as how the participants generated meaning from both of those relationships and experiences. As lived experiences have a transitory nature and are often disregarded (van Manen 2016, 42), a phenomenological approach was also appropriate as it encouraged Emily to reconstruct her lived experiences in order to make sense of them in the present moment. This approach allowed me to explore why Emily had been attracted to the Facebook page initially and why she had reacted to their images online. This approach justifies studying images and interviews together, as it allows for an examination of how Emily's past experiences shaped and affected her support for anti-gender criticism at the time of the interview.

Images were analysed using a critical discourse analysis, which treats discourse as a "social practice" which shapes both the individual and is shaped by them (Wodak 2024, 32). As the analysis explored how anti-gender images helped to forge a sense of identity and belonging, and how the participant's past experiences contributed to these feelings, this approach was well suited.

The two images selected for this article's analysis most accurately captured Emily's sentiments and those of the five self-identified TERFs or trans-exclusionary feminists I interviewed for my research. It is important to note here that I asked all of my participants

which images they had reacted to on Binary Australia's Facebook page.[2] However, none of the participants remembered specific images that had stuck with them. Instead, when asked why they had reacted to the images in the past, all indicated that the images had accurately represented their feelings surrounding a particular issue at a particular point in time. This indicates that the images reflected a shared sense of reality generated from a shared sense of what disappoints, thus indicating their ability to function as an intimate public.

The findings also reveal the extent to which the images captured an individual's personal and private feelings, albeit in a fleeting way. Not remembering what images one had reacted to indicates that the anti-gender image operates, to some extent, on a level of cultural and emotional amnesia. What I mean by this is that the image successfully captures suffering or disappointment despite the source of this suffering or disappointment being forgotten. This suggests a displacement of emotion is occurring here. This is a worrying finding: if what pulls one towards the anti-gender image is forgotten, the feelings which drove one to react to the image in the first place can be diverted to suit other political ends—political ends which accrue efficacy by presenting themselves as a way out of suffering or disappointment. This indicates that anti-gender images may be operating as a gateway to other exclusionary ideologies. The next two sections present my analysis of Emily's feelings of loss and resentment, which I argue become displaced onto the anti-gender image and alleviated by claiming legitimacy along a "natural" cisgender hierarchy—which is sexualised as straight and racialized as white—by demanding a return of one's "sex-based rights" and through a commitment to victimhood.

"They're Erasing Females and Motherhood!"

Sitting on a dusty orange leather couch, Emily fidgets towards her laptop screen as she greets me. Behind her are large bay windows framing the outside front garden, which lay a lemon tree and a selection of flowers and herbs planted in terracotta pots. There is a Led Zeppelin poster hanging on the wall in the left-hand corner, and to the right I can see one speaker, presumably part of a pair, decorating the room. Emily is a white Australian and appears to be in her mid-to-late forties. Greeting me cheerfully in a thick Australian accent, I tell Emily that her name will be changed for this research. "Good!", she responds. "I'm already threatened as being a TERF!" She laughs as I ask her why she joined the Facebook group Binary Australia and began to react to their images online. "I've had issues with them

[2] Binary Australia almost exclusively communicates to its members through the posting of images. Images therefore act as a key mode of recruitment for this group.

[trans women] throughout my life and within the workplace," she tells me. She goes on to say that she is a second-wave feminist who has two daughters and "like most women," she says, "I've been groped, threatened, and have had predators after me… so, male violence and sexual predatory behaviour is also a big issue…" Her voice rises as she concludes: "They're erasing females and motherhood!"

Months later, when I'm writing up my notes of Emily's interview, I send her a Facebook message to clarify whether or not she identifies as a TERF. "Do you think this acronym is useful in describing how you feel about these issues and also in connecting you with other second-wave or radical feminists who share your thoughts on transgender people?", I ask. "I wear it like a badge of honour", she responds. "I am a feminist who excludes males from being identified as female and gaining female sex-based rights (which are now all gone) as any sane, careful, matriarch, intelligent female should".

Emily articulates a deep sense of victimhood in her opening remarks to me. Although she occupies a dominant position within Australian society as a white, cisgender, and heterosexual woman, her remarks indicate that these identities are felt as fragile and at risk of being erased. These sentiments are articulated when she argues that trans women are erasing females and motherhood. In placing these categories as under threat, Emily triggers a sense of nostalgia for these identities—a longing for a time when they were felt as stable. The effort to restore the category of "woman" to a set of chromosomes and reproductive imperatives works to spark a discourse of "vulnerable, maternal femininity" (Blee 2020, 419) which upholds cis-heteronormativity by relegating women's sexuality as in service to her "complementary" cis-male counterpart. However, it also has an imperial effect in that it keeps racialized histories alive by rendering Eurocentric understandings of binary sex as immutable facts (Patil 2018). This privileges the social structure of whiteness, as these understandings have had whiteness pressed upon them since the eighteenth century when modern discourses of race emerged (Markowitz 2024, 47).

For example, as Schuller (2023, 151) points out, white women's bodies were rendered by race scientists as fleshy bodies "capable of progress but also likely to get lead astray," while white male bodies "possessed just the right amount of sensibility, enabling them to maintain altruism, abstraction, and justice" (Schuller 2023, 151). Thus, "the sex binary was deployed to stabilise the precarity of impressible whiteness" (Schuller 2023, 151), impressibility meaning the capacity for the body to be affected and progress over time (Schuller and Gill-Peterson 2020, 6). This system had two major effects. First, it relegated women to the position of the inferior sex in the sex binary. Second, through modern discourses of race, it

rendered non-white bodies and bodies outside binary definitions of sex as unimpressionable, thereby justifying scientific racism and establishing sexual and racial hierarchies.

The deployment of nostalgia by Emily, then, not only works to stabilise whiteness through a longing for binary sex to be returned to its "innate" and "fixed" essence, but through such longings it also affords her body the potential to progress forward through time while trans women are denied this affordability and indeed liveability. This reveals the practice of feeling in the exercise of solidifying group differences, and how these feelings work to stabilise and naturalise sexual and racial differences and hierarchies (Schuller 2018, 37). In a commitment to victimhood, stemming from an anxiety that females and mothers are being erased by trans women, Emily generates pride in her cisgender identity, which is sexualised as straight and racialized as white, thus upholding cis-heteronormativity and the social structure of whiteness.

Emily's opening remarks also evoke a high level of sexual anxiety towards trans women. For example, comparing trans women to violent men, Emily frames these women as deviant sexual Others and simultaneously constructs herself as a vulnerable victim. Through her reliance on essentialist tropes that frame the category of "woman" as vulnerable and in need of protection, Emily perpetuates cis-heteronormativity by positioning femaleness in relation to its presumed male protector. Emily's sentiments also build on a framework of "war and struggle," dependent upon a rhetoric of "us and them" which functions as a silencing technique aimed at distraction and blame evasion what Wodak (2021, 177) refers to as "victim-perpetrator-reversal." For example, by casting blame onto trans women—whom she labels as "violent men"—Emily positions herself as the victim, thereby obscuring her own acts of violence in denying trans women's existence. We can see here how Emily's feelings of resentment are displaced onto trans women and alleviated by a commitment to victimhood. Lastly, Emily's remarks indicate a deep sense of pride for and a commitment to her TERF identity. "I wear it like a badge of honour," Emily says. Emily's sentiments here suggest that identifying as a TERF functions as something that is pleasurable for Emily. The "badge" she claims indicates how a commitment to victimhood confirms a TERF identity, enabling Emily to feel a sense of belonging with others who identify this way. A commitment to victimhood then not only offers Emily a means to displace her feelings of loss and resentment onto the trans subject—who is constructed as a deviant sexual Other—, but also it gives her a sense of belonging to a TERF intimate public by performing the requirements of suffering that constitute this identity.

Furthermore, Emily's feelings of loss, resentment, and pride are similarly represented in Figure 1, one of Binary Australia's most engaged-with images in 2022, gathering nearly three thousand Facebook reactions. The image depicts a young person in school uniform standing against a white wall, their legs bare, with the words "me trying to live my life" imprinted in white across their torso. Opposite them, another young person in school uniform wearing black tights holds a tuba over the first person's face, with the progress pride flag emblazoned across their back alongside the words "LGBTIQAA+++ propaganda." The progress pride flag was created in 2018 to include trans and gender diverse people and to represent rainbow people of colour within the rainbow community (Cathey 2021).

The image's portrayal of loss operates through both a sexual and racialized logic. Specifically, in depicting a young person who is white and, presumably, cisgender and heterosexual as being silenced by a tuba bearing the progress pride flag, these identities are framed —both symbolically and literally—as requiring protection, thereby fuelling pride in their recovery and demarcating sexual and racial difference. The caption "me trying to live my life" further positions white, cisgender, and heterosexual identities as normative within the Australian imagination, placing them on the side of desirability.

Protecting these identities from the perceived threat of sexual and racialized Others demands an investment in the future, primarily through the figure of "the child," which is framed as universal and necessary for "political futurity" (Edelman 1998, 19). Consequently, "the child" represents an investment in the future of Australia, one imagined along a "race/reproductive bind" (Weinbaum 2004, 5). Following this logic, these correctly raced and gendered children represent the reproductive future of Australia, while non-white, queer, and same-sex young people are discursively positioned as preventing life thus generating national death. This framework justifies exclusionary sentiment through a language of eradication, purportedly to protect the nation's "real" citizens, constructed as white, cisgender, and heterosexual.

Figure 1. "Just let kids be kids," Binary Australia Facebook post, September 5, 2022.

Source: Binary Australia

"This Whole Movement is Misogyny in a Dress!"

Returning now to my conversation with Emily. After introductions, Emily spends the next several minutes telling me about her time working on cruise ships. She then asserts that after same-sex marriage became legal, "transsexuals" were hired and began to take over jobs like hers. "They just want to take over! They want supreme rights! This whole movement is misogyny in a dress!", she shouts. She further argues that same-sex marriage is at fault

because it gave trans people a platform to push their agenda, stating, "I knew it would all get worse when that was legalised, not that I have a problem with gay people getting married." When asked about her specific concerns with same-sex marriage, she claims that trans women "want sexual partners… want to groom for more sexual partners… and normalise what's not normal." "When prompted about the motivation, Emily interjects: "To get children! To be able to foster them, adopt them or have sex with them." In response to my question about whether she believes identifying as a trans woman is a motivator to prey on children, she confirms that, in her opinion, "they are all sexual predators, or mentally ill," and "trans women are not genuine women."

Emily then describes her experience as an advocate in the family courts, claiming she has witnessed children being taken off their mothers and handed to "predatory men." According to her, the justice system "tricks you." As she explains, "unless you have a lawyer, you're screwed" and "if you're not a minority group who is on the top of the list to get these things either, you're screwed!" I ask Emily whether she believes the justice system in Australia is a corrupt institution. She responds affirmatively, explaining, "It's called an interconnected system and who's part of that? The education system, Centrelink [an Australian government department which delivers social and income support], the custody and foster care systems, the police, the courts, the media, they're all interconnected and they're all playing the same game." Before I can pose my next question, Emily adds: "Women already had so much trouble getting justice, and now we're just screwed!" I nod, and she continues:

> And I've heard the trans are sitting in Parliament. They've got a special spot in Parliament. And they're sitting there with fishnets and stilettos and lipstick and they're very abusive in there, but they are allowed to have that spot. No one else is. And so they make sure everything the government does suits them. Because they have the voice, the platform, the ear of the government… the voice. Once they've got more rights than you, you're gone!

Emily's remarks reveal deeply embedded feelings of resentment and loss. By constructing trans women as deviant sexual Others who prey on vulnerable and innocent children, she deploys the figure of "the child" as a symbol of Australia's futurity, which she portrays as under threat by trans women. This framing fuels and justifies exclusionary sentiment against trans women for "political futurity" (Edelman 1998, 19). However, Emily's sentiments also articulate a perceived loss of cultural status within the dominant social order of Australia. This perception manifests when she claims that trans women are taking her job, removing children off "good mothers," and occupying a "special spot in Parliament." Her statements thus articulate a desire to return to a dominant status which she believes has been taken by trans women. As she tells me, "once they've got more rights than you, you're gone!"

To alleviate feelings of loss, Emily asserts legitimacy along a "natural" cisgender hierarchy of human worth. She does this by claiming that trans women are "not genuine women," which constructs her own identity as authentic—or, read another way, natural. This "natural" hierarchy of human worth is further defended when Emily declares that "this whole movement is misogyny in a dress!" This comment suggests that trans women are deceptively appropriating femininity and femaleness to inflict misogyny onto cisgender women. Her argument frames masculinity and maleness as unstable or in decline in ways that "cast a shadow of doubt over the supposed supremacy of males and masculinity" (Serano 2017, 15). Though rejecting trans women, then, Emily's comments work to stabilise the privileging of masculinity under patriarchy. Alternatively, her remarks—intentionally or not—work to defend a male-centred gendered order. This upholds cis-heteronormativity as her "authentic" femininity and femaleness is placed alongside its masculine "ideal."

Emily's feelings of loss are further alleviated by claiming legitimacy along a "natural" racialized hierarchy of human worth. I conducted Emily's interview in May 2023, five months before Australia's Indigenous Voice referendum. The Voice referendum was "held on whether to change the Constitution to recognise the First Peoples of Australia by establishing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice" (The National Indigenous Australians Agency 2024). The Voice would have established a permanent advisory body to advise the government about the issues affecting First Nations peoples (Uluru Statement from the Heart 2024). On October 14, 2023, 60.8% Australians rejected the referendum, with all states opposing the reform (The Guardian 2024). While the referendum presented a chance for Australia to recognise its colonial past and to take measures to ensure that Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community gained a voice on issues concerning them, the "Vote No" supporters led a "simple, repetitive, and targeted campaign" featuring messaging like "the voice will divide us" and "if you don't know, vote no" (Carson et al. 2024).

In this context, Emily's remarks about trans women having "the voice" of Parliament can be read as a sideways movement of loss, wherein the anticipated loss of one's dominant status in Australia through the inclusion of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice in Parliament slides and is displaced onto the trans body. This feeling of loss is closely tied to the fear of being erased from the Australian imagination evoked, as by Emily in her statement: "once they've got more rights than you, you're gone!" Emily's comments also reveal a connection between transphobia and racism, and how transphobia serves the regulatory norm of whiteness. Not only does a metonymic slide occur in Emily's comments,

where a fear of losing one's dominant white status shifts onto a fear of trans bodies, but through this metonym, "trans bodies" and the "non-white body" stick to one another and become read as analogous. Rejecting one, therefore, becomes a rejection of both.

Emily's feelings of loss, resentment, and pride are further depicted in Figure 2. The image features Angie Jones, who has been described by Binary Australia as a mother and left-wing feminist (Smith 2023). Characterized by her opponents as "an anti-trans campaigner," Jones hosts TERF Talk Down Under, an Australian podcast and YouTube show (Wilson 2023). The image shows Jones standing on a podium at the event "Why Can't Women Talk About Sex?," held at Australia's Parliament House Lecture Hall on September 11, 2023, approximately one month before Australia's Voice referendum. The event, which aimed to address "the war on women" (Smith 2023), was attended by Binary Australia's director, Kirralie Smith, along with other prominent trans-exclusionary women and TERFs.

The image features a quote: "If everyday Australians understood what 'trans rights' really meant for women they would stand beside us." This quote encapsulates many of Emily's sentiments regarding the perceived loss of her status within Australian society. It also functions to solidify group differences through the mobilisation of fear. By stoking fear between social groups (trans people and those who support their rights versus everyone else), it creates an "us and them" mentality, thereby justifying exclusionary rhetoric on the basis of protecting Australia's "real" women. Trans people and those who support their rights are, consequently, constructed as outsiders to the Australian imagination, as foreigners who threaten to take away the rights of "we" the deserving.

While this dynamic evokes a politics of "us and them," it also reinforces a "natural" gendered and racialized hierarchy of human worth. Specifically, as Angie Jones is depicted as standing up for Australia's "real" women, her identity represents the desired identity of Australia's women: one which is cisgender, heterosexual, and white. This identity aligns with Emily's identity, thereby offering her a place of alignment where she can find consolation and belonging among fellow TERFs. Just as Emily's sentiments of loss reflect a betrayal of the social and political order of Australia, Figure 2 offers a solution to this loss: a future where Australia's "real" women are treated justly and fairly. As this future relies upon a return of "natural" gendered and racialized hierarchies of human worth, it unavoidable evokes a language of eradication. As Judith Butler reminds us (2024, 262), "the language of eradication belongs to fascism, and today it is directed not only against trans people but against all those who have been clustered under the signs of 'gender'".

Figure 2. 100% emoji. Binary Australia, 3 July 2023.

Source: Binary Australia

Conclusion

This article has examined how TERFism functions to create an intimate public that generates a sense of belonging along gendered and racialized lines. Through an analysis of two images from the Australian anti-gender Facebook group Binary Australia and the sentiments of Emily, a self-identified TERF who belongs to this group, this research reveals patterns of belonging and exclusion. The images analyzed best captured Emily's feelings and those of five other self-identified TERFs I interviewed for my PhD project on anti-gender politics in Australia, indicating a broader pattern of feelings across this demographic.

The research shows that individuals like Emily, drawn to Binary Australia and its images, join an intimate public, finding a sense of identification amongst strangers, and confirmation and consolation in living as a TERF in Australia today. This alignment

manifests through feelings of loss and resentment. These feelings are alleviated in three ways: by asserting legitimacy through a "natural" gendered and racialized hierarchy, by demanding the restoration of "sex-based rights," and by maintaining a position of victimhood. By generating pride for a perceived endangered cisgender identity—sexualised as straight and racialized as white—TERF intimate publics uphold the regulatory norms of cis-heteronormativity and whiteness.

As TERFism gains traction in the current political moment, both offline and online, it becomes important to bring to light the gendered and racialized maneuverers discussed in this article. Although TERFs comprise a network of disparate actors, many of whom would distance themselves from and oppose a form of racist nationalism rooted in cis-hetero-misogyny (or indeed fascism), this article finds that these intimate publics provide a space for this ideology through their sexual and racialized formations. This finding should concern all Australians —TERFs included—who oppose fringe and extreme movements in Australia and globally.

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