

On an Alleged Case of Propaganda: Reply to Rachel McKinnon

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In her recent paper ‘The Epistemology of Propaganda’ Rachel McKinnon discusses what she refers to as ‘TERF propaganda’. We take issue with three points in her paper. The first is her rejection of the claim that ‘TERF’ is a misogynistic slur. The second is the examples she presents as commitments of so-called ‘TERFs’, in order to establish that radical (and gender critical) feminists¹ rely on a flawed ideology. The third is her claim that standpoint epistemology can be used to establish that such feminists are wrong to worry about a threat of male violence in relation to trans women.

In Section 1 we argue that ‘TERF’ is not a merely descriptive term; that to the extent that McKinnon offers considerations in support of the claim that ‘TERF’ is not a slur, these considerations fail; and that ‘TERF’ is a slur according to several prominent accounts in the contemporary literature. In Section 2, we argue that McKinnon misrepresents the position of gender critical feminists, and in doing so fails to establish the claim that the ideology behind these positions is flawed. In Section 3 we argue that McKinnon’s criticism of Stanley fails, and one implication of this is that those she characterizes as ‘positively privileged’ cannot rely on the standpoint-relative knowledge of those she characterizes as ‘negatively privileged’. We also emphasize in this section McKinnon’s failure to understand and account for multiple axes of oppression, of which the cis/trans axis is only one.

1. On the Claim that ‘TERF’ is a Slur

i. ‘TERF’ as a descriptive term

Setting aside for a moment the question of whether ‘TERF’ is a slur, we would like to consider McKinnon’s claim that her use of the term at least has descriptive content, and in particular that it is used descriptively to pick out the class of ‘trans exclusionary radical feminists’. We see two problems with this claim. First, we contend, at least if ‘trans exclusionary’ means exclusionary of all transgender people, there are no ‘trans exclusionary’ radical feminists. The phrase is not a meaningful description of any feminist politics; it is not accurately applied to a sub-group of people with radical feminist politics; and no feminist describes her own position in this way (see further discussion at Reilly-Cooper 2016).

Radical feminism is concerned with challenging the oppression of female people. This means it includes trans men (however much they might wish it didn’t, given that they generally

¹ We’ll use ‘radical feminism’ and ‘gender critical feminism’ synonymously in this paper, even though that is technically inaccurate. Gender critical feminism is the broader class that includes radical feminism. All radical feminists are gender critical, but not all gender critical feminists are radical—at least in part because of boundary policing by core radical feminists that has lead feminists sympathetic with the rough position to take up a different label. When McKinnon talks about ‘TERFs’ and ‘TERF-propaganda’, it is highly unlikely that she means to pick out radical feminism understood in this narrow way. So we’ll understand her as using ‘radical feminism’ to pick out the wider category of gender critical feminism as well.

won't like to think of themselves as being female), and so is *not* 'trans-exclusionary' in any general sense; and simply has nothing to say about trans women (because merely identifying as a woman, or taking hormones, doesn't make a male person female).² To say that this makes radical feminism primarily 'trans[women]-exclusionary', is thus equivalent to saying that a children-only swimming session is 'adult-exclusionary.' It's not technically inaccurate, but it's misleading, and replaces the determination to centre the needs of a certain group of people with the determination that the purpose of that centering is to exclude.

Suppose, though, we were to concede that 'trans[woman]-exclusionary radical feminism' was an accurate (if perhaps somewhat loaded) characterisation of the radical feminist position. It would still not follow that the term 'TERF', either as used by McKinnon in her paper, or as used generally, merely serves as an acronym to pick out this position. A quick survey of uses of the term 'TERF' should make clear that it has come to be used in a way that targets anyone who raises any questions about issues relating to the adoption of self-identification as the sole criterion for legal change to sex (as is currently being consulted on in the UK and is at select committee stage in New Zealand), or anyone who questions whether affording all self-identified trans women the full legal status of 'woman/female' in all contexts might have any detrimental effects on natal women's hard-earned rights. Indeed, one can be labelled a 'TERF' even if one does not oneself raise these questions but simply supports the right of others to do so.

The Twitter tool 'TERFblocker' compiles a list of known or suspected 'TERFs' so that those who do not wish to have their tweets read by such individuals, or see such individuals' tweets in their newsfeeds, can easily block them. It currently (7th September 2018) blocks the Twitter accounts of all the authors of this piece, along with a few people who would probably be pretty surprised to see themselves described as radical feminists, like *Top Gear* presenter and *The Sun* columnist Jeremy Clarkson; retired footballer turned football pundit Alan Shearer; gender non-conforming musician Boy George; and the makers of Pampers Nappies. Regardless of whether 'TERF' once was intended to apply as a descriptive term to pick out a particular form of feminism, the term has long since ceased to pick out this position.

ii. McKinnon's rejection of the claim that 'TERF' is a slur

McKinnon purports in her paper to use 'TERF' as a mere acronym:

I use Stanley's account of propaganda to analyze a modern form of propaganda where so-called *trans-exclusionary radical feminists* (TERFs) are engaged in a political project to deny that trans women are women—and thereby to exclude trans women from women-only spaces, services, and protections (McKinnon 2018, p. 483).

² 'Trans woman' is an umbrella term that includes many different people. Some trans women have transitioned surgically (have had sex reassignment surgery). Others have transitioned only medically (by taking hormones), or not at all. Of those who transition neither surgically or medically, some choose to alter aspects of their appearance and some don't. On a view of sex that treats chromosomes as the sole necessary condition, males cannot become females. On a property cluster view of sex that treats the five primary sex characteristics as typically co-occurring but individually non-necessary, transsexual women will count as females, while all other trans women remain males (the majority of their primary sex characteristics remain male). So radical feminism will include transsexual women, and have nothing to say about non-transsexual trans women.

Nevertheless, McKinnon acknowledges that many gender critical feminists claim that ‘TERF’ is a slur, and indeed takes this claim as one of her three examples of ‘TERF’ propaganda in action:

...TERFs often refer to ‘TERF’ as a slur and to those who deploy the term as those who use misogynistic slurs. [...] The idea—it seems to be—is that ‘TERF’ is a term used to denigrate women, and so it is a slur. However, this is an absurd, nonsensical view of the nature of slurs (*ibid*, p. 485).

It’s not clear to us why McKinnon thinks that it would so obviously be an ‘absurd, nonsensical view of the nature of slurs’ that something was a slur when it was denigrating of women, and she does not offer an argument to back this up. Elsewhere in her paper, when she introduces the term ‘TERF’, she offers what might be taken to be another reason to think that the term is not a slur, namely that the term was originally introduced by radical feminists themselves, rather than by trans women:

[‘TERF’ is] meant as a descriptive phrase to separate radical feminists into those who accept trans women as women, and those who don’t. The latter were labeled *by fellow (cisgender) radical feminists* as TERFs. This point is important, since many contemporary TERFs accuse trans women of coining the phrase/term—and, ludicrously, claim that ‘TERF’ is a misogynistic slur (*ibid*, p. 484)

So, in support of her central claim that holding ‘TERF’ to be a slur is part of ‘TERF propaganda’, McKinnon offers (a) that a term’s merely denigrating women doesn’t qualify it to count as a slur, and (b) the fact that the term was coined by radical feminists themselves (although this is contested, and even if true, still involves one group—radical feminists inclusive of trans women—coining and applying the term to another group).

McKinnon does not herself elaborate in her paper why these two considerations might establish that ‘TERF’ is not a slur. Instead, leaving it as an exercise to the reader, she points us (in a footnote) to Anderson and Lepore (2013), where one might hope to find the resources to support her claim. This does not, however, serve her well. Anderson and Lepore’s view of slurs as prohibited words holds that a term is a slur if the group it refers to declare it to be one. They say:

What’s clear is that no matter what its history, no matter what it means or communicates, no matter who introduces it, regardless of its past associations, *once relevant individuals declare a word a slur, it becomes one* (Anderson & Lepore 2013a, p. 39).³

Given that those targeted by the term ‘TERF’ overwhelmingly take it to be a slur, it is hard to see how McKinnon thinks that Anderson and Lepore’s discussion supports her claim that the view that ‘TERF’ is a slur is a ludicrous piece of ‘TERF’ propaganda. On their view, the history is irrelevant; the view supports neither (a) nor (b).

³ It is unclear whether McKinnon’s reference to Anderson & Lepore is to (2013a) or (2013b), as the reference is not in her bibliography. The passage quoted here is taken from 2013a, but it also appears in 2013b, where the authors quote their earlier paper.

iii. Is ‘TERF’ a slur?

As noted above, McKinnon’s own paper fails to make the positive case that ‘TERF’ is not a slur, simply asserting that it is part of ‘TERF’ propaganda to claim that ‘TERF’ is a slur. We would like to interrogate this claim by considering the literature on slurs. Before doing so, though, it is worth noting that those who object to the use of the term ‘TERF’ need not establish that it is a slur in order to establish that the term is objectionable and ought to be avoided in respectful discourse. Imagine it turned out that ‘TERF’ wasn’t a slur on any of the most respectable philosophical accounts of what makes a slur (e.g. Bach 2014; Saka 2007; Camp 2013; Richard 2008; Jeshion 2013). It would *still* be true that the term is used in myriad offensive, denigrating, misogynistic, lesbophobic, dismissive, ways. While it’s widely assumed that being a slur is the worst thing a term can be, that in no way establishes that being something less bad—like a pejorative, a derogative, or hate speech—would serve to vindicate the usage of ‘TERF’, or indeed establish that its usage is not misogynistic.

Usages from Twitter and other online platforms are documented at the websites terfisaslur.com and lesbian-rights-nz.org/shame-receipts. To give a selection of representative examples of derogatory uses of the term: ‘kill all TERFs’; ‘shoot a terf today’; ‘all TERFs deserve to be shot in the head’; ‘somebody slap this TERF c*nt across the face’; ‘literally kill all TERFs’; ‘All TERFs need to cease existing. All of them. Gone. Wipe them from the Earth. They are a plague to be purged’; ‘I’m not into mass murder but I’ll commit TERF genocide if I have to tbh’; ‘do you know a terf? cave their head in with a rock’; ‘look, all im sayin is if a lesbian says she only likes vaginas then shes not a lesbian she a terf congrats’; ‘why would dicks be traumatizing to cis lesbians... unless you a terf...’; ‘fuck you terf bitch... you won’t be saying my girlcock isnt really female when im using your young terf c*nt as a cum dump. you will fucking bow to my girl dick. you will fucking choke on my girl dick. fuck you’; ‘terf lesbians who refuse to date trans women Can Die In A Hole :)’; ‘petition to rename TWERFs to “vagina fetishists”’.⁴

The fact that ‘TERF’ is widely used as a term of offence in these ways should be sufficient for people who want to communicate neutral content to not use the term, regardless of whether it’s technically a slur. If it is a slur, then the reasons not to use it are even stronger. McKinnon has said publicly that “‘TERF’ is not a slur on any modern account of slurs. It’s not even a derogatory term’ (Twitter, 19th August 2018). Indeed, she has welcomed engagement on this point, commenting earlier ‘I’m still sitting waiting for a single TERF to offer a reasoned response to my ‘TERF is not a slur’ video and argument. There are ad hominem and bare assertions, but no substantive argument at all. I suggest it’s because they are incapable of it’ (21st December 2017).

As we outlined above, the account that McKinnon appeals to in support of her own assertion that ‘TERF’ is not a slur (Anderson and Lepore 2013a) appears to hold that, so long as the women who are denigrated by ‘TERF’ declare it to be a slur, which they have done, and McKinnon *admits* they have done, ‘TERF’ is a slur. This first account makes sense in light of what Geoff Nunberg calls the ‘sweeping revision of the framework of civic virtue’ beginning in the

⁴ ‘TWERFS’ is a variant of ‘TERFs’ which acknowledges that radical feminism is not in fact trans-exclusionary, but is specifically trans-women-exclusionary, as we explained above.

1950s, which ‘implied a doctrine of linguistic self-determination, ...that every group should have the right to determine what it should—and, more important, should not—be called, with *slur* the name we now give to certain infractions of that doctrine’ (Nunberg 2017, pp. 2-3).⁵ Arguably, given that this is the account McKinnon appeals to in her own paper, we could rest our case here. However, Anderson and Lepore’s account is certainly not the only account available of slurring terms, and is something of an outlier in the literature on slurs, so we won’t. How, then, does the claim that ‘TERF’ is a slur fare when considered against some other prominent accounts of slurring terms?

Geoff Nunberg gives the strong view of a slur as ‘a kind of verbalized thought-crime: it perpetuates social inequities, infects even innocent minds, and undermines the conduct of public discourse’ (Nunberg 2017, p. 4). We think the case can be made that ‘TERF’ does all of these things. It gives those who hear it an excuse to pigeonhole and dismiss the political concerns of female persons, who have a long history of having their political concerns dismissed and trivialized, and in this way perpetuates social inequity between male persons and female persons. It infects ‘innocent minds’ by associating transphobia (obviously unacceptable) with political concerns about female interests (obviously acceptable). And it undermines the conduct of public discourse by classifying a multitude of divergent views as one homogenous group (i.e. ‘transphobic’), and by encouraging those views to be treated as pure bigotry. This is stultifying for intellectual discourse and the negotiation of our shared political lives.

The second account of slurs we’ll discuss is Nunberg’s (2017), which is pragmatic, and focuses on slurs being markers of in-group allegiance. This is not to say that slurs aren’t weaponized against their targets, but it does mean that this is not the *only* thing going on with slurs, and this is important because previous discussion has focused on the latter and overlooked the importance of the former. He says:

Writers focus almost entirely on what slurs convey about their targets and the insult or offense they give, not on what they have to say about the groups that coin and use them, though these group-identifying or group-affiliating uses are more prevalent, more universal, and arguably prior to their uses as terms of direct abuse (Nunberg 2017, p. 6).

Instead of focusing on the semantics, Nunberg focuses on the sociopolitical importance of slurs (*ibid*, p. 8). With respect to the semantics, Nunberg denies that there’s anything in the meaning of slurring terms that conveys disparagement (contra expressivist and presuppositional accounts) (*ibid*, pp. 9-10). Rather, slurring words carry a conversational implicature insofar as they violate a conversational maxim to use appropriate language (*ibid*, p. 10). The conventions of different social groups prescribe disparaging attitudes toward a class of others, and these attitudes are signaled by the use of a slurring term rather than a neutral term (Nunberg’s example is ‘redskin’ instead of ‘American Indian’) (*ibid*, p. 10). He says:

⁵ Page references are to the pre-print copy available at https://semanticsarchive.net/Archive/GNjNzlhM/The_Social_Life_of_Slurs.pdf accessed 2nd September 2018.

‘In a nutshell: racists don’t use slurs because they’re derogative; slurs are derogative because they’re the words that racists use’ (Nunberg 2017, p. 10).

Nunberg says that the use of slurs by members of an in-group does all sorts of things, from creating solidarity through a shared sense of resentment against, or superiority over, those the slur targets, through enjoying the ‘naughtiness’ together of using terms that are offensive to those they target, and to reaffirm and cement the in-group’s values. He says ‘adolescent boys who threw the word *fag* around loosely aren’t focused on disparaging homosexual men as such so much as communing with each other over their own macho heterosexuality’ (*ibid*, p. 22). For Nunberg, the question is whether the members of the in-group who use the term view those targeted by the term with contempt (*ibid*, p. 52). If they do, the use of that term will conform to an in-group convention to signal that contempt.

All of this is extremely helpful for understanding the use of the term ‘TERF’. Is there a particular in-group who tend to deploy the term? Is it plausible that this group have developed a convention of using this term, rather than a neutral counterpart, in order to signal contempt towards those the term targets, primarily as a means of shoring up in-group solidarity and underwriting in-group values? Yes! The in-group in question are trans rights activists (more specifically, most trans activists, some trans people, and some trans allies). The use of the term ‘TERF’ signals a shared resentment against the collection of views they (wrongly, as we explain in Section 2) associate with radical feminism. The fact that it is common knowledge that the women who hold some number of these views take the term to be a slur is presumably part of the thrill of using it (indeed, this might explain why McKinnon was so adamant about using the term, despite complaints about it prior to publication).

The use of the term ‘TERF’ reaffirms the values of the in-group, including opposition to what they perceive as transphobia, and contempt for any political views that would deny to trans women the full social and legal treatment accorded to natal women (including access to female-only spaces). What Nunberg says about adolescent boys using the term ‘fag’ is entirely plausible as a description of trans activists using the term ‘TERF’. Given the documented usages of ‘TERF’ we gave earlier—e.g. ‘all TERFs deserve to be shot in the head’—it’s clear that this term is used with contempt by members of the in-group against those who hold some number of the targeted political views. Thus ‘TERF’ comes out as a slur on Nunberg’s pragmatic account.

Turning now to a third account of slurs, Eric Swanson (*forthcoming*) argues that ‘slurs and ideologies stand in mutually supporting relations to each other’. This is particularly interesting to us, given McKinnon’s accusation that the commitments of so-called ‘trans-exclusionary radical feminists’ come from flawed ideology (although as far as we know, there is no slur for trans women used by radical feminists). If Swanson is right, and ‘TERF’ stands in a supporting relation to ideology concerning radical feminists (and *vice versa*), that would serve to reverse McKinnon’s charge against so-called ‘TERFs’ and point it back at trans ideology and the associated slur at issue here.

An ideology, on Swanson’s account, is a ‘temporally persistent and socially extended cluster of mutually supporting beliefs, interests, norms, values, practices, institutions, scripts, habits,

affective dispositions, and ways of interpreting and interacting with the world' (Swanson *forthcoming*, p. 5).⁶ Ideologies need not be transparent to those who consent to them, need not involve inaccurate representations of the world, and must involve a mutually supporting cluster of beliefs etc. that makes them socially and temporally persistent (*ibid*, p. 6). The use of slurs strengthens ideology by acting as a signal from the speaker that she consents to and endorses the ideology, and by encouraging the hearer to do the same.

Swanson is concerned with what he calls 'acceptability implicatures', which are the implications carried by the use of any word at all that it's acceptable to use that word (whether 'conversationally, legally, morally, prudentially, all things considered, and so on') (*ibid*, p. 2). These implicatures can sometimes be cancelled, and sometimes not. On Swanson's view, slurs cue ideologies (*ibid*, p. 7), putting the ideology into position to do harm towards those disadvantaged by it. Swanson makes his point using the comparatively mild slur 'nerd'. Using 'nerd' cues an ideology that disparages and subjugates the class of people who are concerned with academic achievement, are socially awkward, are shy, are obsessive, etc. The ideology ranks this group low in the hierarchy of social groups (*ibid*, pp. 7-8).

The use of slurs strengthens ideologies in three ways: first, by emboldening the speaker (because if he is not challenged, he will believe his use of the slur and the cueing of the relevant ideology is permissible) (*ibid*, p. 12); second, by conversationally implicating the speaker's consent to the ideology; and third, by emboldening others to consent to and enact the related ideology (*ibid*, p. 13). Swanson takes the harmfulness of a slur to be proportional to the harmfulness of the ideology that it cues. If an ideology is not particularly harmful, then the use of the slur won't be particularly harmful. The ideology around 'nerd' is harmful to school kids, and not very harmful to adults. So the slur will be harmful for school kids, and not very harmful for adults. Swanson's account of slurs differs from many others to the extent that the terms used as slurs need not be connected by convention to the related ideologies (*ibid*, pp. 15-16).

The strong formulation of 'ideology' given by Swanson might initially seem to suggest that 'TERF' can't be a slur. Paradigm examples of mutually supporting clusters of beliefs etc. are things like racism and sexism—clusters of beliefs etc. about people of colour or about women that persist across time and space, in these cases over hundreds of years and in almost every country. Some cultural commentators place the argument between trans women and radical feminists as beginning only about 40 years ago; and it's a culturally-specific argument in that those who would be trans people in a British, American, Australian, or New Zealand (etc.) cultural context are considered to be 'third sex' people in other cultural contexts (such as India or Pakistan).

Still; one of Swanson's own examples was 'nerd', a slur which relates to an ideology nowhere near as old or as widespread as racism and sexism. The question becomes just *how old* and just *how widespread* a cluster of beliefs etc. has to be before it counts as an ideology. Certainly there is a cluster of mutually supporting 'beliefs, interests, norms, values, practices', 'habits, affective dispositions, and ways of interpreting and interacting with the world' (*ibid*, p. 5) that make up trans activists' account of, and hostility toward, 'trans-exclusionary radical feminism'. To the

⁶ Page references are to a 2017 pre-print version of Swanson's paper.

extent that these constitute an ideology, it's clear that the term 'TERF' relates to that ideology in a supportive way; uses of the term 'TERF' cue consent to and enactment of the ideology that 'TERFs' are bigoted, contemptible, deserving of hostility, etc. Thus we conclude that *to the extent that* trans activists' beliefs about and opposition to radical feminism constitute an ideology, 'TERF' is also a slur on Swanson's account.

One thing that is distinctive about slurs is that people tend not to refer to words as slurs when they think the negative attitudes they express or presuppose are *deserved*. Derogatives (a more general class of terms) disparage people on the basis of features like 'race, religion, ethnic or geographical origin, gender, sexual orientation or sometimes political ideology' (Nunberg 2017, p. 3). We can recognize that a term is derogatory even while thinking that such derogation is entirely appropriate. But we tend not to think that such a term is a slur when the negative attitudes expressed or presupposed by the term are deserved. The act of calling a term a slur seems to depend on thinking that the term is undeserved by those it targets. What, then, are the implications of this difference between derogatives and slurs for settling whether 'TERF' is a slur?

On the one hand, despite some of the more surprising outliers noted above (Clarkson, Shearer, Boy George, Pampers), the term 'TERF' is used most often, and with the most vitriol, against women, and against lesbians. Gender and sexuality are of course paradigm morally arbitrary features of persons. On the other hand, it is not used against women, and against lesbians, *qua* women and lesbians. That is to say, it is not used against *all* women, and *all* lesbians, because they are women and lesbians. Still, other terms that do not target *all* women are still slurs, like 'slut' and 'whore'. Louise Richardson-Self argues that misogynistic speech counts as hate speech even when it targets only a subset of women rather than all women (Richardson-Self 2018). So the question cannot be whether it's all women or a subset of women who are targeted; but rather what it is that's targeted. Women who get called 'TERF' are targeted because they hold a particular set of political views, about a diverse range of feminist issues but which stand in disagreement with the dominant narrative on transgender issues.

For example, women are called 'TERFs' because they are lesbians who maintain that lesbianism is same-sex (not same-gender) attraction; or because they don't think a person can change their sex; or because they think gender has a necessary connection to sex; or because they don't think that changing one's self-declared gender identity is sufficient to changing sex even if they think it's possible to change sex in other ways; or because they deny that sex is a spectrum; or because they accept that trans women are women but think that there should still be some spaces reserved for females alone; or because they don't think there's anything wrong with a feminism that is for females alone; etc.

Some political views, such as racist or misogynistic political views, *are* contemptible. If the political views just mentioned are contemptible, then 'TERF' might be a derogative, but not a slur. Reaching this conclusion is compatible with noting that there's a lot of misogyny in the way the derogatory term is used, in that it disproportionately targets women rather than men who express these kinds of views. We think calling women 'TERFs' is a typical 'down girl' move, deployed

against women who are failing to conform to social expectations about their gender role, viz., that they prioritize the needs and interests of males. See discussion in Manne 2017.⁷

This shifts the question, then, to whether those political views are really *contemptible*. We maintain that there's nothing contemptible about lesbians asserting sexual identities and boundaries, or female persons asserting their interests as members of a subordinated class to female-only spaces, or sportspeople asserting the need for female persons' sports to be restricted to those who have not gone through male puberty, or anyone resisting pseudo-science. Some of these views are open to argument, but it's not obvious that they're so beyond the pale that contempt should be encoded into a term used to group them all together.

To summarize, we've considered three specific accounts of slurs, Anderson and Lepore's account which appeals to whether those targeted by the term take it to be a slur, Nunberg's account on which slurs signal in-group membership, and Swanson's account on which slurs cue harmful ideologies. We've argued that 'TERF' is a slur on all three of the specific accounts surveyed. Of course this article is not an exhaustive survey of all the various accounts of slurs, so it is left open that there might be some accounts of slurs for which 'TERF' is not a slur. Nonetheless, we think this is sufficient evidence to put to rest McKinnon's claim that radical feminists' assertion that 'TERF is a slur' is *propagandistic*. As we will show in the next section, radical feminists (and indeed, all the others targeted by the term who aren't feminists) have legitimate political concerns with the proposed shift to self-identification for gender identity, and the erosion of female protections that come along with it. They should be free to express those concerns without being targeted as contemptible.

2. On Gender Critical Feminism as a 'Flawed Ideology'

i. Does McKinnon establish that the gender critical feminist position is propaganda?

The primary claim McKinnon makes in her paper is that 'the 'arguments' of TERFs constitute propaganda, crucially based on a flawed ideology' (McKinnon 2018, p. 483) (we suppose she puts 'arguments' in scare quotes to signal her attitude toward their quality, although from her discussion it's not clear that she's familiar enough with the arguments to make any judgement as to their quality). This claim is question-begging. The 'flawed ideology' at issue is meant to be the belief that 'trans women are not, and never could be, women [and that] at best, they're deluded men, playing at womanhood' (*ibid*, p. 483). McKinnon asserts that the proposition 'trans women are women' is well-established (*ibid*, p. 485), although no discussion or references are provided to justify this claim. What it is to be a woman is currently contested; there are competing theories of gender, some of which are tied to sex, some to oppression, some to identity, some to personal choice. Trans women say that they know they're women and liberal feminists say we should take people at their word. Gender critical feminists say that womanhood is much more than something one

⁷ We note that Manne is sympathetic to McKinnon's position, and is herself unlikely to accept our diagnosis of the deployment of 'TERF' as a 'down girl' move. But even if we were to bracket all usages of 'TERF' by trans people, there would be a huge number of usages of 'TERF' by male allies of trans people, and *these* are surely good candidates for being classed as 'down girl' moves.

merely knows through introspection, involving, for example, the experience of being oppressed on the basis of one's female-sexed body.

Notably, in the first footnote to 'Trans*formative Experiences' (2015), McKinnon explicitly states that she does not recognise a sex/gender distinction, and that she includes transgender women in the category of female. She notes this is controversial, and that justifying it fully is beyond the scope of the paper. This is significant from our perspective, because the desire to keep a meaningful distinction between male and female is central to our objections to transgender ideology, both in terms of its recognition of female persons, and in terms of its manifold political implications. McKinnon's recognition here that this erasure is controversial thus approaches a recognition that there is something in transgender ideology to which one might have legitimate objections, and not, as she maintains in the paper under discussion, that such objections are simply the result of a 'flawed ideology'.

What there seems to be is a reasonable disagreement on both sides, not 'flawed ideology' on either. Since language only counts as propaganda if it is based on a flawed ideology, and McKinnon does not show that the gender critical feminist view is flawed ideology, she should not take herself to have shown that the gender critical feminist arguments constitute propaganda. (Moreover, if one were to adopt the gender critical perspective, which regard some of the claims of trans activists as flawed ideology—e.g. that claim that gender identity determines sex; the claim that males can be lesbians—then McKinnon's arguments would themselves constitute propaganda.) We will consider the clarity and implications of what McKinnon does say about the gender critical position in the next section.

ii. Gender critical feminism from different points of view

As noted, the claim that what 'TERFs' say is propaganda would require a demonstration that their ideology is flawed. We contend that McKinnon does not establish this claim and what she does say is often inaccurate and confused. It is worth emphasizing first here that gender critical feminists are not an organized group, although McKinnon caricatures them as holding a unified, monolithic set of beliefs. For example: 'they' do not think that inclusion in natal women-only spaces constitutes rape (*ibid*, p. 484); 'they' do not think that trans women are sexual predators (*ibid*, p. 485), or at least, not more likely to be sexual predators than any other male; 'they' do not think that trans women should be denied medical treatment or protection from discrimination (*ibid*, p. 486). (None of us think any of those things which McKinnon attributes to 'TERFs', for example, yet we have all been called 'TERF'.)

The axiom at the heart of the conflict is the phrase 'trans women are women'. McKinnon's claim that radical feminism—and gender critical feminism, even though it doesn't make the acronym—are 'flawed ideologies' and hence 'propaganda' is grounded on the fact that as she presents them, those positions do not accept this axiom, and indeed, believe instead that trans women are men. Note first that this is an axiom McKinnon asserts rather than argues for (and she's not the only one; see e.g. Jenkins 2016). Given that trans women are natal males, it is by no means evident that they are 'women', or at least not in a way that is meaningfully similar to the way in which natal women are women. This is of consequence given that this axiom is presently being

used to ground a wide variety of rights claims and social practices, and is deployed in a manner which suggests that there are no differences between natal and trans women which might impact how we negotiate or adjudicate their claims (particularly when they conflict). Given that the axiom ‘trans women are women’ is highly contentious, and perhaps the core of the present dispute between gender critical feminists and trans activists, McKinnon’s easy reduction of these forms of feminism to propaganda on the basis of any interrogation of this axiom is suspect.

Furthermore, the fact that gender critical feminism does not accept the axiom ‘trans women are women’ does not necessarily issue in the counter-claim that ‘trans women are men.’ This binary is produced by the nature of trans-rights thinking, which, unlike gender critical feminism and the majority of previous feminist thinking, does not recognise a sex/gender distinction. In its current form, trans ideology is committed to the view that whether someone is a man or a woman resides solely in self-declared gender identity, which, through the elision of sex, is assumed to make someone male or female. It is our experience that people committed to trans ideology often do not understand the sex/gender distinction at all, and assume that because gender critical feminists believe in sexual dimorphism and women’s sex-based oppression, we also believe, to crib from Beauvoir, that ‘biology is destiny’. Thus, trans ideology often does not recognise that gender critical feminism is gender abolitionist. Moreover, with respect to the axiom in contention, transgender ideology cannot distinguish between the claim that trans women are male and the claim that trans women are men.

This elision has serious consequences for the clarity of McKinnon’s rehearsal of the gender critical position. She does not give a clear, coherent exposition of the relevant beliefs, and relies instead on a patchwork of claims and citations which remain unformalized. The central point of her recitation seems to be that radical feminists believe that only male-born people can be men, and only female-born people can be women. She claims that ‘[c]ontrary to the famous de Beauvoir phrase that one is not born a woman, but becomes one, TERFs claim that one’s birth-assigned sex is forever one’s sex’ (McKinnon 2018, p. 484) The Beauvoir quote, of course, does not assert that one is not born female, it asserts that one is not born a woman, and, in line with a gender critical perspective, understands the process of becoming woman to involve a process of acculturation, one, in Beauvoir’s case, that specifically involves assuming the position of the ‘Other’ to the dominant patriarchal subject. This quote has been adopted by trans rights thinking, and endlessly recycled, to bolster the claim that womanhood is *only* a matter of gender, and has nothing to do with being female—a proposition Beauvoir never made, and which also conveniently ignores that Beauvoir’s account of gendering is cultural-philosophical, and not about the declaration of an internal gendered essence.

When McKinnon claims that radical feminists think that ‘one’s birth-assigned sex is forever one’s sex’ she is, therefore, strictly correct, in that we believe that male people are still male people even if they transition to live in the social role of women. It is also the case, therefore, that many radical feminists believe that ‘trans women are not, and never could be, women,’ *insofar as* ‘woman’ is a biological/cultural composite (*ibid*, p. 484). It does not follow however, that because we think trans women are male that we therefore think that trans women are men. It is the case that some radical feminists believe that. It is not however the case, as McKinnon asserts, that that

belief is the ‘heart’ of radical feminism, or that that belief is the necessary condition for being labelled a ‘TERF’. At the heart of radical feminism are the beliefs that sex exists, that it is meaningful to how sex-based oppression works, and that gender is a significant means *by which* women are oppressed on the basis of their sex (see e.g. Firestone 1970; Atkinson 1969).⁸

Many gender critical feminists believe that trans women are males who transition to perform the social role of women and believe in supporting those who need to make that transition for their own well-being. We might consider that this is a consequence of rigid, conservative gender norms, and we might hope that those norms might one day loosen to allow a complete unmooring of bodies from gendered expression. We do recognise, however, that under present circumstances, trans women, once transitioned, can meaningfully move through the world in the social role of women, and are thus subject to *some* of the oppressions women experience on that basis.

In sum, McKinnon has not demonstrated that gender critical feminism is a flawed ideology, and has failed to acknowledge that the heart of the disagreement between trans ideology and gender critical feminism is that sex exists, that women are oppressed by male people on the basis of sex, and that that fact should not be erased in the consideration of public policy. We do not consider the belief in the existence or significance of sexual dimorphism to be a basis for claiming that an ideology is flawed, and hence, that the dissemination of such thinking is propagandist. In fact, one might even claim that McKinnon’s article is, in itself, a piece of propaganda, which, by leveraging the thought of radical feminism as propaganda, is intending to play a role in bolstering the claim by the trans rights movement that all criticism of their agenda is illegitimate, thus playing into the creation of a climate in which feminist speech is being silenced as hate speech.

3. McKinnon’s Critique of Stanley’s Account of Propaganda

McKinnon argues in her paper that Jason Stanley (2015) is wrong about the tendency of ‘negatively-privileged’ groups to believe falsehoods about their own situation and that, on the contrary, such groups are in a better position than ‘positively privileged’ ones to know about and understand their predicament. She specifically suggests that it is implausible that trans women would be influenced by the ideas she presents as ‘TERF-propaganda’, and that, following standpoint epistemology, trans women have privileged access to knowing, and refuting, ‘positively privileged’ ideas from such propaganda, such as the concern regarding sexual predation.

Before we begin this discussion it should be noted that McKinnon assumes, without argument, that gender critical feminists occupy the position of the ‘positively privileged’ in Stanley’s

⁸ For example, Firestone says: ‘In the radical feminist view, the new feminism is not just the revival of a serious political movement for social equality. It is the second wave of the most important revolution in history. Its aim: the overthrow of the oldest, most rigid class/caste system in existence, the class system based on sex — a system consolidated over thousands of years, lending the archetypal male and female roles an undeserved legitimacy and seeming permanence’ (Firestone 1970). Atkinson says: ‘I believe that the sex roles both male and female must be destroyed not the individuals who happen to possess either a penis or a vagina, or both, or neither. But many men I have spoken to see little to choose between the two positions and feel that without role they’d just as soon die. Certainly it is the master who resists the abolition of slavery, especially when he is offered no recompense in power. I think that the *need* men have for the role of oppressor is the source and foundation of all human oppression’ (Atkinson 1969).

schema, and trans women occupy that of the ‘negatively privileged’. This follows directly, one infers, from McKinnon’s acceptance and deployment of the ‘cis/trans’ binary, which posits ‘cis’ people as the oppressors of trans people. This framing is multiply contentious. Firstly, in opposition to the definition of ‘transgender,’ trans ideology conventionally defines ‘cisgender’ as ‘a person whose gender identity is the same as the sex they were assigned at birth’ (genderation.org). Gender critical feminists have theoretical objections to the (very poorly defined) concept of gender identity, to the notion that sex is ‘assigned’ rather than ‘recorded’, and to the implications that arise from understanding the category of ‘woman’ in terms of identification with a gender. These objections have been elaborated by one of the co-authors of this paper elsewhere (Reilly-Cooper 2014).

Secondly, we have theoretical objections to the way the ‘cis/trans’ binary frames the oppression of trans people, and the political work that framing is doing. As another of our co-authors discusses at more length elsewhere (Jones 2015), there is reason to question whether the negative limits on trans people’s flourishing stems from oppression, rather than discrimination. On Marilyn Frye’s famous analysis, establishing that a ‘limitation’ constitutes oppression requires an account of ‘to whose benefit or detriment it works’ (Frye 1983, p.11). To wit, the axes of oppression of sex, race and class all function to allow the dominant class to extract labour resources from the subordinate class. In this sense, trans people are not oppressed, because the limitations they face do not arise from a system designed to extract labour resources from them *as a class* (in fact, the same is true for homosexual people). Rather, the limitations faced by both trans and homosexual people have arisen historically as a result of the conventions of gender conformity and heteronormativity which are part of the matrix of patriarchal oppression. That is, the discrimination against trans people is an adjunct of patriarchal oppression.

Given this, it is profoundly dubious to position natal women as the ‘oppressors’ of trans people, or to assume on that basis that they are straightforwardly ‘positively privileged’ with respect to trans people. Both trans people and natal women face severe limitations imposed on them by patriarchy, but these limitations may be quite different. These limitations will also depend on the intersecting identities of specific individuals. Moreover, we would like to underline that in alliance with the erasure of sex, the ‘cis/trans’ binary functions in this discourse to invert the patriarchal hierarchy between male persons and female persons, and thus to invalidate natal women’s concerns about the implications of certain demands of trans-rights politics. We normally recognise, for example, that ‘negatively privileged’ people have a right to organise and assemble without the presence of ‘positively privileged’ people. Positing natal women as straightforwardly ‘positively privileged’ vis-a-vis trans women thus functions to nullify natal women’s political claims about instances in which they want to assemble on the basis of sex. Rather than presenting this complex situation as a rights-conflict between two disadvantaged groups, the ‘cis/trans’ binary allows for women’s claims to be analogised with the types of exclusions performed by dominant groups, for example, with white supremacist segregation.

McKinnon claims that it is easy to see on Stanley’s account *how* negatively privileged groups would come to believe falsehoods perpetuated by the positively privileged groups, but says that Stanley ‘doesn’t adequately address how often or how likely it is to happen. In fact, I suspect

that it's quite rare and unlikely' (p. 486). There are no citations to support the assertion that the phenomenon Stanley describes is 'rare and unlikely' and no general reason given for why we should accept McKinnon's view on this. Furthermore, McKinnon's view that Stanley's claim does not apply to trans women would not, if successful, affect Stanley's general thesis. Since Stanley is not asserting the entirely general thesis that all members of all negatively privileged groups are apt to adopt the falsehoods perpetuated by the flawed ideology of the privileged group, a single counterexample is not sufficient to invalidate his account. McKinnon's conclusion, that 'Stanley's focus on the potential epistemology of ignorance of marginalized persons...is misplaced', is not warranted (McKinnon 2018, p. 488; see also Stanley 2018, pp. 503-505).

We could, moreover, argue that there are certain specificities in the case of many trans people's experience that underlie McKinnon's rejection of Stanley's thesis but that do not generalize to other cases of the 'negatively privileged'. The idea that oppressed persons do not internalize messages from the dominant discourse more widely, and from 'propaganda' more specifically, runs entirely counter to the thinking about oppression developed in both feminist and black radical thought. The effectiveness of binary hierarchies which devalue oppressed persons depend precisely on the extent to which they are unconsciously absorbed by those persons, and the corrosive and disempowering sense of shame those internalizations promote. This is why consciousness-raising has historically been a fundamental part of both sex and race-based liberation movements. It is therefore not necessarily the case, as McKinnon suggests, that '[m]arginalized people tend to know full well that they're marginalized' or that they 'tend to have fairly accurate, detailed understandings of the sources of their marginalization' (McKinnon 2018, p.487).

We would suggest, moreover, that the fact McKinnon does not think it 'plausible' that 'negatively privileged' groups could suffer from absorbing ideas from dominant propaganda, and concomitantly, from not being 'exposed to an alternative ideology' (Stanley 2015, p.237; cited in McKinnon 2018, p. 486) is potentially an artifact of being trans within the present highly-politicized context. That is, being trans in the current climate is immediately inflected with an entire discursive structure about trans oppression and 'cis-privilege' which constructs trans identity in rigid opposition to the oppressive and exclusionary agenda of so-called 'TERFs'. There is very little likelihood a trans person coming into awareness of their identity today would be likely to engage in much depth with radical feminist thinking, given how thoroughly it is presented as a repository of hatred towards them. It is thus—consistent with McKinnon's suggestion—*prima facie* implausible that trans people would be influenced by the ideas of the purportedly 'positively privileged' discourse of radical feminism, and equally implausible that they would not be exposed to an 'alternative ideology' given that the political discourse of trans identity is so highly elaborated and disseminated. But this is a very different situation from the way women, persons of colour, and the socio-economically disadvantaged, are socialized in a society soaked in a dominant discourse which attributes negative qualities to them, which are then unconsciously internalized. So her point does not generalize.

What, then, of McKinnon's diagnosis that trans women (and, by extension, other 'negatively privileged' groups) are relatively immune to adopting false beliefs about themselves via propaganda since they are better placed to know about their own position? (McKinnon 2018, pp.

487-8). McKinnon argues that feminist standpoint epistemology supports the thesis that trans women do not need to be exposed to alternative ideology to regard the ‘TERF’ ideology (the ideology of the allegedly more privileged group) as false, because the trans woman’s own lived experience ‘gives her privileged access to knowing that the propaganda is false’ (*ibid*, p. 488), or, ‘[t]heir lived experiences clearly refute the claims in TERF propaganda’ (*ibid*, p.487). For instance, ‘they [trans women] know full well that they’re not predators, attempting to gain access to women-only spaces in order to harass or sexually assault (cis) women’ (p. 487) and so will regard ‘TERF propaganda’ as false. (We document elsewhere the extent to which a concern with trans women perpetrating male-typical offences is *not* ‘TERF propaganda’, because it is based on actual instances. See discussion in Allen et al. 2018). Even if we accept feminist standpoint epistemology without criticism at this point, there are three serious difficulties with this argument.

First, although it is (arguably) reasonable to accept that an individual trans woman could know that she is not entering women’s spaces in order to harass or to sexually assault other women, it is not obvious how an individual could know from her own lived experience that *other* male-bodied trans women (or people posing as trans) are not entering women-only spaces in order to commit such offences. One can know (arguably) that one is not a predator, but one does not have privileged epistemic access to the intentions of others through one’s lived experience. It seems that the only way in which one could know that the social group to which one belongs does not contain a non-negligible percentage of predators would be via an argument from analogy from one’s own case, or via empirical evidence.

The argument from analogy is clearly invalid in this case: I am not a predator, therefore people who identify as I do are not predators either. On what basis is the analogy drawn? Given that male and female spaces are segregated in part to prevent attacks by males on females, it seems reasonable *not* to accept such generalisations on the basis of individual cases (most males, too, are not sexual predators), and to request that empirical research decide the issue instead (the pertinent question being whether trans women as a group exhibit predatory behaviour at a rate comparable to biological males or biological females). Unfortunately, there is only one long-term study—the Swedish cohort study—which everyone interested in this issue tends to reference on this point, but whose interpretation is controversial (Dhejne 2011; cf. Williams 2015). Empirical evidence to settle this question is sorely needed.

Second, one might also question whether the self-awareness of an individual is sufficient for knowledge that one is neither a threat nor causing harm: first because it is not uncommon for sexual offenders to claim a lack of intent in the crimes they commit (e.g. BBC 2018*b*) and second, harm may be caused unintentionally simply by being a male-bodied person present in a women-only space. For example, women who have previously suffered sexual violence may be traumatized by the presence of male-bodied people in spaces where they shower, change, and sleep. Male-bodied sports people may unwittingly cause more severe injury to female athletes in contact sports than female-bodied athletes would be able to do. Or for another example, positions on women-only political party lists are zero-sum, such that if a trans woman takes a place, a natal woman is prevented from taking it. The trans woman may not intend the exclusion of the natal woman, but her act of taking the position nonetheless causes it. Thus, it is not obvious whether an individual

can be in a position to know from their lived experience that they are not a threat, nor causing harm by their actions.

Third, standpoint epistemology serves the gender critical feminist view McKinnon is opposing *as much* as the view she is trying to support. McKinnon's assertions about the epistemic position of negatively privileged groups could be considered to apply to natal women just as much as (or more than) trans people. As we argued above, we do not accept McKinnon's framing of natal women as simply 'positively privileged' vis-a-vis trans women, and hence, McKinnon's argument could equally apply to them. If so, the beliefs of natal women about the importance of their female-only space and the potential dangers of admitting male-bodied people into this space, beliefs which are formed on the basis of their lived experience as females, should be respected since they are more knowledgeable about this issue than anyone else. McKinnon at this point would need to argue that trans people are *always* more negatively privileged than women (both in general, and more negatively privileged than certain subgroups of women). Although this seems to be an unexamined assumption in McKinnon's discourse, there is no reason given why one should accept it (or even find it plausible).

In the course of her use of standpoint epistemology to support her claim that trans women have privileged access to knowing that 'TERF'-propaganda about potential threats to natal women is false, McKinnon also makes the claim that trans women are better placed to understand how describing trans women 'as 'bio males' creates and perpetuates certain structural oppressions' (McKinnon 2018, p. 487) It is only a passing mention, and she refers to a previous paper to support the claim. However, we consider it worth giving brief attention here, because, as we have mentioned already, this issue of the recognition or erasure of biological sex is at the core of the present conflict between trans ideology and those who question it. In her (2015), McKinnon elucidates why describing trans women as biological males is oppressive by listing the types of limitation that follow from it—such as the inability to have documentation pertaining to one's identified gender, and, hence, the refusal of social and political recognition.

To refer to our earlier argument, we would dispute that this represents, as McKinnon claims, a form of structural oppression—though it is, to be sure, meaningful discrimination. However, in line with our criticism of whether standpoint epistemology supports McKinnon's claim that trans women's situated perspective is the only perspective that should be credited regarding women's single-sex spaces, we would also question whether trans women's situated perspective is the only perspective that should be credited with regard to the recognition or erasure of biological sex. Given that female persons are oppressed on the basis of their sex, and experience violence as a class *from* male persons, standpoint epistemology can equally be used to support the argument that female persons have privileged access to understanding what is at stake in biological sex *not* being recognised.

4. Conclusion

McKinnon has failed to establish that the claims made by gender critical feminists about trans people count as propaganda. In particular, her assertion that it would be 'ludicrous' to claim that 'TERF' is a slur is not supported by the main source she cites in her paper; and indeed, 'TERF'

does count as a slur on several prominent accounts of slurs. We argued that McKinnon's account of so-called 'trans-exclusionary radical feminism' mischaracterizes gender critical (including radical) feminism, and in particular misrepresents the concerns raised by women about allowing self-identified trans women full access to all women-only spaces. We suggested that McKinnon's objection to Stanley depends on a questionable understanding of the axes of oppression at work (specifically, the view that 'cis' women oppress trans women, rather than discrimination against trans people being a by-product of the patriarchal oppression of female persons via the imposition of gender stereotypes). We further suggested that standpoint epistemology cannot do the work McKinnon wants it to do in showing that individual trans women can know that trans women as a group present no more threat to natal women than do other natal women.

McKinnon closes her discussion by claiming that, while trans women through their privileged epistemic standpoint are immune to the claims that she calls 'TERF propaganda', outsiders to the debate, who are neither trans nor gender critical feminists, will likely be susceptible to it:

The real worry is that well-intentioned, relatively uninformed cis people will believe TERF propaganda and perpetuate trans oppression (McKinnon 2018, 487).

She notes that:

There's a large, deep, and rich literature on how systematic ignorance comes about and seems to persist in the face of overwhelming counterevidence. This is known as the epistemology of ignorance... those who are most often the subject of this kind of ignorance aren't the marginally situated, it's [*sic*] the dominantly situated (McKinnon 2018, p. 488).

Given the current level of political discourse and the climate around it, it seems from our perspective that most 'dominantly situated' or 'relatively uninformed cis people' are actually very well aware that they are not to listen to the claims of so-called 'TERFs'. The issue, as we see it, is not that ignorant people are in danger of being taken in by the dominant 'TERF' propaganda. The issue is that most people are not well-informed about the issues that are actually being raised by gender critical feminists (as opposed to distorted presentations of those concerns as straightforward transphobic bigotry), and instead accept at face value the resemblance between gay rights and trans rights, to which a natural progressive liberal response is to decry those questioning the blanket acceptance of self-identified trans women as women/females in all contexts and for all purposes (see further discussion in (Jones 2018)). We hope, by filling out some of the concerns of gender critical feminists in this paper, and by pointing to documented examples of the widespread use of the term 'TERF' to vilify and silence those raising these concerns, we will have contributed not to the spreading of 'TERF propaganda', but to a decrease in the widespread levels of ignorance surrounding the real concerns of gender critical feminists.

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