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It Has Been Handled

Hoping for Transformation in the Neoliberal University Setting

ABSTRACT This article draws on an experience of online bullying in the university setting to make sense of the forces that act in the neoliberal university classroom to preclude transformative learning. This experience took place over two months in early 2023, when I was repeatedly bullied on Twitter[1] by a classmate who claimed my research on J.K. Rowling's amplification of TERFs (trans-exclusionary radical feminists) was a "misogynistic hate crime." These events are analyzed with respect to the constraints imposed by TERFism, classroom civility, and the neoliberal university writ large. Through an autoethnography of these experiences, I unpack the ways that TERFism, hegemonic civility, and the neoliberal university worked in concert to enable my classmate's actions and disempower me. I conclude by imagining a classroom setting in which my classmate could be deradicalized and transformed.   **KEYWORDS** neoliberalism, hegemonic civility, TERFism, (neoliberal) university

INTRODUCTION

In the spring semester of 2023, I took a research methods course for graduate students in the social sciences; the class was taught by Dr. Marsh (a pseudonym). As part of class discussion, we often discussed our research and workshopped methods. My research at the time happened to focus in part on J.K. Rowling's amplification of trans-exclusionary/gender-critical feminists. A classmate, who I will call Morgan for the purposes of this article, was a passionate TERF, one very active on Twitter. When I mentioned that Rowling was "anti-trans" in passing during a class discussion, this sparked a months-long period of online bullying in which Morgan attempted to convert our classmates to her ideology, posted offensive descriptions of me on Twitter, and filed a spurious Title IX complaint against me.

As I attempted to find ways to feel safe in the classroom and deal with Morgan's actions, I found that my interactions with the university's disciplinary systems felt increasingly inadequate as time passed and the bullying continued apace. This article is an autoethnography of the events that took place; I use cyber-autoethnographic practices to reconstruct the events that occurred, practicing writing as a "method of inquiry" with which I make sense and meaning out of my emotions and recollections.[2] In the spirit of St. Pierre, I embrace principles of post-qualitative inquiry to ultimately imagine *what might be*[3] in a world less subject to the forces that spurred Morgan on and left me questioning my right to take up space.

I begin by explaining TERFism, its connections to white (settler, fascistic) feminism, and its current impacts on academia writ large. It is particularly salient that TERFism's impacts on academia take place in the specific context of the neoliberal university and are enabled by its denial of the existence of the power relations we are all subject to. One form

that this denial takes is *hegemonic civility*, which requires that marginalized students stifle their objections to their own oppression, lest they cause more privileged students to experience discomfort.[4] When this is combined with performed disgust at the actions of unruly, marginalized Others, it is a powerful tool for suppressing dissent in the classroom and in the broader university context.[5] I explain how Morgan's performed disgust, alongside the university's contempt for uncivil behavior, brought me to a point where I questioned my own right to take up space and was full of silent rage. However, objection to oppressive ideology, when brought outside the carceral system of punishment favored by the neoliberal university, can be a powerful way to push transformative learning experiences forward. This article concludes by imagining an alternate reality where Morgan's educators and peers are empowered to deradicalize her, reinforcing her self-compassion and guiding her through the discomfort that inevitably accompanies transformation.

BACKGROUND

An Introduction to Trans-Exclusionary Radical / "Gender-Critical" Feminism

The ideology Morgan believes in goes by several names; its adherents often call themselves "gender-critical" feminists, while their opponents tend to use "trans-exclusionary radicial feminism" (abbreviated as TERFism) to describe it.[6] The acronym "TERF" was coined by Viv Smythe in 2008, and its usage is currently fraught.[7] Generally speaking, the term TERF "is used to describe any feminist who justifies her anti-trans views by citing women's rights."[8] Morgan and her colleagues, who often self-describe as "gender-critical" feminists, tend to understand trans women to be predatory males; women, they argue, are defined by their innate biology.[9] Womanhood is a biological fact in this ideological space, not a social construct or a performance.[10] Gender-critical feminism defines itself by its emphasis on the "immutability and explanatory importance of sex" and criticism of masculine and feminine stereotypes.[11] Throughout this work, I will use TERF(ism) when discussing this ideology outside the narrative context.

TERFism can trace its roots back to debates about trans women's inclusion within the women's liberation movement of the 1970s.[12] Over the next few decades, though, scholars developed theories of gender that drew from transgender women's experiences as "striking examples of processes that affected all women's lives."[13] Scholars tend to trace the present rise in anti-trans sentiment to the 2010s.[14] Many point specifically to the year 2017, when the UK government announced its plans to reform the Gender Recognition Act, with major backlash ensuing, as an inflection point for TERFism and anti-trans sentiment writ large.[15]

The Work of TERFism

While TERFism is at its surface a debate about sex and gender, it is also a debate about information and truth in a "post-truth era" and a reinforcement of white supremacist values.[16] It aims to reduce womanhood to "capacity and role" and universalizes the experience of being a woman in a way that tends to erase more marginalized women's experiences.[17] TERFism draws on white supremacist rhetoric to make its points; TERFs caricature sexualized, othered trans women as looming threats to the "purity and innocence"

of cisgender women's day-to-day existence.[18] TERFs and SWERFs (sex-worker exclusionary radical feminists) deploy their weaponized whiteness to reclaim attention from anti-racist or anti-colonial movements.[19] Just as colonial ideologies focused on the linear continuation of the reproductive line above all else when redefining indigenous kinship ties,[20] so too do TERFs construe womanhood in terms of potential reproductive capacity.[21] The fascistic feminism of TERFism carries with it an "unspoken whiteness" that flattens the experience of womanhood into sameness[22] despite erasing the experiences of women of color or working-class women.[23] Its panic about annihilation (of cis womanhood) carries with it echoes of Zionism in its "extinction phobia;" these parallels are especially evident as Israel weaponizes accusations of violence to commit a genocide and trans women are accused by TERFs of violently invading women's spaces.[24] Even US legislation preventing trans youth from participating in sports is rooted in white supremacy, employing white feminist rhetoric about "protecting women's sports" to save fragile white girls from dangerous Others.[25]

There are many famous "gender-critical" figures in the present-day movement, among them academic Kathleen Stock, journalist Julie Bindel, and author J.K. Rowling. My research that drew Morgan's ire focused in part on J.K. Rowling's amplification of TERF content. Rowling, being a public figure with millions of followers whose fame is exogenous to social media, was a perfect case study for my work quantifying the networked effect of retweets on Twitter. She is also a prominent voice in the UK "gender-critical" movement and has bankrolled and platformed "gender-critical" causes.[26] When Morgan tagged Rowling in a tweet about our classroom interactions, she was appealing to a figure with outsize power to amplify and do harm. While TERF-ism is not traditionally folded into the "alt-right" *per* se, the tactics, reputational risks, and power dynamics those who study TERFs deal with closely mirror those experienced by academics under what Massanari calls the "alt-right gaze."[27] Massanari further notes that the risks of such research disproportionately endanger marginalized scholars and calls for institutions to establish best practices around protecting researchers who study the alt-right. It logically follows that it is illiberal to use the higher education system to legitimize TERFism, yet that is exactly what is happening in the UK at a country-wide scale and in my university classroom with Morgan.[28]

TERFism works against pluralism and empathy, especially through its infiltration of institutions of higher education in the UK and elsewhere. Lavery writes that, in TERF academia, we find "a class of teachers [that] aims to intimidate, belittle, humiliate, and silence a class of students"—essentially replicating the kind of power relationship with domination that Foucault advocated for removing from educational settings.[29] Moreover, TERFism converges with fascism on a number of important points, including appeals to the moral and carceral authority of motherhood, framing dissent to their ideology in terms of pathology and degeneracy, and encouraging the progressive restriction of transgender people's rights and freedoms.[30] The power these collectives of bad actors hold is located in their ability to make researchers "discipline ourselves into silence and submission."[31]

Hegemonic Civility, Disgust, and Protest

Civility in the university setting seems a benign enough construct, asking only that students hold in their "anger, annoyance, or contempt" when challenged or frustrated.[32] In practice,

though, it works to suppress critical thinking by silencing marginalized students' arguments, lest their challenges to hegemonic norms be perceived as angry or aggressive.[33] Even the ideal of "civility" itself brings in shades of settler colonialism, drawing a sharp divide between the "civilized" subject and the "barbaric" other.[34] If civility is not upheld, the logic goes, society will collapse; the uncivil individual is an enemy of the public good.[35] Those labeled uncivil fall to the status of a defiled Other, lacking important characteristics that are prerequisites for participation in polite society.[36] Those still within the envelope of "civility" might affect disgust when an Other breaches the bounds of hegemonic civility; this disgust is *performed* by those enforcing civility in order to adhere the sensation of disgust permanently to the Other.[37]

When Stephen Salaita's employment was abruptly terminated by the University of Illinois in 2014 for his tweets protesting attacks by the Israeli government, a university administrator justified the action by stating that Salaita's tweets were "crude, angry, vulgar, and aggressive."[38] Unruly bodies or voices often trigger the deployment of disgust, whether in discourses of homophobia, transphobia, or fatphobia or in the simple enforcement of hegemonic civility. At my own university, hegemonic civility was recently deployed, in the very physical form of university and local police, to violently arrest peaceful pro-Palestine protestors at an encampment. Despite video footage showing that Zionist counter-protestors were yelling the antisemitic hate speech that would later be cited as reason for the arrests, a spokesperson for the university called the speech "repulsive" and any suggestion that its utterance *by counter-protestors* should not have been grounds for the arrests "reprehensible."[39] Hegemonic civility marks dissent as unruly and disgusting; since disgust is "sticky,"[40] the consequences of speaking out and being Othered tend to outweigh the potential benefits of vocal dissent.

Meanwhile, university students are expected to be resilient neoliberal subjects in the face of precarity or harm, easily shrugging off the impacts of harassment, hate speech, or racism.[41] Students who use their voices to protest harmful speech, as a group of Cardiff University students did in 2015 when Germaine Greer, famous for her trans-exclusionary politics, was invited to give a prestigious lecture, are labeled as censorious.[42] In such situations, critics identify the neoliberal politics of the university well enough, noting that students position themselves as consumers and faculty as producers; they suggest that the power to control academics' speech lies increasingly with students.[43] While students were previously seen as "violent subversives," they are now understood to be "intolerant zealots."[44] What these discourses miss, however, is the vital role that counter-speech plays in a thriving democracy, as well as the power dynamics at work in these situations: critics of protest and critique are "privileging dominant voices at the expense of the marginalized."[45]

The Neoliberal University

The power the neoliberal university wields to protect its students, faculty, and staff is brittle and selectively employed, but the power it wields to protect its interests is solid.[46] While university administrators selectively constrain free speech on campuses, citing safety concerns, these same institutions continually fail to protect student survivors of sexual assault and sexual harassment.[47] Just as academics in these institutions do not produce truth, but compete in a marketplace to determine whose ideas are true,[48] so too do university administrations conveniently determine truth in service of their reputation or financial bottom line.

When the ideal of the marketplace of ideas comes into conflict with the university's financial aims or poses reputational risk, only then does it come into tension with the neoliberal marketplace in which universities *themselves* compete.[49] Broadly speaking, "universities are sites where ideological wars play out, and in which they are both pawns and aggressive players."[50] Truly safe spaces for dissent, processing, or critique—counterpublics where marginalized students can reclaim their vulnerability—are few and far between.[51] As universities increasingly prioritize "research impact" and return on investment over academic activism and "changing the world," it becomes more and more difficult to do this work within the context of the neoliberal university.[52] What the neoliberal university *does* excel at is enacting, conferring, and exerting power. It does this when it platforms TERFs; when it suspends student groups who protest genocide; when it grants students degrees, qualifying them for this career or that; and when it conceals its endowments in offshore funds.[53]

Transformative Classrooms

A neoliberal education does not seek to liberate the oppressed or listen to unruly voices. It avoids putting students in situations of intellectual crisis that might lead to epiphanies, in part because the "critical communities" that would nurture learners through these processes simply do not exist in the neoliberal university, but also because such confrontation might feel uncivil or discomforting.[54] Building critical communities requires an emphasis on common interest, "reciprocal responsibility and accountability",[55] and "cooperation within differences."[56] Students in community with each other understand the structure of the university; too often, universities assume they understand community members' needs and impose top-down initiatives without leveraging knowledge that is already present in the community.[57]

The genteel civility emphasized in the neoliberal classroom stands in stark contrast to Boler's *pedagogy of discomfort*.[58] There exists a tension between the inevitability of discomfort as students become transformed in community with each other and the very fact that this transformation will inflict discomfort on students.[59] A Butlerian understanding of "pedagogical discomfort" requires learners to embrace vulnerability to discomfort, in the form of active empathy, as part of being "inescapably tied to others."[60] Verduzco-Baker offers a concrete intervention in the form of "modified brave spaces," where marginalized students are not revictimized in the service of privileged students' education, "calling in" is utilized to address problematic beliefs (even those of the instructor), and "safety" is not prioritized at the expense of transformation.[61] Here, again, civility must be deemphasized in favor of vulnerability and in service of transformative learning; marginalized students must not be situated as the source of tension when privileged students experience discomfort.[62] Coupling pedagogical discomfort with deliberate self-compassion can allow learners to navigate the process of critical self-reflection *through* discomfort and emerge transformed.[63]

METHODOLOGY

This article is, at its heart, an autoethnography where I use my experiences to uncover the forces that ultimately determined the final outcomes. While I did not come to the idea of post-qualitative inquiry[64] in this article's first incarnation, I believe the term is wholly

applicable for this final incarnation. Here, I reckon with the emotions that I felt over the course of the events recounted in this article, but, in the act of rewriting and reframing this article, I also confronted the logical detachment I affected (ineffectually) the first time I tried to make sense of what I experienced. St. Pierre notes that *linearity* stands in opposition to post-qualitative investigation;[65] in the nonlinear process of tearing apart, then rebuilding, this autoethnography, I found my own internal inconsistencies and deep hurt *and* was able to finally learn from them. I was able to see myself simultaneously as other and as subject, and walk through the possibilities that a dialogue between those parts revealed. As I looked more deeply at the possibilities *in between* thinking about power and the university, deconstructing the comparatively sterile narrative about power I had planned to write, I found something irreducible but confusing.[66] Some of it I built in my mind by way of emotional data, engaging with my own failings and disempowerment,[67] and the rest of it I came to as I read deeply about the different, overlapping binds that TERFism, the neoliberal university, and hegemonic civility place us all in. When I tore apart my own assumptions about what this article ought to be, and the vulnerability I was allowed, I also thought my way to new possibilities for Morgan, myself, and the classroom.[68]

This article is also unique in that it contains another person's partial autoethnography, intended for a wholly different audience than the one likely to read this article. Morgan's tweets are her own accounts, colored by considerable slippage,[69] of some of the major events that occurred in and out of the classroom. Atay advocates for a definition of cyber-autoethnography that includes social media posts as a valid form of the practice;[70] here, I use Morgan's tweets as a narrative that tells her version of the dominant group's story.[71] In this work, I will dynamically construct my narrative for this article in conversation with Morgan's archived tweets. By publishing Morgan's tweets here, I allow myself and the reader to see my actions from her point of view, making this a multivocal autoethnography of sorts.[72] A truly collaborative autoethnography would have me and Morgan in conversation as equals in knowledge and power; given Morgan's attitudes about me and my beliefs, this is not currently possible. Moreover, while Morgan was the aggressor in this situation, I still hold power and agency in my portrayal of her in this article. Thinking with respect to "relational ethics" requires that I consider my responsibilities of care to Morgan and the various other individuals involved in this incident.[73] Seeing yourself portrayed in another's autoethnography can be difficult and painful, especially when your understanding of the truth is different from the author's.[74] Morgan's tweets were intended for an audience far different from this one, and I do not intend to create a context collapse for her as she did for me.

The ethical choices I made in writing this article reflect this intention; while I may quote myself ascribing ill intention to various individuals in order to illustrate my emotions at the time, I do not ascribe motivations or morality to any individuals in my role as this article's author. All individuals and offices involved in these events are anonymous; I chose pseudonyms using a random name generator, and no university offices will be mentioned by name in this account. Morgan's tweets present a more thorny question; they are illustrative of my experiences during these months, but they also do not exist on Twitter at present. The account she used to tweet about me was suspended by the platform in March 2023, and by some interpretations of the right to be forgotten, I ought to discard any and all records

I have of Morgan's tweets.[75] However, Morgan clearly intended for her tweets about me to be public and, perhaps, viral; she mentioned J.K. Rowling's Twitter profile in a few of them and used prominent TERF hashtags to attract more attention from her chosen public. The tweets' centrality in the story I am about to tell make Morgan's (redacted) tweets integral to exposing the power relations involved as the cyberbullying, and its aftermath, unfolded. I redact the usernames and profile pictures of all Twitter users in this article, unless they belong to a public figure (e.g., J.K. Rowling).

My full ensemble of data sources is comprised of chat records with Dr. Marsh; screenshots of Morgan's tweets; text messages with my partner; emails with the disciplinary office; the disciplinary office's policy documents; and my own recollections of various conversations and events. Taber uses a similar approach, linking found documents and personal narrative, when sources of data that would be traditionally deemed more legitimate (information about the disciplinary process in my case; access to military interviewees in Taber's case) were not available due to institutional barriers.[76] The various narrative streams I use, when aligned, offer different tellings of the same story, each with its own emphases, vocabulary, and affective purpose.[77] I might align, and make sense of, these sources of "truthfulness" differently than someone else would in my position.[78]

I am a cisgender, mixed-race, queer, disabled woman, and I am usually racialized as white. These intersecting axes of privilege and marginalization mean that I do not experience the same world that Morgan does; in fact, as someone who identifies explicitly as "queer" and is partnered to a non-binary person, I am living out a kind of womanhood that Morgan abhors. My vision of womanhood is what got me into this mess in the first place, and it is also the lens through which I made sense of what occurred. The womanhood I believe in is one that explicitly includes trans women and looks critically at the structures of power that seek to divide us; it is embodied, just like the anxiety I can't quite stop feeling in the pit of my stomach as I write this.

SELECTED VIGNETTES

Morgan's Outburst and Its Fallout

Evening of February 14, 2023

Tweet 1: *Morgan replies to a quote tweet of "Let me make this clear to you: trans women are women and are entitled to use women's spaces" saying "Why are so many trans activists raging, unhinged men who really, really hate Women" with "Unfortunately I'm in class with one & she's a woman . . . although she truly resembles a (pig emoji) . . . pink hair & skin & XXL . . . doing a research project on her personal hatred for JK Rowling and TERFs . . . but I've managed to peak the rest of the women in my class off her dumbass paper idea."*

Tweet 2: *OMG my beloved fellow #TERFs: lost it in class on Porcine Misogyny B**** who wants to do her research paper on @jk_rowling in class tn- she goes "on JK Rowling's anti-trans stance . . ." I interrupted I said "or pro-women . . . you are a woman aren't you? She's pro-feminism" and*

Tweet 3: *The prof goes, "we're not making a judgement on JK Rowling," I said, "she is! She sides w/ sexist men who make rape threats against a feminist!" & the prof insisted we move*

on . . . but I succeeded in peaking half the class. All the female students glared at Porcine Misogyny B**** & 4

Tweet 4: *Of them hung back after class to ask about this pro-rapist stance & by the end of our little chat I had all 4 reading @ReduxxMag on their phones. #WomenWontWeesht #adulthumanfemale #WomenWontSubmit #LGBWithoutTheT #BornNotWorn #MeToo #MensRightsMisogynists*

Class discussion is proceeding as usual, and I am sharing an example from my research with the class. I begin by calling the content and accounts that J.K. Rowling amplifies "anti-trans." I'm choosing my words carefully here and avoiding the term "TERF" because Morgan had briefly mentioned having a "soft spot" for J.K. Rowling in a previous small-group discussion. Morgan interjects, exclaiming, "You mean pro-women!" I get a sinking feeling in my stomach—I hate confrontation, especially with an audience of twenty people. This is going to be a shitshow, I realize, though I have no idea how bad it's going to get. Flustered, I say, "I am not going to engage with that." Dr. Marsh intervenes, saying, "We aren't passing value judgments here," to which Morgan replies, "But she's passing a value judgment!" There's an awkward silence that feels like forever, but eventually another student jumps in with an unrelated question. Morgan's version of the story can be found in Tweets 2 & 3; she also claims that she was successful in "peaking" [*sic*] half of the class, including some classmates who stayed back after class to read TERF articles with her (see Tweets 3 & 4). I leave class disquieted and annoyed, but it ultimately fades to the back of my mind. I have bigger things to worry about, like my fellowship application and research projects.

Morning of February 16, 2023

Tweet 5: *Update! Went on canvas and located her full name . . . & found her Twitter. Block & report! @jk_rowling I STRONGLY RECOMMEND YOU BLOCK HER, as she has expressed her intent to use your Twitter feed & followers for a treatise attacking your #WomensRights activism, block her ASAP! (includes a screenshot of my Twitter profile at the time)*

I am idly scrolling through Twitter, preparing to start my workday, when I notice a direct message from an account I don't follow. Confused, I open it to check whether it is spam. The user is trying to alert me to the Twitter activity of someone they say is my classmate. They were in the process of reporting this account for harassment when they saw a screenshot of my Twitter profile along with several vitriolic tweets about me. The sinking feeling from Tuesday returns, but this time it's more like nausea with a side of flight-or-fight. I panic, show my partner, and then reach out to Dr. Marsh. We both report the tweets to the student conduct office, from whom we receive automated acknowledgments. The sensation of waiting for someone to do something is unbearable. I know this isn't that bad in the grand scheme of things, and people get called fat pigs, or worse, on the internet every day, but I still feel raw and vulnerable. I look in the mirror, seeing myself as Morgan does, ugly inside and out. That feeling will still come back over a year later, every now and then. Dr. Marsh tries to set up a meeting with Morgan, but it is quickly made apparent that he is not able to bar her from the classroom, even if she refuses to meet with him regarding her conduct. When I speak with one of my advisors later in the week, she tells me that barring a student from a classroom is unheard of at my university except in cases of physical attacks. I wonder if

I'm being unreasonable. Maybe my fear and hurt is the exact sort of weakness conservative pundits want to purge from the university setting, and maybe they're right.

Title IX Complaint

February 18–20, 2023

Morgan tweets repeatedly about her intention to wear a shirt saying "Woman (noun): Adult Human Female" to class. Dr. Marsh and I discuss the tweets and the planned wearing of the shirt. We plan for me to not react to or acknowledge Morgan in any way, shape, or form; otherwise, though, I should participate in class as usual. I am worried I'll crack, or that the entire class will see me as Morgan does: pathetic, fat, and crazy. I feel like I am all of those things as I wait for Tuesday night. Neither of us have any insight into the student conduct office's process, but the administration has made it clear that Dr. Marsh must exhaust every option that allows Morgan to complete the class and should not discuss the shirt with her, should she actually wear it. It's a childish thought, but I can't stop telling myself there's an unfairness to the way that Morgan is granted space to antagonize me, while I need to be a perfect gray rock, impervious to whatever barbs she might toss my way. The adult in me notes that Morgan is paying tuition and university free speech lawsuits tend to be high-profile and expensive. I want to rail against the absurdity of it all, but there isn't really anyone to rail *at* or any point in expressing the anger that's been blooming in my chest. Maybe this is what a university *does*, I think. It sands down the spiky parts of people that yearn for justice and care, and eventually you winnow down into a smooth shape that fits neatly into the machinery of power.

Tweet 6: So after I told the male professor of the class w/ the rapists rights hater of fellow women, that I would under no circumstances, refrain from expressing my disgust at his bias towards her incitement of #violenceagainstwomen, today there is a random member of faculty in class,

Tweet 7: Sitting in a desk like a student . . . I assume, she is here for the purposes of clearing him of wrongdoing if he allows this (pig emoji) MRA to go off on Women's rights activists again. Glad I've already opened a discrimination complaint for a misogynistic hate crime w/ NEU

Tweet 8: Filed a Title IX complaint about this incident with Misogyny (pig emoji) & my poor dumb professor in his first semester of teaching showing bias towards haters of JK Rowling & underminers of #womensrights—how you like me now Miss Piggy?!?!

February 21, 2023

Despite tweeting about the shirt, Morgan does not wear it to class. She sits on the opposite side of the room from me and spends the entire class period typing furiously on her laptop. I'm nervous about what's coming next—she keeps glaring at me and the faculty member taking notes (see Tweets 6 & 7)—and I'm concerned about being doxed despite locking down my online presence. When I get home, my partner tells me that Morgan has tweeted about making a Title IX complaint against me and Dr. Marsh. The Title IX office is an office, present at US universities that receive federal funding, that investigates claims of sex-based discrimination. Title IX is a US federal civil rights law that prohibits discrimination based on sex, which is what Morgan was accusing me of. She referred to my research as a

"misogynistic hate crime" and described Dr. Marsh as "my poor dumb professor . . . showing bias towards haters of JK Rowling and underminers of #womensrights" (see Tweet 8). Given the university's lack of supportive response thus far, I panic, worrying that my promising research project would be shut down or that I would be disciplined due to Morgan's mischaracterization of my research. I email the Title IX office late that night, asking for a response by the university and cc'ing Dr. Marsh along with one of my advisors. While trying and failing to fall asleep, I wonder how irrational my concerns are. I can feel the desperation getting stronger: I want to stop seeing myself through Morgan's eyes, and I want to be able to attend class without replaying her tweets in my head. I wonder if I should stop eating a snack during our class break. Maybe everyone else sees it as a gross, piggy spectacle. When I go to lab meeting that week, I hunch into myself, trying to look smaller.

The Bullying Continues
February 22 and 23, 2023

I eventually get a response to my email from someone at the Title IX office (multiple members were out of office, but I eventually reach someone who is in office). It seems that Morgan did make a report to the Title IX office, and the Title IX office does not take issue with my research. It's a small relief, but I still think about skipping lunch and wonder if I should dye my hair back to brown. Sticking out doesn't seem worth it. The Title IX officer connects me to someone at the student conduct office, and I schedule a meeting with that person as well. She also suggests a mutual no-contact order; I worry that this will make Morgan even angrier. Plus, Morgan isn't technically contacting me. She's just glaring at me, tweeting awful things about me, and trying to use the university's apparatus for equity to make my life worse.

February 27, 2023

The meeting with the person from the student conduct office is frustrating; she tells me that the student conduct office cannot take any action until they conduct their hearing, which will take "a couple weeks," and implies that she will tell me when a verdict has been reached. Two weeks after the initial incident, I am regularly anxious to the point of nausea. It's silly to feel abandoned by an institution, and I should know this by now, having had my fair share of similar encounters with corporate HR. Still, some ridiculous, hopeful part of me just wants the people in charge to make it all stop. I know now that there was no way to *make it all stop* once it had started. I still have an uneasy relationship to my body over a year later, and there's this amorphous anger that rises unbidden in my throat whenever I interact with university administration.

Tweet 9: Campus detective volunteered his knowledge of an unhinged TRA publishing death threats to JK Rowling—said he sympathizes w/ my position & if SMURF student violates the no-contact order to call him back& he'll recommend the granting of a restraining order. Think it's clear he's

Tweet 10: Already peaked (dancing emojis). Who woulda thunk it? Society doesn't regard extremists who make rape & death threats against feminists to be oppressed victims or civil rights

*activists. #BetterTERFThanSMURF #WomenWontWeesht #WomensRightsareHumanRights
#adulthumanfemale #BornNotWorn*

Tweet 11: *When I figure out which one of you it was—there will be hell to pay, you skidmark—
believe that. Terrorizing rape victims & retaliation against women who say no—will not be
tolerated.*

Tweet 12: *(in response to a follower): Can't talk about it unfortunately for another two months.
But the person I'm talking to knows who they are. They're a spy and a snitch to the worst kind
of misogynistic and homophobic terrorist.*

March 2023

Morgan continues tweeting about me occasionally. My anxiety also continues to build. I
get a mutual no-contact order with Morgan at my advisor's suggestion; I walk to the uni-
versity police station with a supportive friend, explain the situation to a confused police
officer, and receive a call from a detective soon after, explaining they are setting up the
mutual no-contact order. Morgan tweets about the no-contact order as well, alleging that
I am publishing death threats to J.K. Rowling (see Tweets 9 & 10). A couple days later,
Morgan appears to have found out that someone was showing her tweets to the university
(see Tweets 11 & 12). Dr. Marsh, the dean of the department, and I separately report these
tweets to the student conduct office, as they contain phrases like "there will be hell to pay"
and call me "the worst kind of misogynistic and homophobic terrorist." I am legitimately
frightened Morgan will figure out how to do something awful, and my imagination runs
wild. I do not want to be doxed by an army of angry TERFs, if Morgan manages to raise
one, and I wonder if any recent copies of my resume from my website had my home address
on them. Nobody hears anything from the student conduct office, although the university
police detective acknowledges seeing my email. He notes that he can't do anything about
them unless Morgan escalates, however. Dr. Marsh and I discuss whether I should present
my final research design (the final project for the class) in class or elsewhere, to avoid an out-
burst by Morgan. I am scared, frustrated, and tired of being called a terrorist. The *just want-
ing it to stop* has turned to desperately wishing someone with power realized how awful this
was, but the university administration appears largely indifferent to Morgan's veiled threats
and continued accusations.

"The Matter was Handled"

Over the next few weeks, Morgan barely attends class, and I breathe a sigh of relief. I'm still
angry, though, and want to know if the university ever did *anything* to deescalate Morgan
or stop the bullying. It's silly to want such an indifferent entity to perform care for me, but
that's exactly what I wanted to confirm didn't happen. By the time graduation is about
to begin, I haven't heard anything from the student conduct office. I email and call them
repeatedly over the course of two weeks, until I get a terse response from the person I had
originally spoken to in February. She writes, "As a student [*sic*], I wouldn't be able to dis-
close outcomes to you directly but please know that the matter was handled." As I said to my
partner when I saw the email, "handled, my left ass cheek." While Morgan's original Twitter

account was suspended by Twitter's moderation team by this time, my partner finds a new Twitter account that is extremely likely to be her. She is celebrating her graduation from the university and continues to tweet about TERFism.

Philosophically speaking, I disagree with carcerality in disciplinary procedures. Focusing on whether Morgan was punished for her actions should not have been my intent in the first place, though anger and fear make us do counterproductive things. With the benefit of hindsight, I am instead interested in the actions, written into the Student Code of Conduct that is available on the student conduct office's website, that the student conduct office could have taken or facilitated to stop the bullying (or mitigate its harms) but did not. To understand if anything better could have happened, I consult the student handbook. First, I notice an inaccuracy. In the most recent copy of the university's Student Code of Conduct, I find a saying that no-contact orders can only be initiated by the student conduct office. However, the student conduct office employee I spoke to told me that I had to initiate the order through the university police department; according to the employee, her office had no jurisdiction over no-contact orders. The next section is titled "Temporary Measures Administrative Directive" and makes provisions for the university to issue a directive, enforced by the student conduct office, stopping a student or organization from continuing behavior when "harm is deemed to be occurring and immediate action is deemed necessary." When I spoke to the student conduct office employee, asking (with some frustration) whether her office could take any action at all to help me feel safer, she told me nothing was possible. I do not know when the "Temporary Measures Administrative Directive" could have been invoked; that, and the actual procedure for obtaining a no-contact order through the student conduct office, remain mysterious to me.

The opacity of the disciplinary process, along with the discrepancies between the Student Code of Conduct as written and the Student Code of Conduct as practiced, are deeply frustrating. The student conduct office's website claims that it works to teach students the values of "civility and good citizenship;" it also "strive[s] to . . . provide a community free of intimidation, harassment or unfair treatment." Civility and fair treatment were certainly prioritized in the disciplinary process. In fact, the university's administration seemed more concerned with classroom outbursts and incivility on social media than the fact that a member of its community was attempting to win over classmates toward an agenda with fascistic tendencies and intimidate a classmate who opposed that agenda.

DISCUSSION

TERFism and Womanhood

Ultimately, TERFism seeks to police the acceptable bounds of womanhood on arbitrary, racialized, bioessentialist terms. When I angered a TERF, my own shortcomings as a woman under the TERF gaze were put on full display. Eight years of competitive powerlifting have shaped my body into a disorderly, repulsive object according to TERFism; why would a woman aspire to brute strength when it is her (white settler) fragility that makes her a woman? Morgan's constant usage of the pig emoji and her descriptions of my body size made me the object of disgust: that of Morgan herself, but also her audience's—and my

own. Disgust is an easy way to undermine someone's credibility as a civilized, reasonable subject. The disgust I inherited from Morgan made me question the space I took up in the world and whether I was worthy of it.

However, the contempt and revulsion Morgan directed at trans women and their allies would have manifested—would have *stuck* [79]—as a physical, justifiable disgust at my embodiment no matter what my body looked like. The outrage Morgan performed at my behavior, and her accounts of my alleged *uncivil* behavior (e.g., alleged harassment of J.K. Rowling), were both more credible when their subject was a repulsive Other. This same rhetoric of the repulsive, invading Other is infinitely more harmful when directed at trans women, particularly trans women of color. It "externalizes sexual violence" and ascribes it to convenient, vulnerable enemies—"trans women, gender-nonconforming people, migrant men, Muslim men, Black men, etc."[80] Morgan continually signaled the impending threat of sexual violence by trans women in her tweets, calling me (among other things) a "rapists rights hater of fellow women." Womanhood, to her, was bounded inside the confines of a vulnerable white middle-class womanhood; such a womanhood naturally required the protection only fascistic intervention could provide.[81]

Oppressive Civility

To remain the perfect, unassailable victim, I had to remain silent and expressionless no matter what Morgan did. When I said, "I'm not going to engage with that" to Morgan's initial outburst, there were many other things that I could have said, and would have said, had I not known in the back of my head that I had to be perceived as the more civil party. In the end, though, the harm Morgan did would have been done regardless, and my stoic demeanor did nothing to make the bullying stop. The violent civility espoused by the university's student conduct office also required that Morgan remain in the classroom unless she physically attacked me. After all, civility assumes all parties are on completely equal footing and serves to paper over conflict.[82] Removing Morgan from an educational opportunity she was paying for would be an *uncivil* violation of the economic contract between her and the university; moreover, it would acknowledge the conflict and the hateful nature of her speech offline and online. Hegemonic civility treats all ideas as equal until their intellectual merit is proven; harm to marginalized individuals is not a concern, and engaging politely with one's peers, even if they are doing active harm, is expected.[83]

Neoliberalism and Carcerality

On a cold April day, as I stood arm in arm with fellow protestors, protecting our university's pro-Palestine encampment, I couldn't help wondering whether the bemused officer who took my initial report about Morgan's bullying was among the swarm of university police surrounding us. Later, the same student conduct office that "handled" Morgan's case would be used as a blunt instrument to coerce pro-Palestine protestors into silence. In doing so, it served its ultimate purpose—securing the university's economic and political interests—and protected its students' willful ignorance.[84] As Foss notes in her dissertation, competition in the marketplace of ideas often comes into direct tension with the neoliberal university's need to compete in its *own* marketplace when campus protest is

involved.[85] The free exchange of ideas is allowable until it comes up against the hard bounds of civility, which is itself fluidly defined and adjudicated by carceral institutions like the student conduct office.

Was engaging with the student conduct office a mistake? In hindsight, it did not help my situation whatsoever. The damage was already done by the time I got the no-contact order (which also accomplished nothing), and the student conduct office did not stop Morgan from tweeting vile things about me (only the suspension of her Twitter account accomplished that). I oppose carcerality in principle, but some angry, petty part of me wanted *someone* to acknowledge that Morgan had done something harmful and make her regret it. With a year's distance from the incident, though, I do not think any of that was realistic. The student conduct office metes out punishment and coerces students into "civil" behavior; the justice it doles out is punitive, not restorative. Moreover, the university's administration seemed to view Morgan's TERFism as morally equivalent to my trans-inclusive feminism. Morgan's only wrongdoing, in their eyes, was the cyberbullying directed at me. The reasoning behind it, and its ties to fascism and white supremacy, were moot.

CODA: TRANSFORMATION

In a better world, perhaps even a world within the realm of possibility, Morgan would be deradicalized from TERFism and understand the harm she did. A learning environment that invited deradicalization would begin by nurturing deep self-compassion within Morgan to prepare her for the inevitable discomfort ahead of her; constructing a binary between "good" and "bad" actors would be unproductive here, much as my initial anger might have guided me to label Morgan as wholly evil.[86] We were both disempowered by the neoliberal university and its veneer of civility; Morgan was cut off from opportunities to confront her prejudices head-on, and I was subjected to her hatred and vitriol for months, asked to remain stoic and impassive despite my anger. As much as I might have wished for Morgan to leave the classroom and stop tweeting awful things about me, remaining present in a classroom focused on collective accountability rather than civility could have been a transformative experience for her. It is easy for me to frame Morgan as a wholly "bad" actor, given her actions, but simply leaving her with her hatred is not compassionate.

Leaving TERFism means leaving behind restrictive ideas about womanhood and embracing swathes of humanity previously considered Other. It would be a liberation from vulnerable, angry, hegemonic white femininity, but it would also shatter Morgan's worldview and ask her to *welcome* its shattering. Such a transformation would require a great deal of discomfort on Morgan's part and that of her peers and educators. Teaching her that her TERFism is harmful and logically inconsistent would take patience and courage on the part of her educator(s) and peers. Such a burden ought to be shared by a supportive community that collectively recognizes its heterogeneity and interdependence.[87] Our university, with its focus on civility and decorum (and its bottom line), is not a place where such a process would thrive. Morgan saw "peaked" individuals, already aware of and accepting of TERFism, everywhere in the university where she was met with civility, which accounted for the vast majority of the encounters she retold on Twitter. She therefore had nobody

able to disabuse her of the notion that her TERFism was unacceptable, whether politely or sharply, and continued to do harm to vulnerable others. Perhaps, if she had been immersed in a community insistent on her ability to change, rather than on her entitlement to civility, she would not see TERFs wherever she went, but instead see humans, in all their complexity and contradiction.

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NOTES

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