

Deconstructing Fragility, Identity, and Transphobia

ABSTRACT

This paper sets out to theorise one possible origin of transphobia in relation to the current round of increasingly politically driven attacks on trans people’s human rights. To do this, it attempts – drawing on sections of the US television series *Pose* – to establish a new characterisation of the sociocultural and affective roots of transphobia. I argue that to understand some forms of transphobia, we need to conceptualise *identification* as a process rather than *identity* as a substantive and understand how this process leads to trans people exposing the fragilities in some cis people’s identities, producing an irrational transphobic hatred. The argument developed here represents an attempt to deploy social activity method in a specifically queer sociological approach, creating a “deformance” of the data relating to identification processes and the implications and consequences of this analysis.

Keywords: transphobia, gender, anti-gender, trans, identity, *Pose*, transgender, fragility

THE PROBLEM OF “gender-critical” transphobia has been theorised in a number of ways: as essentialist notions of purity (Williams 2020), a lack of intersectional understanding (Maude 2020), and attempts by a relatively privileged group to retain their position within feminism (Phipps 2020). Psychological research (Makwana et al. 2017; Tebbe & Moradi 2012) has centred on quantifying concepts like need for closure and social dominance orientation. The problem here seems to be that this way of looking at it allows some (e.g., Hughes 2022) to essentialise transphobia,

ignoring the work of scholars from Luria (1976) to Bourdieu (1977) and Lahire (2011), despite Makwana et al. (2017) specifically foregrounding the role of right-wing politics in transphobia. This paper aims to broaden this debate with a sociological theorisation based on a characterisation of identification through a deconstruction and deformation (McGann & Samuels 2001) of sections of *Pose*, the popular, successful and critically acclaimed US television series first broadcast in 2018.¹ *Pose* explores trans women of colour's involvement in ballroom culture and the "houses" – or kinship networks² – of the late 1980s and early 1990s at the time of the AIDS pandemic in New York city. Extending to three seasons, it is particularly groundbreaking in that it centres and humanises a group of Black and Latina trans women, in contrast to much cinematic and broadcast TV content and dominant media narratives, that have often done the opposite. It was conceived and partly written by a black trans woman, Janet Mock, and most of the central trans characters are cast from trans women of colour. By centring and making visible queer people of colour throughout, *Pose* reveals the intersecting oppressions of being poor, trans, queer and non-white.

Background

Trans people, especially in the UK and US, are currently experiencing very high levels of coordinated attacks, particularly from the media establishment (Lavery 2020; Pearce, Erikainen & Vincent 2020; Gira Grant 2022). For example, in 2020, *The Times* published 324 articles about trans people, none of which were written by trans people,³ which is typical of the very high level of media exclusion trans people experience in the UK. Hungary, Russia and parts of the US have enacted extensive and restrictive laws specifically targeting trans people. The UK government has precipitated a "culture war" (Malik 2020) of which transphobia is part, in particular through an exclusionary media campaign that deploys "mirror propaganda" (Chretien 2007, Kennedy 2022), accusing trans people of "silencing" transphobes, while systematically excluding trans people from mainstream media (Baker 2019) – a practice Ahmed (2016) exposes with great clarity:

Whenever people keep being given a platform to say they have no platform, or whenever people speak endlessly about being silenced, you not only have a performative contradiction; you are witnessing a mechanism of power (p. 27).

The objective of the culture war appears to be to make it difficult and dangerous for trans people to exist legally or functionally, by harnessing state apparatuses and orienting them towards oppression. For example, transphobic⁴ campaigners' attempts to prevent trans people from accessing toilets are intended to prevent trans people from engaging in any kind of productive existence, including holding down a job, engaging in civic life, socialising or travelling. This needs to be regarded as a form of necropolitics (Mbembe 2019), not merely of who lives and dies, but of (lack of) quality of life for those who remain alive. Yet as we see in parts of Eastern Europe and the United States at the time of writing, the extended objectives of these transphobic campaigns would appear to be right-wing goals, such as the removal of abortion rights.⁵ It is important to emphasise here how the wider aims of transphobic campaigns are all associated with the far right, despite some who support them claiming to be "progressive". For example, those supporting transphobic campaigns are now opposing LGBT inclusive sex and relationships education in UK schools⁶ and legislating against "Gillick competence" which permits under-16s to consent to medical treatment when they are able to do so.⁷

In seeking to understand the situation in countries like the UK regarding transphobia and the position of trans people in academia, Horbury and Yao's (2019) description of the *Rights of Women* exhibition in 2018 at Senate House – a major academic library in central London – is instructive. The exhibition not only excluded material by trans women but included a book that situates trans people as constituting a "danger" to women. Since then, two significant publications (Olufemi 2020; Phipps 2020) have critiqued this kind of hegemonic "feminism". Most of the transphobic campaign groups in the UK however, still describe themselves as "feminist", apparently deploying this term to conceal their true purpose.

Methodology – Social Activity Method

Although Benavente and Gill-Peterson (2019) describe queer theory as having progressed considerably in recent years, they still describe being able to identify with elements of Stryker's (1994) critique of it. In contrast to much of queer theory, trans scholars appear to have more concrete concerns, such as not being systematically and regularly misrepresented in the media (Cavalcante 2018), accessing healthcare (Pearce 2018) and banning conversion therapy (Ashley 2022). This suggests that trans people's concerns are in many ways of a different order than those articulated by many queer theorists. The challenge in this paper, then, is to construct a sociological characterisation that can begin to account for the existence of transphobia in a way that explains the organised and coordinated attacks on trans people from such groups as "gender-critical" transphobes in collaboration with religious fundamentalists, legacy media and far-right extremists. The purpose of this paper is thus to present a queer sociological deconstruction of transphobia using *Pose* to dismantle the concept of fragility and argue that it needs to be understood in different ways in relation to different people. This paper introduces a sociological method based on the idea of a principled *deformance* (McGann & Samuels 2001) of the empirical data, in effect deploying a queering hermeneutic process.

A deformance, according to McGann and Samuels (*ibid*) is a reorganising or reordering of an existing text in a specified way with the purpose of making visible new meanings. This is one way of conceptualising social activity method (SAM) (Dowling 1998, 2009, 2013), a sociological method that produces a qualitative characterisation of empirical data through a constructivist epistemology. SAM produces *constructive descriptions* based on an internal language that regards the sociocultural as constituted by the "strategic, autopoietic formation, maintenance and destabilising of alliances and oppositions" (Dowling 2009, p. 12). Deploying SAM as a principled deformance produces new ways of examining data. It reorganises data systematically to reveal new meanings, in a similar way to that of McGann and Samuels (2001) when they reorganise Wallace Stevens' poem "The search for sound free from motion" (1942). This reorganisation of the data subsequently produces an

organisational language which is constituted through relational spaces, like the one in Figure 1 below, based on a combination of binary scales usually producing four relational ideal types of strategies or modes of action. The resulting analysis produces a new conceptual language with which to dismantle a sociological dataset and reconstruct it from a theoretical perspective. This analysis can thus be regarded as a queering of sociological data to reveal meanings that may otherwise not be apparent because of the way normatively constituted perceptions orient our gaze. This queering is systematic rather than arbitrary. Whilst binary scales may, superficially, appear anathema to queer theory, their use in this kind of relational space represents a way of generating a principled deformance of qualitative data which deploys binaries to break down binaries. The exclusive binary scales used in Figure 1 below – for example “strong institutionalisation” and “weak institutionalisation” (I+ and I– respectively) – have to be constituted as a binary because in qualitative research, intermediate numerical gradations along a scale would presuppose applying a quantitative measure to that which cannot be quantified. One could not characterise an item of data as, say 70 percent “active” and 30 percent “passive”, because modes of acquisition cannot be assigned intermediate points on a numerical scale. In this paper, the intention is not to deconstruct “identity” – a concept that is often regarded as a substantive. Instead, the SAM deconstruction that follows will characterise the *processes of identification*. Because of its focus on strategies and modes of action, SAM is particularly appropriate for this kind of analysis.

So rather than focussing on identities in the substantive, this paper focuses on identification as a *process* in such a way that the differences and similarities between identities are made visible. While it is entirely valid to argue, for example, that straight-cis identities are as fragile as those that are not, the processes of identification and the social and cultural consequences of identifying in these respective ways are here argued to be very different.

The three sections of *Pose* selected for this analysis are a conversation between Puerto Rican trans woman Angel Xtravaganza and Stan, a white, middle-class cis man, from Season 1, Episode 2; a confrontation

between black trans woman Electra Wintour and a white cis woman in Season 2, Episode 9; and a short narrative from Elektra in Season 2, Episode 3. These three sections have been selected for analysis because they are explicitly about the *ways* trans and cis people identify – the processes of identification which are the focus of this paper’s analysis.

Pose and Identification

In this application of SAM then, summarised in Figure 1 below, I examine the data from these sections of *Pose* – relating to identification – from the perspectives of *institutionalisation* and *acquisition*, through the construction of a relational space. On the horizontal scale, institutionalisation refers to regularity of practice, so a practice that is very regular and widespread is constituted as “strongly institutionalised” (I+) and one that is not regular and widespread as “weakly institutionalised” (I-). On the vertical scale, acquisition (i.e., the ways people arrive at an identity), is characterised as either “passive” or “active”.

So someone whose identification is part of a group whose identity can be characterised as I+, will be identifying in a way that is commonly acknowledged and recognised, so much so that their identity may even be considered a default. Someone whose identification is I-, is engaging in a classification (often a self-classification) that is much less common or regular, to the extent that members of this group often need to come out. The vertical scale, acquisition, refers to the way one takes on one’s identity; either through an “active” or a “passive” process.

Acquisition	Institutionalisation	
	Strong (I+)	Weak (I-)
Passive	Conforming	Discovering
Active	Adapting	Asserting

Figure 1 *Modes of identification.*

So rather than focusing on identities as substantives, SAM looks at the extent to which the identification process is based on institutionalisation and whether the acquisition of a given identity is active or passive. Even though all identities may be characterised as unstable and contingent, some are based on more strongly institutionalised characteristics than others, some are more easily recognisable than others, some are more regularly acknowledged and culturally centred than others and some are more liminal than others. Some are constructed in the face of social and cultural opposition and others are not.

Initially the following scene between Stan, a white, middle-class, cis man, and Angel Xtravaganza, a trans woman of colour, will be deconstructed using SAM.

Angel Xtravaganza: What are you?

Stan: I'm no one. I want what I'm supposed to want, I wear what I'm supposed to wear and I work where I'm supposed to work. I stand for nothing. I've never fought a war and probably won't ever have to, 'cos the next one's gonna kill us all. I can buy things I can't afford which means they're never really mine. I don't live, I don't believe. I accumulate. I'm a brand – a middle-class white guy. But you're who you are, even though the price you pay for it is being disinvited from the rest of the world. I'm the one playing dress-up. Is it wrong to want to be with one of the few people in the world who isn't, to have one person in my life who I know is real?

Angel Xtravaganza: You think of me as a real woman?

Stan: You'd be crazy to choose this life if you didn't have to.

Pose Season 1, Episode 2 (2018)

This excerpt emphasises Angel’s authenticity in relation to Stan’s inauthenticity and consequent fragility of identification. With reference to Figure 1, Stan’s mode of identification can be characterised as conforming to such an extent that he describes himself as a “brand”; his identity is strongly institutionalised (I+) and passively acquired. By contrast, Angel’s mode of identification can be characterised as asserting; she has had to claim her identity through her own actions and actively depart from the identity path assigned to her at birth. In contrast to Stan, her identity as a trans woman of colour is weakly institutionalised (I-) to the extent that it is heavily culturally delegitimised, as Namaste (2000) argues, predominantly through erasure. In contrast, although Stan’s identification is I+ in that his identity as a white, straight, middle-class, cis man is so widely institutionalised that it is often recognised as a default, his description of himself suggests his identity is more fragile and less secure than one might expect. He contrasts his identity with that of Angel, inferring that her identification is anything but fragile and insecure, at least in part because she has had to construct it actively – through a struggle against cultural expectations and norms – suggesting an element of authenticity that is somehow earned in the face of adversity. Yet, despite this, Angel’s identity might appear much less secure because of her lack of social recognition outside her in-group and because of poverty and racialised oppression.

This characterisation of the way these identities are constructed demonstrates that both Stan’s and Angel’s identities can be regarded as fragile but at the same time stable, although in different ways. Stan’s I+ identification is widely recognised. It may feel in some respects unstable, contingent, and fragile (especially in relation to Angel’s), but it has the advantage of being recognised ubiquitously; a stabilising factor. The social and cultural context of Angel’s identification is very different. While her identity can also be characterised as contingent, fragile, and unstable, it is actively acquired, it is however also I-, meaning that the practice of identifying as a trans woman is not widely recognised. When looked at in this way, there is a significant difference between Stan and Angel, between “conforming” and “asserting”; two very different prospects.

These differences raise important questions regarding authenticity, inferred by scholars as diverse as Sartre (1943), Umbach and Humphrey (2018), Hines (2019), and Shimizu (2008, 2020a). Are identities that need to be achieved through struggle and sacrifice any more or less authentic than those acquired more passively? And are I+ identities more secure because of their relatively unchallenged status? Stan characterises Angel as authentic in contrast to the inauthenticity of the neoliberal cultural norms he embodies, his roles as an employee and consumer. He regards Angel as “real” because she is not a product of these norms, consumption patterns, and social atomisation (Bourdieu 1998). The implication here is that neoliberal ideology produces inauthenticity, which is often only revealed when contrasted with the authenticity of an identity that has been actively asserted. This implies that authenticity constitutes a more extensively socioculturally produced concept than might otherwise be considered (Umbach & Humphrey 2018, p. 123), and that authenticity is therefore culturally or socially ascribed or constructed in different, and sometimes conflicting ways.

The characterisation of destabilised or fragile identities as varied and multi-layered is further reinforced by Elektra’s “reading for filth” of a white cis woman (WCW) encountered in a restaurant in Season 2, Episode 9:

WCW: (*smiling*) Hello ladies. I’m a loyal customer here, out with my girlfriends and we’re having just the darndest time trying to relax into this peaceful summer evening.

Elektra Wintour: (*Smiling*) And what is it that we can do for you?

WCW: There’s nothing peaceful about your grating voices, cackling so loudly we can’t even hear our own conversation.

Lulu Ferocity: Elektra, do not do it, this one right here is not worth it.

Elektra Wintour: (*calmly*) I don't think that my girlfriends and I are any louder than these other tables. Why don't you be frank with us? What exactly is it that you're trying to say?

WCW: I'm no dummy, I work in the city, and I know a man pretending to be a woman when I see one, and I see three right in front of me. (*Points at Lulu, Angel and Elektra*). This is not that kind of establishment.

Angel Xtravaganza: (*to Elektra*) Wait a minute...

Lulu Ferocity: (*To her also*) girl...

Elektra Wintour: (*Stands up*) God may have blessed you with barbies, a backyard with a pony in it, a boyfriend named Jake and an unwanted pregnancy that your father paid to terminate so you could go to college and major in being a basic bitch.
(*Angel Clicks fingers for the missing beat*)
None of these things make you a woman. (*Holds up index finger, palm outwards in front of the WCW, and reaches for a glass from the table*)

Lulu Ferocity: (*Handing it to her*) Clear your throat. (*Elektra takes a sip and hands it back*). Read that bitch!

Elektra Wintour: Your uniform of ill-fitting J-Crew culottes, fake pearls and 50 cent scrunchies cannot conceal the fact that you do not know who you are. I know our presence threatens you, we fought for our place at this table, and that has made us stronger than you'll ever be.

(Angel and Lulu click the missing beat with their fingers)

Now pick your jaw up off the floor and go back to your clam chowder and shallow conversations. My girlfriends and I aren't going anywhere. *(Makes shooing gestures)*

Lulu Ferocity: It was *lovely* talking to you.

Elektra Wintour: *(To WCW's friends across the room)* Y'all heard that?

Angel Xtravaganza: *(As WCW walks back to her table)* Go and get your clam chowder before your clam chowder gets you.

Pose Season 2, Episode 9 (2019)

This text also sets the identification of trans women of colour against that of the white middle class, in this instance a white cis woman's. The strength of Elektra's identification contrasts with the bland, neoliberal conformity of the middle-class WCW and everything she symbolises, producing a desire in her to exclude those who make her feel insecure. The juxtaposition between the WCW's normative appearance and Elektra and her friends' resonates with her critique of the WCW; that she has no identity.

It is significant that Elektra can "read" the WCW in depth, in contrast to the WCW, whose "reading" of Lulu, Elektra and Angel extends only as far as transphobic abuse. I argue here that when Elektra says "I know our presence threatens you..." the threat is not so much to her *identity* as to her *identification*. When faced with those whose I-

ties have been forged through the hard struggle of *assertion*, her conforming and privileged identification is revealed as shallow and fragile.

In a sense then, whiteness, cisness, middle-classness and heterosexuality, especially in combination, can be characterised as constituting an absence of identification, or at least a fragile and unstable mode of identification based on the passive acquisition of an I+ identity; an identification that is predominantly based on default privilege, often largely invisible to those identifying in this way. Indeed, these identities can be regarded as such a default *conformity* that the underlying neoliberal culture needs to fabricate a cultural veneer of “individualism” (Bourdieu 1998) in order to conceal the shallowness and inauthenticity of identities produced by *conforming*. What Elektra embodies is *asserting*, significantly the mode of identification diagonally opposite that of *conforming* in the relational space, which can constitute it as a particularly significant opposition. Her weakly institutionalised (I-) identity is combined with an active identification process that reflects the challenges these women have had to face in overcoming the mis-assignment of default gender identities at birth combined with their identities as women of colour. Far from the default, far from conforming, these women, as Elektra emphasises, have “fought for [their] place at this table...” on more than one level. The strength and authenticity of their identification reveals the weakness of the WCW’s own, “... and that has made us stronger than you’ll ever be.” In a sense their presence, and the fact that they are not passive in articulating the strength of their identification in contrast to hers, compels the WCW to confront the shallowness of her own.

So, if instead of focussing on identities as categories our analysis focuses on identification and categorisation as processes, the relative kinds of (in)stability and contingency become more apparent. One-dimensional characterisations of all identity categories as fragile can obscure real and significant differences. It is no coincidence that the character presented as most vocal and most secure in her identity is Elektra, who describes her struggles to *assert* this:

You think I was born a butterfly? I am who I am because I know who I am and I refuse to *ever* let anyone *ever* tell me otherwise. And you know what? No-one is going to tell me who I am or what I want.

Pose Season 2, Episode 3 (2019)

Here, the way Electra describes her identification process is revealing; she expresses a strong and secure identity – suggesting that she considers identification to be a process rather than an essentialisation. She describes herself as consciously resisting external cultural pressures to define her, and does so passionately, indicating that not only is her identity particularly important to her but that she has needed to fight for it against considerable opposition, probably on multiple levels, from the personal and social to the cultural and economic, as is evident throughout the series.

Analysis: From Identification to Fragility

The contradictions inherent in the ways identity is often regarded can produce fragility. Yet we live in a culture that appears to place a high value on individualism, something that can have an effect on expectations and self-expectations. However, this ideology of individualism can be undermined when identification processes are revealed.

If we regard identification as a process, then although Stan expresses fragility in his identity and the WCW has hers revealed to her by Elektra, the main sources of their fragility are different from those experienced by Angel, Lulu and Elektra because of the different experiences that contribute to their identification. Stan's and the WCW's fragility is a product of social conformity and racialised power structures and consequently includes an element of lack of individualism. Their fragility can be characterised as *normative fragility*. In contrast, the fragility of Angel's and Elektra's identities stems predominantly from their social, racialised, political, cultural and economic exclusion. This fragility can be characterised as *structural fragility*. While normative fragility is produced primarily by cultural, social and ideological processes which are often invisible to those subject to them, structural fragility is produced by processes that are usually all too visible, and manifest themselves

on a quotidian basis, such as through social exclusion. It is notable that “conforming” constitutes a mode of identification that can be vulnerable to perceptions of inauthenticity, something that is much less likely of “asserting”. The restaurant scene is where these differences clash.

The other two sections of the relational space in Figure 1 above – “discovering” and “adapting” – also produce different kinds of fragility. “Discovering” is illustrated by the following passage from Anzaldua (1987), indexing what I characterise as *epistemic fragility*:

Chicanos did not know we were a people until 1965 when Cesar Chavez and the farmworkers united and I am Joaquin was published and la Raza Unida party was formed in Texas. With that recognition, we became a distinct people. Something momentous happened to the Chicano soul – we became aware of our reality and acquired a name and a language (Chicano Spanish) that reflected that reality. Now that we had a name, some of the fragmented pieces began to fall together – who we were, what we were, how we had evolved. We began to get glimpses of what we might become. (p. 85)

Anzaldua describes not merely the joy at being named as part of a group but also the feeling of being aware of the commonalities shared by members of this group even before it was named but not being able to express them adequately in language. Epistemic fragility can thus be regarded as not unrelated to *epistemic injustice* (Medina 2017) and *epistemic violence* (Spivak 1998). These are also particularly relevant to trans people who, prior to coming out, often do not have access to the knowledge they need about themselves. Epistemic injustice is manifest in the passive erasure of trans and non-binary people (Kennedy 2020), while epistemic violence indexes to the more recent and actively hegemonic attempts to delegitimise trans people’s knowledge and self-understandings (e.g., Horbury & Yao 2020; Shimizu 2020b). The final part of the relational space, “adapting”, can be characterised as an element of the pre-coming out stage, the assumption of a normative presentation, as cisgender and/or heterosexual, in spite of the knowledge that one is different. These

four different modes of fragility map loosely onto the modes of identification schema shown in Figure 2 below.

As with the modes of identification, the modes of fragility should not be regarded as necessarily attached to any particular individual but represent different modes by which fragility is produced, meaning that individuals' identities and the fragilities of those identities may be constituted in multiple different ways.

<u>Acquisition</u>	<u>Institutionalisation</u>	
	Strong (I+)	Weak (I-)
Passive	Conforming <i>Normative</i>	Discovering <i>Epistemic</i>
Active	Adapting <i>Coerced</i>	Asserting <i>Structural</i>

Figure 2 Mapping modes of fragility.

From these different modes of fragility, a particularly notable difference between *normative* and *epistemic* fragility on the one hand, and *coerced* and *structural* fragility on the other, is evident. The former predominantly represent responses to broader cultural factors that are internalised and can usually be regarded as invisible to those affected by them. The latter two are different in that the fragility is more evident to those subject to it. For example, the threat of social exclusion can force some to engage in *adaptive* identification that often produces a *coerced* fragility. The *structural* fragility of the lives of Angel, Elektra and all the other characters in the different houses in *Pose*, is evident as a constant everyday factor in their lives that they cannot easily ignore and which, significantly, has a racial dimension to it that Moussawi and Vidal-Ortiz (2020) have criticised queer sociology for excluding. There is a significant contrast between the diagonally opposing modes of fra-

gility *normative* and *structural*. *Normative* fragility is tacit or imperceptible to those to whom it applies, rather than openly being part of their everyday awareness. *Structural* fragility, by contrast, is often explicit and can constitute a significant feature of the everyday lives of those affected by it. The kinship support networks, in the case of the characters in *Pose* established through their system of “houses”, are actively constructed in response to the poverty, racism and social exclusion of structural fragility. Again, here the process of revealing normative fragility can constitute a threat to one’s feeling of authenticity in a way that structural fragility does not.

So, once we start to dismantle the concept of fragility, it starts to look very different from different perspectives. The contrast here is significant; those whose modes of identification result in their experiencing normative fragility often do not perceive their fragility explicitly which sets them apart from those whose modes of identification are produced by structural fragility. The exchange between Elektra and the WCW serves to make visible the WCW’s normative fragility, a fragility not normally apparent to her. Here I argue that those – in this case Elektra, Angel and Lulu – who make this fragility visible are likely to become the targets of discrimination, abuse and exclusion from those whose fragility their existence exposes. I argue that this constitutes one of the causes of transphobia.

This analysis suggests that trans and non-binary people are perceived by transphobes as a threat because we render visible the apparent instability upon which their identification is based; a variation on shooting the messenger. It is evident that their rhetoric is based on an essentialisation (Pearce et al. 2020) of gender and belief in gender “purity”, an absence of intersectional perspectives, racism, and is the product of increasing links with an anti-feminist extreme right (Lewis 2019; Maude 2020; Shimizu 2020a; Hermansson 2022). So, the existence of trans women as well as other trans and non-binary people threatens these myths of purity because we reveal the normative fragility of identity, which in turn produces fear and hatred of trans people. Significantly however, this fear and hatred is different from the rhetoric produced by anti-trans campaigners

(Riddell 1980) and voiced repetitively in UK legacy media (Braidwood 2018; Faye 2018). Riddell's critique is particularly perceptive as it suggests that anti-trans rhetoric is little more than an attempt at wrapping what is ultimately an affective hatred in academic and reasonable-sounding justifications, a view supported by Williams' (2020) accounts of transphobic violence and threats against trans people and our allies dating back to the early 1970s. The calls for the complete elimination of trans people, from "morally mandating" us out of existence to what amounts to an eliminationist campaign against us (Duffy 2021), constitutes evidence of the affective hatred that underpins this belief system. The ultimate goal of this opposition to our existence is to end "transgenderism" globally.

The normative fragility of "gender-critical" identities results in their responding with rationalisations such as denial, pathologisation (Tosh 2016), biological determinism, confected faux-vulnerabilities, bad-faith rhetoric and fearmongering. They feel threatened in the way Phipps (2020) characterises, through a challenge to their positions at the "centre" of what they constitute as feminism, but also through their vulnerability to having the apparent stability of their identities undermined. Their transphobia can be regarded as a reaction to the passivity, inauthenticity, shallowness and fragility of their own identities.

So, one of the main causes (although not the only one) of the so-called gender critical transphobic opposition to the existence of trans people, and how it appears to have be operating like a cult (Parsons 2020), is that the mode of identification for many members of this group is destabilised by our existence. The fragility of the way members of this group have come to identify is revealed and it is disturbing for them, consequently they have reacted in the way so many people in positions of relative power do in such circumstances; with aggression, antipathy and, in their case, attempts to direct proxy violence, including stochastic terrorism (Tannehill 2019) at trans and non-binary people.

Bourdieu's (1998) characterisation of neoliberalism – as an ideology that, on the face of it, promotes and values individualism while simultaneously producing a mass consumer society in which individualism is suppressed – is again particularly relevant here. I characterise this effect

as the *neoliberal contradiction*; if transphobic belief-systems represent a response to this, it is perhaps significant that their rise has been historically synchronous with the imposition of neoliberalism (Stryker 2006; Williams 2020). This, perhaps, explains why “gender critical” transphobes appear prepared to engage in alliances with the far right in order to further their aims. My argument here focuses on affect and its discursive veneer that covers raw hatred which might explain why transphobes often seem to be prepared to sacrifice the gains of past feminist struggles in order to eliminate trans people (Ferber 2020).

The neoliberal contradiction produces a crisis of individualism; its ideological production of faux-individualism is in direct opposition to the way it operates as a de-individualising process. In this sense, trans people’s identification can be characterised as destabilising, not in the sense that our existence destabilises people’s identities *per se*, but because our existence reveals and makes visible the fragilities and instabilities of the processes of identification in neoliberal culture, which then produces an affective response in some. Trans people are one of the groups that make visible what the neoliberal contradiction attempts to conceal.

This in itself produces another apparent contradiction in that while many trans people live in fear, social exclusion or in stealth as a consequence of transphobia, our identities are still presented by “gender-critical” transphobes as so threatening that they need to engage in campaigns against our very existence (Duffy 2021). White, middle-class hegemonic “feminism”, with its underlying ideology of bio-essentialism and white supremacy (de los Reyes & Mulinari 2020; Phipps 2020), feels threatened by a group whose identification is stronger, even though, as a group, we are small in number and wield very little power. While identities produced through “conforming” have high social and cultural institutionalisation, as a result of the sedimented cultural processes that validate them, they are at the same time vulnerable to normative fragility, which, when revealed, can produce a strong irrational antipathy and enmity. White, middle-class “gender-critical” transphobia has, at its root, a tacit fear of its own fragility and inauthenticity, a fear projected onto trans people, especially trans women.

Conclusion

Rather than regarding identity as static, undifferentiated and uniform, this paper has attempted to recruit SAM to produce a constructive description of how the process of identification occurs and to deconstruct the concept of fragility as qualitatively different for different groups. Another potential issue raised here, through the character of Stan is Sartre's (1943) formulation of authenticity, is how authenticity is constituted. Authenticity is linked by some theorists to identity (Umbach & Humphrey 2018; Taylor 1991; Sartre 1943), with inauthenticity of identity produced by neoliberal ideology.

Since 2017, legacy media in the UK has mounted an intense and very one-sided campaign against trans people, often portraying unfounded accusations as fact and seeking to demonise trans people as a group. Yet, despite being funded (Archer & Provost 2018, 2020) and supported by the far right and despite their genocidal objectives (Duffy 2021) becoming clearer – although, significantly, not widely publicised in the media – these astroturf⁸ campaign groups have supporters still claiming to be “progressive”. The commonality with the right-wing originated anti-gender campaigns in Europe characterised in Kuhar and Paternotte (2017), Dietze and Roth (2020), and Graff and Korolczuk (2022), reflects how these anti-gender campaigns all take on outwardly different forms according to location, but appear to be centrally directed and funded, constituting a top-down, internationally-directed campaign in which “gender-critical” transphobes have been working closely with mainstream media and far-right groups.

Being able to locate some of the social and cultural basis for transphobia is an important part of understanding it. One of the most significant and revealing events in relation to this analysis has been the censorship by the *Guardian* – one of the UK's leading “progressive” newspapers – of the words of Judith Butler (Gleeson 2021; Lothian-McLean 2021). Despite campaigning against the “silencing” of academics, the *Guardian* is responsible for quite possibly the only text relating to trans people that can be verified as having been censored. Maintaining outward respectability for “gender critical” transphobes appears to be a crucial consideration, as the

Guardian's censoring demonstrated; the “gender-critical” transphobes needed to extinguish any claims in mainstream media that they are on the same side as the extreme right. It is argued here, however, that the aim of this censorship, and indeed the no-platforming of trans human rights perspectives, is not merely to maintain an external respectability, but to allow “gender critical” transphobes to maintain their self-image as “progressive”, “liberal” or “feminist” and, metaphorically speaking, to avoid that conversation in the restaurant with Elektra. For the middle-class transphobes at the centre of “gender-critical” transphobia, it is for their own self-image that their hatred is obscured and concealed, not least from themselves. That their opposition to the existence of trans people is rooted in affect rather than the, increasingly torturous and spurious, discursive rationalisations they promote, must not be revealed – to themselves. Although the origins of right-wing transphobia are perhaps clearer – the extreme right has always deployed division and prejudice as a means of obtaining power – the reasons for the existence of “gender critical” transphobia are less obvious, but in many instances appear to originate from the same cultural processes as those deployed by the far right; an emotional hatred. This is why understanding how trans people expose the fragility of “gender critical” transphobes’ identification potentially constitutes a significant contribution to explaining the extremes to which these groups are increasingly going. Graff and Korolczuk (2022) characterise the links between the far right and groups like “gender-critical” transphobes as an *opportunistic synergy*, reflecting the endlessly opportunistic nature of the extreme right. In the UK, this is manifest in an alliance with the far-right (Norris 2021), legacy media and other elements of the political establishment. Ultimately, organised transphobia in the UK is very much about the acquisition and deployment of centralised, top-down power.

Despite its pretence of being “respectable”, often driven as it is by groups practised in maintaining respectability, transphobia needs to be regarded as an inherently (proxy-)violent practice, which includes campaigning against trans people’s human rights under the pretence of caring about cis “women’s concerns”. The aims of these campaigns appear to be to harness the power of the state to repress trans people, using

the power of the media to recruit and direct state violence and power. Beyond this, the oppression of trans people appears to be deployed by the far right as a wedge issue to roll back the human rights of many other groups and to recruit people into right-wing politics (Tannehill 2021; Hermansson 2022; Doyle 2022). All this is important in light of the theorisation produced here, supporting the idea that many, if not most, component groups under the umbrella of organised transphobia are transphobic as a consequence of affect, despite the superficially “reasonable” rhetoric these groups deploy. This is how its adherents are either recruited into right-wing politics or become so emotionally invested in their opposition to trans people’s existence that they are prepared to accept, or ignore, the wider consequences of their alliance for cis women and marginalised minoritised groups.

Although some appear tempted to do so, this paper specifically avoids pathologising “gender-critical” transphobes in its attempt to theorise the existence of this group and its opportunistic collaboration with the far right, so no inference to this effect should be drawn from this paper. Pathologisation removes responsibility, and these groups should not be permitted to escape accountability for their actions. That I avoid pathologizing “gender-critical” transphobia does however not mean I avoid problematising it; in this paper I argue that “gender-critical” transphobia is the product of fear and hatred generated by sociocultural action in combination with right-wing politics, and as such those propagating it need to be held to account on this basis. Normative fragility is argued to constitute one of the most likely sources of these (proxy-) violent responses because this kind of fragility is felt as a fundamental threat to the identification processes of some individuals. It needs to be emphasised at this juncture that this theorisation is regards transphobia as a product of the sociocultural rather than the psychological.

What is clear, however, is that the rise of transphobia in the UK and elsewhere is a significant problem and efforts need to be made to understand its origins in order to prevent it from targeting other groups and further emboldening the far right in its roll-back of human rights for everyone. As evident in places like the US, a significant proportion of

those who oppose trans people's human rights also oppose abortion, gay, lesbian and bisexual people's rights as well as opposing provisions to protect women from domestic violence.⁹ The global rise of the far right is a danger to everyone and "gender-critical" transphobes have, through their collaboration with them, at the very least given them an element of encouragement and credibility. Consequently, further research into transphobia is needed. It is my hope that the ideas in this paper may contribute to starting a productive dialogue about this issue, linking it with similar research into far right anti-gender campaigns worldwide. In the meantime it is evident that "gender critical" transphobes, because of their alliance with the far right and although they claim to be acting in the interest of protecting cis women, are actually – and unlike trans people – a danger to all women.

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NOTES

1. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7562112/?ref_=ttfc_fc_tt
2. <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/striking-a-pose-a-brief-history-of-ball-culture-629280/>
3. <https://twitter.com/Jefflez/status/1346046772569899008?s=20>
4. This article uses the TransActual definition of transphobia <https://www.transactual.org.uk/transphobia>
5. <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/01/28/europe/poland-abortion-restrictions-law-intl-hnk/index.html>
6. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/sex-education-class-school-wales-lgbt-religious-studies-parents-lessons-a9296026.html>
7. <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/uk/boris-johnson-defends-exclusion-of-transgender-people-from-conversion-therapy-ban-1.4846403>
8. Merriam-Webster defines Astroturfing thus; “organized activity that is intended to create a false impression of a widespread, spontaneously arising, grassroots movement in support of or in opposition to something (such as a political policy) but that is in reality initiated and controlled by a concealed group or organization (such as a corporation).”
9. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/05/hungary-blocking-of-domestic-violence-treaty-further-exposes-women/>