

I.B. TAURIS

FEMALE MASCULINITIES AND THE GENDER WARS



FINN MACKAY

The Politics of Sex

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*This book is dedicated to
My father
Roderick Beattie Mackay
1951–2015*

*And
My friend, Greenham Woman
Helen John
1937–2017*

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Sadly, during the pandemic, the ceaseless attacks on and lies told about trans people in our media have only increased. I would like to take this opportunity to point out the real effects this has on trans men, trans women, transgender people and their families. The gender wars are not an item on a Gender Studies reading list; they are real battles, with real casualties. Trans women and trans men respond and persist with honour, dignity and patience, and it is enraging because they should not have to. They should not have to deal with the fallout of a culture war in which they have been made easy scapegoats to detract from the actions of a monstrous government that is burning down the remnants of what civil society is left after over a decade of ideological cuts. The fact that our media is awash with conspiracy theories about trans lives, in the face of this, should be a national shame.

Sometimes, when discussing gender wars, people will accuse those that disagree with them of being on the wrong side of history. When I look through history, I see familiar sides; I see conservatives, religious fundamentalists and traditionalists on one side, and I see queers, and trans people and gender benders on the other side. This

whole book is against binary approaches; it is about how many things can be 'true' at once, and how real life happens in the grey areas. Yet, when I see the lines that are drawn, I know which side I choose. I stand with the queers every time because they are my people and because I am one of them.

We know what the other side is capable of, with their strange alliances on all the bridges they are willing to cross; this is no time to be burning ours. It is likely that this book will not please everyone from any particular vantage point on the gender wars. No doubt it will attract criticism for not going far enough or for going too far. I remain convinced that there are areas of agreement in the middle, there are similar visions of a better future and we have to try to keep heading towards it, together.

Introduction

Despatches from the wrong sides of history

In a way I have been researching this book my whole life, because I have been studying masculinity for as long as I can remember. Like many queer people, I realized the sociological separation of sex and gender early on, and in that space was where I made my home. I have always been interested in the in-between identities, the not quite one or another, the individuals who, for various reasons, don't quite fit. Today, there are more categories than ever to choose from, for sex, gender and sexuality identities, but still relatively little tolerance for those who don't choose one and stick to it. This mirrors our political and social context, which is dominated by a with-us or against-us approach, in which potentially liberating debates about our changing landscape of previously fairly fixed labels and identifiers have been turned into a war. It is a war that has real consequences for people's basic human rights, to family life, to freedom of movement, to employment, to parenting and, even, to life itself; and all the while, different sides are screaming this over a battlefield, telling the other they are on the wrong side of history.

These are the so-called gender wars. If you have been anywhere near social media recently, you are likely to have encountered them; high-profile celebrities and public figures have joined in and also furthered mainstream awareness of debate and disagreements around gender identities and trans rights. In the summer of 2020 the famous British children's author J. K. Rowling, for example, departed from wizards and owls to start blogging about the rights and wrongs of trans and transgender movements; mainly the wrongs from her perspective, which she describes as gender critical (GC), a term often used by campaigners focussing particularly on the exclusion of trans women in some or all women-only spaces. British newspapers from left to right have also covered this topic, and it has taken up airtime on several news and cultural documentaries in the UK, for example, on BBC and Channel 4. In the UK, as well as other European countries and the United States, the issue is further popularized by attention to so-called culture wars and dismissive suggestions by politicians and media that trans rights are part of a generational move to 'snowflake' identity politics. Many people may only have fleeting awareness of such controversy and be unsure of what terms and labels mean, feeling unable to take any one side or another, but not wanting to offend anyone. If you are one of this majority in the middle, then, hopefully, you will find this book useful in providing some of the background about how this issue has come to prominence, explaining why it is often so controversial and defining some of the common terms you may hear.

For many of us these debates are personal though, and it is impossible to remain neutral. Trans men, trans women and transgender people are having to watch their basic human rights being put up for debate on an almost daily basis. Trans people are seeing themselves scapegoated in an increasingly bizarre array of things, from anti-vaccine protests to conspiracy theories about Big Pharma and Artificial Intelligence as well as profoundly antisemitic conspiracy theories. In the United Kingdom, the United States and other countries too, it is difficult to avoid seeing headlines or comment pieces about trans youngsters, the rights and wrongs of gender-neutral toilets, debate about who should be allowed in changing rooms or statistics about referrals to gender identity clinics. My perspective on this is from a UK standpoint, and my research is UK and US focussed; the narratives and activism in both these countries are often similar and mutually informative. These two countries actually share activists and activist groups as well, particularly those arguing for trans exclusion, as I shall explain later. Policy and commentary in the area of sex and gender are fast moving and changing; it is difficult to keep up with, even here in my home country of the UK, with Celtic nations often differing in approaches. This is another reason for keeping my focus on where I am most familiar. The findings and arguments presented here are therefore from this particular standpoint and location. In this book I will platform voices from queer and transgender masculine subjects that are taken from my 2017 survey research with over 200 responses from all over the UK, including the Celtic nations and from both rural and urban locations. I use the term 'transgender' in this book as the umbrella term which the influential scholar Susan Stryker has defined as: 'all identities or practices that cross over, cut across, move between, or otherwise queer socially constructed sex/gender boundaries' (Stryker, 1994: 251). The current gender wars, or trans debates or trans questions, or whatever we call them, mainly consist of a ceaseless media focus on the medical responses to trans young people, the conflicts over whether women's spaces should be inclusive of trans women or not and conspiracy theories about alleged trans agendas. All of this is often simplified in the media into a battle between feminists and trans people, particularly between trans women and one school of feminism, which I personally subscribe to and have been researching for many years, and that is Radical Feminism. The popular term TERF, standing for trans-exclusionary radical feminist, is used to describe any anti-trans or anti-trans-inclusion viewpoint or campaign, whether it is from someone who describes themselves as a feminist of any kind or not, let alone whether they actually are a Radical Feminist.

Stuck in the middle with me

Many of those struggling in the gender wars, and many of those watching all of this unfold, whatever their own opinion on the matters that arise, have unquestioningly taken on the received wisdom about the roots of this increasingly fierce fight, and the homogenous framing of Radical Feminism. As is always the case, things are not as simple as they are presented. Not all Radical Feminists are trans-exclusionary, and not all those who are transphobic or trans-exclusionary are feminists, far from it; and much of Radical Feminist theory was presciently queer and radically trans-inclusive. Some Radical Feminists are even trans themselves. It is therefore not always possible to

pick a side in this skirmish; some of us have roots in both camps. I am a long-standing feminist activist. I have identified as and with Radical Feminism since my teens, because that is the political theory that most closely matches my own political standpoint; not that I agree with all that has come from that school or strand of feminism. Putting my politics into action I have organized and campaigned for women's liberation alongside other social justice activism for peace and socialism. I founded the London Feminist Network in 2004 and revived the London Reclaim the Night march against all forms of male violence against women. My career has included working in the women's sector, against domestic abuse and for organizations such as Women's Aid. As a teenager I lived at a women's peace camp, inspired by Greenham Common. I have also been active in building and maintaining queer social spaces from my early twenties and spent several years in London immersed in the queer scene. Identifying as a butch lesbian for some of the time, as well as trans butch in some settings, I am used to communities where sex, gender and sexuality are organized very differently to the mainstream sex-gender rules, and I have seen and benefited from the potential that flourishes within those alternatives. Butch is a term that describes a sexuality and gender identity, usually understood to apply to lesbian or bisexual masculine women. For Black lesbian and queer women or masculine queers, the term 'stud' is commonly used, in place of butch, as the latter is more associated with White communities. The phenomenon that such terms describe is a universal phenomenon, with varied and wonderful names all over the world; and I will introduce you to all of this further in Chapter 6. Suffice to say, I have a stake in both sides of the current gender wars, I have skin in this game, and I find myself in the middle, yet again in between categories. From this vantage point I hope to guide you through some of the military history of this current supposed culture war, correcting some of the myths that are thrown from both trenches and contextualizing where it all came from and where we might go next.

Post-trans landscape

The current backdrop for this book is one marked by a growing awareness of the fluidity and flexibility, rather than fixity, of sex, sexuality and gender – a backdrop I will refer to as a post-trans landscape. By using this term, I certainly do not mean to suggest that all trans rights have been won and that thus movements for the human rights and recognition of trans women and trans men, and transgender people more broadly, are redundant. The reality, of course, is far from the case. However, while perhaps still widely misrepresented and misunderstood, there is undeniably an increasing visibility, including in mainstream media, of the lives of trans men and trans women and gender diverse people. These lives are receiving new attention, but they are not new. Trans people have been organizing in the UK, for example, for decades, long before the current attention. In her collection *Trans Britain* (2018), Christine Burns documents this activism, allowing trans organizers to archive and report on the history of their movement, from transgender groups in Manchester in the early 1970s to legal campaign groups like Press for Change, founded by Professor Stephen Whittle in 1992. From America, the trans activist and academic Susan Stryker also

outlines over a hundred years of transgender history in her classic text *Transgender History* (2017). The mainstream visibility that we see today, while far from holistic, does add to the apparent generational shift in attitudes towards categories previously presented as unquestionably fixed. The fact is that for many young people today, gender, sexuality and even sex are at least up for debate, and often, a moveable feast. This more questioning and fluid context is what I refer to with the term 'post-trans landscape'.

The actress Laverne Cox's appearance on the cover of *Time* magazine in May 2014 was referenced by that magazine as a so-called 'trans tipping point'. Not long after, in the summer of 2015, Caitlyn Jenner was featured in *Vanity Fair*. In 2018 a series of programmes with the title 'Genderquake' were screened on the British terrestrial television channel, Channel 4. This included a fly on the wall documentary bringing together young individuals of diverse sex, gender and sexuality identities, including trans women, a non-binary young person and one trans man. Accompanying this there was also a live, studio debate including celebrity activists for trans rights: the model Munroe Bergdorf and Caitlyn Jenner. These examples are of course some of the most famous examples of trans lives, from the United States and the United Kingdom, and it cannot be, and has not been, ignored that those enjoying most visibility are often those with arguably particularly privileged lives and who embody gendered body ideals, in this case of femininity. As the scholar Hannah Rossiter has asserted, 'The last few years have seen a significant rise in the visibility of trans women such as Carmen Carrera, Laverne Cox, Caitlynn Jenner, and Janet Mock, who are all conventionally physically attractive and very feminine' (Rossiter, 2016: 87).

A 2015 survey of 1,000 thirteen to twenty-year-olds by a US marketing intelligence firm reported that 56 per cent of the youth respondents knew someone who used gender-neutral pronouns such as 'ze'. On sexuality, just over half, 52 per cent stated that they did not define as exclusively heterosexual (Innovation Group, 2016). This cohort of digital natives, those born approximately between 1995 and 2003, often labelled in marketing language as 'generation Z', appear to be embracing sex, sexual and gender diversity in even greater number than the older millennials (those who entered higher education, training or career in the early 2000s). Recent research with children in UK schools has found over twenty-three different terms in use for gender identity, for example:

One significant theme was children and young people's expanding gender vocabulary: 23 different terms for gender identity were used by participants in our research. Many participants were also advocates for the rights of sexual minorities and trans people, and were highly critical of gender inequalities. They often saw these rights as 'modern' or 'twenty-first century' and as important aspects of their sense of self and values, identifying themselves as more progressive than earlier generations. (Bragg et al., 2018: 4)

Gender ideology and other conspiracy theories

These shifts have not been without friction, as I have introduced earlier, and there are some fierce kickbacks to such changes, from across political spectrums, left and right.

It should be noted that these have been going on for some time. The Catholic Church began mobilizing specifically against shifts towards more fluid understandings of gender and gender identity as far back as the mid-1990s, when feminist organizations brought language around gender mainstreaming and gender equality to the fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, for example, in 1995. Pope John Paul II wrote a letter to the then United Nations (UN) secretary general Mrs Gertrude Mongella, emphasizing the complementarity but difference of women and men, and of masculinity and femininity. This was emphasized again in the *Declaration of Interpretation of the Term 'Gender' By The Holy See* (Beijing, 15 September 1995), in the Pope's *Letter to Women* in Beijing again, and also in the *Lexicon*, from the Pontifical Council for the Family, *Lexicon: Ambiguous and Debatable Terms Regarding Family Life and Ethical Questions* (2003). In October 2015 the *Relatio Finalis* or final report from the Synod of Bishops to the Holy Father, Pope Francis on *The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and in the Contemporary World* made clear that gender follows sex like soul and body. 'According to the Christian principle, soul and body, as well as biological sex (*sex*) and socio-cultural role of sex (*gender*), can be distinguished but not separated' (*Relatio Finalis* 2015: 58; emphasis in original). More recently, guidance aimed at schools and educators brought together these standpoints on sexuality and gender and specifically critiqued and warned against 'gender ideology' and 'gender theory'. In *Male and Female He Created Them: Towards a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education* (2019), the Congregation for Catholic Education warns that a dangerous gender theory is undermining marriage and the family, destabilizing sacred differences between men and women and indoctrinating children to believe that sex, sexuality and gender are matters of individual choice.

The terms 'gender theory', 'genderism' and 'gender ideology' have all entered into public debate on trans and transgender rights, often being used in the current gender wars by 'anti-gender' right-wing religious groups, as well as by right-wing governments (Graff & Korolczuk, 2018a; Kuhar & Patternotte, 2017; Grzebalska, 2016). 'The anti-gender discourse effectively mobilised groups, associations, and organisations belonging to the Catholic militancy, along with radical right parties and groups' (Lavizzari & Prearo, 2019: 431). These terms and similar language are also used by some GC and feminist groups; indeed, this terminology may have influenced the term 'gender critical' in the first place, or arguably at least popularized its use. However, many trans-exclusionary Radical Feminists and GC feminists point out that they use this term very differently from how the Christian right and right-wing states will utilize it. Writing for Woman's Place UK on Viktor Orban's transphobic, misogynistic and homophobic decrees in Hungary, the socialist feminist Jayne Egerton asserts that 'our respective analyses have so little in common' (2020). Egerton highlights that for GC feminists, the term 'gender-critical' (GC) means to critique any approach that serves to 'conflate sex with gender and deny the material reality of sex-based oppression. This is a far cry from the definitions shared by the growing "anti gender" movements in Central and Eastern Europe' (Egerton, 2020). Sadly though, groups of Conservatives, Christian right organizations and feminists do sometimes work together on questions of trans rights and inclusion, and I shall go on to give a couple of examples of this (Moore & Greenesmith, 2021; Correa et al., 2018; McRobbie, 2018).

In the United States, right-wing conservative Christian fundamentalist groups like the Family Research Council view gender ideology as a third wave of an assault against the heterosexual nuclear family, the first wave being the feminist movement and the second being the gay liberation movement (O'Leary & Sprigg, 2015). Attending for the third time in October 2017, Donald Trump became the first sitting US president to speak at the Values Voter Summit in Washington, DC, run by the Family Research Council. The 2017 Summit saw a panel on 'Transgender Ideology in Public Schools: Parents and Educators Fight Back' at which an activist called Meg Kilgannon, director of Concerned Parents and Educators of Fairfax County, asserted that lesbian, gay and bisexual or LGB rights had taken hold in American schools and that attacking the trans community was the only way to fracture and break this hold, believing that there is less public support for trans rights and that this could unseat the LGBT movement as a whole. 'Gender identity on its own is just a bridge too far', comforted Kilgannon. 'Divide and conquer. For all its recent success the LGBT alliance is fragile, trans activists need the gay rights movement to help legitimise them' (Kilgannon, 2017). Kilgannon went on to promote coalition building wherever possible, praising the group Hands Across the Aisle, founded in 2017 by lesbian activist Miriam Ben-Shalom and Christian anti-choice activist Kaeley Triller-Haver (Triller, 2019), communications director of a group called Just Want Privacy, who campaign to reverse policies allowing trans men and trans women to use the bathroom that matches their identity.

Hands Across the Aisle is a coalition of Christian women, feminist women and anti-trans-inclusion campaigners, including one British member, the founder of a successful anti-trans-inclusion group called Standing for Women (HATA, 2018). 'Who knew we agreed on so much', Kilgannon said in 2017, reassuring the audience that lesbians and feminists all share their view that gender identity is bad and explaining that it can be seen as a form of lesbian eugenics to erase masculine lesbian girls. This is our first indication of the importance and presence of the figure of the masculine female; it is one often invoked and utilized as a reference point in the current gender wars. As I will go on to explore, this is just one reason why masculine lesbian genders and masculine queer female identities need to be centred and allowed to speak for themselves, rather than being weaponized as pawns in someone else's game.

Right-wing conservative Christian fundamentalist groups like the Heritage Foundation have also hosted numerous conferences and panels on gender ideology – for example, a fringe event at the 2019 Committee on the Status of Women (CSW), which was titled 'Gender Equality and Gender Ideology: Protecting Women and Girls' (CSW63 Side Event). Anti-trans-inclusion feminist organization the Women's Liberation Front (WoLF) have participated in events with the Heritage Foundation, and they describe themselves as a Radical Feminist organization. For example, they collaborated at a conference on 16 February 2017 on 'Biology Is Not Bigotry: Why Sex Matters in the Age of Gender Identity' with Mary Lou Singleton from WoLF; And again, on 28 January 2019, for example, at a panel debate on the inequality of the Equality Act, concerned at moves to outlaw discrimination on the grounds of sex and gender identity (SOGI), with Jennifer Chavez and Kara Dansky for WoLF (Dansky now works for the Women's Human Rights Campaign). The anti-trans-inclusion activist and founder of Standing for Women in the UK, Mrs Kellie-Jay Keen-Minshull, known on social media

as Posie Parker, attended that meeting in Washington, DC, as an audience member and also conducted some direct action of her own. A few days later, on 30 January 2019, Mrs Keen-Minshull and another British anti-trans-inclusion campaigner, filmed and broadcast themselves on Facebook live while interrupting Sarah McBride in a meeting on Capitol Hill. McBride is a prominent activist for trans rights in the United States and is press secretary for the HRC or Human Rights Campaign. The two activists are heard in the video accusing McBride of not caring about lesbians receiving mastectomies, of hating women in general and of ignoring women in a male fashion (Braidwood, 2019).

In 2019 WoLF also collaborated with the Heritage Foundation, the Family Policy Alliance and other groups to produce a parent resource guide, *Responding to the Transgender Issue*, published by the Minnesota Family Council, an affiliate of Alliance Defending Freedom and Focus on the Family, which was founded by the influential evangelical Christian, James Dobson. All these groups are against same-sex marriage and abortion. Focus on the Family, for example, founded a long-running gay conversion conference titled Love Won Out. Speaking at the fortieth anniversary celebration for Focus on the Family, former US vice president Mike Pence described James Dobson as a 'friend and a mentor' going on to enthuse the audience and assure them they had an ally in Donald Trump (Pence, 2019). WoLF also worked with another conservative Christian group, Concerned Women of America, to host a lobby outside the Supreme Court on 8 October 2019 supporting the dismissal from employment of a trans woman, the late Aimee Stephens, seeking to transition in her workplace, Harris Funeral Homes, who were defended in their legal fight by Alliance Defending Freedom (*R.G. & G.R. Harris Funeral Homes Inc. v. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission*). A famous British feminist activist and lesbian rights activist Linda Bellos also flew from the UK to attend the event. These two countries have much interaction on the gender wars, sharing both activists and activism it seems. WoLF have worked on other legal cases, trying to attack trans rights through the courts, together with far-right conservative Christian groups, such as the Family Policy Alliance, for example, a lobbying arm of Focus on the Family, filing an Amicus Brief with them in 2017 in the case of a young trans man, Gavin Grimm, taking his school through the courts to provide him with access to the bathroom that matched his identity as a man (*Gloucester v. G.G.*).

None of this has done much to separate the wedding of feminism with anti-trans viewpoints of course, although groups such as WoLF do receive criticism from feminists, especially those on the political Left, for aligning themselves with wealthy and well-connected homophobic, right-wing anti-abortion conservative groups. Such criticism appears to have little effect though, as groups like WoLF believe the Left and mainstream feminism has abandoned them in their fight against gender ideology, which they believe is the most dangerous threat to women's rights today. From that framing, it is vital to make coalitions wherever is possible, and the ends justify the means. It is important to make clear, right at the start of this book, and as I shall argue throughout, that this is not a position I support. For the record, as far as I can see, the tragedy is that we all share a much greater enemy, and that enemy is the religious right and associated conservative forces, what Graff and Korolczuk define as 'illiberal populism' (2018: 798). A movement which is 'inherently anti-elitist and anti-expert, hostile to individualism and minority rights, which are the core tenants of liberal democracy' (2018: 798). As Wodak (2015)

elaborates, this form of populism is rooted in ideology based on ‘a nativist concept of belonging, linked to a chauvinist and racialized concept of “the people” and “the nation”’ (Wodak 2015: 47). Whatever we call it, it is growing across Europe and North America. This threat is fascist, and it is masculinist nationalism. This enemy is the anti-choice, pro-natalism, White supremacist forces that are seeking to build their own version of Margaret Atwood’s nightmarish vision of Gilead, in fact rather than fiction, across Europe, the United States and other parts of the world. They must not succeed.

UK consultation mobilizes gender wars

Here in the UK the shifting sands in the terrain of terminologies and policies on gendered and sexed identities have come increasingly into the public eye, accompanied by increasing backlash. This was partly due to the Westminster government’s public consultation, in 2018, on the Gender Recognition Act (GRA) 2004. The review concluded in September 2020, with the government deciding to make no changes, but to reduce the costs of a Gender Recognition Certificate (GRC; Truss, 2020). The Women and Equalities Select Committee followed this up in October 2020 with an enquiry into whether the government’s conclusions were adequate, hearing evidence from those with different perspectives on reform of the GRA. The 2018 review of this act had followed the initial Women and Equalities Select Committee transgender equality inquiry back in 2015, which resulted in a report suggesting urgent updating of the GRA. The then minister for women and equalities Nicky Morgan promised to ‘tackle unnecessary bureaucracy and to assess the need for medical checks contained within the 2004 Act’ (Morgan, 2016: 5). Trans rights organizations, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex or LGBTQI+ and allies groups around the country agreed and organized to campaign in favour of reforms to this act, particularly the proposals for self-identification. The consultation asked about reforms that would remove the costly, invasive and time-consuming need for medical authorization before a GRC, with amended sex marker, could be issued. The Conservative government noted themselves, however, that many trans people did not bother pursuing this route currently, probably partly because of the aforementioned barriers. Their national LGBT survey for the Government Equalities Office in 2017, the largest survey of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans or LGBT life ever conducted, found that around 12 per cent of trans respondents had secured a GRC.

Just as campaigns began or stepped up in support of trans rights and to lobby for liberalizing reforms to the GRA 2004, so too new organizations set up to work against such moves. This included several GC or gender-abolitionist feminist, lesbian separatist and lesbian feminist groups who took this opportunity and began far-reaching lobbying and activism against reforms relaxing the existing bureaucratic and medical processes. Such groups have protested, disrupted and picketed Stonewall and Pride (Ditum, 2018c) events, for example, conducted billboard campaigns and imaginative media stunts. They have experienced protest in turn, with public meetings by groups such as Woman’s Place UK having venues cancelled at the last minute and being subject to large and noisy direct action outside events that do go ahead. To avoid this, such groups often arrange pre-meeting sites and avoid advertising venues in advance. This was the case with one of the

early groups to emerge against liberalizing the GRA 2004. Set up in July 2017 by Venice Allen, We Need to Talk ran a series of information events to raise awareness about the UK consultation. In September 2017 women waiting to go to a London meeting of We Need to Talk were assembling at Speaker's Corner in Hyde Park, central London. Protestors aiming to disrupt the meeting were also there and one of those protestors assaulted a woman waiting for the meeting. Protestors also accused GC activists of filming them without consent, and of holding one protestor in a head lock. GC activist Maria MacLachlan was struck by a young protestor and video footage of that incident was widely shared. The case later went to court in April 2018 and the protestor was found guilty of assault. In March 2020 a meeting of Labour members opposed to Labour support for recognition of gender identity and in defence of what they called sex-based rights was disrupted by protestors using smoke bombs. This was in an area of London in close proximity to a residential tower block of flats called Grenfell Tower, the site of a horrific fire on 14 June 2017 that took seventy-two lives and is widely seen as an act of corporate manslaughter. This protest tactic was seen as an insensitive move and the organizing group, London Bi Pandas, later apologized, confirming that they should have put more thought into the action and been mindful of the local residents so recently affected by the traumatic fire.

The point to take from such examples is that the warlike phrasing that is often used about the gender wars is not entirely an over-dramatization, as these sorts of incidents demonstrate. This is not an abstract debate; it has become highly charged and often physical; meetings are stopped, venues withdrawn, attendees threatened, jobs lost and cases have even ended up in court. While protest is a political right for those on all sides, it is hard to support this when it turns to physical violence or the complete blockading of political meetings from taking place at all. Self-organization and political assembly are also a political right, as long as such gatherings do not move into hate speech that promotes or incites violent hate crime or violence of any sort. However, reaction is inevitable in the current environment, especially when some feminist and GC groups and individuals are against not only reform of the GRA 2004 but the whole existing system for legal recognition and protection of trans men and trans women – in a continuation of a fight that was declared within feminism decades before (Hines, 2020; Jeffreys, 2018; Hines, 2017). As I set out at the start of this chapter, this historic and long-running battle is now at the stage of what some scholars in the field of gender and sexuality studies have described as a war: 'The dispute between some self-identified feminists and trans persons, trans women especially, and trans supporting feminists has erupted into a full-scale ideological war. Once at the level of conflict, officially undeclared, we have moved into the territory of "you are either with us or against us", with real threats against real people – from both sides' (Watson, 2016: 246). While this quote refers to a long-running skirmish as being officially undeclared, this will, perhaps, not seem the case to feminist activists who have been barracked up against just these arguments for a long time, since the 1960s and 1970s.

Turf wars

It has been noted before (Enke, 2018; Awkward-Rich, 2017; Williams, 2016) that these gender wars are often fought over the turf or territory of women's self-organized

spaces and movements. These are the grounds of the so-called TERF struggle. TERF is a label put onto anyone who voices transphobic views, or standpoints against trans inclusion in any spaces, but particularly in women-only spaces. Feminist activist Viv Smythe is widely credited with having first coined the term, or at least put keyboard to internet and forever immortalized the acronym. In 2008 Smythe was running an introductory blog on feminist facts; when it reached a larger following, discussions inevitably emerged over whose facts were being represented as true, and whose were being erased. In a debate over differing views on the famous women-only music festival at Michigan, which I will explain in Chapter 3, the acronym TERF was utilized to avoid posters having to write out the whole descriptor for a particular standpoint within some elements of Radical Feminism (Smythe, 2018). The very need for this term, within feminist communities, has now been completely overlooked; the need for a discerning term arose because not all Radical Feminists agree on trans inclusion or exclusion. There is no one homogenous Radical Feminist stance on trans inclusion, as I will go on to argue in this book.

Fights, conflict and struggles over who can or cannot be allowed entry to women-only spaces and on what grounds are not a new invention. Nevertheless, it seems important to repeat this, because it is often suggested that the feminism of the Second Wave in the United States and the United Kingdom, which is my focus in this book, was implicitly and irredeemably transphobic to its core and was by nature trans-exclusionary. Widely critiqued as a racist, homophobic, classist and transphobic period of activism, Second Wave is a term used as a chronological referent point as well as an ideological label. Simply chronologically it is used to describe the uprisings of feminist activity and visibility that occurred during the emergence of many New Left social justice movements from around the 1960s to the 1980s across the Western world. The common accusation or charge is that these Second Wave feminists who went before us were unconcerned with power relationships between women, and only concerned with barricading the Women's Liberation Movement or WLM to anyone who did not look like the norm in the mainstream – White, educated, middle-class, heterosexual. This is not true, of course, and even a cursory look through any archive, such as the Feminist Archive in the UK, for example, illustrates that Second Wave feminists were diverse, and also profoundly and urgently aware of power relationships between women and were trying to address those issues transparently. 'The second wave of women's liberation in the 1970s was made up of many currents, including women of colour, socialist feminists, and others, who fought for an understanding that all women don't face identical oppression. Many white women within the movement recognised the necessity to be on the frontlines against racism' (Feinberg, 1998: 52). Simplifications of that herstorical moment also erase the presence and contributions of Black women's feminist movements and scholarship, working-class women's activism and theory, lesbian women's self-organization and also trans women active and influential in feminism. The WLM of that era did not manage to eradicate the structural inequalities of racism, homophobia or transphobia, for example, inside its movement or without, nor has any so-called wave of feminism since, though more recent waves often define themselves favourably against the perceived failures of past activism (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000). What herstory shows is that debate about the inclusion of trans women

in feminism has been long-running and that some groups and organizations were in favour and were working with trans women, while others were not (Williams, 2016). The takeaway point here is that trans women were involved in the foundational and legacy-building Second Wave of feminism, and that some feminists, including Radical Feminists, were supportive of working alongside trans women in that movement.

Then, as now, there were Radical Feminists reflecting on power relationships, solidarity and differing life histories and organizing together with trans women. Then, as now, there were also Radical Feminists, often also lesbian feminists, lesbian separatists or separatist feminists, who took what is now called a GC or gender-abolitionist stance, and who viewed the growing medical and legal advancements in the 1980s and 1990s, around sex reassignment surgery and interventions, as just the medical institutionalization of gender stereotypes. Those are truisms and should not be glossed over or denied. But, the mythology of the gender wars today frequently weds all Radical Feminism to transphobia; in fact, the two have become synonymous, and all feminism and feminists are arguably now suspect. Sometimes, those uncritically accepting this mantra have a sense of where this mythology stems from, and names like Janice Raymond and Michigan are touchstone citations. I shall introduce you to this history here in this book, detailing the infamous work of Raymond (1989) in Chapter 2 and, in Chapter 3, the saga of the lesbian feminist rite of passage that was the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. While there is much to critique, the unquestioning merging of Radical Feminism with transphobia deflects attention from the much larger structural threats which endanger both feminists and trans people alike.

If it were only Radical Feminists that trans people had to worry about, then their worries would be severely decreased. Radical Feminists are not a majority in government, nor are they dominant in major medical companies, insurance multinationals or chief executives of the National Health Service or NHS in the UK. Donald Trump, implausible former president of the United States, is not a Radical Feminist. Yet, he barred trans people from the military, many with years of exemplary service in that career; he promoted rules for entry to public toilets, based on birth sex, regardless of whether individuals have been living as trans men and trans women for decades, and he allowed medical providers to refuse to provide trans surgery, he furthered freedom to practice prejudice for those who wish to refuse healthcare, or even goods and services to trans people purely on the grounds of them being trans. Across Europe the growth of the nationalist right includes vocal lobbying against LGBTIQ+ rights, utilizing language from the Catholic Church and warning against what it calls gender ideology. These forces of sex and gender conservatism have never been good for women or minorities, and any feminists who assume that their enemy's enemy is their friend do so at their own, and everyone else's peril. As we saw in the quotation from Kilgannon, different factions on the trans-critical side of the gender wars, while mainly focussed on controlling and often restricting the lives of trans women in particular, often invoke the figure of masculine females or butch lesbians, weaponizing these identities to suggest that a trans agenda is erasing lesbians and coercing them into becoming trans men from a young age. Masculine female queer or lesbian people are then in a slightly contradictory position in these debates; being secondary in focus to trans women, the most feminine of whom are most likely to be

platformed by the media, and being without queer or trans masculine figureheads, and being regularly spoken about while rarely given space to speak for themselves.

Female masculinity on the map

British media loves to fuel and fan the flames of the gender wars. The terrain of this battle is often full of stories about children being forced to transition too young, as trans men or trans women, and later regretting those interventions. Often the figures used in such media coverage are young female-bodied people, masculine individuals who we are told were really, all along, just tomboys or just lesbians or just butches. Sometimes these sorts of labels are shamelessly manipulated by those who care less about young butches or queers and mainly about attacking trans people. It seems everyone is very suddenly concerned about butch lesbians and female masculine queers, especially heterosexual commentators, yet mostly the mainstream remains completely ignorant about our actual lives and identities. ‘Lesbians face a fight for their very existence,’ wrote journalist Janice Turner for *The Times* in July 2019; Turner is married to a man and mother to two sons. She bemoans that butch swagger is being transed out of young lesbians who turn to transition purely because of homophobia and misogyny. ‘Because if a lesbian is seen as a second-class woman – or barely a woman at all – why wouldn’t girls surrender the fight and take testosterone’ (Turner, 2019). Turner writes that ‘butch girls now stand alone’ going on to cite increasing referrals to gender identity clinics as ‘the erasure of lesbians’ (2019). In a blog about why she takes a GC stance, author J. K. Rowling discloses that thirty years ago she may have transitioned to live as a trans man, to escape the ‘sexualised scrutiny and judgement that sets so many girls to war against their bodies in their teens’ (2020). She states that she felt ambivalent about being female: ‘I’ve wondered whether, if I’d been born 30 years later, I too might have tried to transition. The allure of escaping womanhood would have been huge’ (Rowling, 2020). Passionate about LGB rights since its strong support for homophobic Clause 28, *The Telegraph* covered the launch of a new LGB organization in 2019, the LGB Alliance UK. The Alliance was set up in frustration with Stonewall, the UK’s national LGBTQ+ rights group, for failing to respond to charges of putting trans people before the concerns of lesbian, gay and bisexual people. *The Telegraph* journalist quotes LGB Alliance co-founder Bev Jackson: ‘Young lesbians in particular are suffering; experiencing huge social pressure to transition to male if they do not conform to traditional gender stereotypes’ (Swirling, 2019). ‘At last!’, shrieked the *Daily Mail* in September 2020, ‘Teachers are told to stop pushing tomboys to change their gender just because of the way they like to dress or play’ (Owen & Heale, 2020). ‘Thank God they didn’t make this tomboy trans’ is the headline in another article in *The Times*, interviewing a psychotherapist about her concerns that gender non-conforming children are being wrongly diagnosed as transexual (Kinchen, 2018). While identifiers like butch and gender non-conforming (GNC) are being utilized in such discourse regularly, the people who actually identify as butch or GNC are rarely heard from, let alone those who blend available categories or identify as trans and butch or transgender butch, for example, or transmasculine.

Masculine female people are being given a narrative about who they are, which is allegedly naive potential victims of transing who need protecting, all the while there are ironically no masculine female role models in the media at all, and no celebration of female masculinity, lesbian masculinity or trans masculinities, and no trans men. Mainstream media is cheerleading for tomboys, yet the reaction to gender non-conformity in children appears to be waiting any revolution, with bullying, discrimination, hate crime and everyday hostilities still very much in evidence. In addition, certain strands of feminism, the very same strands that are now often situated on the trans-exclusion side of the gender wars, have ironically long demonized butch lesbians, accusing them of aping patriarchal masculinity and fetishizing sexism; I shall explain this in more detail later in this book. For these reasons I have focussed my analysis of the gender wars from the perspective of those very figures, centring female masculinities and transgender masculinities for a change. We have a useful perspective on these debates; just as we are often between certain identities, we also fall between the cracks of available discourses on current so-called gender culture wars and panics. We have an investment in camps which are described as warring and discrete. From this perspective there are no easy answers to today's gender questions, and there should be less picking sides and more sharing of common ground. That is my aim in this book.

Seizing the means of masculinity

As I have introduced briefly at the start of this chapter, I have always identified as and with masculinity for as long as I can remember; from the available gender models in society, that was the one I was drawn to. I therefore have never felt like I crossed from one expected gender to another possible gender, and thus I do not formally use the term 'transgender' for myself. The word 'trans' means to cross, as in words like 'transport', or 'transnational'. Thus, to trans gender would mean to cross the socially constructed lines of gender, or to cross identify with a gender that one originally did not or was not able to. That is not my story. Another reason I do not formally use the word 'trans' for myself is because I personally think that legally, socially and medically transitioning to live life as a trans man or a trans woman is significant and so I reserve the term 'trans' for those who are trans men or trans women. People who have crossed the lines of sex are individuals who, in the past, would have been called transsexual, meaning literally cross-sex. That term is now considered pathologizing though, overly medical and is widely seen as out of date. Queer professor extraordinaire Jack Halberstam has introduced the term 'trans' with an asterix added, trans* – to highlight that this contains a multitude of identities and to encourage and celebrate the fluidity of gendered and sexed terminology (2018a). All acts of naming and identity claims are of course deeply personal, and everyone has their own unique perspective on this and will have their own personal preferences.

I consider myself quite gender conforming; the gender I most conform to just happens to be masculinity, as it is quite conventionally recognized and understood. For these reasons I cannot formally label myself as transgender, trans, GNC or non-binary (NB); they just don't feel like they fit, although I certainly identify with many

of the criteria for those terms. I'm a butch lesbian but not in the sense of being a woman-loving woman, or a woman-identified woman in the way that so many proud butch lesbian women inhabit and honour that identity. I will explore these identities more in Chapter 7. I have come to settle on queer, or queer butch as an identifier, acknowledging the many, often contentious, political and ideological attachments to that term. This is a new development for me, as previously I rejected the term 'queer' due to my opposition to various political stances that are often associated with queer politics, particularly legal and policy responses to the industry of prostitution. I was always excited by and have enjoyed studying queer theory since my first degree in women's studies in the 1990s, however, and recently the normative conservatism at work in the context of the gender wars has ironically pushed me more towards this label as a personal identifier. While I certainly do not agree with all of the political stances often attached to queer, it is a fluid term that is not defined by any sex, sexuality or gender. It encompasses that which is outside the sex/gender/sexuality conservative norm – the rigid binary assumption that everyone will be either male, masculine and heterosexual or female, feminine and heterosexual. Like many people, not only those who would consider themselves LGBTQI+, I have never been able to fit into those rules, mainly because my gender identity was never viewed by others as congruent with my sex at birth, although it felt perfectly natural to me.

Climbing the tomboy family tree

From as way back as I can remember I watched, noted and copied how the men around me, and those in films and books, looked and behaved. How they sat, how they walked, how they wore their shirts, how they rolled up their sleeves, how they ate, drank and smoked. I knew precisely how belts should be worn and which way round the buckles should go; I knew the right side for shirt buttons and that a gentleman should never fasten up a waistcoat all the way down. Growing up in rural Scotland, in a poor farming community, I never had much opportunity to practice such sartorial delights, and the irony is that the boys I knew and grew up with could not care less about style rules for masculinity. The men I knew were rarely in anything but boiler suits, and my own father lived in putty stained jeans and a fleece. My mother told me once that my dad bought a new shirt only twice in his life, and wore it straight out of the packet, first to visit me in hospital when I was born and then to attend my wedding. My dad was a quiet soul, practical and competent at pretty much everything, from cooking and cleaning to installing new windows or building a roof. He showed me that men can be as kind and caring as the next person; a natural baby whisperer with a solitary, grumpy edge, he wasn't a saint, but he was never a stereotype. It is right that I should start this book about masculinities with my own father, and that's where those of us with dads, for better or worse, first learn about who and what men are meant to be, the fiction and the reality. For some of us, we take these examples and are drawn to a masculinity that we were never expected to have, never taught and never schooled into. We pick and mix from the available models around us and we make an identity that suits. At best such a bespoke, hybrid identity is tolerated, but for many it is brutally suppressed,

just as their brothers are having it brutally enforced. For too many boys, masculinity is groomed through stereotypical gender rules, the first lesson of which is not to be feminine (Roberts, 2018; Frosh, Phoenix & Pattman, 2002); I will discuss all this in more detail in Chapter 5. This is a book informed by the masculinities of those people who were not born with bodies sexed as male, who aren't men and who were never supposed to find a home in the masculinity they now make their own, and own. These individuals have had many names, always and forever and all over the world: tomboys, butches, dykes, transgender, studs, he-she, bulldagger.

I was what you would call a tomboy. For a long time I thought I was a boy, or rather, I just never wasted much time contemplating whether I was or not. I considered myself the same as the boys I hung around with. Everything they did, I did, and I dressed as they did and looked similar to them. Then I began to realize I probably wasn't male like boys were male. I have memories of sometimes wondering before I went to sleep if I would wake up the next day and be male bodied, because then it would match who I was. Such a physical transformation did not seem out of the question when I was about seven or eight; and I would not have been surprised if it had happened one morning. Eventually, I realized I was not male and probably would never be, but this didn't have to stop me from being a boy, so I carried on boy-like. I grew up with the only child around, a boy my age, and we lived like siblings. From dawn till dusk we played armies, made rafts, climbed trees and pursued adventures to avoid being caught and called for farm duties or to stack wood.

In the summer holidays I would sometimes leave the countryside for the city, spending weeks at a time with my grandmother and grandfather in Nottingham in the Midlands of England. For several of those summers I lived as a boy, making little gangs with other local boys and getting into trouble. I must have been about nine or ten at this time. I had short, white blonde curly hair and a red baseball cap my grandma had brought back from Perth, Western Australia, and it was the only baseball cap I had. I can still remember it like a picture. It had a black swan on the front and I wore it every day. I would go for tea at my friends' houses, and their mothers would call us down to eat, shouting up the stairs with a carefree: 'boys, teas ready'. I have distinct memories of this jarring, not because I knew it wasn't true but because I knew they would not believe it was true if they knew I wasn't male. It never occurred to me that I was being anything but my honest self, but I was aware even then that nobody else would see it that way. I was perceptive enough to understand that it would be seen as lying. As I was quite an honest and worthy child, that felt difficult. The majority of readers may be unfamiliar with such experiences; I would ask you to imagine something you experience as core to yourself, in a natural and seamless way, being viewed by others around you as a lie – a stigmatized, vulgar lie for which you know you are expected to feel shame. It makes the everyday business of just being yourself – self-conscious; this is a feeling that may be familiar to many queer people, to many lesbian, gay and bisexual people. It is a sense of observing oneself as you know others will see you, tailoring and tweaking appearance, mannerisms and speech in response. What conflicted was the awareness that my life would be considered performance, rather than just my life. I much preferred being called 'he' and being known as a boy, because that meant I could carry on being me in the ways that I felt were natural and unthinking. Being any other way would have

been a performance. Yet people like me did not have the luxury of unthinking self-expression, or not for long into childhood anyway. There is a common assumption that female children are tomboys because they want to play with boy's toys and enjoy physical activity. I didn't want to be a boy so that I could enjoy the freedom of boys; I already had that freedom.

When I reached my teenage years, I had to get to grips with the idea that I might be a lesbian, as I had always mainly been attracted to girls. I say mainly, but it was hard to separate being attracted to boys with wanting to be them. However, the label of lesbian was not appealing, and it felt too specialized and niche. I did not feel special or different but of course as everyone was growing up into teenagers around me, now I was being forced to realize that I was different, very much so. When I was about eleven or thereabouts, I remember having a conversation with one of my friends, who knew I was female by that time. We were in my grandma's house watching the original *Total Recall* on VHS; although then it wasn't the 'original', it was just *Total Recall* and there was only one. This of course was highly illegal, as the film was an 18 rating; unfortunately my dear grandma has now passed so there's no worries of her being reported to the social for retrospective safeguarding issues. My friend was called Mehboob and he was a bit younger than me; he lived round the corner with his family and his sisters. We were laughing at the scene where one of Arnold Schwarzenegger's friends makes out with an alien woman who has three breasts. Mehboob was saying he'd know what to do with three breasts and he stood up wiggling his hands around and then dancing about in the front room singing. I can remember his face, his shiny school trousers and tank top, and his lovely Nottingham accent. He asked me why I didn't just stop telling people I was a boy, and just be a 'lemon' instead; this was how kids talked about lesbians in those days, and he used it purely as a describing word, as did I. I explained to him that it wouldn't feel right because if I was to get a girlfriend, I would not want to be with a girl who wanted to be with a girl, because I wasn't a girl. I would have to find a girl who wanted to be with a boy who was a kind of boy like me. I remember him nodding and accepting this completely in that way that young people are so good at accepting other people's truth, being not yet cynical, and hopefully with little reason to be. I did not know then about femme lesbians, I did not know the word 'butch' either, and I wouldn't even learn that word until I was eighteen. I hoped that there were girls out there who wanted boys like me, but I had no language for it. Later I would understand identity terms like 'lesbian', 'butch' and 'trans'.

The absence of seamlessness

I read the late Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* when I was around eighteen and finally felt validated, learning that the way I was had a name, and a history. Here was a character who was female bodied, but regularly lived as a man, a character who also inhabited lesbian spaces, but who didn't quite fit in any of these spaces. I recognized a lot of myself in that character, in Feinberg's Jess. Throughout my life I have questioned whether I should pursue a path to transition as a trans man. In my twenties I signed up to the FTM (Female to Male) London Network newsletter, and looked into hormones